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Journal Title: Journal of library administration.

Volume: 57 Issue: 6

Month/Year: April 2017 Pages: 683-700

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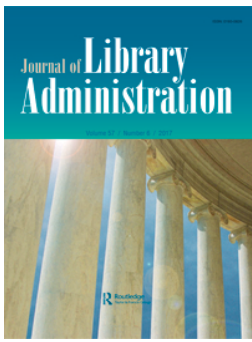
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# Building a Learning Organization in a Public Library

N. Tanya Sinclair


To cite this article: N. Tanya Sinclair (2017) Building a Learning Organization in a Public Library, Journal of Library Administration, 57:6, 683-700, DOI: [10.1080/01930826.2017.1291183](https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2017.1291183)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2017.1291183>

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## In the Public Interest

JOSIE BARNES PARKER, Column Editor   
*Director, Ann Arbor District Library, Ann Arbor, MI, USA*

**Column Editor's Note.** *It is a privilege to be asked to edit and write a column addressing issues of concern to the general public and the public library community. I will attempt to bring issues forward from the point of view of public libraries, large and small, wealthy and struggling, used and neglected, and those facing the future, as well as those struggling to preserve practices that deserve respect, if not preservation.*

*Although the Journal of Library Administration has peer-reviewed articles, this "In the Public Interest" column is intended to represent all of the perspectives of the public concerning public libraries, and those of persons who are delivering service to the public through public libraries. This column will appear on a rotation, in several issues each year. Submissions are reviewed and selected by the column editor. Public library administrators, managers, anyone on the staff of a public library, and those serving in elected and appointed positions in local governments are invited to contribute to the column by contacting Josie Parker at [josie@aadl.org](mailto:josie@aadl.org) email address. Manuscript guidelines and submission timelines will be sent with further instruction for authors.*

### BUILDING A LEARNING ORGANIZATION IN A PUBLIC LIBRARY

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**ABSTRACT.** *Libraries are discovering that building an effective learning culture can be a strategic component of success in the workplace. This case study outlines how a public library system in Canada built a strong learning culture as a change initiative. Multiple methodologies were used including a single group pre-test/post-test intervention, surveys, and focus groups combined with elements of participatory action research and appreciative inquiry. Study findings suggest that employees' perceptions of the workplace became more positive as learning organization principles were implemented. This study offers best practices for leaders who wish to build effective learning cultures in the library.*

**KEYWORDS** *case study, leadership, learning culture, best practices, public library, learning organization, training & development, organizational learning*

Libraries continue to be faced with the challenge of enabling continuous learning to remain competitive and sustainable. The theoretical concept of a learning organization, as popularized by MIT scholar Peter Senge in 1990, has intrigued organizational leaders tasked with maintaining an organization's adaptability and resiliency in the workplace.

A learning organization is an organization where it is the norm for employees to be continually learning how to work together collaboratively for constant improvement. This ongoing commitment to lifelong learning in the workplace is largely team-based and self-directed with hands-on learning, risk taking, and team collaboration. Team learning and challenging assumptions or mental models (Senge, 2006) while considering impacts on the entire system are key aspects of a learning organization. Workplace teams form communities of practice (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985) where team members freely and passionately share thoughts, take risks, and make decisions as it relates to their shared profession or practice in a spirit of collective learning where everyone is a leader with a voice that is valued. In a learning organization, the intentional focus on learning as a normal part of work life creates a learning culture which in turn benefits the organization, employees, and clients with shared knowledge, innovation, and continuous improvement.

Leaders interested in the principles of the learning organization commonly find literature referring to best practices in large organizations, often within the private sector, or in academic libraries, but few studies have been conducted using multiple methodologies to research the introduction of learning organization concepts in small to mid-sized public libraries.

This paper presents a quasi-experimental case study research project where the learning culture was built by applying concepts of a learning

organization (LO) as an organizational change intervention strategy over a period of nine months at Pickering Public Library (PPL)—a small, Canadian public library system, with 60 permanent employees. The Director of Human Resources at PPL served as the researcher for this project. The study documented how the LO concepts were introduced and explored, through surveys and focus groups, how employees perceived their workplace learning culture over the course of the project. Key implementation actions in this study included the provision of dedicated time for self-directed learning, the creation of committee roles where library professionals applied team learning as “communities of inquiry in communities of social practice” (Argyris et al., 1985, p. 34), and the establishment of an advisory committee of learning champions. Other critical actions included increased financial and staffing resources for learning, the creation of monthly peer-led informal dialogue meetings for information sharing, and the launch of a professional development day taken on a date selected by each individual employee. The pre- and post-test learning organization survey that was employed in this study was the full non-profit version of the Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ). Focus groups were conducted by utilizing semi-structured interviews to discuss workplace learning activities, support for continuous learning, and organizational and industry challenges. Elements of participatory action research and appreciative inquiry were incorporated in this study to foster employee involvement, trust, and dialogue throughout the organization.

## LITERATURE

Senge and Watkins and Marsick offer similar definitions of the LO. Senge (2006) describes the LO as a workplace “where people are continually learning how to learn together” (p. 3). Watkins and Marsick (1993) state, “the learning organization is one that learns continuously and transforms itself” (p. 8). Senge popularized the concept of the learning organization in the 1990s with his book *the Fifth Discipline*. Senge (2006) lists the five principles of a LO as: “personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking” (p. 6–9). Personal mastery is an individual commitment to lifelong learning. Mental models involve being open to challenging internal assumptions, perceptions, and beliefs. Shared vision is a shared sense of purpose for a desired future state of achievement as a team and as an organization. Team learning is a group of individuals who regularly engage in reflective dialogue and collective critical thinking knowing that in a learning organization, working collaboratively is a powerful and motivating form of learning. Systems thinking is the ability to identify patterns and relationships in order to understand how every part of the system affects the whole organization. Senge (2006) asserts “the organizations

**TABLE 1** Watkins and Marsick's LO survey dimensions and performance indicators.

Dimensions & performance indicators	Description
Continuous Learning - CL	Create continuous learning opportunities
Inquiry and Dialogue - DI	Promote inquiry and dialogue
Team Learning - TL	Encourage collaboration and team learning
Embedded Systems - ES	Establish systems to capture and share learning
Empowered People - EP	Empower people toward a collective vision
System Connection - SC	Connect the organization to its environment
Strategic Leadership - SL	Provide strategic leadership for learning
Financial Performance - FP	Financial health and resources available for growth
Knowledge Performance - KP	Service enhancements from learning and knowledge
Mission Performance - MP	Fulfillment of organization's mission through services

*Note.* Adapted from Watkins, Milton, & Kurz, 2009, p. 5.

that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization" (p. 4). The LO approach has proven effective in positively impacting organizations as noted in several workplace studies over the last two decades (Bender, 1997; Davis & Daley, 2008; Dymock & McCarthy, 2006; Fowler, 1998; Marsick & Watkins, 2003; McHargue, 2003; Renner et al., 2014; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994; Smith, 1999; Song, Chermack, & Kim, 2013; Yang, Watkins, & Marsick, 2004).

As the human resources leader responsible for employee engagement and development, the researcher posited that the introduction of LO concepts would help create a more sustainable, higher functioning workplace by targeting the enhancement of learning throughout the organization. The researcher approached both PPL's Union executive and the CEO to discuss the proposed research, and the parties agreed to PPL's participation as the case study organization for the LO research project. PPL's concerns regarding technology and client service needs served as the catalyst for this case study. The intended outcome of the project was to improve PPL's organizational culture to better respond to client demands and to document what was learned from that experience for other organizations. The main question that formed the basis of this case study was: What are employee perceptions of the workplace when learning organization principles are introduced?

As displayed in Table 1, LO scholars Watkins and Marsick's (1996; Marsick & Watkins, 1999) Dimensions of a Learning Organization model highlights seven characteristics of workplace learning culture that promote change and learning along with three performance indicator outcomes. Watkins and Marsick (1993) operationalized Senge's (2006) theoretical concepts by creating a tool of measurement for the LO known as the Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire or DLOQ (Watkins & Marsick, 1997; Marsick & Watkins, 2003). The non-profit version of the DLOQ was

**TABLE 2** Parallels between senge LO disciplines and Watkins & Marsick's LO dimensions.

Watkins & Marsick LO dimensions & indicators	Level of measurement	Senge's comparable LO disciplines
Continuous Learning - CL	Individual	Personal Mastery
Inquiry and Dialogue - DI	Individual	Mental Models
Team Learning - TL	Team	Team Learning
Embedded Systems - ES	Organizational	Systems Thinking
Empowered People - EP	Organizational	Shared Vision
System Connection - SC	Organizational	Systems Thinking
Strategic Leadership - SL	Organizational	Shared Vision
Financial Performance - FP	Organizational	Shared Vision
Knowledge Performance - KP	Organizational	Systems Thinking
Mission Performance - MP	Organizational	Shared Vision

*Note.* Adapted from Senge (2006, p. 6–9); Watkins et al. (2009, p. 5). Financial performance was not measured in this study due to relevance for participants.

utilized in this study with express permission from the originators. A primary consideration for the use of the DLOQ was the validity of the tool and the originators' assertion that "for human resource practitioners, our work offers initial evidence that when organizations invest in learning and make system-level changes to support learning, they are more likely to thrive in a changing economy" (Yang et al., 2004, p. 52).

Critics of the LO state that the theory as outlined by Senge (2006) is too abstract and idealistic to translate into solid business practices (Nyhan et al., 2004). It is with consideration of this critique that the researcher for this study chose not to rely solely on Senge's LO concept. The PPL case study integrates the LO concepts espoused by Senge (2006) as well as those of Watkins and Marsick (1993). After reviewing both models, the researcher incorporated the Watkins and Marsick (1996; Marsick & Watkins, 1999) model of dimensions of a LO as an operational complement to Senge's (2006) LO theory. The parallels of these two dominant LO concepts, as interpreted by the researcher for the purposes of this case study, are noted in Table 2.

According to the Conference Board of Canada's Learning and Development Outlook report of 152 businesses across Canada, "learning organizations place a strong emphasis on growth, adaptable change, and the development of human capital...Organizations with strong learning cultures are better positioned for agility and resilience" (Cotsman & Hall, 2015, p. 6). Findings in the same report indicate that LOs "have superior employee performance, higher levels of customer satisfaction, and provide higher quality products and services to their customers compared with their competitors" (Cotsman & Hall, 2015, p. v). With this information in mind, the PPL case study examined employee perceptions during the LO implementation with a desire to enhance PPL's organizational culture for improved ability to serve library clients. Learning organization literature, commonly refers to best practices in large or private sector organizations such as General



Electric, Honda, AT&T, the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC), and Motorola (Garvin, 1993; Schwind, Das, & Wagar, 2010; Smith, 1999). At the time of this study, there were limited empirical studies that had documented the process of a library transitioning to a LO model (Song et al., 2013; Worrell, 1995). The studies that have been conducted tend to focus on academic libraries typically in the United States or in Australia (Bender, 1997; Fowler, 1998; Giesecke & McNeil, 2004; Renner et al., 2014). This case study adds breadth to the existing body of best practices in library workplace learning and development by applying a mixed method approach to document the implementation of a large learning initiative over several months in a public library setting in Canada.

## METHOD

Throughout the study, employees were engaged in group discussions and various collaborative activities, often facilitated by peers, in which conversations centered on the topic of workplace learning and sector challenges and exploring how LO concepts were of assistance to PPL. An online survey tool and focus groups were used to gather employee perceptions of the workplace. This was a company-wide initiative for a period of nine months. Participation in surveys and focus groups was voluntary and employees who were participated in those components and the related data collection and dissemination provided written consent in advance. The majority of the project activities and participant dialogue occurred midway through the project. Learning through hands-on practice, described as experiential learning by John Dewey (1938), is foundational in a LO. PPL created multiple new opportunities for experiential learning throughout the action phase of the implementation including interactive morning sharing meetings and afternoon play days (see Figure 1).

The intervention in this case study consisted of a series of practical, learning-related activities. These were implemented throughout the organization in support of each of Senge's five disciplines of a LO to enhance PPL's culture of caring, sharing, and learning. The intent was to rekindle a desire lifelong learning in staff to keep up with changing library user demands.

Most LO activities listed in Figure 1 were designed during this study with the LO principles in mind. The members of the project advisory team were champions for the learning organization implementation. In keeping with LO scholar Argyris' et al. (1985) community of practice concept, the team met on a quarterly basis, to share updates, ideas, and feedback which led to the creation and modification of LO activities.

This study incorporated aspects of participatory action research (PAR) through the use of a project advisory committee of employees and appreciative inquiry (AI) through the use of strength-based focus group questions



Personal Mastery	Team Learning	Mental Models	Shared Vision	Systems Thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional Development Day (Learn Anywhere PD Day) pilot with paid individual learning time to support a wide array of informal, self-directed learning</li> <li>• Formal and informal individual learning time provided in all departments</li> <li>• In-house technology training facilitated by peers</li> <li>• Increased staff coverage and extra hours support for learning</li> <li>• Hands-on public services training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased time for dialogue at meetings.</li> <li>• Created opportunities for informal cross functional information sharing throughout the organization (Morning Share Meetings, Monthly Learn Meetups)</li> <li>• Created additional opportunities for committee participation</li> <li>• Applied appreciative and participative approaches to idea management (Thinking Together)</li> <li>• Formal learning organization training</li> <li>• Reinvented Annual Staff Learning Day to focus on team building</li> <li>• Peer facilitated informal gatherings to discuss random topics and ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practised questioning assumptions and considered other points of view through facilitated reflection and inquiry in meetings.</li> <li>• Displayed emerging support for risk taking by increasing support for employee generated client service offering ideas (PPL connect mobile library service project).</li> <li>• Project advisory team members engaged in one-on-one learning culture conversations</li> <li>• Applied appreciative and participative approaches to solution finding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Created more opportunities for shared input into projects, task groups, committee participation.</li> <li>• Revamped the learning policy to include learning organization principles.</li> <li>• Deployed a group of staff-level learning champions to provide learning organization guidance and leadership while sharing best practices throughout the organization.</li> <li>• Co-created a learning philosophy with employees throughout the organization</li> <li>• Started team meetings “appreciatively” by sharing successes and gratitude as a standing item.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrated terminology from Peter Senge’s five disciplines of a learning organization into day-to-day conversations</li> <li>• Applied participatory approaches to ideas including multiple units in cross functional dialogue throughout the organization (meetups, committees, share meetings).</li> <li>• Aligned of organizational activities with consideration of PPL’s organizational culture of caring, sharing, and learning</li> <li>• Displayed emerging support for leadership at all levels through team meetings, shared decision making, and project consultant and collaboration.</li> </ul>

**FIGURE 1** Actions taken to support PPL’s transition to a learning organization.

and appreciative activities. PAR is a collaborative and empowering qualitative approach that emphasizes the importance of democratic participation and embodies research “with people”, not on participants (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013, p. 10). Also, PAR is in line with the views of human resources scholars who specialize in LO concepts and suggest, “a more participatory workplace affords both individuals and the organization more space for learning” (Watkins & Marsick, 1993, p. 17). AI, an offshoot of PAR, employs the concepts of positive psychology to engage and encourage strengths over weakness by focusing on the best of the past to leverage action in the future (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). A simplistic definition of AI states, “AI searches for the best of what is to provide the basis for imagining what might be” (Barrett & Fry, 2005, p. 26). Due to the limited scope of this project and workplace scheduling constraints, full application of the PAR and the AI model, which would have involved a significant commitment to team meetings and focus groups with participants, was not possible. However, the positive elements contained within the AI approach, combined with the egalitarian PAR approach, were used to frame a collaborative and optimistic research environment for all participants in support of team learning.

Due to the nature of the project as a case study in the workplace, sampling was purposive. Of the 60 permanent employees actively working at the library at the start of the study, 45 employees volunteered to participate in the research project (equivalent to a sign-up rate of 75%). The participant response rate was 91% and the same group of participants were utilized throughout the study, except for three individuals who left the organization and were not replaced as research participants.

This study utilized three primary sources of data collection, a pre-test, a post-test, and focus groups over a period of nine months. As a qualitative measure, a series of focus groups were conducted with participants mid-way through the study to gain a deeper understanding of employee workplace perceptions through facilitated reflection and dialogue. A diagnostic self-reporting online survey tool, the DLOQ (Watkins & Marsick, 1997; Marsick & Watkins, 2003), was used as a predetermined set of measures for employee perceptions of the LO in the form of a pre- and post-test at the start and end of the project. The non-profit/public sector version of the DLOQ (McHargue, 2003; Marsick & Watkins, 2003; Watkins & Marsick, 1997) was administered on two occasions for comparison. The instrument consisted of 57 survey questions: 43 traditional DLOQ items, 12 DLOQ performance items geared to non-profit/public sector organizations, and 2 organization specific sampling descriptors. Financial performance questions were not included in the survey due to lack of participant knowledge in that area. The non-profit/public sector version of the survey tool has nine categories referred to as dimensions: CL continuous learning, DI inquiry and dialogue, TL team learning, ES embedded systems, EP empowered people, SC system connection, SL strategic leadership, KP knowledge performance, MP

mission performance (Marsick & Watkins, 2003; Watkins & Marsick, 1997). Each dimension has six survey items except CL continuous learning, which has seven items. The DLOQ was selected as a tool for this study because “over 70 articles using the DLOQ in many contexts and cultures have been published” (Watkins & O’Neil, 2013, p. 139), it has been in use for over 20 years in more than 200 documented studies (Yang et al., 2004; Song et al., 2013).

## RESULTS

The findings of this study suggest that employees’ perceptions of the workplace became more positive as learning organization principles were implemented. Based on the findings, PPL’s learning culture showed encouraging indicators for the presence of a learning organization, which can in turn lead to future improvements to employee morale and productivity, and in the overall provision of client services.

There were seven key findings in this study:

1. *Overall, PPL employee perceptions of the workplace were more positive after the implementation of the learning organization concepts.* This was evidenced by the comparison of the pre-test mean result of 3.73 which increased to 4.22 on the post-test.
2. *PPL demonstrated strong learning culture dimension scores synonymous with perceptions of the presence of a learning organization in the workplace.* This was evidenced by PPL’s post-test DLOQ score of 4.22 on a scale of 1 to 6. In comparison to previous studies, other organizations reported a combined means of 4.07 and other non-profit and government organizations reported means of 3.83. These results were also consistent with employee focus group statements about learning.
3. *PPL is perceived by participants as least proficient in the inquiry and dialogue dimension which corresponds to Senge’s (2006) principle of mental models.* This was evidenced by PPL’s inquiry and dialogue dimension score of 3.32 on the pre-test and 3.79 on the post-test which represent the lowest scores of all the DLOQ dimensions and supported by focus group comments.
4. *PPL is perceived by participants as most competent in the strategic leadership and knowledge performance dimensions which corresponds to Senge’s (2006) principle of shared vision and systems thinking.* This was evidenced by PPL’s strategic leadership and knowledge performance mean scores which were the top scoring dimensions on both the pre- and post-tests.

5. *Incorporating a participatory action research approach combined with an appreciative inquiry stance positively contributed to participant acceptance of the study and the LO implementation.* This interactive, democratic, and positive approach to case study research was intentionally and directly aligned with PPL's organizational culture of caring, sharing, and learning. The approach minimized potential power imbalances for the researcher. Also, the approach fostered collaborative and progressive interactions among participants throughout the study which enabled the sharing and capturing of employee perceptions without the resistance common with most change initiatives. This was evidenced by the high volume of active participation in the focus groups and by the high response rates in the study.
6. *Some employees in non-public service roles, i.e. the support services job function grouping, perceived the workplace less positively after the implementation of the learning organization concepts.* This suggests some respondents in this non-public service grouping experienced challenges during the LO implementation feeling less connected with client service goals, compared to their public service counterparts.
7. *Employees perceive improved customer service as the outcome of learning.* During the implementation of learning organization principles at PPL, employees demonstrated their perception of PPL's culture of caring, sharing, and learning. They also indicated the provision of customer service as a top priority and placed great value on their personal role in achieving this common goal through learning. This suggested that the strong community service orientation of library workers combined with a compatible workplace culture could partially explain the positive reception of the learning organization intervention at PPL as a compatible fit for the workplace. The implementation of the LO principles, including shared vision and team learning were fitting complements to the fundamental value library workers place on the common goal of sharing and helping others. This is most strongly evidenced by the emergence of team learning, support, and customer service within the top six themes in the focus groups. This is further supported by the high pre- and post-test scores in the knowledge performance dimension, which focused heavily on client focus.

## DISCUSSION

### Pre-test

Of the 45 participants who consented to participate, 41 completed the online questionnaire resulting in a very high response rate of 91%. A mean score was calculated using a Likert scale of 1 to 6 for each of the LO dimensions

in the DLOQ survey tool to determine the extent to which the organization exhibited the behaviors of a LO. PPL's pre-test means were then compared to DLOQ results from other organizations (Watkins & Dirani, 2013) and results from other not-for-profit and governmental organizations in previous studies (Watkins et al., 2009). PPL scored below the DLOQ means of other not-for-profit and governmental organizations in six of the nine dimensions prior to the intervention of the LO implementation. The overall DLOQ pre-test mean across all dimensions in this study was 3.73. PPL's pre-test scores were modest, when compared to the overall mean of 3.83 for other not-for-profit organizations and governmental organizations and a mean of 4.07 for other organizations (including not-for-profits, public, governmental, and private sector organizations). PPL's pre-test results served as a baseline measurement for comparison to the subsequent post-test eight months later.

### Focus Groups

A total of 41 employees attended the focus groups which were conducted approximately five months after the pre-test. The focus group sessions were two hours in length and covered 14 questions derived from Senge's (2006) learning organization principles. Individual comments were captured through open discussion based on a structured interview guide in a group interview setting. Focus group size was seven to 10 participants per session. To eliminate a potential barrier to participation, there was a separate focus group held for only managers while all the other focus groups had only non-management employee participants. The project analysis team, formed of representatives from the Learn Committee project advisory group, used thematic analysis to identify themes that emerged from the data. The top themes in order of frequency were: informal learning and self-directed learning, learning barriers, including time, support, team learning, customer service, and technology. The following is a small sample of direct quotes from participants showing the top three themes:

*Focus group emerging theme # 1—informal learning and self-directed learning.* There were a total of 240 comments (19% of total comments), including 42 comments from management, on the topic of informal learning and self-directed learning. Respondents made frequent comments about their participation in a wide variety of informal and self-directed learning experiences including webinars, e-learning courses, peer-to-peer learning, reading articles, professional development days, and discussions at morning sharing meetings:

“Staff naturally have an inclination to share. It's the nature of libraries. We do that regularly through socializing rather than always through formal meetings. Sharing meetings are great for talking with everyone about day to day things we might not know.” (Focus group 2 participant)

*Focus group emerging theme # 2—learning barriers.* There were a total of 148 comments (12% of total comments), including 24 comments from management, on the topic of learning barriers. Respondents repeatedly listed lack of time as the prevailing learning barrier in 99 focus group statements.

“Shortage of time is the issue. We don’t have time to set aside to focus on new learning opportunities and resources. My workload takes up most of the time.” (Focus group 4 participant)

“There is lots of training going on in the organization. I feel like more frequent, but shorter training would give more concentration and be easier to absorb. Day long sessions are overwhelming” (Focus group 1 participant).

*Focus group emerging theme # 3—support.* There were a total of 136 comments (12% of total comments), including 26 comments from management, on the topic of support. Several individuals expressed appreciation for having a voice regardless of job level. Some individuals commented on the lack of management support in some departments especially in the area of risk-taking and leadership. Several respondents mentioned a need for increased community support. Many individuals cited positive experiences and perceptions of learning support from the library and co-workers:

“I appreciate that the library is allowing time for employees to learn and allowing them to choose their own learning path. They are also making current technology available for us to train on and try out.” (Focus group 4 participant)

“To tackle many of the issues facing us today and in the future we need to be a cohesive, singular unit. Need to tackle things as a team, as a whole. The concept of learning organization will help us get there.” (Focus group 1 participant)

## Post-test

For comparison purposes, the post-test DLOQ was administered eight months after the LO intervention to the same participants, with the exception of three participants who had left the organization. For eight months, employees throughout the organization had applied a variety of formal and informal LO related concepts. The overall DLOQ post-test mean across all dimensions in this study was a high score of 4.22 which marked a 0.49-point increase over the pre-test score of 3.73. PPL’s post-test scores were also impressive when compared to the overall mean of 3.83 for other not-for-profit organizations and governmental organizations and the mean of

4.07 for other organizations (including not-for-profits, public, governmental, and private sector organizations). [Table 3](#) shows the comparative results of this study's pre- and post-tests along with other organization comparators from previous studies (Watkins & Dirani, 2013; Watkins et al., 2009).

The most improved dimension was continuous learning (CL) which increased by 0.84 from 3.36 on the pre-test to a mean of 4.20 on the post-test. This may be attributed to employees' personal focus on learning and to the organization's expanded focus on creating more learning opportunities, providing learning time, and supporting a wide variety learning styles and preferences through informal and peer-to-peer learning. On the pre-test, PPL scored lower than other organizations and lower than other not-for-profit and governmental organizations across all DLOQ dimensions. However, on the post-test PPL scored higher than both these comparators in all categories, except for the inquiry and dialogue (see [Table 3](#)). These results appear to imply an overall employee perception of improvement and comfort with the LO concepts. Compared to the pre-test and prior to the LO intervention, it appears that there has been a culture shift towards learning including the taking of risks and discussion of mistakes along with open and honest communication.

The support service grouping went from being the highest scoring job functional group on the pre-test to being the lowest on the post-test. The support services grouping contains employees from non-public service areas. This may imply that some non-public service employees felt less empowered and not directly linked to PPL's shared vision compared to their public service counterparts who experience daily job satisfaction from meaningful customer service interactions. The project analysis team speculated that this result may also indicate that there was some type of change or issues that occurred during the LO implementation that negatively affected some respondents in that particular job functional area.

As in the pre-test, management and part-time non-management staff tended to give most questions slightly higher ratings than full-time non-management staff. Management respondents may have been especially optimistic given the additional amount of LO leadership training they received. Part-time employees ranked all survey statements higher than their full-time counterparts across all dimensions on the post-test. This may be partially due to the efforts that have been made to ensure all permanent employees, including part-time employees, were given increased opportunities to learn. In the past, full-time staff had more opportunities for learning due to their increased time in the workplace. Based on the results, it appears that regardless of job status (management, part-time non-management, full-time non-management), overall, PPL employees have positive perceptions of learning in the workplace.

Inquiry and dialogue (DI) stood out as the only dimension where PPL scored lower than both the other organizations' and the other not-for-profit



**TABLE 3** PPL DLOQ Pre- and Post-test means by dimension including other organization comparators.

	Continuous learning	Inquiry dialogue	Team learning	Embedded systems	Empowered people	System connection	Strategic leadership	Knowledge performance	Mission performance	Overall mean
Pickering Public Library Means - Pre-test	3.36	3.32	3.65	3.67	3.64	3.82	3.97	4.20	3.93	3.73
Pickering Public Library Means - Post-test	4.20	3.79	4.22	4.22	4.10	4.22	4.59	4.54	4.10	4.22
** Other Non-profit & Governmental Means	3.95	3.95	3.92	3.54	3.76	3.91	4.21	3.71	3.48	3.83
* Other Organization Means	4.08	4.00	3.97	4.06	3.97	4.17	4.24			4.07

*Note.*

\*The data in this row is as reported in the Watkins & Dirani (2013) study with 7,954 DLOQ responses in five countries from 28 companies including nine government related organizations. The means for knowledge performance and mission performance were not captured in that study. The standard DLOQ was used.

\*\*The data in this row is as reported in the Watkins et al., (2009) study listing 1,841 DLOQ responses from non-profit and government related organizations in various countries. The not-for-profit version of the DLOQ was used.

and governmental organizations' comparators. A source of encouragement is that lowest scoring items on the pre-test significantly increased on the post-test. Apart from inquiry and dialogue, PPL was higher than the comparators in all the other dimensions. In looking at the standard deviation, PPL scores were consistent with the other dimensions indicating there were no major outliers that skewed the results.

During their meetings, the project analysis team discussed the DI dimension. The team suggested that library workers, by virtue of their personalities and career attraction, may often be less comfortable with voicing opinions and facing challenge and conflict in the workplace. The project analysis team mentioned that a focus on building trust, respect, and emotional intelligence as part of the DI dimension may be of assistance to employees. The team felt that the consistent high scores on strategic leadership (SL), mission performance (MP), and systems connection (SC) could be leveraged and linked to shared vision for client services goals. They also suggested that PPL's workplace culture of caring, sharing, and learning could also be instrumental in continuing the journey towards becoming a LO.

Although not directly attributable to this study, PPL has experienced several noteworthy successes since building an effective learning culture by transitioning to learning organization:

- PPL employees self-assessed their technology comfort and proficiency 20% higher in 2016 compared to 2014 surveys.
- Employee self-directed learning activity participation increased by more than 36% in 2016 compared to 2015.
- The City of Pickering was named as one of the world's Smart21 Communities of 2017 by the Intelligent Community Forum (ICF). The library's work with digital literacy outreach was recognized as a major contributor to this achievement.
- PPL was awarded the #1 Library in Canada for the Summer Reading Club program by Toronto Dominion Bank in 2016.

### Limitations and Future Research

There were some limitations in this study. First, the nature of case study research with a single-unit of study and relatively small sample size presents limitations of generalizability. The findings of this study were based on one organization's experience with a small sample size and as such, the results were not meant to be generalized beyond PPL. Instead, the intent was to share PPL's experience in order to contribute to an existing body of knowledge that may inform and inspire other libraries to embark on similar learning journeys by sharing PPL's experiences. The presence of the researcher in the workplace throughout the study had the potential for bias and measures were taken to minimize this through the deployment of a project advisory

team in keeping with the participatory action research approach. For future inquiry, replicating this study in other library systems, could help determine the extent to which the presented findings can be generalized.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate a positive shift in employee perceptions of the workplace culture after LO implementation. PPL's experience contributes to the breadth of knowledge that exists to enable library leaders to understand how employees may view the introduction of a learning organization change initiative. Like many change initiatives, full transition to a learning organization takes time, support, and ongoing commitment from all individuals in the workplace. Based on the findings reported in this study, PPL is progressing towards becoming a LO. This case study indicates that LO concepts can be successfully implemented in a public library, in the pursuit of a stronger learning culture.

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**Video Abstract Transcript: Building a Learning Organization in a Public Library  
(DUE TO LICENSING, CANNOT PROVIDE THE ACTUAL VIDEO)**

What is a learning organization? General Electric, CIBC, Honda, and AT&T are a few organizations that have been cited by researchers as examples of learning organizations. According to MIT scholar Peter Senge, a learning organization is an organization where it is the norm for employees to be continually learning how to work together collaboratively for constant improvement. This ongoing commitment to lifelong learning involves questioning the status quo and keeps the workplace evolving through leadership at all levels, risk-taking, systems thinking, and team learning.

A research case study was conducted at Pickering Public Library in Ontario, Canada to examine employee perceptions during a learning organization implementation. The desire was to create a culture of learning for improved ability to engage clients while remaining competitive and sustainable in today's ever changing business markets. Learning organization literature, commonly refers to best practices in large or private sector organizations. At the time of this study, there were few studies that had documented the process of smaller organizations, such as public libraries, transitioning to a learning organization model.

Why does this learning organization case study research matter? Quite simply, it's good for business. According to the Conference Board of Canada, learning organizations "have superior employee performance, higher levels of customer satisfaction, and provide higher quality products and services to their customers compared with their competitors". But how do you actually go about creating a culture of learning in the workplace? And how will employees feel about this shift towards a major focus on learning?

The answers to these questions are detailed in the article "Building a Learning Organization in a Public Library" written by Human Resources Leader Tanya Sinclair in the Journal of Library Administration. Multiple research methodologies were used in the case study including surveys and focus groups combined with some basic elements of participatory action research and appreciative inquiry.

Here are some of the highlights of the key research findings you will learn when you read the article:

- Employees' perceptions of the workplace became more positive as learning organization principles were implemented.
- Employees perceive improved customer service as the outcome of learning.

This study demonstrates a variety of practical actions leaders can take to build effective learning cultures in their organization while obtaining a high level of employee participation.

This is Tanya Sinclair. Thank you for viewing this video abstract. For more information, visit the Journal of Library Administration site at Taylor & Francis Online to access the full article. Thank you to the video production team and to all the employees at Pickering Public Library who made this project an ongoing success.