

# Teaching Old Dogs New Tricks

## *Implementing Organizational Learning in an Asian National Police Force*

**Tay Keong Tan**

**Loizos Heracleous**

*National University of Singapore*

---

---

The authors employed a longitudinal in-depth action research method to explore the implementation of organizational learning in an Asian national police force. They aimed to get an interpretive, in-depth understanding of the related processes of transformational change, as well as the barriers to change, in a machine bureaucracy with entrenched structure and culture not ordinarily conducive to learning and adaptation. Second, they aimed to explore the applicability of universalist change management prescriptions in this context. The authors found several structural and cultural barriers to transformational change that were nevertheless being successfully contested through a bottom-up participative change process, the existence of change champions, experiences that challenged the prevailing culture, and change actions that were congruent with the organization's authorizing environment. Second, they found that universalist change management prescriptions may not always be relevant because the nature, task, and culture of an organization influence what approaches are appropriate and applicable.

---

---

Effective organizational learning (OL) is widely seen as a key to sustainable competitive advantage and necessary for organizational survival (De Geus, 1988; Nonaka, 1991; Schein, 1993; Senge, 1990a, 1990b) as well as a potent way of meeting the strategic challenges of the organization and of even redefining its boundaries (Baldwin, Danielson, & Wiggenhorn, 1997). Developing OL capabilities is not an easy task,

---

*We would like to thank two anonymous reviewers and the editor for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this article. We contributed equally to this article.*

however, and it may be elusive even in organizations under long-term organizational development assistance (Beer & Eisenstat, 1996).

Even though the OL literature is vast (Dodgson, 1993; Huber, 1991), unfortunately there are few empirical in-depth accounts of OL implementation efforts (e.g., Beer & Eisenstat, 1996; Lipshitz, Popper, & Oz, 1996). In addition, the OL literature generally adopts a blanket approach that does not differentiate between various types of organizations on dimensions such as their cultures, structures, tasks, and contexts. Appropriate approaches to OL implementation, and the related change management processes, may be different in each case, yielding potentially useful lessons for organizational scholars and developers. This study responds to calls for further empirical studies in the public administration domain as well as for case studies of OL interventions that yield in-depth descriptions and analysis (Golembiewski, 1999; Popper & Lipshitz, 1998).

We employed a longitudinal in-depth action research method to explore the implementation of double-loop learning in an Asian national police force (NPF) that has embarked on an ambitious program aiming to transform itself into a learning organization (LO) infusing the philosophies of Peter Senge's (1990a) five disciplines. Our aim was to get an interpretive understanding of the processes of transformational change, as well as the barriers to change, in a machine bureaucracy with entrenched structure and culture not ordinarily conducive to learning and adaptation. We also aimed to explore the applicability of universalist change management prescriptions in this context. We documented several structural and cultural barriers to transformational change, barriers that nevertheless were being successfully contested through a bottom-up participative change process, the existence of change champions, experiences that challenged the prevailing culture, and change actions that were congruent with the organization's authorizing environment. We also found that universalist change management prescriptions may not always be relevant because the nature, task, and culture of an organization influence what approaches are appropriate.

### **Dimensions and Levels of Organizational Learning**

There has been some ambiguity in the literature as to the nature of OL (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Garvin, 1993), arising from the plethora of definitions that emphasize different aspects of learning. Learning is a multidimensional and multidisciplinary concept involving cognitions and actions that are mutually interactive (Dodgson, 1993; Easterby-Smith, 1997). For a summary of leading definitions, please see Table 1.

If we consider these definitions, we can discern several important points. First, both the cognitive and behavioral dimensions of learning are important; second, cognitive alterations are seen as a means of guiding more effective actions, leading to improved

---

*Tay Keong Tan is assistant professor of public policy at the National University of Singapore. He is a cofounder of Sea-Change Partners, a consultancy firm specializing in governance, conflict management, and development in Southeast Asia.*

*Loizos Heracleous is associate professor of business policy on the Faculty of Business Administration, National University of Singapore.*

**TABLE 1**  
**Definitions of Organizational Learning and Learning Organization**

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Definitions</i>
Organizational learning Argyris (1977, p. 116)	“A process of detecting and correcting error. Error is for our purposes any feature of knowledge or knowing that inhibits learning.”
Fiol and Lyles (1985, p. 811)	“The development of insights, knowledge, and association between past actions, the effectiveness of those actions, and future actions.”
Kim (1993, p. 43)	“Increasing an organization’s capacity to take effective action.”
Learning organization Garvin (1993, p. 80)	“An organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.”
Huber (1991, p. 89)	“An entity learns if, through its processing of information, the range of its potential behaviors is changed.”
Levitt and March (1988, p. 320)	“Organizations [learn] by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behavior.”
Pedler, Boydell, and Burgoyne (1989, p. 2)	“An organization which facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself.”

performance; and finally, facilitating the diffusion of learning from the individual to the organizational level, learning is a vital precondition for creating a LO (Kim, 1993; Popper & Lipshitz, 2000). Given these considerations, our empirical study has focused on gathering data and discerning patterns both in participants’ interpretations and their actions over time.

Gregory Bateson (1972) originally differentiated between learning I, where there is “change in specificity of response by correction of errors of choice within a set of alternatives,” and learning II, where there is “a corrective change in the set of alternatives from which choice is made or a change in the punctuation of experience” (p. 293). Later scholars made similar distinctions under different labels: Argyris (1977) differentiated between single-loop and double-loop learning, Fiol and Lyles (1985) between lower-level and higher-level learning, and Senge (1990b) between generative and adaptive learning.

The significance of this distinction lies in the fact that to achieve single-loop learning, incremental change in the organization may be sufficient. To achieve double-loop learning, however, a transformational change is required. In the NPF’s case, the pursuit of double-loop learning enabled us to study the related organizational change processes and whether well-accepted change prescriptions would be applicable in this context.

### **Cultural and Structural Barriers to Learning**

The grounding of organizational culture in individual cognitions, which are largely subconscious, self-validating, and conservative (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), makes organizational culture into a highly conservative, self-legitimizing force that is inherently oppositional to double-loop learning (Johnson, 1987, 1988; Schein, 1992). Cultural change is thus a complex and time-consuming process that can take years, if it succeeds at all (Pettigrew, 1987).

Organizational structures tend to cluster into internally consistent configurations, some of which are more conducive to learning than others (Miller & Mintzberg, 1983; Mintzberg, 1981). OL is not endemic in mechanistic structures because of the low amounts of discretion that individuals have, the restricted communication flows, the strict definition of roles, and the stifling of creativity. Frequent and meaningful social interaction, low centralization, and low formalization, as in organic-type structures, are important conditions for the effective diffusion and utilization of learning.

Related to the above are political issues. Organizations are composed of coalitions that have potentially incompatible interests, leading to conflicts and power plays (March, 1962; Mintzberg, 1985). An efficient and effective flow of information is critical for developing a LO. From a political perspective, however, control of information is a potent power base. Thus, under conflict conditions, information control becomes widespread.

Cultural and structural barriers were endemic in the NPF, a situation that has raised awareness of the need for improvements to enable the force to achieve higher levels of effectiveness.

## **METHOD**

We used action research to study the implementation of OL at the NPF. Action research was originated by Lewin (1947a, 1947b) and is concerned with achieving social or organizational change through researchers' direct involvement in practical settings. Ideally, it is characterized by a joint, collaborative effort among stakeholders. The action research method involves an organic process of diagnosis, action planning, implementation, evaluation, and specification of learning (Susman & Evered, 1978) and is unique in its ability to address the current issues and concerns of organizational members in a rigorous manner (Heracleous & DeVoge, 1998).

We spent 9 months, from December 1998 to August 1999, pursuing this research with the NPF. We conducted 40 in-depth interviews with police officers, Ministry of Home Affairs officials, and staff members of agencies collaborating with the police (e.g., Prisons Headquarters and Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau). The interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours. Our questions aimed to explore the respondents' understanding of LO ideas, their reaction to these ideas, the roles they played in the implementation, the implementation problems faced, and examples of obstacles or successes. We modified the questions and probing depending on each respondent's understanding of, and role in, the LO movement. As police officers are wary of being

recorded, we could not tape the interviews; instead, we took extensive notes. In addition to the formal interviews, we gathered data through informal conversations during gatherings and reservist duty.

We selected the interviewees with the aim of getting a breadth of views, from senior to junior officers and uniformed staff to civilians, men and women, active and reservist officers, operational staff in land divisions and headquarters staff officers, regulars and national servicemen. We proceeded in a top-down manner, approaching the commissioner first, getting his views and approval, and then working down the line. Doing this was important, in an organization like the NPF, in order to secure authorization for the research and the cooperation of interviewees.

We also observed various LO-related gatherings, such as the commissioner of police's directorate forum (composed of the force's top decision-making body—the Leadership Group—and unit commanders), Leadership Group meetings, dialogue sessions between headquarter staff and ground officers, in-service training sessions, and debriefing panels at the operational units. These observation sessions lasted from 2 to 5 hours. We were invited by the police commissioner to participate and to give input and lectures at such meetings. This gave us firsthand knowledge of the LO processes and legitimacy to interview the police directors and commanders in their operational domains. Finally, we examined various documents, including vision statements, staff reports, NPF internal magazines and directives, and notices and mail posted on the force's intranet.

We therefore engaged in data triangulation, continually gathering and cross-validating data from these different sources (interviews, informal discussions, documents, and observations) with the aim of discerning patterns (and how they changed over time) in the interpretations and actions of NPF members. We focused subsequent data gathering on salient emerging patterns from earlier stages of the research.

The first author served as a senior police officer for 5 years, from 1988 to 1992, and still is a member of the police reserve. We thus were able to tap into his intimate knowledge and network of contacts to gather in-depth interview data. The NPF is an agency proud of its traditions and imbued with a strong mistrust of external consultants; it is an investigative and crime-fighting agency that is wary of probing by outsiders. Having one of us as a former member and reserve officer who knows many of the commanders and directors inspired trust and a certain degree of openness to the study. Having an insider also facilitated the interview sessions and observations and helped us to gain local knowledge and appreciation of the culture and jargon peculiar to the agency. The second author was invited to participate as an organization developer based on his prior involvement and expertise in organizational change programs (Heracleous & Barrett, *in press*; Heracleous & DeVoge, 1998; Heracleous & Langham, 1996).

We thus served as voluntary organizational development consultants to the NPF in this transformational effort, giving feedback and advice to the commissioner and his directors on strategies for implementing OL and managing related organizational change. The first author continued his contacts with the officers in the NPF until March 2000, during which he completed a survey study on the problems faced by the NPF in implementing the transformation to a LO.

## CASE STUDY: IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AT THE NPF

### Context: Utopia and Its Police Force

Utopia is a highly computerized society and a regional port and air travel center at a crossroads in the flow of people, goods, and information in Asia. In this fast-paced and complex environment, the ability to learn has become a key competitive resource; according to the head of the Utopia Civil Service, "The public service must be a thinking, trying, and learning public service if we are to keep Utopia in front. Innovation and creativity must not be a choice for us: It must be [an] absolute necessity."

Public agencies in Utopia serve an increasingly educated citizenry with rising expectations and demands on the quality of public service. Internally, these agencies need to deal with a progressively more sophisticated workforce expecting a range of opportunities for learning and growth in a public service career.

Interest in learning and innovation has grown dramatically in Utopia in the past 3 years. Utopia's prime minister in 1999 called it the imperative of "being in time for tomorrow," the need to keep abreast of the ideas and technology in the information age. The public service has to "learn to anticipate demands, influence developments, and meet needs with innovation . . . to provide Utopia with competitive advantage over other nations."

The NPF operates in this rapidly evolving cosmopolitan city-state. The NPF started as a small British-commanded vigilante force in the early 19th century when Utopia was a British colony. Up to 1959, the police force had a poor reputation among the local people because of its "excesses as an intimidating tool of the colonial government" (Drysdale, 1985). From Utopia's self-rule in 1959 and its eventual independence in 1965, the force began to adopt successive organizational reforms to modernize its operations and improve its relations with the people. Formerly staffed primarily by Malays and Sikhs, the force began in 1965 to attract members from other races, over time resulting in a composition more representative of Utopia's multiracial population.

In 1983, the NPF adopted a community policing strategy modeled after the Japanese Koban posts, establishing 92 neighborhood police posts and centers. This community policing strategy marked an expansion of the focus of the police mission beyond fighting crime and preserving law and order to include community service and crime prevention. It also represented a major shift in operational philosophy toward an emphasis on partnership with and service to the community.

Today, the NPF is made up of about 7,400 regular officers, 2,800 national servicemen, 20,000 reserve officers, and 800 civilian officers. The force operates on a staff-and-line structure. It has 12 operational units, which include seven land divisions (territorial precincts), the Special Operations Command, Police Coast Guard, Airport Police Division, Security Branch, and Gurkha Contingent. The operational divisions are supported by 15 staff departments with specialized functions. The traditionally established departments include Operations, Manpower, Training, Logistics, and Public Affairs. More recently, Planning and Organization (P&O), Special Projects, and the

Service Development and Inspectorate have been added to the force's structure to spearhead its modernization programs and developmental projects.

### **Impetus for Change**

By the late 1990s, increasing public demand for police services and rising expectations for high standards in police professionalism imposed escalating stress on the organization. The police commissioner observed,

In 1996 (when I took over as commissioner), we were doing well in terms of tangible output. Crime rates had been brought down. We had implemented many developmental programs. However, there was concern that we were not internally prepared to meet the challenges ahead. How can we become a world-class police force? All along we knew that the normal measures and practices we had been adopting were not sufficient. . . . The culture and methods of the organization needed to change. We needed responsive and empowered officers on the beat, but our men did not have the tools, the proper training and motivation to perform their duties to that level of excellence. Our internal communications were not well handled. Supervisors on the ground were passing the buck—referring decisions upwards. And in recent years, there were accelerated technological advancements in the police and MHA [Ministry of Home Affairs]. We had many technological projects to prepare the force for the 21st century. The question was, How can we prepare our people to meet these challenges?

The Asian economic crisis and regional political uncertainties had spawned new security problems for the force. Major operations to detect smuggling and illegal immigration from the Indonesian islands involved significant collaboration and information exchange between several police units such as the Coast Guard, Special Operations Command, Police Intelligence Department, land divisions, and other public agencies such as the Immigration Department and Central Narcotics Bureau. The islandwide operation against pornographic and pirated video compact discs required close partnership between the police and the Ministry of Information and the Arts. Implementation of traffic regulation policies involved coordination with the Land Transport Authority, Urban Redevelopment Authority, and Public Works Department. The list went on.

Changes in technology also had changed the way police work is done. Patrol cars, for example, were fitted with a computerized automated vehicle screening system and an optical character recognition system to detect vehicles associated with wanted criminals and traffic offenses and with a breath evidential analyzer to screen suspected drunk drivers without blood tests. In the NPF, the Electronics, Computers and Communications Department was busy managing the implementation of the computerized investigation management system and basic computer training program at its new training center. As an assistant superintendent observed, "The fast-evolving technological environment had forced us to continually change our methods and procedures. Nowadays, we need officers who are not only physically adept and socially skilled but also computer literate and fast learning." Operating in an environment characterized by rapid social, political, and technological changes and a region recently plagued by economic crises and political volatility, the force strained to keep pace.

Initial interest in the LO was born when police officers took part in the operational master plan teams (OMPTs) of the Ministry of Home Affairs. These teams were com-

posed of representatives from the various departments of the ministry, including the NPF, and were charged with planning overarching policies coordinating the various departments in the ministry in areas such as operations, intelligence, investigation, and human development. OMPT participants had undergone training in LO approaches conducted by consultants from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. NPF participants, led by the police commissioner, publicly demonstrated interest and support for the training by actively participating in the sessions.

The police commissioner was actively searching for ideas to transform the NPF into a “world-class law enforcement organization” when he came across the ideas and strategies of OL. Impressed by the impact of these ideas and approaches on the attitudes and behaviors of officers exposed to LO training, the commissioner decided to adopt these philosophies as strategies to transform the NPF into a responsive and adaptive public service agency in the 21st century.

#### **Barriers to Learning at the NPF**

Over the history of the force, the operational divisions, some with overlapping jurisdictions, became preoccupied with managing their turf and embroiled in rivalry to “outdo the others.” A senior officer from a land division quipped, “During the meetings, divisional commanders could be seen actively ‘scoring points’ by highlighting the achievements of their units and citing all sorts of performance indicators. Sometimes, they would try to *tolak* [push] difficult cases to other divisions.”

Specialization among the staff departments also engendered a parochial outlook in their decisions and policy initiatives. A staff officer at police headquarters commented,

In the past, instead of taking a broad view of organizational mission and interests, the staff departments tended to operate from their narrow functional viewpoints. Often, projects were formulated by individual staff departments without consulting the other departments. These projects were subsequently presented at staff conferences to the other departments for support. But there was little joint ownership and active cooperation in these projects. Because of this, effectiveness and coordination were compromised.

Despite changes made over the decades, the force was an entity with a very entrenched organizational culture and established practices. Structurally, it operated according to an authoritarian chain of command and a disciplined hierarchy. A sergeant in a land division reflected,

Within the force, the junior officers do not mix with the senior officers, except for the plainclothes branches, where investigators and detectives of all ranks work closely together. We are expected to respect our supervisors and to obey their orders. That’s part of being in a disciplined organization.

The commissioner of police observed that “in the old system, respect came out of fear rather than from admiration.” Field commanders and supervisors traditionally depended on fear of disciplinary action and authority to promote, demote, or transfer subordinates to secure subordinates’ compliance and cooperation. The organization was coordinated by unilateral, top-down information flows, with policies and direc-



tives from the commanders and directors flowing down the chain of command to the operatives on the ground.

Turf battles between specialized units are another persistent organizational issue for the force. The director of the Prisons Department, who was the former director of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), remembered,

When I took over the CID, I was astonished at the rivalry among the specialist branches. The detectives in the intelligence and investigation branches did not talk to each other. The officers from the Major Crime Division did not deal directly with those in the Secret Societies Division, and the Intelligence Division did not talk directly to the Commercial Crime Division, and so on. The heads of each unit used to communicate to one another by sending reports to me and suggesting that I pass [them] on. For a while, I was acting like a messenger between them! There were deep cleavages and compartmentalization in the entire organization. There was no sharing of information or cooperation to solve cases.

Within the seven land divisions, too, there was a distinctive divide between the uniformed patrol force and the plainclothes investigators and detectives. Officers from these two branches seldom communicated with one another or undertook joint operations even though they shared a common mission in fighting crime. In practice, the patrol force was primarily responsible for preventing crimes before they were reported and apprehending suspects for crimes in progress, whereas the detectives and investigators focused on solving the crimes that had been reported. It was commonly known among the members of the force that plainclothes officers perceived themselves to be an elite and specialized group separate from their uniformed colleagues. Even within the patrol force, the officers in fast-response cars seldom exchanged information with the neighborhood police post officers who patrolled mostly on foot and on bicycle. Both groups, in turn, regarded themselves as of higher status than the administrative, logistics, and clerical staff that supported them. Thus, within a police division, the officers were segregated by an informal pecking order that promoted distinct subcultures and uncoordinated subunits.

Another organizational trait was the “culture of secrecy.” A staff officer at police headquarters observed,

When I first joined the force and was later posted to HQ, information was shared on a “need to know” basis rather than as a resource for empowering the staff. Sometimes, we would be reading about a policy decision or an event from the newspapers rather than from internal communications.

Police work often involved criminal cases and internal security matters in which the confidentiality of information relating to criminal intelligence, undercover work, and operational tactics was seen to be critical for operational success. Most cases and policy matters were shrouded in secrecy rather than being openly discussed within the organization. The lack of transparency was preventing the consultation and information sharing needed to empower good decision making and coordinate policies and action across departments.

These organizational conditions of interunit rivalry, parochial outlook, secrecy, and the authoritarian top-down approach acted as impediments to OL because they created a climate in which task-related information was not shared freely and was rigidly con-

trolled. There often was no motivation or interest to cooperate with, work jointly with, or learn from other parts of the organization. These barriers are summarized in Table 2, in terms of structural and cultural factors (cf. Bate, Khan, & Pye, 2000; Popper & Lipshitz, 1998, 2000).

### **Emergence and (Uneven) Diffusion of the Vision**

At the early stages of this transformation, receptiveness to the new ideas and approaches was very much limited to the upper echelons of the force. The police commissioner initially promoted LO ideas in the force's top decision-making body, the Leadership Group. Beginning in 1997, using extensive dialogue with officers from various units, the Leadership Group solicited ideas for a corporate vision statement. This vision-crafting exercise was unlike any other policy-making processes in the force. It was a series of consultations that culminated in a 2-day corporate retreat of the Leadership Group in late April 1997 focused on "visioning exercises" and resulting in the NPF Shared Vision. This vision is summarized in Table 3.

Instead of imposing this vision on the directors and commanders, the commissioner decided to give his directors and commanders the freedom to create their own units' vision statements and directions for the future. Commenting on his strategy, the commissioner recalled,

During the early stages of the LO transformations, I realized that there was a strong identification among the LG [Leadership Group] members but there were also strong barriers and rigidities to be broken down. I knew that a top-down approach would not be conducive to long-term and sustained change. Once the mindset is changed, the barriers will collapse. And it takes time to change the set ways of thinking. I was inspired by an article written by our former minister . . . who said that leaders of organizations sometimes face the danger of dictating their directives to followers and managing too tightly. A wise leader should allow his followers to express themselves and move at their own pace. It is like herding a school of fish; the leader must set the general direction and not over-control. . . . Instead of directing the commanders to embrace the ideas of LO, I chose to lead by example and "walk the talk" by changing my own actions and approaches. I shared with the LG members the success stories and let them decide for themselves if the LO disciplines would benefit them. In the meantime, the P&O department was tasked to spearhead the communicating, cascading and implementing the changes in police headquarters. We began to reform the way we conduct staff meetings and plan our projects. In terms of the physical structure, we created a learning center and coffee corners to facilitate self-learning and team building.

By late 1998, early signs of attitudinal shifts toward the LO were concentrated largely at the headquarters, as it served as the focal point and launching pad of the fledgling LO movement. The deputy assistant commissioner was encouraged by the milestones achieved by the Leadership Group members:

At the corporate retreat, we came to the realization that people can actually contribute when they are given the chance. When they contribute, they become co-creators of the vision and are able to co-own the product. That was the first time the whole organization's top management came together to discuss our shared vision. CP [commissioner of police] was convinced that that was the style of leadership he wanted and the type of organization we want to become. At those meetings, we want the participants to own the issue. Everyone present should feel involved. We want to create the thinking that "this is our problem, and I can contribute to [solving] it."

**TABLE 2**  
**Barriers to Learning in the National Police Force**

<i>Structural Barriers</i>	<i>Cultural Barriers</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interunit rivalry and turf battles</li> <li>• Work units trying to outdo one another, passing off hard cases</li> <li>• Parochial interests of staff departments specializing in different functions</li> <li>• Decisions made in a top-down manner</li> <li>• Lack of coordination between units</li> <li>• Lessons from mistakes and failures not diffused or shared</li> <li>• Information flows inhibited by rivalry and secrecy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little participative or consultative decision making</li> <li>• Mistakes are not kindly perceived, even well-intentioned ones</li> <li>• Vision is defined and directed from the top management, not collectively owned</li> <li>• Obedience out of fear rather than respect as a definition of discipline</li> <li>• Organizational culture favoring internal distinctions (plainclothes officers better than the uniformed staff)</li> </ul>

**TABLE 3**  
**The Vision of the National Police Force**

Our Shared Vision for the Next Fives Years (1997-2002)
<p><i>Our Purpose:</i> Our purpose is to contribute to the effective governance of Utopia so as to ensure the security, survival, and success of our nation.</p> <p><i>Our Vision Statement:</i> We are a police force that inspires the world. We are the premier public service organization in Utopia. Our dynamism and professionalism are the hallmarks of excellence. We are a force for the nation, helping to build Utopia into our best home.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are united with the community in a strong common purpose. We care for the community that we work in and with. We have a clear, shared understanding with the community of what our respective needs are. In doing so, we share quality partnerships with the community. The community is constantly delighted in finding their expectations met and exceeded by us.</li> <li>• We are feared by those inclined to crime and disorder. Our capabilities and resolute approach serve as strong deterrent.</li> <li>• We treat our people as our most valued asset. Our people see themselves as part of a harmonious community that supports them, sustains relationships, and generates a sense of belonging. Each of us serves and leads, contributing to the objectives of the team we are part of. Our workplace is enjoyable to be in.</li> <li>• We are passionately guided by values of courage, fairness, loyalty, and integrity. Our culture is anchored in sincerity, humility, openness, mutual respect, and mutual trust.</li> </ul>

SOURCE: Planning and Organization Department, National Police Force.

Several commanders were keen to introduce LO concepts to their own units, organizing seminars for shared vision building by key supervisors. A senior staff sergeant who attended such a seminar commented,

During the shared-vision seminar, everyone was rather excited. The junior officers spoke of their personal grievances and hopes for the unit—the openness was there. Officers of various ranks spoke their mind and contributed their views to the vision statement. We felt that we are part of the process and we own the vision.

After this session, the vision was gradually communicated to officers in the unit through briefings and weekly in-service training sessions. Conversations with frontline officers in the divisions, however, indicated that some, if not most, frontline officers were aware of the unit vision but were unable to appreciate how that vision affected their day-to-day work. Indeed, some supervisors lamented that the consultative processes of the LO were time consuming and might have eroded the hierarchical authority of ground supervisors who were sometimes expected to explain their decisions to subordinates or have their behavior questioned by them. As a supervisor observed,

When we tried to disseminate the vision to the men, we found it rather difficult because they were not there to create the vision statement. It is best for the officers to be part of the process, to better understand and accept it. They just want to fight crime and not be bothered with other issues. It can be difficult to convince the men of the new vision because they don't understand how it can help us in our daily work.

#### **Gathering Support From the Authorizing Environment**

Fortuitously, the LO movement found a key sponsor in the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Stories at police headquarters told of the fortuitous events leading the permanent secretary to "the way." The genesis of the LO movement had become legend among the police commanders and staff officers. The commissioner recounted,

The folklore circulating was that our perm sec [permanent secretary in the Ministry of Home Affairs] was attending a seminar in a hotel. During his free time, he was browsing around in the bookstore in the hotel. He came across Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline* and began reading it. Upon reflection, he found the ideas in the book so compelling that he asked me to consider implementing it in the force.

Since the inception of this effort, the Ministry of Home Affairs permanent secretary has been an important supporter. Explaining his support for the LO program in the force and in the Ministry of Home Affairs, he said,

For a long time, I was looking for a way to solve the problems of managing a multidepartmental ministry. We had about seven departments, including the police, in the MHA [Ministry of Home Affairs], and it was always difficult to get the organizations to look beyond their own interests. We had many developmental and technological projects such as the Cantonment Complex that was to house the CID, CNB [Central Narcotics Bureau], and Central Police Division. But this project had to be delayed because it was difficult to get the departments to work together and agree to share the premises. Many of our projects required consultation, communication, and a certain amount of compromise. When I read Peter Senge's book, the ideas provided a way of facilitating broader thinking and teamwork. We tried it out in some joint projects and found that the LO skills helped members form strategic partnerships. The changes are quite significant. I saw significant improvement in the way departmental staff think and relate to one another.

Rather than taking the support and authorization of the minister and permanent secretary for Home Affairs for granted, the NPF's leaders actively kept the authorizing environment informed of the activities and outcomes of its LO transformation. Apart

from keeping them apprised at the police ministerial meetings every 3 months, the police force also presented regular updates of its organizational initiatives through the quarterly Public Service 21 Review Report, a report detailing the milestones in organizational development projects in the agency.

### **Toward Becoming a Learning Organization**

From mid-1997, the P&O department was tasked by the commissioner to be the lead agency strategizing the movement. The P&O department began to initiate changes to staff meetings, information channels, departmental reporting structures, training practices, and the physical environment at headquarters to foster desired changes in staff behavior. The theory: Practice and structures can change attitudes and culture (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990). The police commissioner asserted,

There is power in the philosophy “to be is to do,” but there is also truth in the saying “to do is to be.” We hope to get the people to practice until they see the results and believe in it. The other philosophy is to effect change by convincing [people] of the power of the method. By setting an example, by going down the ranks to talk to the men, and by training and retraining in courses and seminars, we hope to mobilize a shift in their mindsets.

One of the critical events underpinning the shift in mindsets of the NPF’s leaders was a much-publicized case of the force apologizing for its member’s actions. The headlines read: “Police car parked in lot for disabled.” This was yet another reminder to the force of rising public expectations of police professionalism—a writer to the Forum page of an English-language daily paper, *The Straits Times* (April 2, 1998, p. 44), submitted a photograph of a patrol car parked in a handicapped parking lot on Sunday, March 8, 1998.

The commissioner considered the complaint before him and decided that the force should be open and confident enough to make a public apology for the officers’ insensitivity to the needs of the disabled. This was in spite of the fact that the officers in question had good reason for parking in the lot—they were hurrying to respond to a distress call. The driver of the fast-response car in the photograph was attending to an urgent case of a woman calling for help. Upon arriving at the scene, the officers saw a few men running away. They parked the patrol car in the nearest empty parking space, which happened to be for the disabled, to give chase. One of the suspects was eventually detained.

Substantiating the changes in mindset among the police directors and commanders, the deputy assistant commissioner argued,

The CPDF [commissioner of police’s directorate forum] was one of the first meetings to adopt the LO approach. The encouraging results from the change were that more people are willing to speak up, more were willing to listen, and more “undiscussibles” were listed in the agenda. There was greater willingness to revisit old decisions and discuss past mistakes. All these were to unearth the truth and provide lessons for the organization. . . . There was also greater transparency and willingness to admit mistakes. The ground commanders are key to the movement. They must be convinced of the movement. Convincing people of the need for change takes time. But persistence is key.

Following the lead of headquarters, many police units were able to use the latest technologies to promote internal communication, teamwork, and learning. Information on laws, civil service regulations, and police practices were made widely accessible online. The deputy superintendent of the P&O department noted,

One of our strategic plans is to use technology to drive the organizational changes. We now have "electronic forum"—bulletin boards to facilitate internal dialogue and information sharing in the divisions. I was told that participation was very good. Usually the officers discussed issues of staff welfare and pay. But it is also a useful tool for unit commanders to obtain feedback and get a sense of the issues at the frontlines.

By the middle of 1998, practically all police units had set up learning centers with online computer systems for Internet communications and audiovisual equipment for self-instruction. The force also had instituted innovative processes such as after-action reviews to promote individual learning and reflection on the part of its ground operatives. Also, through the Internet, the force has built a growing network of like-minded organizations and persons to exchange ideas and to provide mutual support.

Statistics collated by the Service Development and Inspectorate Department showed a significant drop in the number of substantiated cases of assault and rudeness by police officers as well as in all other forms of public complaints against the force. Complaints about assault were down by 44%, rudeness by 29%, and all other complaints (inefficiency, high-handedness, threat, etc.) were reduced by 15% for the first 10 months of 1998 compared to the same period in 1997. The assistant commissioner and director of the Service Development and Inspectorate Department was optimistic about the prospects for further improvement in the discipline and public image of the force:

I think morale and discipline have improved. When we tell the officers that the organization will treat them fairly and value them, even when they make mistakes, they tend to do their job better and with more pride. This year [by late 1998] we see an almost 50% fall in the number of assaults. The total [number of] substantiated complaints [has] also dropped by 31%.

By mid-1998, the P&O department had lined up a series of evaluative measures: the Organizational Development Survey on the impact of LO reforms; focus group meetings with ground officers; and informal feedback from commanders and dialogue through the police intranet.

The organization development survey of 1,281 NPF staff members showed encouraging signs: 65% of the officers reported that they saw changes in their behavior as a result of the LO transformations, and more than 60% of officers interviewed agreed with the statement "because of shared vision and core values, the management can empower [them] more meaningfully." More than 80% of respondents (up from an estimated 10% to 20%) had become aware of the vision and mission of the force and their units, and 69% of respondents agreed with the statement that a learning culture in the ministry and the NPF is "not a 'nice-to-have' thing but is crucial in ensuring [the force] stay ahead of challenges." Finally, 56% of officers surveyed said they had attended at least one LO training session.

In 1999, the NPF embarked on four more surveys (Customer Satisfaction Survey, Public Perception Survey, Organizational Health Survey, and Utopia Quality Award Survey) to derive data for self-assessment and reporting to higher authorities. These efforts were seen as critical in maintaining the support and interests of the powerful stakeholders in the force's long journey of reform.

### **Skepticism With Organizational Learning**

However, the high level of compliance and the command-and-control mentality that had been inculcated into the culture of this uniform organization might have prevented open voicing of reservations and resistance to the changes mandated from the top echelons.

Internally, the NPF had spent numerous man hours in its team-building and vision-creating meetings in an effort to get as many of its members on board as possible. This was not an easy process, as even high-ranking officers on occasion had expressed skepticism about the LO program. Some had privately expressed reservations as to how a "Western idea" like OL would be relevant in the more conservative Asian context. They felt that the NPF was rushing headlong into new approaches without concern for the older generation and less adaptive officers. Others likened the wholehearted embrace of the LO approaches as an act of "blind faith." One staff officer quipped, "The LO has become a religion in the force! It is the basis for everything we do around here!" Among the older commanders and directors, particularly those without college degrees, comprehending the intricate concepts and profound framework of the LO undoubtedly posed a challenge. Noticeably, in the Leadership Group meetings, the active and vocal advocates of LO ideas and approaches were the younger commanders and directors who have advanced graduate degrees, most of them from renowned universities in the West.

Through the P&O department's efforts, the movement has cascaded down from headquarters to unit commanders, but the commanders often have to deal with skeptical and complacent members who resist or ignore these changes. A sergeant in charge of training in a land division, for example, commented poignantly,

Some officers in our division thought that [the LO] was a big theoretical concept, understood only by graduate officers and intellectuals. Others took the workshops [on the LO] as "the flavor of the month," and they don't see it as a practical tool. Our men are practical people, and they don't care much about such things. They need a lot of training and briefing to convince them that the tools can be used in policing work.

Reflecting on the response of his officers to his new vision and management style, the director of the Logistics Department observed,

Most of our officers are excited about the vision of an open and consultative organization. By nature I want to consult and include people in decision making. But consultation sometimes takes time and effort. Now, some officers may have the impression that I need to consult them on all things. . . . Some of our officers may have had unpleasant experiences in the past. They may have been punished for disciplinary offenses or bypassed in promotion. These find it difficult to see that the force is able to treat them as valued assets. . . . They tend to mistrust the vision.

Nevertheless, the process of diffusion of OL in the force is slowly but steadily bringing members on board. Expressing his optimism about the future growth of the LO transformations, the P&O director observed that the commissioner, staff directors, and commanders were "thinking alone" less and consulting more. He also sensed that decisions and actions by the key police staff are less reactive and more purposeful and mission oriented. However, the journey is still in its early stages.

We have made some distance, but we have a long way to go. It might take another few years before all commanders think along these lines. But LO is associated with modernity, and it excites the young people. The force is getting younger, and our commanders are getting younger. I am sure more and more will find interest in it.

## DISCUSSION

This case study illustrates how the disciplines of the LO can be used in public sector organizations as tools for large-scale organizational change, from conservative and often inefficient bureaucracies to forward-looking and responsive organizations. The NPF was such a traditional authoritarian organization with several barriers to learning built in its corporate culture and structure.

The experience of the NPF has confirmed several guidelines for effective implementation of significant organizational changes. For example, this case illustrates that a bottom-up participative process (e.g., in developing a vision for the future) is important to inculcating a sense of ownership of change initiatives by organizational members and in providing a credible direction toward which to advance through highlighting a gap between a vision and the current reality (Senge, 1990b) and the use of frequent and multifaceted communication to create readiness for organizational change (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993). The case shows, on the other hand, that skeptics and cynics will always exist, and sometimes with good reason; however, the change agents nevertheless have to persevere in their attempts to achieve the requisite organizational changes.

The case also underscores the importance of having a champion to sustain the momentum for proposed changes, in this case the P&O department acting as a policy entrepreneur in change management to take deliberate measures to counter the tendencies of bureaucratic organizations that inhibit learning. It also highlights the importance of the leader (in this case the commissioner) realizing the criticality of giving complete and long-term commitment to the idea of the LO and acting as a role model for the proposed changes (Johnson, 1990; Smircich & Morgan, 1982).

The case has illustrated, moreover, how experiences that contradict existing beliefs and attitudes are highly potent in promoting learning (Feldman, 1986). For example, this occurred when the force publicly apologized for its action of parking a police car in a lot for the disabled. This response by the force would have been entirely unexpected before the onset of the LO journey, and it served as a public symbolic action that showed the officers that the leadership of the force was serious about implementing the LO philosophies and practices.



Finally, the NPF case illustrates that the process of implementation should be shaped by contingencies presented by the organization's environment. In the Utopian context, obtaining support from the authorizing environment is critical for the success of proposed changes. The case illustrates the circumstances by which the LO initiative in the NPF was tacitly authorized by higher political offices, who were also periodically kept up to date with the changes.

However, the NPF case has challenged the applicability of some conventional prescriptions about how organizational change can be more effectively managed. First, it is accepted that incentives and control systems are important levers for change and that they ideally should be altered in support of a desired organizational change (Heracleous & DeVoge, 1998; Johnson, 1992). The analytical underpinnings of this suggestion relate to wider systems ideas supporting the desirability of subsystem alignment and interfunctional integration (Hanna, 1988). The NPF case also has demonstrated the potential complexity of operationalizing this relatively straightforward-sounding suggestion. The constraints and conservatism of public service pay scales have meant that the NPF leadership has been unable to financially and tangibly reward individuals who demonstrate LO behaviors. Therefore, symbolic rewards such as public recognition of individuals at important officers' meetings and "pats on the back" from superior officers were used. Promotions also were influenced by LO considerations, but the leadership could not openly acknowledge this because the officers' perceived adherence and contribution to OL cannot be satisfactorily measured and evaluated within the current staff performance review processes. For instance, the NPF found it much easier to assess individual contribution and achievement in operations than to attribute individual contribution to team success and personal mastery of the learning disciplines.

Although symbolic rewards worked well with higher-level officers, lower-level officers who were not very clear about what the LO was about preferred more tangible rewards, which were not forthcoming. This situation presented an additional and unexpected barrier to change because an effective change lever (incentives and control systems) could not be fully and unambiguously employed to support the organizational changes. This situation illustrates that the use of certain levers for change can be severely constrained by the nature of the organization and its context.

Second, attempting to implement OL in the NPF, which is charged to maintain public safety and to deal with emergencies swiftly and decisively as they arise, requires changes quite different in extent and nature from the usual cultural changes required as public bureaucracies attempt to become more market oriented. A national police force such as the one we studied is in essence a command-and-control organization with a uniform tradition of strict hierarchy. The ideals of the LO, especially those related to empowerment, critical reflection and questioning, and information sharing on an equal footing (which would be more readily applicable to business organizations, for example), not only directly challenge this mindset but, more important, may do so inappropriately given the organization's critical task.

The NPF must not only become a LO but also must retain its predictability and machinelike functionality as a guardian of public safety and an actor of the last resort when dealing with potential emergencies. Such emergencies are not too far away from

citizens' minds (and bodies) in a region of the world where destructive racial and ethnic tensions, state and business corruption, and high levels of crime are a daily reality. The NPF leaders, therefore, are in a much more delicate predicament than most change leaders because they have to deal with a paradox: how to create an organization that embodies LO values but at the same time maintains its machinelike functionality and predictability when the crucial time comes for unquestioningly following orders from superiors. To date, the NPF has been struggling with this paradox.

Third, the nature of the organization creates specific problems that have to be dealt with, such as passive resistance. Passive resistance is harder to address than active resistance because the change agents do not know who is resisting the changes, how, or why. Acknowledging the antipathies toward the LO transformations in the middle- and lower-ranking officers of the force, the NPF change agents are taking a long-term view of the process. They seek to win over the skeptics and laggards by consistently role modeling the behaviors associated with OL, giving LO training, and offering public praise of success stories.

Fourth, although various approaches to change management (on a continuum from education and communication to coercion) have been addressed, the type of change that is appropriate and feasible (transformational/incremental change and its timing) has not received enough attention (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). The task of the NPF did not simply pose a paradox when compared with LO ideals but also influenced the type and timing of change that was feasible. Swift transformational change often is necessary for business organizations to survive when a large "strategic drift" is created between the organization's strategy and environment (Johnson, 1987). In these cases, incremental change is not sufficient to close the gap in the time available. In the NPF's case, however, even though transformational change was ultimately desired, it could not be carried out swiftly because any lapse in the organization's functionality potentially could have disastrous consequences for public safety. Reengineering, for example, in this case would have been both unfeasible and undesirable. The NPF ultimately has to achieve transformational change additively, in an incremental fashion. The nature of the organizational task, therefore, is an important consideration with regard to the type and timing of change that is appropriate and feasible.

The NPF case not only confirmed several aspects of conventional wisdom in change management but also has raised consideration of unexpected issues that are not fully accounted for by existing theory. First, the important change levers of incentives and control systems may be severely constrained because of the nature of the organization and employee characteristics. Second, the organizational task may (appropriately) pose a potent paradox to implementing LO ideals, something that change leaders nevertheless have to find a way to deal with. Third, the organizational tradition and culture may lead to specific problems such as passive resistance, where consistent encouragement and role modeling by top-level NPF leaders and the use of training to win officers over to LO ideas is required. Fourth, the organization's mission and tasks can shape both the type and timing of the change that is appropriate to its situation.

Collectively, these observations show that change management prescriptions are not universal. Rather, their appropriateness is shaped by the organizational task, culture, and context. This fact puts further pressure on change leaders and organization

developers to be sensitive to these factors, to change their approach according to the situation, and not to expect to merely apply conventional recipes for change that may or may not be appropriate given the specific situation. This raises the competency bar in an area that is inherently complex and where accumulated experience is not necessarily beneficial in terms of improving executive competence in change management (Church, Javitch, Waclawski, & Burke, 1996).

## REFERENCES

- Argyris, C. (1977). Double loop learning in organizations. *Harvard Business Review*, September-October, pp. 115-125.
- Armenakis, A. A., Harris, S. G., & Mossholder, K. W. (1993). Creating readiness for organizational change. *Human Relations*, 46, 681-703.
- Baldwin, T. T., Danielson, C., & Wiggenhorn, W. (1997). The evolution of learning strategies in organizations. *Academy of Management Executive*, 11(4), 47-58.
- Bate, P., Khan, R., & Pye, A. (2000). Culturally sensitive structuring: An action research-based approach to organization development and design. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 23, 445-470.
- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. London: Intertext.
- Beer, M., & Eisenstat, R. A. (1996). Developing an organization capable of implementing strategy and learning. *Human Relations*, 49, 597-619.
- Beer, M., Eisenstat, R. A., & Spector, B. (1990). Why change programs don't produce change. *Harvard Business Review*, November-December, pp. 4-12.
- Church, A., Javitch, M., Waclawski, J., & Burke, W. (1996). Managing organizational change: What you don't know might hurt you. *Career Development International*, 1-2, 25-30.
- De Geus, A. P. (1988). Planning as learning. *Harvard Business Review*, March-April, pp. 70-74.
- Dodgson, M. (1993). Organizational learning: A review of some literatures. *Organization Studies*, 14, 375-394.
- Drysdale, J. (1985). *In Service of the Nation*. Singapore: Federal Publications.
- Easterby-Smith, M. (1997). Disciplines of organizational learning: Contributions and critiques. *Human Relations*, 50, 1085-1113.
- Feldman, J. (1986). On the difficulty of learning from experience. In H. P. Sims, Jr., & D. A. Gioia (Eds.), *The thinking organization* (pp. 263-292). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fiol, C. M., & Lyles, M. A. (1985). Organizational learning. *Academy of Management Review*, 10, 803-813.
- Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1991). *Social cognition*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Garvin, D. A. (1993). Building a learning organization. *Harvard Business Review*, July-August, pp. 78-91.
- Golembiewski, R. (1999). Shortfalls of public administration as empirical science. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 23, 3-17.
- Hanna, D. 1988. *Designing organizations for high performance*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Heracleous, L., & Barrett, M. (in press). Organization change as discourse: Communicative actions and deep structures in the context of IT implementation. *Academy of Management Journal*.
- Heracleous, L., & DeVoge, S. (1998). Bridging the gap of relevance: Strategic management and organizational development. *Long Range Planning*, 31, 742-754.
- Heracleous, L., & Langham, B. (1996). Strategic change and organizational culture at Hay Management Consultants. *Long Range Planning*, 29, 485-494.
- Huber, G. P. (1991). Organizational learning: The contributing processes and the literatures. *Organization Science*, 2, 88-115.
- Johnson, G. (1987). *Strategic change and the management process*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- Johnson, G. (1988). Rethinking incrementalism. *Strategic Management Journal*, 9, 75-91.
- Johnson, G. (1990). Managing strategic change: The role of symbolic action. *British Journal of Management*, 1, 183-200.

- Johnson, G. (1992). Managing strategic change: Strategy, culture and action. *Long Range Planning*, 25, 28-36.
- Kim, D. H. (1993). The link between individual and organizational learning. *Sloan Management Review*, 35(1), 37-50.
- Kotter, J., & Schlesinger, L. (1979). Choosing strategies for change. *Harvard Business Review*, March-April, pp. 4-11.
- Levitt, B., & March, J. G. (1988). Organizational learning. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 14, 319-340.
- Lewin, K. (1947a). Frontiers in group dynamics I. *Human Relations*, 1, 5-41.
- Lewin, K. (1947b). Frontiers in group dynamics II. *Human Relations*, 1, 143-153.
- Lipshitz, R., Popper, M., & Oz, S. (1996). Building learning organizations: The design and implementation of organizational learning mechanisms. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 32, 292-305.
- March, J. G. (1962). The business firm as a political coalition. *Journal of Politics*, 24, 662-678.
- Miller, D., & Mintzberg, H. (1983). The case for configuration. In G. Morgan (Ed.), *Beyond Method* (pp. 57-73). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Mintzberg, H. (1981). Organization design: Fashion or fit? *Harvard Business Review*, January-February, pp. 103-116.
- Mintzberg, H. (1985). The organization as political arena. *Journal of Management Studies*, 22, 133-154.
- Nonaka, I. (1991). The knowledge creating company. *Harvard Business Review*, November-December, pp. 97-104.
- Pedler, M., Boydell, T., & Burgoyne, J. (1989). Towards the learning company. *Management Education and Development*, 20(1), 1-8.
- Pettigrew, A. (1987). Context and action in the transformation of the firm. *Journal of Management Studies*, 24, 649-670.
- Popper, L., & Lipshitz, R. (1998). Organizational learning mechanisms: A structural and cultural approach to organizational learning. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 34, 161-179.
- Popper, L., & Lipshitz, R. (2000). Organizational learning: Mechanisms, culture and feasibility. *Management Learning*, 31, 181-196.
- Schein, E. (1992). *Organizational culture and leadership* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schein, E. (1993). How can organizations learn faster? The challenge of entering the green room. *Sloan Management Review*, 34(2), 85-92.
- Senge, P. M. (1990a). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.
- Senge, P. M. (1990b). The leader's new work: Building learning organizations. *Sloan Management Review*, Fall, pp. 7-23.
- Smircich, L., & Morgan, G. (1982). Leadership: The management of meaning. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 18, 257-273.
- Susman, G. I., & Evered, R. D. (1978). An assessment of the scientific merits of action research. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 23, 582-603.