



Employer Answers IN THE WORKPLACE Creating a Learning Organization

Glen Fahs
Director, Training & Organization Development
Cascade Employers Association

As part of SEDCOR's alliance with Cascade Employers Association, this feature appears periodically in the Enterprise. Cascade provides employment knowledge and support in the areas of human resource management, employment law compliance, training, pay information, safety and employee benefits.

In the October T&D Magazine cover story, “*Passion for Learning: the 40 Best Learning Organizations of 2008*,” the **American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)** noted that excellent Learning Organizations: “. . . linked learning to business strategies, created a culture that encourages and instills learning across all levels of the organization, and developed learning initiatives that promote teamwork, leadership, and growth.”

Most Marion and Polk County organizations are smaller than the 300 employee or larger BEST winners that ASTD identified, and most are not as ambitious about developing a learning culture. Is yours? Or are your leaders too busy focusing on production, customer service, and quality that they forget that planning, communication, and learning are the keys to improving the very things on which they want to focus. If we are not changing from good to great these days, we are slipping backward.

Learning Organizations are innovative, collaborative, and successful. Employees at all levels share what they do well, what goes wrong, and what they are learning from studying both internal and external patterns and ideas. They are committed to continuous improvement and accountability. One of the great attractions of becoming a Learning Organization is that it doesn't matter what size or industry you are. You can even create a mini-learning organization in your own team.

- **Platt Electric** is Oregon's best example of a Learning Organization, based on hiring (good learners only), training, partnering with vendors, and bottom line results. But Platt has long had the advantage of a strong, enthusiastic training manager and very supportive owner.
- **Hanard Machine** had a more “old fashioned” culture. It was not taking advantage of its well-established expertise, and decided change was needed. The management team had Cascade partner with them on:
 - o An **Employee Opinion Survey**, conducted to identify what was most satisfying, what was most frustrating, and what suggestions employees had for improvement.
 - o Hiring a **full-time HR manager** to improve both systems and spirit.
 - o Four **employee sessions** (in four groups) identifying issues and improving team work.
 - o Six half days with managers to improve leadership and collaboration.
 - o An **Employee Involvement Committee** to provide access for employee concerns and process improvement ideas.

The results have been great for teamwork at all levels, employee commitment, and productivity clearly tied to bottom line success.

- The **State of Oregon** in the late '80s and early '90s had **Fred Miller**, a former Economics Professor at #2 below the Governor. As Director of the Executive Department (later the

Department of Administrative Services) the State showed it could convert its large, diverse, and bureaucratic culture to a Learning Organization. Fred had innovative practices featured every week at agency head meetings. The results were great innovation, efficient use of resources, and collaboration across agencies.

- Consortia of Food Processing, Metals, High Performance, and Secondary Wood Processing in Marion, Polk, and Yamhill counties are sharing what they learn and getting funding from the **Enterprise for Employment and Education** for in-depth leadership and technical training, as well as follow up coaching. Many are also applying the principles of lean manufacturing and process improvement.

The results in improved leadership, reduced cycle time, prevention of problems, and bottom line success have been impressive. While there is great variety in all these organizations, nearly all have continued to invest and see benefits from their learning.

But what if you are a smaller organization? Is being small a disadvantage? In some ways, but most people prefer the flexibility, efficiency, and caring that surfaces in smaller organizations, helping them believe that “small is beautiful!” In fact, the ratings of small employers in Portland Magazine's Best 100 Employers in Oregon and Southwest Washington are higher than larger employers. As an individual, you can have a powerful influence over the entire system.

For an easy-to-read book, check out “*Ten Steps to a Learning Organization*”. For discussion, contact Cascade's Glen Fahs, Ph.D. in Adult Education and Organization Development, at 503-485-5927 or email gfhahs@cascadeemployers.com. Glen not only gives advice, he learns from your experiences.

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4068 Hudson Avenue NE, Salem, OR 97301 • 503.585.4320 • Fax 503.585.4322
www.cascadeemployers.com