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The Organisations That Never Stop Learning

*Why some organisations grow wiser with every challenge,
while others repeat the same conversation indefinitely.*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two organisations can look near identical — talented people, experienced leaders, established governance, comparable investment — and still diverge sharply over time, because organisational learning and individual learning are not the same thing. Most organisations are good at capturing knowledge but far less consistent at letting it travel, so lessons get identified, documented and shared rather than changing how decisions get made. Knowledge behaves like water: if it doesn't flow between people and functions, it stagnates, however well recorded. The organisations that keep improving aren't the ones that know the most. They're the ones where understanding keeps moving.

1. Introduction

When researching the history of two organisations to satisfy one of my many curiosities, they seemed on the surface, to appear remarkably similar. Both employed talented people. Both had experienced leaders and well-established governance. Both invested in technology. Both, by any reasonable measure, had every reason to succeed. Yet over time their paths diverged. One improved and innovated with every challenge it encountered. The other seemed destined to repeat the same conversations.

An organisation does not need extraordinary individuals to become remarkably intelligent. It simply needs knowledge to move.

Those observations have stayed with me — not because one organisation was better than the other, but because it made me wonder whether learning itself is something we have misunderstood. When people talk about learning, they instinctively think about individuals: training, qualifications, professional development, mentoring. All valuable, and I have benefited from every one of them. But I have grown steadily less interested in how individuals learn, and considerably more interested in how organisations do — because an organisation can employ thousands of capable people and still struggle to collectively learn.

2. What Happens to a Lesson After the Review

I've sat in countless project reviews — some celebrating outstanding outcomes, others examining disappointing ones. Almost every review concludes with lessons: identified, documented, shared. Then everyone returns to work. What happens next, not to the report, but to the lesson? Does it disappear into a folder? Does another team discover it? Does it influence a decision twelve months later, or does it simply become something we recorded because good governance expected us to?

I've come to suspect that organisations don't become wiser because they collect lessons. They become wiser because lessons change behaviour.

2.1 Knowledge Versus Wisdom

Most organisations have no shortage of information — reports, dashboards, audits, project reviews, performance data, risk registers. The modern organisation has become exceptionally good at capturing knowledge. I'm not always convinced we've become equally good at letting it travel. Sometimes it stays inside a project. Sometimes it stays inside a department. Sometimes it leaves the organisation entirely when an experienced person retires. I've started thinking that knowledge behaves rather like water — if it doesn't flow, it becomes stagnant.

Key Point: Knowledge explains the past. Wisdom shapes the future. A lesson that stays inside one project has limited value; that same lesson influencing fifty future decisions will become organisational wisdom — and its value only ever increases through being shared, never through being withheld.

A few signs tend to suggest knowledge has stopped moving inside an organisation, however well recorded:

- Lessons are documented but rarely referenced again once the review closes.
- Experience leaves the building along with that key resource.
- Insight stays filed inside the project or department that produced it.

3. Learning Before the Event

There's a tendency to think of learning as something that happens after an event — after the project, the audit, the incident, the review. The strongest organisations usually learn before events just as often as they learn afterwards. They notice, discuss, observe and experiment while there's still time to influence the outcome. That's a genuinely different kind of learning — proactive rather than reflective, curious rather than corrective.

One of the questions I now ask whenever I spend time with an organisation is: "How does knowledge move around here?" Not formally — informally. Who talks to whom? Which conversations happen naturally? Where does experience go once a project finishes? The answers are often more revealing than any organisational chart, because a chart describes authority. Conversations reveal learning.

1. Which conversations happen naturally here, without anyone scheduling them?
2. Where does experience go once a project or engagement finishes?
3. How quickly does one team's insight become another team's advantage?

4. The Organisations Worth Remembering

One of the most impressive organisations I've ever encountered wasn't impressive because it had better systems, or noticeably smarter people. What impressed me was much simpler: people were genuinely interested and encouraged in learning from one another. Operations wanted to understand technology. Technology wanted to understand customers. Leadership listened more than it spoke. Questions travelled easily, and so did ideas. Looking back, I don't think I was observing collaboration. I think I was observing organisational learning.

Every organisation values learning, and I do not doubt they mean it. The more interesting question is whether learning changes anything — whether it alters conversations, challenges assumptions, or improves judgement, rather than simply becoming another document that demonstrates learning occurred. I've stopped measuring learning by what organisations know and become far more interested in what they do differently because of what they have grown to know.

Conclusion

I have become increasingly sceptical whenever organisations describe knowledge as an asset. Assets can be owned. Knowledge is different — its value only increases once shared. A lesson inside one project has limited value. The same lesson has the potential to influence a decision which will influence another and we suddenly have a compounding effect on future decisions. Knowledge explains the past. Wisdom shapes the future.

When I look back I rarely remember the ones with the most impressive systems. I remember the ones that stayed curious despite their success — where thoughtful questions were welcomed, experience was shared generously, and ideas travelled without waiting for permission.

And I suspect the organisations that never stop doing that will continue surprising us for all the right reasons.

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