

Organizational Learning Interview

with

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In a recent interview, Mike was asked the following questions about Organizational Learning. All of these questions are frequently asked questions (FAQs), so we would like to share Mike's responses here.

INTERVIEWER: How do you define Organizational Learning?

MIKE: I define Organizational Learning as “the processes used to acquire new learning, capture that learning, and transfer that learning to other organizational members.”

INTERVIEWER: So, is Organizational Learning the same thing as training & development?

MIKE: No, training & development (T&D) is only a small part of Organizational Learning. As you know, corporate training budgets have been dramatically cut. The traditional delivery of training through corporate classrooms will continue to decline.

INTERVIEWER: How will knowledge-driven companies survive if they do not offer training & development (T&D) for employees?

MIKE: T&D will survive, but will be replaced to a large extent by more efficient learning opportunities.

For example, self-directed learning (SDL) will replace much of the trainer-directed classroom learning. So, companies must understand how to encourage, support, and reward SDL.

INTERVIEWER: So, will e-learning become the sole delivery method for organizational learning?

MIKE: Well, the term “e-learning” is not interchangeable with SDL. As we all know, e-learning is a poor delivery method for certain types of learning. Many universities and corporations wasted enormous amounts of money by jumping on the e-learning bandwagon in the 1990s. The result was a “dot-com” type disaster.

INTERVIEWER: What are some of the other developments you see happening in organizational learning?

MIKE: One major development is the creation of corporate universities (CUs). CUs are the “coordinators” of all organizational learning, not the “providers.” As the coordinators, they seek out the best learning opportunities from not only in-house experts but also from external providers, such as independent trainers, for-profit private schools, and traditional universities. There are more than 1,000 CUs in operation today.

INTERVIEWER: Is Organizational Learning the same thing as Knowledge Management?

MIKE: No, Knowledge Management (KM) is a term usually used by information technology (IT) experts who are interested in building large electronic databases of codified knowledge. Capturing and transferring codified knowledge is only part of

what is needed to be captured and transferred in organizations.

INTERVIEWER: Are you saying that some knowledge can not be captured and stored in an electronic database?

MIKE: Yes, that's right. In fact, some of the most important knowledge, known as "tacit" knowledge, can not be codified. Tacit knowledge includes the practitioner knowledge that is accumulated over many years of practice. It's very valuable, but you can't find it in a book or database.

INTERVIEWER: How can tacit knowledge be transferred?

MIKE: Tacit knowledge is best transferred through face-to-face interactions, in what's called a "personalized" KM system (as opposed to a "codified" system). Communities of practice are a wonderful way to transfer tacit knowledge.

INTERVIEWER: What is a Community of Practice?

MIKE: A Community of Practice (CP) is a community of practitioners who gather together periodically to discuss practice issues. These CPs are made up of practitioners in the same profession (e.g., accountants, sales professionals, financial planners, dentists, psychologists). I meet for lunch once per month with a group of professional speakers and consultants in Charlotte, NC. It takes me two hours to drive to the meeting from my home in Greensboro, NC. I have not missed a meeting in over a year.

INTERVIEWER: There is a lot of literature available on

leadership development. Are there any critical aspects of leadership development that organizations need to improve today?

MIKE: Yes. Succession planning has become critical at companies where aging baby-boomers are near retirement. And, expatriate training and support has become critically important for companies operating internationally.

INTERVIEWER: You are recognized as a leading authority on Professional Development. Is Professional Development different from leadership development?

MIKE: Yes, Professional Development focuses on the needs of in-house consultants (e.g., CPAs, lawyers, HR professionals, IT professionals, trainers, and engineers). Professionals maintain two allegiances: one to their company, and one to their profession. Many professional development needs can not be met in-house. Professional societies and communities of practice (discussed earlier) are essential contributors to professional growth.

INTERVIEWER: The title of your upcoming book is “Strategic Organizational Learning.” What’s the significance of the word “strategic?”

MIKE: I believe everything in the organization, and I mean everything, should be driven by the strategic plan. This includes organizational learning (OL). OL requires an on-going commitment of time, people, and money. OL efforts must contribute to the implementation of the strategic plan.

INTERVIEWER: When will “Strategic Organizational Learning”

be available?

MIKE: The publication date is May 2005. It should be available on Amazon.com in mid-June.

Conclusion

The information discussed in this interview is, of course, only a brief overview of the practice of organizational learning. Dr. Beitler teaches an entire course on organizational learning in the MBA program at the University of North Carolina - Greensboro. For more information on organizational learning check out Mike's book, "Strategic Organizational Learning."

<http://www.strategic-organizational-learning.com/>

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