

Learn or Die: Using Science to Build a Leading-Edge Learning Organization

by Edward Hess

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The premise that [Hess \(2014\)](#) makes in *Learn or Die* is the compelling need for both people and organizations to learn as a means of survival. Through the book's captivating title, *Learn or Die* instantly draws the reader to reflect on the importance of learning – and to ponder as to whether it truly is a life or death matter. The author makes the case that the rapid advances in technology and changes to society makes it imperative for survival to grow and learn at both the individual and the organization levels. Thus, the aim of the book is to synthesize a multiple of research across numerous disciplines to answer two questions, “How does one become a better and faster learner?” and “How does one build an organization that is more adaptable and learns better and faster than the competition?” ([Hess, 2014](#)).

Learn or Die is divided into two major sections. Part One, “The Science of Learning” forms the bulk of text; roughly two-thirds of the total content is found in these first eight chapters. In the first portion of the book, the author provides an overview of numerous studies found in books and articles published over the past decade. Through this section of the book, [Hess \(2014\)](#) succinctly describes the learning process at the individual level based on various studies into human cognition. Also, with a benchmark on [Senge's \(1990\) *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*](#), [Hess \(2014\)](#) introduces the reader to more than two decades of research on the learning organization and organizational learning since Senge's seminal work was published. Part Two, “Building a Learning Organization” is comprises the final three chapters to provide real world depictions of the material introduction through three case studies.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the concept of what the book describes as a “High-Performance Learning Organization (HPLO),” an organization that is composed of the right people, learning environment and the right process. The second chapter describes the functionality of the brain and the human mind learns. Those familiar with psychological terms of such as “System 1” and “System 2,” made popular by [Kahneman's \(2011\) *Thinking, Fast and Slow*](#), will likely find this chapter to



be a brief, yet thorough refresher of these subjects. Students of the learning organization/organizational learning will also likely appreciate this chapter's connections to [Argyris \(1991\)](#) "single-loop" vs "double-loop" learning. In the third chapter, the author makes the connection as to how emotion and cognition work together to impact learning. This chapter discusses concepts such as the role of mindfulness, positive emotions and emotional intelligence in the learning process. The fourth chapter is where the author introduces the first component of his HPLO, the "right people," by describing an organization's need to hire, train and retain such individuals who are internally driven toward lifelong learning. The author also makes the case as to how one can become one of these "right people," as well as the necessity to better lead such individuals through a discussion on the managerial "Theory X" and "Theory Y." The fifth chapter is where the second component of the HPLO is introduced, the "learning environment." This is one of the longer chapters in the book as the author makes the case on how creating a learning environment is the foundational element needed to develop a HPLO. This learning environment is achieved by extensive engagement between the management staff and the employees to include an alignment with the organizational systems that foster a learning culture. The fifth chapter also briefly discusses several of the organizations in the case studies that form the second part of the book. The last component of the HPLO, the "right process" is discussed in the sixth chapter titled, "Learning Conversations" as well as the seventh chapter "Critical Thinking Tools." The learning conversations primarily reference back to earlier concepts in the book such as "System 1" and "System 2" for internal dialogue to achieve mindfulness, whereas the critical thinking is enabled through addressing impediments such as defeating incorrect assumptions and personal ego. The eighth and final chapter in the first section of the book is a transcript of an interview between the author and Gary Klein, a psychologist and research scientist with MacroCognition, LLC. The interview is a dialogue where Klein provides more insight into many of the topics discussed throughout the book. The second part of the book, "Building a Learning Organization," encompasses the last third of the text. It is in this section where the author lays out "how three very successful companies have operationalized the "science of learning" described in the first portion of the book ([Hess, 2014](#)). These companies are Bridgewater Associates, LP, Intuit Inc. and United Parcel Service Inc. – better known by its acronym, "UPS." The book concludes in an epilogue where the author revisits several of the subjects that are essential in both understanding learning on the personal level as well as what is needed to build a HPLO.

Learn or Die is impressive in its breadth of topics discussed and research referenced, despite not being exhaustive in its depth on any particular subject. While [Hess \(2014\)](#) does not introduce new theory or research in *Learn or Die*, the text weaves current and prior studies into a synthesis that can be appreciated by both the scholar and the casual reader. Perhaps the finest aspect of this work is its ability to appeal to a wide audience. *Learn or Die* is complete with practical insights for the businessperson seeking tools to develop a learning culture at his or her organization – complete with chapter conclusion summaries and reflection questions to ensure that the chapter's message sunk in. While at the same it shares practical insights, *Learn or Die* provides thorough chapter end notes for the more scholarly minded reader to dive into the numerous thought-provoking subjects briefly discussed in the book. One critique that derives from the broad appeal of the text's toward practicality over scholarship, is that those seeking to have a more in-depth look at any of the topics discussed in *Learn*

or Die will need to reference other materials. Therefore, this book is best served as an introduction for readers looking for a survey of personal and organizational learning or as a practical source for implementing a learning organization. Thus, for those seeking to understand the foundational theories and recent scholarship surrounding the learning organization, this book will only serve as an initial exposure.

References

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