If you want to conclude swiftly that people and organisations are not so different from one another after all, you should consider the ways they learn versus the factors that disable them from learning. There are many similarities to be found in the lists that emerge. Although usually expressed through different wording, you will find that the motivators as well as the discouraging factors toward individual and organisational learning are fairly consistent. Let’s briefly consider these lists.

How do people learn?

1. By doing: When we undertake new actions, we learn from the unexpected complications that often surface. Depending on how important the goal we pursue is to us, we become creative, persistent, and very knowledgeable about the situation at hand.

2. Through education: This is an increasingly manifested requirement in today’s rapidly and vastly changing work environment. We obtain our education either formally, through college enrolment or informally, through self-education such as reading and following self-selected mentors; and internally at work, or externally, in an environment away from our immediate workplace.

3. From experience: When we reflect on our mistakes and successes, we apply emotional learning.

4. Through observation and contemplation: Not all of our learning happens through input from others or through experience. Sometimes our own minds can guide us toward learning through engaging in thinking about matters and processes.
5 Through communication with others: Our interactions with friends, spouses, colleagues, instructors, mentors, and others, are often also important pathways to increased knowledge.

6 From society’s expectations: Every society has its behavioural do’s and don’ts. We continuously learn from those as well. As we climb the ladder of success, the circles in which we move change, and so do the expectations.

7 From contacts with new/other environments: The confrontation with other cultures is an interesting and immense factor in the enlargement of our horizons.

8 From trends: This should not just be perceived as a process of tagging along with contemporary fashions. Trends surface in all areas of our existence, and most of us follow them without even realising that we do: think of our ways of communicating, dressing, and transporting ourselves today compared to 500 years ago.

How do organisations learn?

1 By undertaking and evaluating processes: When a new line of products or a new strategy is implemented, unexpected lessons emerge. Smart organisations take the time and invest the effort to learn from these lessons.

2 From new leadership, or government rules: When a new leader steps aboard, there are often new visions created, new directions given, and new processes developed. This is the internally generated reason for obtaining education. Government may also set new rules, which may require changed directions or procedures as well: this is the externally driven reason for obtaining education.

3 From operating experience: Like human beings, intelligent organisations learn from their experiences, whether these were successful or fruitless.

4 Through research and development: Organisations that want to advance in their industry and preferably also in other industries, have an R&D department that continuously explores innovative ways of performing. The implementation of innovations also requires learning.

5 Through communication with stakeholders, and by reviewing competitors’ actions: Employees, customers, suppliers, but also competitors, are important teachers and determinants to smart organisations and their future actions. Ignoring them is like asking for failure.

6 From economic, social, environmental and other requirements: Whether driven by the need for exploring new markets due to economies of scale; saturation of the local market; or obsolescence of the product in the current market; organisations today are facing a lot of pressure from ‘out there’ toward change and thus, toward learning.

7 From exploring and entering new markets: When an organisation starts thinking of entering new markets, a number of lessons need to be learned, such as: can we just sell our product there in its current state or do we need adaptation? Can we use the same advertisements or do we need different messages? What are our competitors doing here, and what share of the market do they control? What are our chances of succeeding? The list could go on and on.

8 From trends: Things change. Perceptions change. Procedures change. Rules change. Today’s organisations function differently from those in the 80s, and even more differently from those in the 50s.

What are some factors that disable people from learning?

1 Fear of failure: Unfortunately, many of us have learned to perceive failure as a shortcoming, and an occurrence that may alienate us from our peers. So the idea that we may fail could discourage us from trying new things.

2 Overconfidence and arrogance: This may initially sound as the opposite of point 1, but it’s not. It pertains to the false notion of some people that
Resistance to and fear of change: One of the most common reasons why particularly mature workers refrain from learning in workplaces: they are ‘set’ in their ways and resist moving out of their comfort zone.

Prejudices and stereotyping: Although seemingly outdated, this disabling factor still occurs in our society today. Some people, out of sheer prejudice, maintain a stern reluctance to see differences among others, and learn from them. They stereotype members of other groups in a negative way, and fail to consider that there are differences in each ethnic, age, sexual, or ability group.

No positive affirmation: When people don’t receive encouragement from their environment, or worse: when they receive only negative feedback, they get discouraged and may cease future learning.

Unawareness of the big picture: Workers, who are denied crucial information about their organisation’s ultimate goals, don’t have the chance to realise the purpose of their work. This lack of vision results in inadvertent ignorance.

No social interaction: From your own experience you may recall that most learning (just like most business deals) happens informally. It is during the social gatherings and in-between the official sessions that imperative sharing happens.

8 Too much distraction from focus: Whether deliberately instigated or brought about by external factors, distraction from your focus may lead to discouragement and termination of further learning.

9 Lack of motivation: When someone doesn’t see the link between the learning process and his or her future, the driving motive and commitment to learn is missing.

Environmental factors: Although we increasingly learn that we should consider our fate as mainly being in our own hands, it remains a fact that some people have fewer opportunities than others, for either economical, social, or geographic reasons.

What are some factors that disable organisations from learning?

1 Set strategies: When organisations refuse to examine their strategies on a regular basis, they tend to blame setbacks on everything else. They refuse to ask themselves conscious questions and consequently fail to evolve.

2 Negative organisational culture/inflexibility: When an organisation maintains a culture that is either too rigid; too hierarchical, or too political, the chance of learning decreases.

3 No challenge toward exploring: Especially in the US – since this is such a vast market – organisations are satisfied with their current market and thus their status quo. This inhibits their urge toward exploring other markets, and therefore toward learning.

4 Groupthink: Unfortunately, there are still too many organisations with a homogeneous board at the top. This board, which has been together for many years, may have developed ‘groupthink’, the single-perspective syndrome that declines new processes and strategies, and keeps the organisation stationary.

5 No appropriate recognition of the go-getters in the organisation: Proactive workers get discouraged when they find that their efforts are not appreciated or recognised. They may subsequently fall in a pattern of apathy, or exit.

6 No communication (and follow up) with stakeholders: When organisations fail to listen to (and follow up on) the calls of important stakeholders such as employees, customers, suppliers, and community members, they restrain their own progression.

7 No benchmarking: Even organisations that consider themselves leaders in their industry should continue reviewing the actions of current and potential competitors.

Table 1 demonstrates the similarities between personal and organisational ways of learning.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How people learn:</th>
<th>How organisations learn:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. By doing: undertaking new actions</td>
<td>1. By undertaking and evaluating processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Through education: formal or informal and internal or external</td>
<td>2. From new leadership, or government rules, which require education in new processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. From experience: reflection on mistakes and successes – emotional learning</td>
<td>3. From operating experience: evaluation of mistakes or successes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Through observation and contemplation: thinking about matters and processes</td>
<td>4. Through Research and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Through communication with others: peers, colleagues, instructors, mentors, etc.</td>
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<td>7. From exploring and entering new markets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. From trends</td>
<td>8. From trends</td>
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</table>
Too much internal turmoil: If there are too many problems internally, the organisation will be distracted from exploring new directions and engaging in new endeavours.

Management’s lack of ambition: If the organisation’s management (at the strategic as well as the operational levels) lacks the drive needed to steer the organisation ahead or into new directions, learning will not take place.

No clear link between the learning process and the purpose: When organisations only have their workers learn for the sake of learning, and not with alignment toward future practices, learning will be a wasteful activity.

Five Steps
Here are, as a concluding recommendation, 5 steps to improve personal and organisational learning:

1. Regularly assess and evaluate the status quo. Ask questions such as:
   a. Am I (are we) still satisfied with the direction in which I am (we are) heading?
   b. Am I (are we) still on top of developments with my (our) knowledge?
   c. In what areas do I (we) need upgrading?

2. Formulate the need that you may have identified in step 1. Try to be as clear and precise as possible.

3. Look for ways to fill the gap. The ultimate choice will be determined by your available financial sources, time, and determination.

4. If applicable, bring these sources to the attention of colleagues and supervisors as well. They may also be helpful to others, or you may need approval first.

5. Engage in the learning process and, while doing so, keep considering the link between what you learn, what you want to achieve with the learning, and how you will apply it.


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