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The Crossover Point —
Firing Up the Learning Organization

When one hears references to the Learning Organization, different words or phrases accompany the conversation, such as learning how to learn, redesigning work, reflecting critically, redirecting effort toward learning, practicing adult learning theories, experimenting, solving problems systematically, learning from customers. Additional ones might be dialoging, sharing visions, mastering personal modeling, learning experientially, thinking systematically. Others could be empowering people, focusing on performance, eliminating deficiencies, overcoming resistances, surmounting difficulties, and maximizing potential.

In all these ideas, as good as they sound, something seems to be missing. Some may suggest that in order for a Learning Organization to flourish, there must be complex tactics and strategies of assimilating increasing amounts of new knowledge, personal thinking, application of problem solving abilities, and high flexible work loads. Others may think that there needs to be a shift from being “told what to think” toward being “engaged with how to think.” Still others are puzzled about what it takes to have a Learning Organization. To state it in very practical terms, what would it take for AAACE to reach the crossover point and get fired up and become a vibrant Learning Organization?

I believe one ingredient would characterize a viable answer “commitment.” But each person reading this may ask, “commitment to what?” First, the nature of our commitment to do this goes beyond our typical loyalty to AAACE. It involves a commitment to changes needed in the world (our world) and seeing ourselves and AAACE as instruments for bringing about such changes.

This “commitment” would mean that learning is based on risk taking and not fear of failure.

Second, this is a commitment of ourselves to learning, which I would describe as a shift of mind that goes on inside of each person as she/he undertakes to gain or acquire new knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, values, and interests. The shift of mind is in perceiving — sensing or feeling concrete reality, thinking or reasoning abstractly, and the shift of mind is in internalizing or processing — making it a part of ourselves by reflecting on or watching what’s happening, or actively jumping in and trying the newly acquired learning.

Third, the “commitment” includes AAACE’s conscious and intentional development of its people and a continuous transformation of itself. This means AAACE’s learning takes place in its executive board, general board, commissions, units, conference participants, and readership. Its learning is a constantly, strategically used process — integrated with, and running parallel to, its work. Its learning results in changes in knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors, and it enhances its capacity for innovation and growth.

Fourth, this “commitment” would mean that as learning is based on risk taking and not fear of failure, team and collective performance rather than individual performance, cooperation and collaboration instead of competition, coaching and supportive feedback in place of appraisal and criticism, informality in contrast with formality, discovery of possibilities replacing one right answer, intuition and relationships in a context overshadowing abstract and logical reasoning, the journey and not the destination.

Fifth, the “commitment” to have AAACE fired up and cross over the line of becoming a Learning Organization requires it to ask of itself: Which processes that add value to our constituencies need to work better? How can we make those processes work better? How will we speed up our learning about ways to improve these processes? How can we capture our learning, record it, and transfer it to other processes and parts of the association?

Sixth, the “commitment” needs to take shape in AAACE’s mind that to get fired up and cross over the line of becoming a vibrant Learning Organization, we need to believe this is important and urgent, strengthen our trust that we have the capacity to make this happen, acknowledge our desire and take the initiative to experiment with new projects that will help us grow in maturity and number, challenge ourselves to stay involved, support new ideas, and have as much fun and playfulness as possible.

Seventh, the “commitment” to cross over means that we may need to be a bit like Mercedes-Benz as they are establishing an auto plant in Alabama — their first in the U.S.A. They call it a “Learning Field,” which speaks about Germans’ ambivalence about new ideas. “Learning Field” means once they decide to expose themselves to new ideas and new ways of doing things, they go at it with thoroughness and zeal. This could also be true for AAACE. This could help us do what Johnsonville Foods did when they decided to become a “Learning Organization.” They changed

See President’s Podium, p. 31
the problems that may be encountered reinforces
the credibility of the program-
ning. By providing solutions for the
problem you reinforce the perceived
"do-ability" of the endeavor.

3. Structure the program to mesh with
other adult responsibilities. Scheduling
classes to accommodate various work sched-
ules, providing convenient program locations
and clear administrative procedures,
are all effective in recruiting and retaining
the working adult student. Suggest ways to
maintain balance and harmony. Help stu-
dents identify techniques to stress manage-
ment and possible structures to support
successful study.

4. Provide affirmation to the students as
they complete sub-goals. Help them cele-
brate their achievements along the way.

5. Assist in the development of a viable
support system among the students. Possible
equivalent to this would be to promote stu-
dent communication by providing adminis-
trative assistance for the development of car
pools, study groups, student directories, and
child care arrangements.

Further Thoughts
Adult educators need to offer programs that
address the needs and problems of this
growing segment of the student body.
Increasing access to educational opportuni-
ties by creative program development is part
of the answer. In addition, adult educators
can effectively help students stay motivated
and overcome barriers by incorporating the
strategies and tips of adult learners who
have already succeeded.

President's Podium, continued from p. 4
their focus from using people to
to build a great business to
building to build great people.
This is Adult Education!

Eighth, the "commitment"
needs to become a passion with
us, which will fire up AAACE to
cross over the line to become a
Learning Organization. A friend
of mine is a consultant at a major
company, which has its world
headquarters in St. Louis —
Monsoor, Inc. She participated
in an Adult Education Facilitator
Workshop I conducted. The top
officers of Monsoor had her
come in one day to help them
develop the structure for some
new things they are wanting to do
as they move toward the future.
They said to her, "Tell us what
you are passionate about." She
took some time and told them.

When she finished they said,
"Now, we want you to make that
happen with us in this venture.
Whatever it costs — energy, time,
money, etc., we want it and will
do what it takes to accomplish it." They
believed that passion and
commitment go together.

We may ask, Can AAACE cross
over the line and become a Learn-
ing Organization? Can we make
the "commitment?" I believe so.
I am passionate about the idea of
AAACE becoming a Learning
Organization and I am passionate
about learning. Will you join in
the "commitment?" That ingredi-
ent will move us beyond the idea
stage and fire up AAACE to cross
over the line and become a
"Learning Organization."

— by John A. Henschke
President, AAACE

its inherent challenges and opportuni-
ties for continued change and
learning throughout our entire
life span. Much like Thomas, she
presents growth as an innate
characteristic of individuals, and
change as an inherent character-
istic of life itself. She further sug-
gests both growth and change are
even more critical than ever in lives
currently being lived. Lives that
are longer than they ever have
been before. Rabbi Schachter-
Shalomi (From Age-ing to Sage-
ing: A Profound New Vision of
Growing Older, Warner Books,
1995, p 7) also refers to this
"extended longevity," suggesting
elderhood as "a time of unpar-
alleled inner growth."

In summary, the constantly
changing and lengthening con-
texts of our lives now, more than
ever, dictate our need to become
comfortable partners with change.
As Gardner asserts, "The world is
an incomparable classroom, and
life is a memorable teacher for
those who aren't afraid of her" (p.12).
Life is teaching us to be flexible,
and if we wish to be successful
learners, perhaps the only answer is still
learning to "keep up."

— by Jean Fleming
Guest Editor

Jean Fleming is an assistant
professor of adult continuing
education at Ball State University
in Muncie, Indiana. She
came to this position after
twenty-one years as a teacher,
trainer, administrator, and
consultant in adult education
in Colorado.