

# Re-floating Stranded Organisations

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*Virtually no concept in management development is as popular as that of the learning organisation, judging by the stream of publications exploring it. Since its introduction in the 1980s it has become almost an integral part of everyday business practice, as virtually every organisation tries to keep pace and wants to learn to adapt even better and faster to its changing environment. But how is a leader or manager to choose from the vast range of interventions targeted at learning, changing and development? And how to choose the right approach and the right focus for its application? This article explores the state of the art of the learning organisation and tries to give specific, practical suggestions.*

**KEYWORDS:** Learning organisation, intervention, change management

## **Organisations that become stranded**

**I**t's not just people who can get stuck, organisations get stuck too (Critchley & Casey, 1989). They can become stuck with a strategy that doesn't fit, a market that isn't developing, or circumstances that don't turn out as predicted. They can also become stuck with a leadership style that isn't working or an organisational culture that is driving the best professionals away. Many organisations are accustomed to rapidly changing conditions and the need to improve and professionalise on an

ongoing basis. But sometimes, in meeting that need, they end up in a dead end street where more of the same only leads to further problems.

Solutions to this problem of 'stuck-ness' have come thick and fast in recent decades and, with careful exploration, an organisation can often successfully re-float itself. Change professionals are increasingly aware of the options available to them and where they might take action in the enormous complexity of a large organisation in order to 'revitalise' it. This article identifies the points where action can be taken and gives an example of a conversation aimed at revitalising an organisation. Thus it

describes ways to re-float 'stranded' organisations and contrasts them with a number of traps which merely make the stuck-ness worse. Unfortunately, professionals and managers still too often fall into one or other of these traps.

Since the introduction of 'learning organisations' (Argyris & Schön, 1976, and Senge, 1990), this concept has held a great attraction for many but has also raised many questions. In my view, its attraction lies mainly in the general appeal of learning and of the suggested links between personal learning, learning with colleagues and institutional learning. The questions are connected mainly with the inherent complexity of the concept and its internal contradiction ('is it actually possible to learn *and* to organise? Are those terms not essentially antithetical?' – Weick & Westley, 1996). Others claim that merely talking about 'learning organisations' is evidence of unjustified reification and anthropomorphism (Stacey, 2003), or, as I would term it, 'anthropofication'. Although I accept all of these criticisms, I believe that the concept of 'learning organisations' does have value in practice: people in organisations often understand what you are talking about and concede that, for them, much depends on the extent to which their 'organisation' is a 'learning organisation'. They relate the abstract concepts to specific challenges that they face. Still, it is worthwhile to remind ourselves regularly that there is no authority that can tell us where 'the' organisation starts and ends, and to what extent 'the' organisation is learning or stranded.

Classifications of 'learning/working methods' such as those discussed below, and choices between them, have been described previously (see, for example, French & Bell, 1995, or Langdon, 1999), but we still lack clear criteria to enable us to differentiate between different learning/working methods.

### ***Three potential traps in re-floating organisations***

When faced with a stranded organisation, it is very difficult to assess what action is needed, and when. Usually, there is no consensus on the

fact that the organisation is stranded, let alone on *how* it is stranded and *what* to do about it. What usually makes 'stuck-ness' particularly complicated is the fact that there are always many different views about what is going on in the organisation, and that either everyone is clinging to a similarly restricted view of the situation, or different parties are clinging to totally irreconcilable views. The risk of making the wrong decision is enormous. In my experience, these are the three most common ways in which wrong decisions are arrived at:

1. Problem and solution coexist in people's minds, so they already have an idea of the solution to their 'stuck-ness'. This is when the solution becomes the problem and the suggested approach is usually just more of the same, a simple repackaging of something that has already failed to work in the past.
2. People in the organisation take action where they can, which is where circumstances create opportunities for intervention. This often leads to a reification or personalisation of the 'stuck-ness'. The vast complexity of the issues is reduced to a single person or a single thing that is the 'cause of all evil'. The entire re-floating campaign then becomes focused on a single person or group of people – or everyone puts their weight behind a slogan such as 'a deal is a deal!' or 'customers first!'.
3. People in the organisation focus mainly on solutions and less on the way towards any solution. Often the conversation now circles around scale and around who should be involved: 'do we need an individual approach (such as coaching or mentoring)?' 'Or should we in fact do something in small groups (such as peer consultation, action learning, or learning networks)?' 'Or is the whole organisation affected and should we introduce an organisation-wide intervention (large-scale strategic conferences, future search, or strategic learning)?' It is, however, all too easy to focus only on scale and to

distinguish between approaches merely on that basis.

These three traps have been pointed out before, e.g. by Watzlawick, Weakland & Frisch in their book *Change* (1974). They call the first variant, in which an organisation is convinced both of the problem and of the solution, “more of the same”. The second variant, in which an organisation locates the problem where one exists, is referred to as “terrible simplifications”. And the third variant, in which an organisation locates the solution where none exists, is described as the “Utopia syndrome” (Watzlawick, Weakland & Frisch, 1974).

### **Four questions to ask when re-floating an organisation**

The art in choosing the right learning/working method is to refrain as long as possible from defining and pinning down both problem and solution. The aim is then to initiate and prolong as open and in-depth a conversation as possible about what is going on – and for whom. This conversation about the situation is in fact part of every intervention and in my view at least as important as the interventions themselves. An ongoing ‘good conversation’ about what is happening is essential for the success of whichever approach is adopted. Over the years I have developed a number of questions for these conversations, questions which seem to be sufficiently probing and surprising yet also

broad enough not to ‘crystallise’ the problem or solution. There are four of these questions, and I often ask them in this order.

1. *Are the issues work-related or pervasive?*  
Can the ‘stuck-ness’ be localised around a specific work process? Or are there massive frustrations that bother everyone and that people take home with them? If the issue is work-related, what aspects of the work are involved? A good way to look at this is to ask about ‘learning objectives’: what exactly is different once the issues have been successfully addressed? By formulating one or two main learning objectives, it is often easy to tell whether the issues concern
  - ‘things’ (organisation systems, machines, procedures, etc.);
  - ‘people’ (personal skills, expertise, knowledge, attitude, etc.);
  - the way in which people work (drafting a report, performing a task, handling clients, etc.);
  - the way in which people manage things and/or people (leading others, engaging with strategy, relating to political processes, etc.).

If the issues concern ‘things’ or ‘people’ individually, learning can usually be tackled separately from working. This is therefore often the easiest option, although it is sometimes difficult to transfer what has been learned back to the workplace. If issues concern the way in which people do their work or work together, learning must be integrated

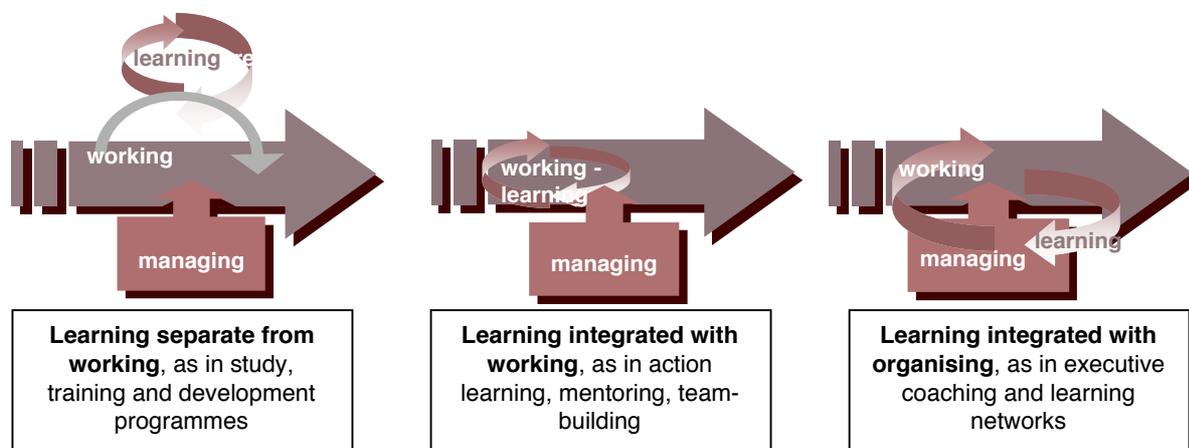


Figure 1: Integrating learning

with working. And if they concern 'managing' as well, learning must be integrated with working *and* managing, so must take place in a 'strategic' manner – see Figure 1 or compare with Chapter 22 of *Learning with Colleagues* (De Haan, 2005):

2. *Are we dealing with puzzles or problems?* A puzzle is an issue with an optimal and unique solution, while a problem is an issue which can never be solved entirely and allows many different approaches. In the case of a puzzle we can try to find and implement the unique solution. A problem will always keep niggling away at you, however you solve it. Often, in one way or another, a problem has something to do with yourself and your approach thus far, while a puzzle can be solved outside of yourself or separate from the organisation.
3. *Does the 'stuck-ness' differ from person to person or is it shared collectively?* Is there a conflict, with different perspectives on the stuck-ness? For example, are there parts of the organisation which may even benefit from the stuck-ness? Or does everyone experience the same problem, leaving aside the question of whether it is 'the' problem? What I am trying to find here is not a shared problem *definition* (because there often isn't one), but a shared problem *experience*. In other words, is a particular group of people dealing with the issues jointly and in a similar manner, or is this different for each of them?
4. *Is the stuck-ness relational or existential?* Relational refers here to relations between people, while existential refers to the nature or existence of a person or thing. In other words, do the issues concern the way in which people relate to each other, for example how (part of) the organisation handles its clients? Or do they concern people's professional development, or the rationale of certain products and services, i.e. fundamental choices concerning professionals,

markets, products, customers, and strategy?

Technically speaking, question 1 measures the level of intervention or the level at which the solution must be tackled (Harrison, 1963), question 2 measures the need for a learning intervention, question 3 explores the conflict nature of the issues, and question 4 examines the nature of the issues. Question 4 is exactly the same as the criterion proposed by Yalom (1989) in order to help choose between individual and group therapy.

Note: none of these questions indicates a scale. So each one can be applied equally well to a single person, a small part of the organisation or the organisation as a whole. However, the questions *are* interrelated: if the stuck-ness has to do with working or managing (question 1), it is very rare that puzzles are involved, so question 2 becomes superfluous. Conversely, in the case of learning separate from working, the question about the conflict nature of the situation (question 3) no longer has to be asked. Finally, if the stuck-ness has to do with working *and* managing, both existential and relational aspects are often at play, so question 4 yields little further information.

With these questions in mind, it is usually possible to find an appropriate and often surprising answer to the issues of stuck-ness which can befall organisations.

### ***A route towards re-floating***

The four questions outlined above often generate a 'good conversation' about the issues and some promising approaches, and can also help later on, when those approaches are being implemented, e.g. to check whether attention is still focusing on the right 'solutions' and the right systems and people

Figure 2 illustrates a suggested order in which managers can ask themselves the four questions, shows how their answers may influence each other, and gives an indication of the sort of learning/working methods that follow from the answers to the questions.

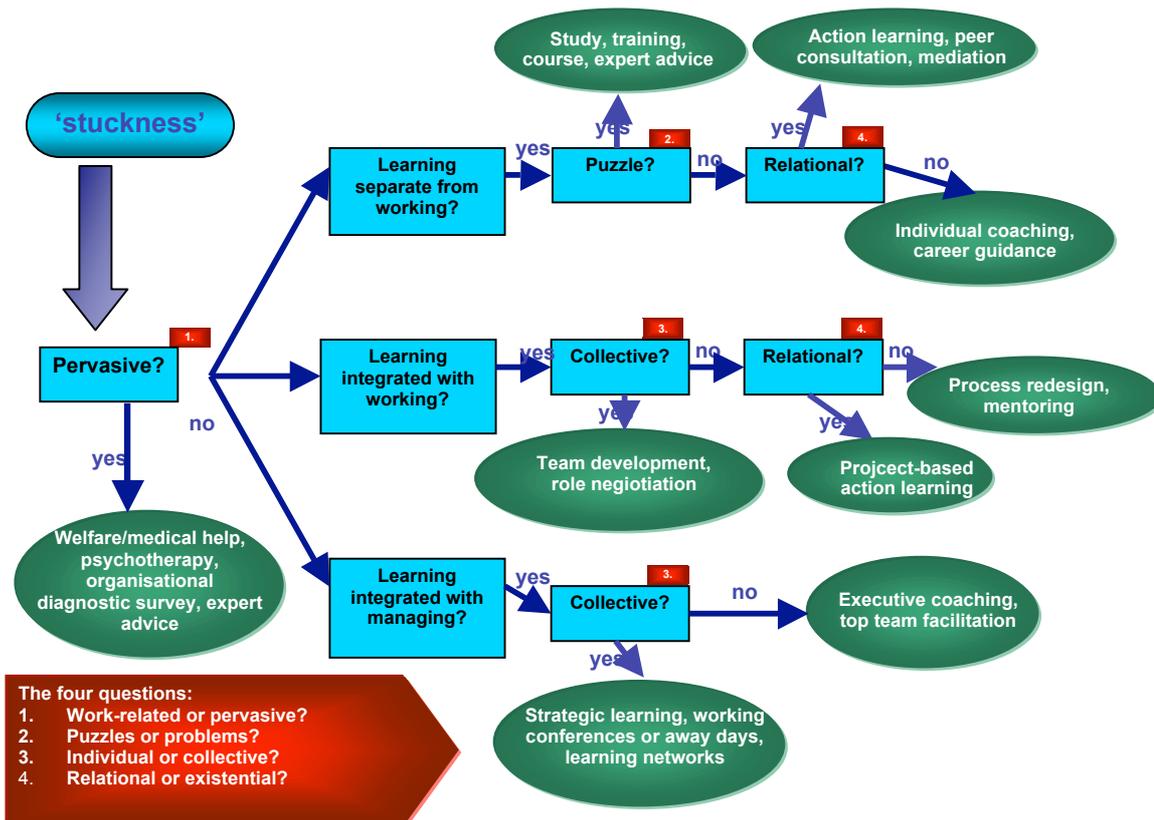


Figure 2. The routes that conversations about re-floating organisations may take, on the basis of the four questions, leading to examples of learning/working method

### Example of a conversation aimed at re-floating the business

One such conversation, held recently within a large multinational, concerns a division formed a year ago from business units which previously had nothing to do with each other. Before this merger, the different business units had sold different types of 'widget' from different divisions. A year ago they were requested to merge and consider focusing their business around the sale of 'widget cards': special IC cards with which users can collect many different widgets at many different places and also receive discounts on a range of other services. There are several teething problems within the division, both financial and structural, but also involving the style of leadership and the working relationships between different countries and organisational cultures. Six months ago the conversation between the twelve members of the management team, including the head of strategy and the chairman, went along the following lines.

(Names have been omitted and the conversation condensed – in reality many hours were spent discussing this topic and the same conversation is still ongoing).

[strategist:] "In my view there are currently far too many initiatives within the division: no-one knows what the priorities are any more."

[chairman:] "Yes, but they're all equally important. Some are imposed on us by senior management, others we have to do in order to fulfil the promise of our new division."

[strategist:] "Nevertheless, we have to set priorities in one way or another. People are getting swamped by improvement programmes, quality cycles, safety regulations, strategic plans, ..."

[chairman:] "That's true – but how....?"

[strategist:] "Let's first establish that we want to continue working in accordance with the mission that we formulated a year and a half ago, that we're still working on a move away from traditional widgets to more proactive widget cards. Does the board still support us in that undertaking?"

[chairman:] “Of course, I was just speaking to John last week and he assured me that we have their support, and would understand if we don’t make a profit this year either.”

*(here is the answer to the first question: is it a pervasive problem or not? Evidently not, if only because the mission can be maintained and there is continuing support from head office.)*

[strategist:] “That’s important to know. So the basic principles remain the same. And in order to maintain those basic principles we have to work on the basis of local expertise, don’t we? There is no-one in the whole organisation who knows more about the introduction of widget cards than our local salesmen, in my view.”

[chairman:] “Exactly, this is a change that has to be managed on the basis of expertise within Sales & Marketing. The different countries have sales professionals who know what is going on with our clients and what they need. And these are people who don’t know each other, and often haven’t even heard of each other. They are working in many different countries and, until not so long ago, in completely different divisions.”

*(here we have a more precise answer to the first question: learning will evidently have to be closely geared to the primary work process, and mainly to Sales & Marketing. This means ‘learning integrated with working’ without too much interference from ‘managing’.)*

[strategist:] “At present there are countries where the card business is already going well, mainly in Central Europe, isn’t that the case?”

[chairman:] “Certainly.”

[strategist:] “Others have other aspects under control. For example, Southern Europe is the most transparent financially and, thanks to relatively long-term customer relations, is also in a position to experiment with new card systems.”

[chairman:] “That’s right. There are different problems and opportunities in different countries. So much so that they can learn a lot

from each other, if they don’t insist too much on defending and advocating their own way of working. It is certainly the case that we can create something really special with this division.”

[strategist:] “So despite the wide differences between countries, everyone is facing more or less the same problem, which is, to put it briefly: how do we become the dominant European player on the widget card market? How can we not only define but also control that market? I think that is seen as our most important challenge, by everyone within the division.”

[chairman:] “Yes, I hear that a lot. Unfortunately, I also hear quite often that our management team is still not showing enough leadership.”

*(the third and, for this example, final question is answered here: this is a collectively shared problem experience – although the individual learning issues vary greatly.)*

[strategist:] “It seems sensible to coordinate the strengths and weaknesses of the different business units and functions, and to enable the different units to learn from and with each other. Perhaps we should start with our management team, which is after all the only team that presently looks beyond national borders and the borders of business units?”

[chairman:] “Yes, absolutely. We can start with our own bimonthly meetings. The longer they go on, the more difficult they become, too often bogged down in lack of alignment and misunderstanding.”

[strategist:] “And if there are particular problems, as there are now with the finances in England, or in the area of Health & Safety in Spain, the business units might be able to help each other?”

[chairman:] “Yes, I think that’s a good idea. It’s high time more expertise was exchanged – for example, perhaps Central Europe could lend a financial specialist to England, where the finances are in such a mess?!”

[strategist:] “Excellent. Does this also mean that, in the case of the many requests with

deadlines, the division-related issues now take precedence?”

[chairman:] “Within limits, yes – because, if we no longer fulfil our obligations with respect to head office, we’ll be for the high jump.”

[strategist:] “I’ll let everyone know, and draw up a plan for team development of the division management team.”

*(N.B.: answering the four questions for this organisation leads in a natural way to team development of the central leadership team, and to building more links between different country organisations. The team development is now over half a year underway and seems to lead to more cohesion and more integrated decision making for the division.)*

The four questions and the diagram make it easier to hold and to make more transparent this type of conversation about re-floating an organisation. They also make it easier to move towards an informed and transparent choice between possible ways of re-floating or revitalising the organisation. In more complex projects it is important to keep the various parties up to date with progress and perceived effects of the learning/working methods. My own preferred way of doing the latter is the survey feedback method (Baumgartel, 1959), which has the advantage that it is an organisation-wide learning process itself. To keep these conversations and ‘feedback loops’ alive over a sustained period can be immensely challenging, but is really worth the effort.

### **A note about language: solutions, but which solutions?**

The words ‘stuck-ness’, ‘stranded’, ‘re-floating’ and ‘solution’ are used several times in this article. These terms perhaps give the impression that organisations are ‘things’, like rafts or vehicles, that get stuck in the mud of their surroundings or display internal defects – images that cannot but misrepresent the complex reality of organisations. However, I believe that words

such as ‘stuck-ness’ and ‘solution’ remain sufficiently meaningful to people inside organisations to warrant their further use. Moreover, they point to phenomena that I have been able to observe in many different organisations going through many different types of transition.

The dictionary defines a solution as (1) a ‘liquid in which another substance is dissolved’, or (2) the ‘satisfactory answer to a problem’. A solution can therefore be both (1) a liquid, a container, or a solvent, and (2) an answer, a missing piece of a puzzle, or an approach. The same distinction applies to the equivalents of the word ‘solution’ in other European languages: compare, for example the German *Lösung*. This article uses ‘solve’ and ‘solution’ primarily in the first sense but, without this note, I can well imagine that some readers might think of the second meaning first. In my experience, confusion between the two meanings is a common occurrence in organisations.

A solution-as-answer applies to *puzzles*, from simple right through to complex puzzles, or issues which can be answered and taken away. A solution-as-liquid applies to *problems*, where something of the original issue always remains and the ‘solution’ is never entirely satisfactory or ideal. Consider the *puzzle* of optimising the logistical process in a vegetable auction-hall compared with the *problem* of integrating minorities in a multicultural organisation. One has an ideal answer, based on the latest techniques, while the other will always involve friction however you ‘solve’ it.

When an organisation gets stuck in some way, there is a huge temptation to think of solutions in the ‘Type-2’ sense, i.e. solutions to puzzles. The primary process of an organisation consists mainly of solutions (in the sense of approaches, methods, answers) to complex puzzles held by customers, clients and users. It is therefore an obvious step for people in that organisation, when they themselves get into difficulties, to reach for solutions (again: approaches, methods, answers). But those type-2 solutions may only make the problem worse if what is needed are ‘real’ solutions, in the sense of releasing, re-floating and creating space.

More generally, it is an all too human response, when in an awkward situation, to want to get rid of or put an end to something. Natural, human reactions to the problem of stuck-ness are efforts to clear up, bring order, tackle, change, resolve – or even to suppress, ignore and erase – leading to a quest for ‘type-2’ solutions, i.e. solutions to puzzles which are often not the right solutions to the difficult, multi-layered, ambiguous problems in organisations.

What can be understood by ‘type-1’ solutions? Their effect is ‘putting into solution’, i.e. relaxing tight connections and fixations, stepping back, questioning established patterns and viewing them from a different perspective, etc.

Now it is tempting to think that a true learning organisation is one that is able to stand back from its day-to-day work and primary process, an organisation whose members continually reflect jointly on what is going on, what that means, and how things might be done better or differently. An organisation which is itself ‘in solution’, sufficiently detached from its own primary process and its inherent patterns and dynamics. I have found this sort of healthy looseness in a wide range of organisations, from small groups of professionals working together (carpenters, salesmen, consultants) to large bureaucracies and multinationals. A ‘learning’ looseness and flexibility is often expressed in a great capacity to generate and accept sharp criticism, conflicts and differences of opinion among colleagues and to allow these conflicts to continue without adverse consequences for the persons or departments concerned. This is the ability to take on board, tolerate and even cherish diversity. But, in my view, the conclusion that a learning organisation is always a ‘loose’ organisation is premature and overly simple, because often organisations which are relatively loosely structured, such as universities and hospitals, can only become ‘un-stuck’ by putting firmer links and structures in place.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to thank my colleagues Charlotte Sills (Metanoia Institute) and Nico Swaan (Learning Consortium) for their very helpful suggestions.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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