

## **RELATIONSHIP-BASED CONTINUOUS LEARNING MODEL**

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### **Introduction**

This conference is a forum for sharing information and discussing the development of quality career consulting and training. We know that educational and vocational guidance counsellors work with employees in private-sector firms. However, we regret that they constitute a minority of human resource management teams, that they are limited to providing services to individuals and groups and, in particular, that they seem to be absent or silent in terms of providing advice and support for the development of company strategies. We believe that counsellors' greater participation in this area of activity would help them further develop the quality in training that is sought after, for example, by taking action upstream from more formal and traditional human resource management practices. We will contribute to this discussion by relating our recent experiences in this area. After providing some background, we will set out the components for a Continuous Learning Model that was recently developed and implemented in the Public Service of Canada. Then we will discuss our reasons for believing that this strategy is a promising and integrated way to meet the challenges facing workers and companies.

### **Background**

The objective of one of the key speeches on educational and vocational guidance at the Conference of the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) in 2003 was to support the policies adopted by several countries to promote *ongoing career training* for workers. Our experience is consistent with this new trend. Innovation Canada's strategy of *Achieving Excellence—Investing in People, Knowledge and Opportunity* emphasizes training and maintaining a sufficiently large pool of highly qualified workers to act as engines of innovation. The Canadian policy goes so far as to establish benchmarks for measuring progress towards this objective, such as the following: (1) within five years, increase by one million the number of men and women adult learners in all groups of society, and (2) increase the funding invested by Canadian firms in worker training by one third.

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The target of transforming Canada into a country that attracts talents and investments and plays a lead role in learning and innovation cannot be achieved without the contribution of a highly skilled Public Service. In turn, the Public Service at the start of this new century faces human resource management challenges of an increasingly and particularly complex nature. As proof of this complexity, we need only mention the technological changes that are transforming Public Service jobs, the over-abundance of information and the associated expectations of accelerated processing of information. These developments present challenges to be dealt with in the areas of career transitions and organizational health. The ageing of the Public Service workforce, associated with a falling birthrate, poses other challenges in terms of workforce renewal, succession planning and safeguarding the corporate memory. The external world environment from a social, political and economic standpoint is another factor affecting the management of the government machinery. Regardless of the examples we use, be they geopolitical crises or sudden or anticipated climate change, the least we can propose is that Public Service employees should be required to quickly adapt.

This contextual profile gives us a better understanding of why the senior management of the Public Service of Canada has decided to assert itself as an innovative learning organization in order to support the development and well-being of highly skilled employees who are representative of Canadian society. As career guidance consultants with a human resource management perspective, we recommended to the decision makers a Relationship-Based Continuous Learning Model as a strategic option and course of action for achieving this objective.

### **Relationship-Based Continuous Learning Model**

As shown in the figure below, a management philosophy for developing a learning organization can be made operational by basing it on quality work life management. Helping adults manage their work lives involves educating them in the new career management paradigm for maintaining a worklife balance (Limoges 2001). Maintaining a worklife balance is a dynamic process that oscillates between letting go and holding on in order to prevent employee burnout and obsolescence. The challenges of maintaining such a balance require interaction between individuals and their environment. Moreover, employees also face specific challenges in terms of maintaining a balanced work life depending on whether they are in their early career phase (Main<sub>1</sub>), mid-career phase (Main<sub>2</sub>) or late career phase (Main<sub>3</sub>).

According to Limoges' research, 6 out of 12 workers maintain optimum performance, 2 out of 12 show serious signs of burnout, 3 out of 12 show serious signs of obsolescence, and 1 out of 12 urgently needs a career change. To maintain a balance, workers need education in work life management to meet the challenges of employee motivation, competency development and balance between worklife and personal life. Companies benefit in that employees are prevented from becoming obsolescent, preventive measures are taken with respect to organizational health, the need to retain workers is addressed and there is a positive impact on organizational performance.



## The Federal Public Service: A Learning Organization Serving Canadians

Tutoring                      Action Learning

Legacy Circles →→→ **WORKLIFE MANAGEMENT** ←←← Management Circles

**Maintaining a Worklife Balance and Career Mobility**

Mentoring                      Coaching

### Through Learning Relationships

Middle Management Network's Integrated Continuous Learning Model, D. Doyon, 2002

Helping adults more effectively manage their worklives also involves respect and support for each employee's cyclical and ongoing needs for mobility. Consequently, there is a need to make career mobility more efficient. Mobility in this context refers to a change of function or workplace that the employee chooses or which is part of the organizational need to accelerate the next generations' competency development through work experience. Borrowing from Clavier's work<sup>2</sup>, the Continuous Learning Model described above provides assistance for workers facing the imperatives of career mobility. It should be explained here that helping employees develop competencies to make them more mobile is based on a broader concept of career mobility that goes beyond the traditional perspectives of vertical career advancement or geographic mobility. According to the Continuous Learning Model, employees in transition—ie, workers who must relocate in order to maintain a worklife balance—should be given assistance to facilitate their mobility. Career mobility will also be the method used by workers who decide to participate in an accelerated competency development program for their firm's renewal within the next generation of employees. Because this development focusses mainly on the fulfilment of various mandates within a firm, there is increased mobility.

Research have demonstrated that a worklife balance and employee mobility were successfully achieved 85% of the time through supportive relationships, the third component of the Continuous Learning Model. Relationships promote the transmission and joint creation of knowledge and become the cornerstones of an organization's project to become a learning organization. There are organizational tools, such as mentoring, tutoring and legacy circles, to facilitate knowledge transmission. Mentoring is based on helping and learning relationships between an experienced person (mentor) and another less experienced person interested in profiting from the exchange for his/her personal and professional development. Mentoring is therefore more focussed on the employee's ability to develop. Tutoring is based on relationships between helping experts and trainees that target the transfer of specific competencies in order to provide new employees with some degree of autonomy more quickly. Legacy circles involve a group approach that essentially consists of providing accompaniment for people at the end of their careers so that they can compile their legacies and thereby safeguard the organization's corporate memory. For the joint creation of knowledge, there are mechanisms to support the development of coaching relationships, co-development group relationships and action learning relationships. Coaching is understood to be a helping and learning relationship between a coach and a trainee in order to develop the trainee's generic competencies in the here and now. This type of relationship is usually based on performance results. Co-development groups promote professional development through discussions of participants' practices or strategies for maintaining a balance that are specific to their career phases (Main<sub>1</sub> or Main<sub>2</sub>). All participants in these groups take turns being clients or consultants. Action learning groups promote multiple learning experiences through activities and putting learning into practice. Participants work with a facilitator and co-operate with one another to carry out each participant's project.

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<sup>2</sup> See the Co-Pilot Mobility tool (<http://www.human-research.com/>)

To develop a learning organization, it is necessary to build on relationships. Mechanisms must be put in place to make these relationships more relevant and nourishing for all participants according to their needs (specific issues of maintaining a balance and career mobility), type of relationship (dyad or group) and career phase (early, mid or late career). It is understood that each type of relationship has a special character depending on whether it involves knowledge transmission and joint knowledge building, whether the helper's assistance is directional or non-directional, or whether the committed participants choose to emphasize discussion or action in the relationship.

## **Discussion**

A learning organization is understood to be an enterprise management philosophy. It is a special organizational culture that is sought after and articulated in management strategies. For the current exercise, the learning organization concept is structured around two components: organizational learning and knowledge management.

According to Paquette (2002), learning is a process in which various types of structured or unstructured information become knowledge and skills that the individual incorporates in order to acquire new competencies and carry out new tasks. Individual learning is a necessary precondition for organizational learning. An organization can also learn independently from each individual it encompasses, but it cannot learn independently from all the individuals it encompasses (Argyris and Schon, 1978). Organizational learning is defined as a group process in which ideas, knowledge and new perspectives that enable the organization to fulfil its mission are proposed and understood.

The concept of organizational learning is associated with the progressive dimension of the organizational group. But systems cannot just have a progressive dimension. In our theoretical model, we need to include dimensions of preservation and continuity, or in other words, a secure base or homeostasis if we want to have a systemic understanding of quality of life aspects at work. To incorporate all of these dimensions, there is a need for a "knowledge management" component, which is often an issue in the development of a learning organization culture. The challenge for the organization is to be able to manage all of the knowledge of its teams while building an infrastructure that is both human and physical. This infrastructure facilitates the circulation of information within the organization in order to improve the organization's performance (Jacob and Pariat, 2000). Knowledge management can play a role because it is intended to be a strategy for promoting the transfer and incorporation of explicit and tacit knowledge among individuals within the organization. According to Senge (2001), knowledge is a social phenomenon. The notion behind organizational learning and knowledge management is that knowledge can be obtained through relational networks.

According to Jacob and Pariat (2000), it is not because a transmission of information occurs that a person acquires new knowledge. Between the acquisition and application of new information there is a whole process of assimilation and internalization of the information. The suggested methods for assimilating and internalizing include discussions, information sharing and experimentation between peers and co-workers or

between trainees and persons possessing specific knowledge. The key to success for a learning organization is to share and disseminate its knowledge, allow others to make use of its knowledge and learn to benefit from the knowledge of others. The Public Service of Canada, Quebec Region, understands these keys to success and has therefore selected the Relationship-Based Continuous Learning Model as the direction or road it should take to achieve its objective.

Like Jacquard (1998), for whom “the only way to deal with complexity is to create linkages,” we have made enhanced interpersonal relationships the cornerstone of the organizational project to become a learning organization. With our expertise in educational and vocational guidance, we can introduce a special dimension into relationships to make them into actual learning settings for people and achieve the desired organizational development. We know that learning involves a degree of anxiety, which must be overcome by relationships of trust (Schon, 1996). We agree with what Hivon (1996) says about professional identity and would like to propose preconditions to ensure that *interactions are “rendez-vous” for personal growth.*

By introducing Limoges’ new career management paradigm (2001) with its worklife balance maintenance component and complementary component of career mobility, we have all of the operational ingredients to provide support for individual employees and work groups. Individuals will not see themselves bound solely by the managerial directive to take responsibility for their training throughout their careers and to create learning relationships for knowledge transmission (knowledge management) and joint knowledge building (organizational learning), but, above all, they will see their most basic human right to manage their work lives honoured and respected. The Relationship-Based Continuous Learning Model develops a context conducive to innovation in the workplace (Nonaka, 2002), a context similar to care providing. Is it not imperative at this point to individuate the subject dealt with by Touraine, ie, that the desire to construct oneself as the subject of one's own existence is to be found within oneself (2000)? Accompaniment methods such as mentoring, coaching and legacy circles are significant learning forums for developing major reflexes, such as the reflex to dare to ask for help and the reflex to dare to provide it. However, they will continue to be accessories if we do not take an interest in what is essential and fail to recognize that human beings are basically project people with an ability to develop and that their satisfaction with work includes the spinoffs to be obtained from working. Education in using the worklife balance paradigm and assistance in developing competencies to give employees mobility are innovative components that enable all workers to take charge of managing their work lives and inevitably lead them to establish significant relationships for the transmission and joint creation of knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

We have provided a brief overview of the environment in which we practise our profession and we have presented the Relationship-Based Continuous Learning Model to help enterprises develop projects to become learning organizations. This model, which the Public Service of Canada, Quebec Region, has adopted for its employees in Quebec,

is now being implemented gradually. Our work thus far suggests that the Public Service is staying the course in terms of its expectations to meet the many challenges facing employees and enterprises every day.

Our objective was to share our experience in providing in-house career counselling for companies. Since investing in human capital is currently viewed as essential to the development of advanced economies and democratic societies, it is become increasingly necessary for employees to have training as well as continuous career counselling throughout their careers. This requires a stronger presence of career counsellors in and around the work lives of employees. We believe that developing quality career counselling and training depends on the counsellor's ability to integrate into multidisciplinary teams, including teams concerned with human resources management. We hope that what we have learned from our Relationship-Based Continuous Learning Model, as outlined in this article, will be an inspiration in that regard.

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