Enhancing Critical Thinking through Creation of Learning Organizations within the Confines of an Overarching Mechanistic Organization

David Riel
Professor of Acquisition Management
Defense Acquisition University/Midwest Region
**Title:** Enhancing Critical Thinking through Creation of Learning Organizations within the Confines of an Overarching Mechanistic Organization

**Author:**

**Performing Organization:** Defense Acquisition University/Midwest Region, 3100 Research Blvd., Kettering, OH, 45420

**DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

**Supplementary Notes:**
Presented at the 12th Annual Acquisition Research Symposium held May 13-14, 2015 in Monterey, CA.
DoD as a Mechanistic Organization

• Characteristics of a mechanistic organization
  – High levels of hierarchical structure and control
  – Clearly defined roles and responsibilities
  – Written policies and procedures
  – Specialized, standardized tasks
  – Centralized decision-making processes
  – Higher efficiencies through lessened variation and improved predictability
  – Restricted innovation, flexibility and creativity

• History
  – Frederick the Great of Prussia
  – Frederick Taylor’s scientific management
  – SECDEFs Robert McNamara and Donald Rumsfeld

• Calls for change

• Today’s acquisition workforce
  – 2014 Acquisition Policy Survey report
  – Acquisition Workforce Questionnaire
Organizational Behaviors
-- Survey Results --

### Organizational Behaviors -- Top Organization

- **Flexible Participative**: 2 students
- **Rules-Based/Participative**: 16 students
- **Flexible/Centralized**: 7 students
- **Total**: 83 students

### Organizational Behaviors -- Immediate Organization

- **Flexible Participative**: 34 students
- **Rules-Based/Participative**: 27 students
- **Flexible/Centralized**: 16 students
- **Rules-Based/Centralized**: 32 students
Five Distinct Questions

-- Survey Results --

I am encouraged to think "outside the box"

My top organization values risk-taking to improve operations

My inputs are valued outside my functional area are valued
Layered Learning Organizations

- Retaining overall mechanistic organization construct
  - Use of policies and statutes as tools versus obstacles
  - Age and size of DoD
- Why not build a layered learning organization within the construct of an overarching mechanistic organization?
Learning Organizations

• Characteristics of learning organizations
  – Little to no hierarchical social structure
  – Free flow of information to encourage new ways of doing business
  – Continuous improvement of established procedures
  – Change and risk taking supported

• Advantages of learning organizations
  – Maximum flexibility
  – Dynamically responsive to changes in the environment
  – Learns from mistake
  – Adapts to new realities more readily
  – Better decision-making in non-problematic situations, i.e., innovation

• DoDI 5000.02’s new “framing assumptions”
  – Deepens learning from single-loop learning to double-loop learning
Adopting Learning Organizations

• DoD Cultural Change
  – Impractical to expect DoD as a whole to become learning organization
  – Develop a culture with low power distance and low uncertainty avoidance cultural value dimensions (CVDs) within each layer
  – Adopts America’s cultural dimensions

• Requires change in cultural values and artifacts
  – Responsible risk-taking preferred
  – Failure acceptable

• Leaders need to incentivize the transition of the culture from one that desires hierarchical control to one that values innovation and encourages debate
• Autocratic leadership destroys double-loop learning

• Humility
  – Successful PMs readily admitted programmatic issues using honest, candid communication (2010 GAO Report)
  – Must be receptive to criticism and employees bearing bad news
  – Characterized by respect and a restraint of egotistical intentions
  – More apt to acknowledge need for help and extend trust
  – Leads to think open-mindedly -- acknowledging and evaluating alternate solution sets -- key sign of a well-cultivated critical thinker
  – Part 1 of “Level 5 Leadership”

• Professional Will
  – Part 2 of “Level 5 Leadership”
  – Focus on long-term goals
  – Must be coupled with ethical leadership

• Humility and professional will leads to organizational trust
Organizational Trust

• Crucial for learning organizations
  – Driving force allowing employees to experiment and adapt to changing culture
• Must take the place of daily, direct observation of workers’ efforts
• Factors for building trust
  – Abilities
  – Benevolence, i.e., good intentions
  – Integrity
  – Trust propensity
• Enhanced by DoD’s high in-group collectivism CVD
• Hindered by DoD’s high power distance CVD
• Ops units may require high power distance, but do acquisition units?
  – Supports DoD organizational characteristic of differentiation
• Leads to environment where critical thinking can be cultivated
Enhanced Critical Thinking

• Purposeful, reasoned, and goal-directed
  – Boils down to Socratic method of asking and answering questions, along with challenging assumptions

• Leadership must create atmosphere of reasoned questioning and active, respectful dissent
  – Hierarchical control limits critical thought as junior officers and civilians are reluctant to question their immediate supervisor or their supervisor’s boss

• Functional conflict can be healthy and used as a change agent to drive growth in an organization
  – Requires foundation of interpersonal and organizational trust
  – Opens team up to new alternatives while taking all perspectives into consideration
  – Takes education and practice
Summary

Enhanced Critical Thought

- Layered Learning Organization
- Functional Conflict
- Level 5 Leadership
- Organizational Interpersonal Trust

Depart of Defense’s Mechanistic Organization