

# G R A S P I N G

TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPT OF THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION IS LIKE TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPT OF AN ELEPHANT—WHILE BLINDFOLDED. YOUR PERCEPTION OF THE WHOLE IS DETERMINED BY THE PART THAT IS CLOSEST TO YOU. WHEN PRACTITIONERS GATHERED TO DISCUSS LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS, THEIR CONVERSATIONS SHOWED HOW FAR WE HAVE COME AND HOW FAR WE HAVE TO GO IN TRANSLATING THE THEORY OF LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS INTO PRACTICE.

# THE LEARNING

Right now—explain what a “learning organization” is and does. Can you answer completely? Perhaps you’d prefer to turn the tables—if you could grill other practitioners about learning organizations, what would you ask them?

In a recent series of focus groups, HRD professionals and frontline managers had the chance to take turns as explainers and interrogators, sharing what they already know about learning organizations and telling what they would like to know.

Nearly 50 practitioners representing most regions of the United States participated in the focus groups.

Participants included senior trainers, HRD managers, line managers, and internal and external OD consultants. They represented private industry, universities, and government agencies, including Apple Computers, Amdahl, ASTD, Cable & Wireless Communications, General Electric, George Washington University, Hewlett-Packard, Levi-Strauss, Martin Marietta, Marriott Corporation, Pacific Gas & Electric, U.S. Defense Information Systems Agency, U.S. Office of Personnel Management, and Westinghouse.

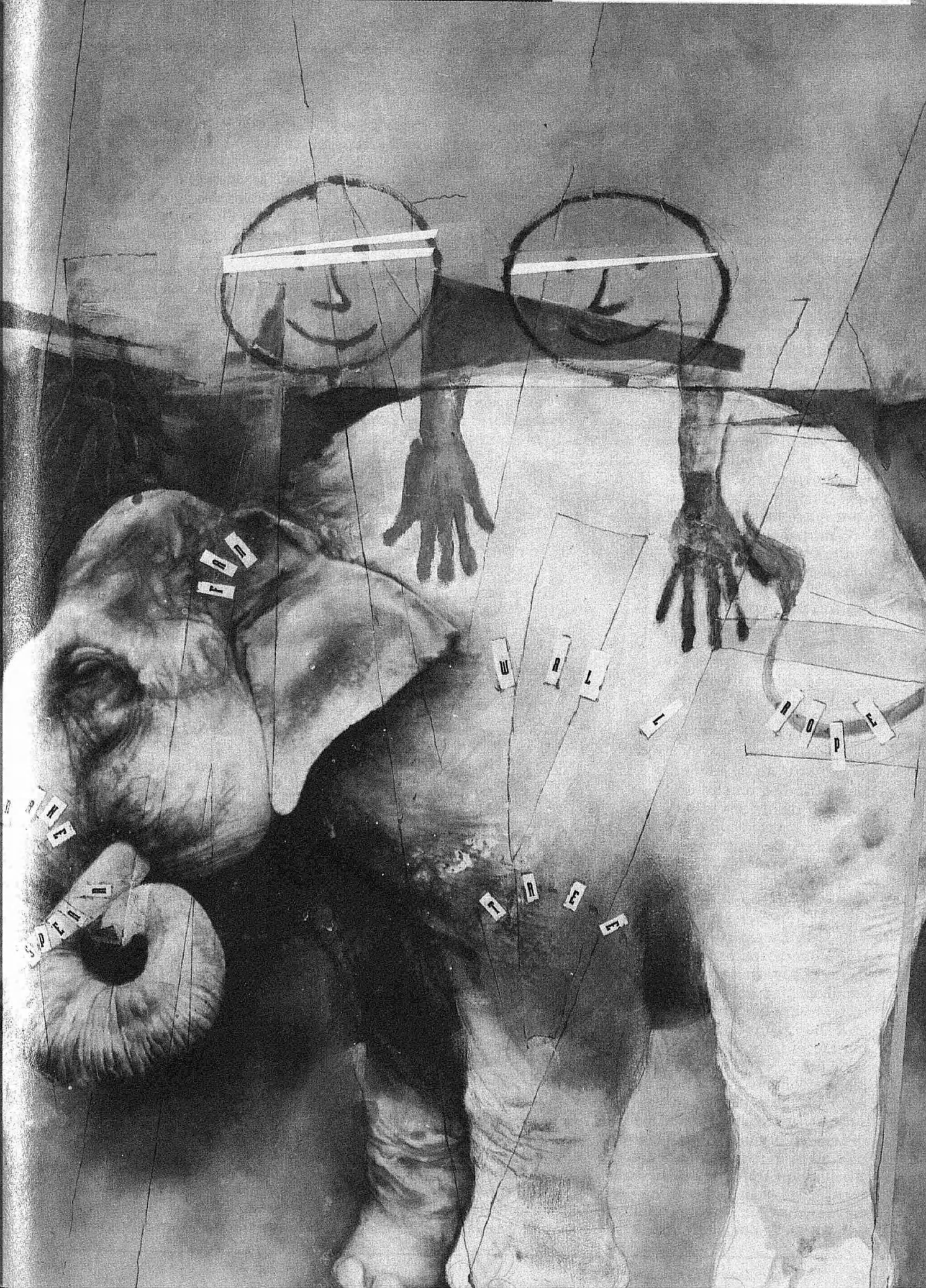
We designed the five sessions to elicit different ideas and perspectives

about learning organizations. Using David Bohm’s concept of “dialogue,” we asked the dozen or so participants at each one-day session to view each other as inquiring colleagues, suspend their assumptions, and explore possibilities, rather than advocate their points of view. We asked them to explore freely their beliefs, expectations, and questions about learning organizations.

We restricted our roles to clarifying their discussion agendas, keeping the conversation on track, managing time, relating topics and themes when needed, and handling other basic facilitation tasks.

# ORGANIZATION

BY GENE CALVERT, SANDRA MOBLEY, AND LISA MARSHALL





Among other things, participants addressed such questions as these:

- ▶ What definitions of a learning organization make sense?
- ▶ What distinguishes organizational learning from individual learning?
- ▶ What does a learning organization look like and how can it be measured?
- ▶ Would training and development specialists play different roles inside a learning organization?

### Grasping the elephant

Like the blind characters examining an elephant in the ancient fable, participants' answers depended on what parts of the concept they grasped. Each person started with some preconceptions. No one could articulate precisely why and how some organizations learn better than others.

Participants weighed the merits of nearly 20 definitions of a learning organization, debating which one explained the concept most lucidly and usefully. They also discussed how the definition of organizational learning differs from the definition of a learning organization.

Participants preferred definitions they considered concrete and nonacademic. Many tried to amend and combine definitions to produce a complete and precise one; these efforts proved difficult and perplexing.

Ultimately, the definition of a learning organization offered by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline* most consistently captured the hearts and minds of participants: "Where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together."

Most participants preferred the definition of organizational learning offered by Nancy Dixon of George Washington University: "The intentional action of an organization to continuously transform itself through both adaptive and innovative learning."

According to the focus groups, "the learning organization" describes an organization that excels at advanced, systematic, collective learning. "Organizational learning" refers to methods of collective learning. This distinction in meaning suggests three useful, if debatable, conclusions:

- ▶ All organizations learn. (In other words, they use organizational learning methods.)
- ▶ All organizations learn at different levels of proficiency and at different paces.
- ▶ To become a "learning organization," an organization must find ways to make learning more intentional and more systemic.

apply it—which they readily admitted. Learning organizations are works-in-progress, both conceptually and practically.

Participants agreed on many criteria for learning organizations. Learning organizations, they said, employ a distinctive set of learning strategies and tactics. Their learning differs from that of other organizations; for example, in its effectiveness, productivity, adaptiveness, and link to achieving goals.

But participants also decided that descriptions of learning organizations sometimes muddle understanding. Some organizations meet certain criteria yet learn ineffectively or inefficiently. Other organizations fail to meet criteria, yet learn productively.

The answer, participants suggested, can be found in key characteristics of learning organizations, which are difficult to articulate—the characteristics that create the conditions for learning. Collectively, these catalysts might be described as an organization's spirit, or its character.

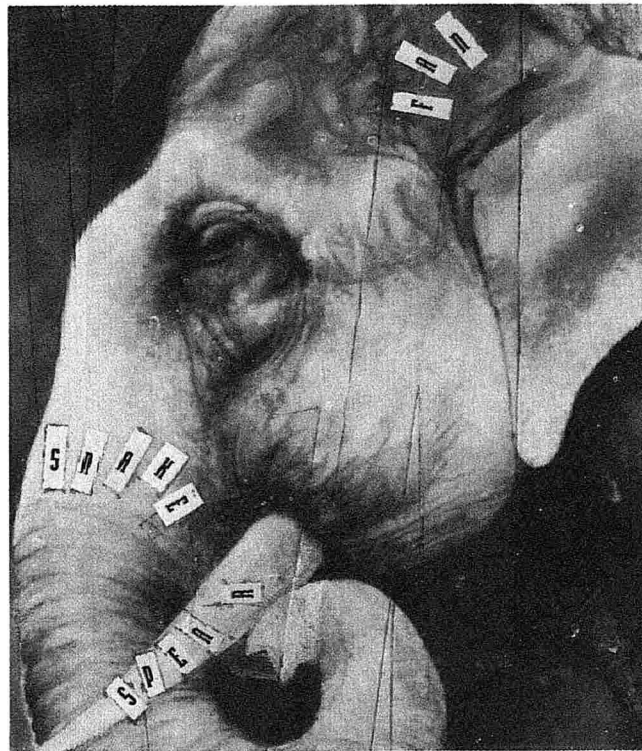
### Avoid the magic bullet

The allure and the elusiveness of the learning organization make it tempting for organizations to seize the notion in order to fulfill any number of needs, from a quick fix, to a boost for a sagging TQM initiative.

Participants warned of the potential for organizations to latch onto the concept of the learning organization as a magic bullet. They cautioned each other against moving too quickly to label any organization as a learning organization. Trendy phrases used to excess can generate a backlash—the total-quality-management movement offers an example.

Participants agreed that organizational learning, like quality, happens in small steps taken with strong commitment and clear intention throughout the organization. "Breakthrough" experiences are few and far between.

As focus-group discussions unfolded, examples of learning organizations



### Silence and a blank flipchart

Given that all organizations learn, for good or ill, how do learning organizations differ from other organizations? If you take away from us our security-blanket copies of *The Fifth Discipline* or any book by Chris Argyris, what do we actually know about learning organizations and organizational learning?

Faced with silence and a blank flipchart, participants gave off-the-top-of-their-heads responses to this question that showed they know a lot about learning-organization theory, but far less about how to

in-the-making emerged. For example:

▶ Martin Marietta gathers all of its engineers at the completion of a project to capture lessons learned and to share this information with other teams.

▶ Cable and Wireless Communications provides training budgets to self-managed teams to enable them to take responsibility for their own learning. This forces the training department to be unusually flexible and expert in offering just-in-time support.

▶ AT&T eliminated most corporate vice-presidents. Instead, operating managers meet with the CEO once a month for two days so they can update each other, work more synergistically, and learn more collaboratively.

From these and other real-world examples emerged some of the ways HRD professionals and line managers can advance or slow down the process of intentionally developing a learning organization.

Strategies that seem to encourage organizational learning include talking about learning with the learner's vocabulary, making learning tangible, and addressing the learner's work priorities. Conversely, actions that diminish organizational learning include using professional jargon, being "the expert," and solving hypothetical problems.

Examples suggest that HRD specialists and managers can use case studies of organizational learning to develop broad strategies for fostering more effective learning in their own organizations.

### **The moose on the table**

Although we asked participants what learning organizations learn, what they look like, and how to start building one, we did not ask an important question: "What *should* learning organizations learn?"

Based on the dialogue that took place, we speculate that in response to this query, participants would have cited such knowledge as environmental scanning and rigorous verification—and truth-telling.

Within a true learning organization, learners will know how to talk honestly with each other about what is really happening, both inside and outside the organization. Within a true learning organization, people learn to

### **What Does a Learning Organization Learn?**

What do learning organizations learn that other organizations do not? Learning organizations learn

- ▶ to use learning to reach their goals
- ▶ to help people value the effects of their learning on their organizations
- ▶ to avoid making the same mistakes again (and again)
- ▶ to share information in ways that prompt appropriate action

- ▶ to link individual performance with organizational performance
- ▶ to tie rewards to key measures of performance
- ▶ to take in a lot of environmental information at all times
- ▶ to create structures and procedures that support the learning process
- ▶ to foster ongoing and orderly dialogues
- ▶ to make it safe for people to share openly and take risks.

### **What Does a Learning Organization Look Like?**

A learning organization

- ▶ learns collaboratively, openly, and across boundaries
- ▶ values *how* it learns as well as *what* it learns
- ▶ invests in staying ahead of the learning curve in its industry
- ▶ gains a competitive edge by learning faster and smarter than competitors
- ▶ turns data into useful knowledge quickly and at the right time and place
- ▶ enables every employee to feel that every experience provides him or her a chance to learn something potentially useful, even if only for

leveraging future learning

- ▶ exhibits little fear and defensiveness; rewards and learns from what goes wrong ("failure" learning) and right ("success" learning)
- ▶ takes risks but avoids jeopardizing basic security of the organization.
- ▶ invests in experimental and seemingly tangential learning
- ▶ supports people and teams who want to pursue action-learning projects
- ▶ depoliticizes learning by not penalizing individuals or groups for sharing information and conclusions.

### **How Does a Learning Organization Evolve?**

What are the first steps to becoming a learning organization? A budding learning organization can begin by

- ▶ questioning current assumptions about learning
- ▶ getting an outside perspective
- ▶ tying the goal of becoming a learning organization to its organizational vision
- ▶ finding or creating a champion in top management

- ▶ looking for the "pain" in the organization—the place where more effective learning could help
- ▶ articulating learning-organization ideas plainly
- ▶ rewarding group as well as individual learning success and failure
- ▶ finding an external enemy to spur greater cooperative learning
- ▶ finding ways to collaborate internally in and unhampered by boundaries.

say the unsayable—to point out, as representatives from Westinghouse put it, that there is a sick moose on the table, and to ask for help in diagnosing and curing it.

Clear organizational learning goals must be rooted in honest assessments of the current learning envi-

ronment. Truth-telling short-circuits what Chris Argyris calls "skilled incompetence"—defensive routines born of fear, which perpetuate inaccurate and unreal perceptions and prevent organizational learning from happening. Organizations that learn the best engage in double-loop



## Better Learning and the Bottom Line

What connections do trainers, line managers, and consultants see between organizational learning and organizational profitability?

When organizational learning directly addresses operations—for example, as with training for TQM—people are less likely to question the positive connection between organizational learning and profitability. The same could be said of any training initiative targeted at improving organizational productivity and performance.

Focus groups addressed the connection between organizational learning and profits by contrasting the positive effects learning has on profits with the negative effects that

occur when no learning takes place.

Consider, for example, the effect on the bottom line of unsolved customer problems or missed new-market opportunities. Compare those scenarios with the bottom-line gains that would be realized if a company learned to solve customer problems or exploit new-markets.

Participants suggested ways that organizational learning can increase profits. Organizations can use learning to better their bottom lines by

- ▶ using action learning to solve business problems or seize business opportunities
- ▶ reflecting on learning experiences,

such as asking what prevented or permitted seeing better solutions

- ▶ improving processes by learning from more knowledgeable people
- ▶ developing awareness of the gains that can be squeezed from mistakes and successes
- ▶ shortening competitive cycles, as in developing new products more quickly
- ▶ helping management to recognize learning as a factor that affects the bottom line
- ▶ increasing individual and group accountability for learning
- ▶ leveraging key learning points, such as learning to acquire the most critical data, not all data.

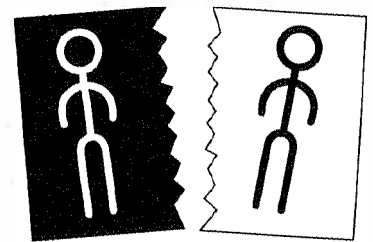
learning—they look at the beliefs and values they hold and notice how these affect their behavior and, in turn, the solutions they create.

Senge calls this kind of learning “personal mastery”: The ability of

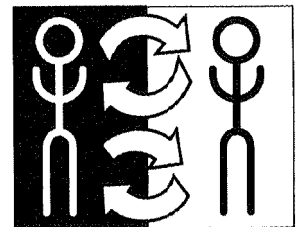
individuals and their organizations to examine their mental models, the behaviors that arise from those models, and the effect both mental models and behavior have on their organizations’ systems.

Just visualizing what a learning organization would look like poses an enormous task. Creating or sustaining one is even more daunting. Senge himself notes that the concept called the learning organization has yet to be

# Human Potential Lost.



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JUST VISUALIZING  
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ORGANIZATION IS AN  
ENORMOUS TASK

"reduced to practice," as engineers describe the process of turning ideas into working prototypes.

Participating in the focus groups enabled participants to examine their own and others' mental models. Pooling their perceptions brought the organizational elephant called a learning organization into sharper focus.

But many participants urged their colleagues to risk staying confused or curious for a while about the nature and implementation of the learning organization. Instead of devising instant and unproven answers, they suggested that the role of HRD professionals may be to ask fresh and constructive questions—to act as master learners who use the art of not knowing to strengthen the learning process, as well as the results. ■

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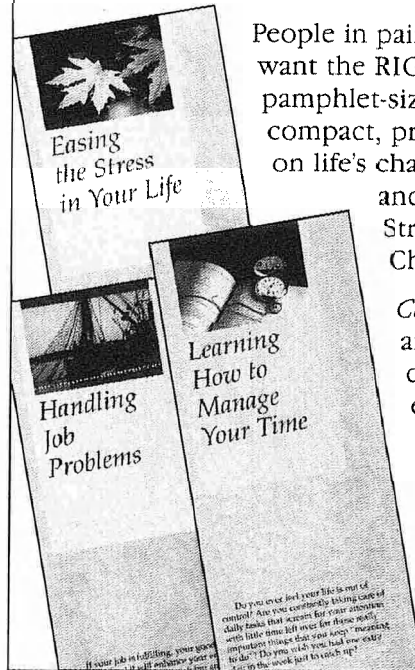
The authors thank the focus-group participants for their creative questions and candid insights.

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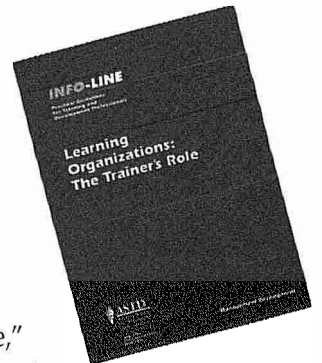
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