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Leading a Learning Organization: The Science of Working With Others

By Casey Reason

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Study Guide

This study guide is a companion to the book *Leading a Learning Organization: The Science of Working With Others*, by Casey Reason. *Leading a Learning Organization* explores ways that principals and teacher leaders can use current research from the fields of psychology, education, and neuroscience to deepen and strengthen organizational learning in their schools.

This guide is arranged by chapter, enabling readers to either work their way through the entire book or to focus on the specific topics addressed in a particular chapter. It can be used by principals, teacher leaders, and administrators to identify key points, raise questions for consideration, assess conditions in a particular school or district, and suggest steps that might be taken to help struggling staffs overcome such obstacles as negative emotions, cynicism, and organizational inertia.

We thank you for your interest in this book and hope this guide is a useful tool in your efforts to create a healthy culture in your school or district.

Chapter 1

Strategic Emotional Focus

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1. What is the relationship between emotion and learning at the neurological level?

2. What are some of the consequences of muting emotion? Has your school experienced any of them?

3. The author claims that "emotional variety supports focus." What does this mean? What kinds of emotions get "clumped together" in your organization, and how would a nuanced recognition of the differences between these emotional states be helpful?

4. What distinction does the author make between *experiencing* and *expressing* negative emotional states?

5. Why is it important to engage in strategic emotional focus on a regular basis? Looking at your own organization, how could strategic emotional focus prevent staff members from acting on immediate emotional impulses?

Chapter 2

Acknowledging and Reframing Fear

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1. What is *predatory immanence*, and what effect does it have on learning? How could you increase the degree of freedom from predatory immanence in your school?

2. Describe ways the fight or flight response gets triggered in your organization. What steps can be taken to decrease this response?

3. What is *habituation*? What are the implications of habituation for a school that is ruled by fear?

4. Why is a certain degree of fear inevitable in any change process? Name three ways the author suggests for dealing with it.

5. In the change, analysis, and reframing strategy, what are some of the consequences of rushing too quickly through the phase titled "What's the Worst That Could Happen?"

Chapter 3

The Impact of Stress on Organizational Learning

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1. How can small amounts of stress act as a motivating factor in bringing about change? Give an example of how you have experienced this phenomenon in your organization.

2. Name some of the ways that your organization has distracted itself from stress. What are the repercussions of ignoring the causes of stress?

3. Which of the patterns of group stress response given on pages 45–47 best describes your school? Why?

4. Explain the stress-reward endorphin cycle. The author refers to this cycle as "emotional junk food for the brain." How much of this junk food has your school been taking in, and in what form?

5. Give some examples of healthy endorphin pursuits mentioned in the text. How could you make room for these in your school?

Chapter 4

Vision With Learning in Mind

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1. What are *mental representations*? How do they differ from ordinary vision? What subjective factors contribute to the construction of mental representations?

2. What are the prevailing mental representations about the nature of change in your school? About parents? Reflect on how you could replace them with more accurate and empowering ones.

3. Why is it important to evaluate the personal belief systems of your group? How will you make everyone more aware of and respectful of the strongly held beliefs within the group?

4. How can answering context-related questions help uncover factors that might be swaying the group perspective? What specific actions can you take to improve your organization's dynamic and stress level with the information gleaned from such questions?

5. Describe your current degree of intention. How do you plan on challenging your organization to establish a new, more positive degree of intention?

Chapter 5

Purpose-Driven Inquiry

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1. What does the author mean by "inquiry is a collective pursuit"? Describe a situation where a group emotion affected an inquiry pursuit. What can you do to avoid losing focus?

2. Which of the ineffective inquiry patterns listed on pages 73–75 have you witnessed or taken part of in your organization? What are the consequences of falling into such patterns?

3. How can reframing a question around the pronoun *we* help your group aim for a more positive, forward-thinking answer?

4. Why is it important to always ask the obvious questions? Give examples of how you can create a safe space within your organization that allows such questions to be asked.

5. Moving from thoughtful conversation to meaningful action is key in the inquiry pursuit. How will you emotionally engage your organization to act on the inquiry's results?

6. What is the danger of asking too many questions?

Chapter 6

Using Memory Systems to Stimulate Deep Organizational Learning

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1. Explain firing and wiring. How does this process shape our memories? Why do memories change over time?

2. What is the relationship between short-term memory, working memory, and long-term memory? How can you use this understanding to benefit your organization's learning process?

3. What are *priming strategies*, and how can they enhance organizational learning?

4. Describe an experience where collaboration helped (or could have helped) stimulate the firing of neurons, and therefore the building of connections. Why does the inclusion of breaks, food, and fun change the way participants record their experience in memory?

5. What does the author mean by "deep wiring opportunities"? Why are they necessary? How can your organization create more opportunities for deep wiring?

Chapter 7
Handling Learning Overload

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1. What is the *cocktail party effect*? How is it affected by a listener's focal points? How does this idea relate to an entire organization?

2. Is learning overload recognized as a problem in your organization? Which brain mechanisms, such as chunking, are your teacher leaders encouraged to use to help alleviate learning overload, and why?

3. How does establishing emotional relevance help a group construct stronger focal points? Discuss current focal points, goals, and outcomes that could be more powerful by aligning them with the group's passions.

4. Why is it important to acknowledge and accept the fact that there are learning limits? How do focal points help lighten the load?

Chapter 8

Creating a Defined Learning Culture

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1. List the core elements of a defined learning culture. Which does your organization currently engage in? Which would you like to try?

2. Describe a situation where fear or panic has caused you to not learn as deeply as you could. How do you find the balance between alert and relaxed in order to emotionally engage in a new learning experience?

3. How do situational, interpersonal, and physical context differ? In what ways can your awareness of context help a) your learning process and b) your students' learning process?

4. Which of the enemies of a defined learning culture have you or your organization encountered? What was your response?

5. How can you tell if consolidation of information is working? Does your organization use consolidation strategies to enhance learning? If yes, how so? If not, how would you implement such strategies?

Chapter 9

Inspired Collaboration

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1. In what ways have you witnessed collaboration stimulating individual and group learning? How will you ensure this stimulation of learning happens in the future?

2. Neurologically, how does collaboration build memories and stimulate emotional ties? How does collaboration affect memory?

3. How might collaboration reveal personality conflicts, disconnects, or other issues? If your school found itself in a situation where problems were revealed by collaboration, how would it go about resolving them?

4. Which pattern of collaboration do you recognize as predominant in your school? In what ways can you be proud of your collaboration and in what ways can you improve your collaboration?

5. How will adopting "collaboration as a corporate nonnegotiable" change the dynamics of your organization?

6. If your organization is large, have you tried implementing a "skill-building team" that evaluates the collaboration process? Describe how such a team could help your collaboration efforts.

7. Why is it important to bring a sense of clarity to the collaboration team regarding each team member's role? What size team would work best for your collaboration needs, and why?