



STEPS TOWARD ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING: THE SWISS POST

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In 1992 the Swiss Post started to transform itself from part of a public institution into an autonomous, efficient, and competitive public enterprise. With its approximately 39,000 employees, the Swiss Post is the second-largest enterprise in the country and one of the largest public sector organizations of the industrialized world seeking to embark on an organizational learning journey.

There are many reasons for the Swiss Post's transformation. Until 1992 the Swiss Post and Swiss Telecom were integral parts of the Swiss PTT (Postes Télégraphes Téléphones), a public institution with little autonomy from politics and no autonomy for budgeting. Under the pressure of global liberalization of telecommunications and in anticipation of the European Community's Telecom deregulation on January 1, 1998, the Swiss government passed a new law that forbade the heavy cross-subsidies of the Swiss Post by Swiss Telecom as of January 1, 1997. Thus the Swiss Post, with a sizable annual deficit, was significantly challenged.

Growing market pressure added to the Swiss Post's difficulties. Not only was the deficit unacceptable, but the Swiss Post also was losing market share, especially in its most profitable businesses—the international express and parcel services that were increasingly being lost to global competitors (TNT, Federal Express, DHL, UPS, etc.). In short, without substantial changes, there was little chance that the Swiss Post would ever become an efficient public enterprise.

Structural Changes

With these considerations in mind and a heightened sense of urgency, in January 1992 the newly appointed

director of the Swiss Post initiated a profound transformation. A strategic decision was made to effect internal structural changes first, followed immediately by cultural transformations, while initiating autonomization from the Swiss political system three to four years later.

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The main structural changes that have taken place include separating the bookkeeping for the Swiss Post from that of Swiss Telecom; making the three main profit centers within the Swiss Post independent of each other; and decentralizing decision-making, introducing management by objectives, and pursuing a customer- and market-centered orientation.

Cultural Initiatives

Immediately after having engaged in internal structural transformations, the Swiss Post initiated substantial cultural changes. Several major initiatives have been undertaken since late 1992 (see "Five Initiatives"). A first initiative targeted at top management was started in the summer of 1992 and lasted about eight months. Because a deliberate decision had been made by the Swiss Post to undertake the transformation with the managers in place, particular attention was and still is given to their individual and collective learning. As part of this first initiative, all top managers (approximately 100) of the Swiss Post used a biographical or life-history assessment to learn about their fears, anxieties, strengths, and weaknesses in light of the forthcoming changes. As a result, a typology of managers' attitudes toward change was elaborated, and corresponding training for the different types was offered.

A second major initiative was started in 1994 with the unit in charge of implementing organizational learning throughout the Swiss Post—the Personnel and Organization Post.

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FIVE INITIATIVES

The Swiss Post launched five initiatives in their effort to create a culture of learning:

- Assessing managers' attitude toward change
- Clarifying shared vision and identifying potential obstacles and steps toward implementation
- Setting up structures essential to the smooth functioning of organizational learning
- Developing indicators for assessing progress
- Identifying impediments to change

This unit needed to transform itself from a human resources administration and provider of training into a facilitator of organizational learning. In our work with the collaborators of this unit (approximately 40 people), we elaborated a common vision, identified the main obstacles to realizing this vision, and defined the major steps (including structural changes) necessary to implement that vision.

A third initiative started in fall 1995. Its first aim was to carry out a companywide capacity-building effort in the areas of Total Quality and marketing. Its second aim was to set up the structure crucial to the functioning of organizational learning. On the one hand, a group of regionally based full-time trainers, whose role would be to transmit whatever knowledge and skills collaborators at all levels of the organization need, was put into place. On the other hand, all heads of the various local organizational units (five to 30 employees) were coached with some initial information about their roles in order to be trained as leaders of the change process. Their role would be not only to facilitate organizational learning within their units but also, more specifically, to integrate the transmitted knowledge and skills into their organization by means of "quality circles."

A fourth initiative was started in 1996 and was more technical in

nature than the previous three.

Through it, we sought to develop the necessary indicators for assessing progress. Such indicators pertain to individual and collective learning; to cultural and organizational transformation; to emerging leadership capacities; and to the evolution of skills, knowledge, capacities, and motivations within the Swiss Post. Once fully

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developed, these indicators can serve as powerful tools for the management of organizational learning at all levels.

The fifth initiative, implemented between spring and summer 1995, involved identifying impediments to change. This undertaking was targeted at the approximately 100 top managers and was built on the earlier initiative that identified individual roadblocks to organizational learning.

Swiss Post managers gathered in five groups of approximately 20 people within their respective organizational units over two days separated by a month's time. In preparation for the first session, they had filled out a questionnaire listing all the problems in their everyday work. The participants then gathered in small groups to classify the problems in terms of impediments to organizational learning. Not surprisingly, impediments were quite similar for all groups.

In preparation for the second session one month later, the top managers formed small groups to elaborate projects that would accelerate the realization of the Swiss Post's change effort. During the second session, these projects were critiqued by

the participants, who had to develop arguments why, given the current state of the Swiss Post, these projects were not feasible. A list of the main obstacles to implementing these projects was thus generated; and only then was this list compared with the previous list of impediments. The lists were almost identical. As a result, the five groups were able to establish a common list of the main impediments (see "Impediments to Learning").

Moving Forward

Through this last initiative, the top managers of the Swiss Post came to realize that substantial obstacles still prevented it from achieving its organizational learning objectives and that they themselves acted as impediments (for example, when they criticized their collaborator's projects). Such an approach, however, is not without danger. The goal of embarking on an organizational learning effort is an ambitious one, and the obstacles identified by managers of the Swiss Post can seem overwhelming. If an organization cannot rapidly demonstrate progress during the journey, or at least show success in the market, this ambitious ideal may well have counterproductive effects, especially on the managers' motivation. ☐

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IMPEDEMENTS TO LEARNING

The Swiss Post identified the following eight impediments to learning:

- Subservience to regulations
- Fear of risk
- Perfectionism
- Fear of conflict
- Linear thinking
- Communication problems
- Ineffective decision-making processes
- Compartmentalization

Suggested Further Reading

Argyris, Chris, *On Organizational Learning*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.

Dixon, Nancy, *The Organizational Learning Cycle: How We Can Learn Collectively*. London: McGraw-Hill, 1994.