

key characteristics

The concept of a learning organisation has been developing in the last thirty years as attempts are made to identify the key characteristics of successful companies and organisations. These are companies that are successful over time, both in the public and private sector.

There are five principal features of a learning organisation (derived from Iles and Sutherland 2001):

Organisational structure

See 'knowledge about learning organisations' (dark blue) cards 1-3.

Learning organisations have managerial hierarchies that enhance opportunities for employee, carer and service user involvement in the organisation. All are empowered to make relevant decisions. Structures support teamwork and strong lateral relations (not just vertical).

Networking is enabled across organisational and hierarchical boundaries both internally and externally.

Organisational culture

See 'knowledge about learning organisations' (dark blue) cards 4-7.

Learning organisations have strong cultures that promote openness, creativity, and experimentation among members. They encourage members to acquire, process and share information, nurture innovation and provide the freedom to try new things, to risk failure and to learn from mistakes.

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Information systems

See 'knowledge about learning organisations' (dark blue) cards 8 & 9. Learning organisations require information systems that improve and support practice and that move beyond those used in traditional organisations where information is generally used for control purposes. 'Transformational change' requires more sophisticated information systems that facilitate rapid acquisition, processing and sharing of rich, complex information which enables effective knowledge management.

Human resource practices

See 'knowledge about learning organisations' (dark blue) card 10. People are recognised as the creators and users of organisational learning. Accordingly, human resource management focuses on provision and support of individual learning. Appraisal and reward systems are concerned to measure long-term performance and to promote the acquisition and sharing of new skills and knowledge.

Leadership

See 'knowledge about learning organisations' (dark blue) cards 11 & 12. Like most interventions aimed at securing significant organisational improvement, organisational learning depends heavily on effective leadership. Leaders model the openness, risk-taking and reflection necessary for learning, and communicate a compelling vision of the learning organisation, providing the empathy, support and personal advocacy needed to lead others towards it. They ensure that organisations and work groups have the capacity to learn, change and develop.

From these principal features we have developed 12 key characteristics of learning organisations in social care which are outlined on 'key characteristics' (yellow) card 2.

Useful reference

- Iles, V. and Sutherland, K. (2001) 'Managing change in the NHS', London: NHS Service Delivery and Organisation Research and Development.