An Investigation of Organizational Learning Theory using Action Research: A Qualitative Leadership Study

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Shavonne Marie Ekeledo
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Therese F. Haeger, PhD
Chair
June 1, 2019

Peter F. Sorensen, PhD
Committee member
June 1, 2019

Katherine A. Schroeder, PhD
Committee member
June 1, 2019
Abstract
This study examines the dynamics of how applying the Organizational Learning (OL) Theory can progressively transform an organization. The goal of this qualitative action research study was to evaluate the implementation of a Leadership Development Program at the American College of Surgeons (ACS). Seven participants, referred to as “Change Agents”, were involved in six different program sessions. Additional leaders provided feedback through direct observation of learned leadership practices. Various performance areas were analyzed to show that the implementation of organizational learning based programs improve leadership qualities, staff productivity, staff position ownership, staff retention and overall job satisfaction. The results of this OL program indicated elevated learning outcomes at the ACS. The collective narrative from the participants in this study demonstrated an individual awareness of the “big picture”, tolerance for mistakes during learning, a trusting and collaborative climate, a shared and monitored mission, and ongoing professional development at ACS.

Key terms: Organization development, organizational leadership; action research; change agent
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Chapter I: Introduction

According to Richard Beckhard (1969), organization development (OD) is an effort that is planned, organization-wide, and managed from the top. This definition has many points that have outlasted time, including an emphasis on organizational effectiveness, the application of behavioral science knowledge, and the inclusion of deliberate interventions targeting specific functions of the organization (Anderson, 2016). A more recent definition of OD comes from Burke and Bradford (2005):

“Based on a set of values, largely humanistic; application of the behavioral sciences; and open systems theory, organization development is a system wide process of planned change aimed toward improving overall organization effectiveness by way of enhanced congruence of such key organizational dimensions as external environment, mission, strategy, leadership, culture, structure, information and reward systems, and work policies and procedures” (p. 12).

Finally, Donald Anderson (2016) offers a succinct combination of the two previous definitions for OD: “OD is the process of increasing organizational effectiveness and facilitating personal and organizational change through the use of interventions driven by social and behavioral science knowledge” (p. 3). Two noteworthy consistencies between these definitions include the proposition that OD precedes organizational effectiveness and an emphasis on the relationship between OD and social and behavioral science disciplines (Anderson, 2016).
To increase viability and effectiveness, a company will invoke interventions as it implements various change agents. The purpose of these interventions is to improve productivity, performance, and behaviors through a series of structured individual and team activities that focus on what employees do and how they do it. There are various OD interventions that employ carefully designed actions to help a team, department, or organization achieve a goal or solve a problem; consequently, making an organization more effective.

When describing possible intervention strategies, Beckhard (1969) makes several assumptions about the nature and functioning of organizations including:

1. “The basic building blocks of an organization are groups (teams). Therefore, the basic units of change are groups, not individuals.

2. An always relevant change goal is the reduction of inappropriate competition between parts of the organization and the development of a more collaborative condition.

3. Decision making in a healthy organization is located where the information sources are, rather than in a particular role or level of hierarchy.

4. Organizations, subunits of organizations, and individuals continuously manage their affairs against goals. Controls are interim measurements, not the basis of managerial strategy.

5. One goal of a healthy organization is to develop generally open communication, mutual trust, and confidence between and across levels.
6. People support what they help create. People affected by a change must be allowed active participation and a sense of ownership in the planning and conduct of the change” (Gao & Rusu, 2015, p. 102).

Organizational learning (OL) is a theoretical framework that highlights how individuals collect, absorb, and transform information into organizational memory and knowledge. The present study explores how the American College of Surgeons (ACS), a non-profit association, applied OL as an organization development intervention strategy. Permission to publicize the ACS name was obtained from the organization (see Appendix A).

The ACS is a scientific and educational association of surgeons that was founded in 1913 to improve the quality of care for the surgical patient by setting high standards for surgical education and practice. The ACS is dedicated to improving the care of the surgical patient and to safeguarding standards of care in an optimal and ethical practice environment (ACS, 2018).

**Background of the Study**

OL has emerged as one of the central and most important concepts in the strategic management literature (Garvin, 1993). Learning is not restricted to special organizations but is widely found across the spectrum of organizational types (Dibella & Nevis, 1998). Senge and colleagues (1999) agree with this sentiment and state, “All organizations learn – in the sense of adapting as the world around them changes. But some organizations are faster and more effective learners; the key is to see learning as inseparable from work” (p. 24). Senge and colleagues (1999) also contrast this
integration with work and the continuous nature of learning with training, which is typically episodic and takes place outside of the normal work context.

OL has the potential for sustaining effectiveness because it results in the development of a learning culture (Silins & Mulford, 2002). Schein (2004) identifies ten features of a learning culture, namely, a) a proactivity assumption, b) commitment to learning to learn, c) positive assumptions about human nature, d) the assumption that the environment can be dominated, e) commitment to truth through pragmatism and inquiry, f) an orientation toward the future, g) a commitment to full and open task-relevant communication, h) a commitment to diversity, i) a commitment to systemic thinking, and j) a commitment to cultural analysis for understanding and improving the world.

OL is an ongoing, dynamic process and should become part of the organization’s DNA. A learning culture supports a community of learners as a total organization where everyone teaches, learns, and shares knowledge. Individual and collective learning is encouraged and rewarded. Those companies that embrace these values will be able to gain and sustain competitive advantage over competitors who do not (Blackwood, 2014).

**Statement of the Problem**

ACS offers Performance Improvement courses and UConnect Workshops for managers, which have been effective avenues to teach and learn new skills within the scope of employment. While these resources are useful, a closer analysis of their components revealed that they lacked relevance to departmental nuances. Each
department within ACS has distinctive processes, procedures, and knowledge. To help improve the organization’s culture, a training curriculum, modules, and permissions were developed using OL as a framework. Professional development requires more than books or training courses; it requires employees to actively learn by doing.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to explore OL at the ACS and its potential benefit for participants in the Trauma Department Leadership Foundations Program (TDLFP) at the College. Herein, OL is generally defined as a learning process within organizations that involves the interaction of individual and collective (group, organizational, and inter-organizational) levels of analysis that leads to achieving an organizations’ goals (Nowak-Popova & Cseh, 2015).

Implications for the study’s outcomes include emphasizing OD within the ACS to encourage professional growth by promoting positions of greater responsibility and to provide practical use of a learned skill set in varied positions. Using OL as a framework is practical because it allows the ACS to implement newly learned abilities into current roles, while obtaining a more thorough understanding of effective leadership qualities. For this OL strategy to be successful, the ACS needed to understand how individuals, teams, and organizations learned and the extent to which OL activities contribute to organization performance.
Research Questions

This study examines a training and development program designed to provide leadership education at ACS. The following research questions will be addressed by analyzing secondary data, including assessments, surveys, and participant and management feedback:

1. Will an OL style of training and development result in better leaders based on an improvement in key leadership competencies?

2. What is the effect on a company's performance having better trained and developed employees?

3. Will this six-month project be perceived as a catalyst for change?

Theoretical Perspective

Two of the most noteworthy contributors to the field of OL theory are Chris Argyris and Donald Schon. OL, according to Argyris and Schon (1978) is a product of organizational inquiry. This means that whenever the expected outcome differs from actual outcome, an individual (or group) will engage in inquiry to understand and, if necessary, solve this inconsistency. In the process of organizational inquiry, the individual will interact with other members of the organization and learning will take place. Learning is therefore a direct product of this interaction.

Argyris and Schon (1978) emphasize that this interaction often goes well beyond defined organizational rules and procedures. Their approach to OL theory is based on the understanding of two (often conflicting) modes of operation – espoused
theory and theory in use. Espoused theory refers to the formalized part of the organization. Every firm will tend to have various instructions regarding the way employees should conduct themselves in order to carry out their jobs (e.g. problem solving). These instructions are often specific and narrow in focus, confining the individual to a set path. An example of espoused theory might be if the computer does not work, try rebooting it and then contact the IT department.

Theory in use includes the actual process for completing various processes. Individuals will rarely follow espoused theory and will predominately rely on social interaction and brainstorming to solve a problem. Theory in use refers to the loose, flowing, and social way that employees solve problems and learn. An example of this might be the way someone actually solves a problem with their computer by troubleshooting solutions, researching on forums, and/or asking co-workers for opinions. Figure 1 below demonstrates the difference between espoused theory and theory in use, according to Argyris and Schon (1978).
Figure 1. Espoused Theory and Theory in Use Models (1978) as presented by Argyris and Schon

The lack of consistency between these two approaches is potentially problematic if the company enforces espoused theory. In order to create an environment conducive to learning, firms are encouraged to accept theory in use, and make it easy for the individual to interact with their working environment in an undefined and unstructured way. Essentially, they should provide the right environment for organizational inquiry to take place, unconstrained by formal procedures (Frost, 2010).

Levitt and March (1996) expand further on the dynamics of OL theory. Their view presents the organization as routine-based, history dependent, and target oriented. While lessons from history are stored in the organizational memory, the event itself is often lost. They note that past lessons are captured by routines “in a way that makes the lessons, but not the history, accessible to organizations and
organizational members” (p. 320). The problem facing most organizations is that it is usually better to have an event rather than the interpretation. However, this is often too costly (both financially and time-wise) to be feasible. OL is transmitted through socialization, education, imitation and so on, and can change over time because of interpretations of history.

Argyis and Schon (1996) identify three levels of learning which may be present in the organization: single-loop learning, double-loop learning, and deutero-learning. Single-loop learning consists of one feedback loop when strategy is modified in response to an unexpected result (error correction). For example, when sales are down, marketing managers inquire into the cause, and tweak the strategy to try to bring sales back on track. Double-loop learning results in a change to theory-in-use. The values, strategies, and assumptions that govern an action are changed to create a more efficient environment. In the above example, managers might rethink the entire marketing or sales process so that there will be no (or fewer) such fluctuations in the future. Finally, deutero-learning emphasizes improving the learning system itself. This is composed of structural and behavioral components which determine how learning takes place. Essentially, deutero-learning is therefore “learning how to learn” (Frost, 2010). This can be closely linked to Senge’s concept of the learning organization, particularly in regard to improving learning processes and understanding and/or modifying mental models.

Effective learning must include all three levels, continuously improving the organization at each. However, while any organization will employ single-loop
learning, double-loop and deutero-learning are a far greater challenge. Figure 2 below demonstrates the relationship between single and double loop learning and their impact on organizational outcomes.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 2. Three Levels of Learning by Argyris and Schon (1996)**

From OL theory we can infer the following issues which may affect knowledge management and knowledge management systems:

- OL is dependent on allowing organizational inquiry to take place according to theory in use, not espoused theory.
- OL is a complex mechanism, resulting often in the storage of interpretations of past events, rather than the events themselves.
- OL can take place on three different levels. While single-loop learning comes natural to most individuals/organizations, special attention must be paid to the double-loop and deutero-learning (Frost, 2010).

**Dissertation Structure**

Chapter I describes the background and purpose of this research with support for the need of the study, research questions, and the study’s relevance to the field of
OD. Chapter II includes a review of the available and relevant literature on the concept of OL and the aspects of action research that apply to OD. Chapter III describes the methodology employed in this study and Chapter IV summarizes the major study results. Finally, Chapter V discusses the theoretical and research implications of the study, limitations, and conclusions.

Definitions of Terms

1. *Organization Development:* “…an interdisciplinary field with contributions from business, industrial/organizational psychology, human resources management, communication, sociology, and many other disciplines” (Anderson, 2016, p. 2).

2. *Organizational Culture:* The shared basic, tacit assumptions held by people in a setting about how things are or ought to be. These assumptions determine their perceptions, thoughts, feelings and to an extent, their overt behavior (Schein, 1996).

3. *Organizational Leadership:* A concept that leadership is inherently a social phenomenon. It resides in the actions of an individual or set of individuals who endeavor to move a collective along a goal path (Zaccaro, 2002).

4. *Organization Learning:* The study of how organizations learn and a process where errors are detected and corrected, insights and knowledge are generated, reflection of past events and practice inform future practice, and behavior is changed through the process of information gathering and meaning making. Insights and knowledge may begin with the individual but
must move via groups to the organization at large to fit this construct (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

5. **Change Agent**: A person from inside or outside the organization who helps an organization transform itself by focusing on such matters as organizational effectiveness, improvement, and development. A change agent usually focuses efforts on the effect of changing technologies, structures, and tasks on interpersonal and group relationships in the organization (Grimsley, 2018).


7. **Qualitative Research**: Qualitative research involves the development of questions and methodologies and data collection procedures that are typically in the participant’s setting. Data analysis inductively builds from specific to broad general themes (Creswell, 2009).
Chapter II: Literature Review

In this study, the concept of Organizational Learning (OL) is explored at the ACS and the factors that facilitate or impede it. This chapter provides a review of the literature on OL and the relevant aspects of action research. According to Jang (2016):

“Some theories of organization are compatible with and build upon others-in what they explain or predict the aspects of organizations they consider to be important, their assumptions about organizations and the world at large from which they are created, and the suitable methods for studying organizations” (p. 1).

Organizational Development

According to Richard Beckard (1969), a pioneer in the field, OD has five major components: 1) it is a planned change effort 2) it involves the total “system”; 3) it is managed from the top; 4) it is designed to increase organization effectiveness and health; and 4) through planned interventions in the organization's “processes,” using behavioral-science knowledge (Gallos, 2006, p. 3). OD is a strategic approach for a group of people within an organization, guided by leaders or consultants and supported by employees, to enhance organization efficiencies through planned change in processes, interventions and systems.

Organizational Learning

Some definitions of Organizational Learning are as follows:
Organizational learning explains the development capability of thought and productivity, though commitment to which for continuous improvement in the organization, is obtained (Marquarrdt, 2002).

Garcia Moralez et al, define OL as an organizational capacity to keep and improve the performance based on the previous experiences and know this capability and ability of achieving and productivity from vivid and implicit science to sharing science and using science in the organization (Crossan, Lane & White, 1999).

Chris Argyris (1977) interpreted OL as a process of discovering and correcting mistakes (Malek-Poor Gol Sefidi. 2006).

OL consists of all the methods, mechanisms, and processes which are used in an organization in order to achieve learning (Mayo, 1994).

OL is the process of finding errors and mistakes, and resolving and correcting them. It is a process, which happens by achieving science and improving the performance during the time (Alvani, 2008; Saadat, 2016).

These definitions are all different, yet convey the same intricacies. OL is an OD system of ideas to study the process of developing, retaining and transferring knowledge into the organization. Cyert and March (1963) introduced OL for the first time. They believed that an organization’s effort to respond to changes of their external environment in order to match the objectives with new conditions, leads to discussions to find procedures, which help an organization be more effective (Allemeh & Moghaddami, 2010; Saadat, 2016).
OL occurs when members of the organization act as learning agents for the organization, responding to changes in the internal and external environments of the organization by detecting and correcting errors in organizational theory-in-use, and embedding the results of their inquiry in private images and shared maps of organization (Argyris & Schon, 1978, p. 29).

**Why is Organizational Learning Important?**

OL has been discussed for about half a century and is continuing to become more relevant. Present-day challenges often require organizations to form by the power of learning and to synchronize itself so it can evolve into a more effective system (Allameh & Moghaddami, 2010). Today, traditional structures do not have either the necessary aptitude or inflection for alignment with fast environmental changes. In order to survive, they have to either change their structure or equip themselves with tools to achieve the ability to counter global changes. One of the most important tools is to characterize the concept of OL within their work systems. By applying this approach, organizations, instead of their traditional movements and behaviors that in its best situation include education, change to an organization, which always learn (Saadat, 2016).

**Types of Organizational Learning**

OL has two main premises. First, recognizing the need for various levels of learning and second, retaining science principles among business organizations and practice. Many experts have divided OL in to different categories. According to
Argyris and Schon (1978), there is monocyclic learning, two-cyclic learning, and three-cycle learning. Monocyclic learning happens when organization members respond to the environment by finding and correcting errors. Two-cyclic learning not only controls current processes, but also includes correcting culture, policies, goals, strategies and organizational structure. This also includes changing the science base of competencies and the common works of an organization. Finally, three-cyclic (or twofold) learning is based on changing methods and requires people’s conceptual reflection. This kind of learning results in new findings and new science.

According to Marquardt (2002), adaptive learning, forward-looking learning, and practical learning do not limit each other, and the individual, group, and organizational levels can occur simultaneously. Adaptive learning happens when a person, group, or organization learn through experience and evaluation, mostly in the form of past performance. The result is analyzed in terms of congruency with the aim, and the organization does a new action or corrects the previous action based on the result. Forward-looking learning begins when an organization learns through prospective futures. This approach is meant to help avoid negative results and experiences by identifying best practices and opportunities and finding ways to execute them. Lastly, practical learning consists of working on real issues, focusing on the obtained science and performance of solutions (Saadat, 2016).

Most recently, Dawes (2003) describes three kinds of OL: 1) hereditary learning, which emphasizes science created by organization founders; 2) experiential learning, which is considered a science obtained through either purposeful or
unintentional experience; and 3) vicarious learning, which highlights the impact of “second hand experience”, which has been done by the people outside of the organization.

**The Process**

OL is a process that can be described as complicated, unplanned, vigilant and purposeful, interactive and dynamic, continuous and persistent, ever-changing, and is commonly affected by the base of knowledge of cultural sources used by these people (Saadat, 2016). Several experts in organizational management have discussed OL from a point of view that defines it as a *kind* of process, which includes several stages. For example, Daft and Weick (1984) defined OL as three-stage process, which involves searching and collecting information; interpreting information; and learning by practical use of information. From there, Huber (1991) proposed that OL was more of a non-linear process that includes the following activities: 1) identifying scientific needs; 2) trading and issuing science; 3) increasing science to current scientific systems; and 4) characterizing science. In 1995, Nanaka and Takochi returned the OL process three stages, involving identifying and collecting useful information; the practical use of science; and the dissemination of results throughout the organization. Most recently, Lopez and colleagues (2006) introduced OL as a continuous process which includes obtaining information, interpreting science, distributing results and organizational memory, which are a combination of processes from Huber’s (1991) and Nanaka and Takochi’s (1995) models (Saadat, 2016).
These researchers have the basis of OL in common, that being: identifying what the problem is, or the organizational needs; figuring out how “fix” the issue; how to measure the outcome; and to continually learn is the key. Participants are not just learning, but employing what they have learned.

**Effective Elements of Organizational Learning**

Most of the OL models emphasize management and leadership, organizational culture, knowledge, information and communicational systems, and organizational structure and systems, which are used for facilitating and instrumenting change (e.g., technology) (Masudi Nadushan & Javan Shargh, 2005; Saadat, 2016). The organization must have the support of management and leadership to fulfill this goal. Additionally, the culture of the organization should be a continuous one that strives to provide employees with a higher standard for responsibility and focus on professional development. With learning comes the knowledge and information that will be shared and used within the work force, facilitating positive change.

**Facilitating Factors of Organizational Learning**

Considering processes and structures help the organizations to facilitate learning, OL is a product of these two similar, and also quite different concepts. Indeed, it can be analyzed that in OL processes and within learning organization, structures form the main position. In OL, learning processes are manipulated in order to improve science, organizational and individual understating, but the power of them in accordance. These concepts are similar because using OL requires a set of characteristics in the organization, in which performing learning processes and
implementation of learning process makes the organization purposeful and learning (Allameh & Moghadamni, 2010; Saadat, 2016).

**Organizational Learning Functions**

Improving at the science level in an organization and OL has several functions and advantages. First, the power of learning faster than competitors is a kind of permanent competitive advantage for organizations. Second, according to Bowen and colleagues (2006), learning precedes competitive advantage. Third, learning is the most important way to improve performance in the long-term. In the short-term, the most superior organizations are those that use employees’ strengths and capitalize on their commitment and learning capacity (Akhaven, & Jafari, 2006). Overall, OL can lead to improved public and team learning in an organization, more effective organizational activities, better individual and group behaviors and finally, efficiency, effectiveness and productivity (Saadat, 2016; Sharma, 2003).

**Organizational Learning and Organizational Culture**

Creating learning organizations requires establishing a strong organizational culture that includes commitment to learning, effective and reliable science, transparency, topic guidance and leading, and responsibility and liability (Malek-poor Gol Sefidi, 2006). In addition, it is stated that, “a learning organization learns for future from mistakes by accurate identifying mistakes. Such space happens in a proper organizational culture, which does not believe mistakes to be punished” (Akhavan & Jafari, 2006, p. 169).
The role of culture in a learning organization also has four main outcomes: 1) it supports and encourages learning and entrepreneurship; 2) it encourages researchers and search, discussions, risk taking an obtaining experience; 3) it allows participation in accepting mistakes to be seen as an opportunity for organization learning; and 4) it esteems all personal’s welfare and convenience (Masudi Nadushan & Javan Shargh, 2015; Saadat, 2016).

**Organizational Learning Effectiveness**

In order for OL programs to be effective, managers should employ scientific methods, which can permeate through their organization and form operational outcomes. It is critical that managers and leaders should know the ways which people both acquire and use information to solve problems, and should know how to encourage the use of science to lead processes, structures, and organizational activities. By doing so, chances for improving performance and business are likely to increase (Allameh & Moghaddami, 2010). Eyesight, strategy, leadership, values, structure, processes and experiences should all be ever-changing in order for people’s learning to be improved. This is one of the premier ways to accelerate OL (Madushan & Shargh, 2005; Saadat, 2016).

**Action Research**

According to Vogelsang and colleagues (2012), action research is the process by which managers and employees in an organization are engaged in the self-study of the organization to achieve desired changes. Data is collected then returned to the involved members of the system for analysis, action is determined and taken, data
regarding the impact of the action is collected and fed back to the system; the cycle continues as more action is taken; and so on. Lewin describes action research as “comparative research of the conditions and effects of various forms of social action” using “a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action” (p. 206). Action research is about undertaking action and studying that action as it takes place. It is about improving practice through intervention, and demands rigorous preparation, planning, action, attention to process, reflection re-planning and validating claims to learning and theory generation. It is collaborative, involving interacting with others.

Zuber-Skerritt (2001) adds that action learning means learning from and through action or experience, as well as taking action as a result of learning outcomes. Similarly, action research is a cyclical and iterative process of both action and reflection. He further emphasized that the main difference between action learning and action research is the same as that between learning and research in general; both include active learning, searching, problem solving and systematic inquiry. To differentiate, action research requires a more systematic approach and as a result, involves more attention, verification, and public dissemination. Koshy, Koshy and Waterman (2005) define action research similarly but add that the emerging outcomes then contribute to the researcher’s professional development; hence, the notion of generating new knowledge. Figure 1 below shows where action learning and action research overlap.
Figure 3. Commonalities of Action Learning and Action Research (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001)

According to Coghlan and Brannick (2010), action research distinguishes four kinds of knowing, reflecting different ways for dealing with and acting within the world. The first is experiential knowing, which is essentially the knowledge gained as a result of experienced realities. The second is presentational knowing, which is knowledge expressed through culture and the arts (i.e., language, music, and images). The third kind of knowing is propositional, which helps refine experiential and presidential knowledge into explainable concepts. Finally, practical knowing is the full fruition of the former three types of knowledge and is demonstrated by the ability to doing appropriate things, skillfully, and competently (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010).

Relative to this study, the form of knowledge that action research aims to produce is practical knowledge. Accordingly, our daily knowing in usual situations is always incomplete and can only be solidified by tending to the particular task and
adequately appropriating to the new situation. No two situations are identical and as
time passes and new experiences are gained, memories evolve. This is why reasoning
is critical skill – it allows a person to reflect and judge practically in order to move
from one setting to another by making necessary changes (Coghlan & Barnnick,
2010).

Summary

The main purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between certain
learning organization characteristics and to change adaptation, innovation, and
bottom-line organizational performance. Organizations need to constantly learn so
that they will be able to cope with the future challenges that are brought about by
dynamic technological changes, which are inevitable in this day and time.
Simultaneously removing old assumptions that are no longer valuable and in tune
with current practices is critical to OD.

Once a learning organization is developed, management must ensure that the
pace of learning is continually increased and not impeded. Typically, when
organizations achieve initial success, they are inclined to stop learning due to feeling
that they have “arrived.” This feeling of mastery is a common reason why most
companies fail after achieving initial success. Learning must engrained as part of an
organization’s philosophy and as a core organizational value and culture in order to
continue positive growth. Organizational leaders also have to appreciate the value of
learning as a remedy for organizational sustainability (Odor, 2018).
Learning organizations are also good at learning from experience, whether it be their own or a competitor’s. Companies often conduct a thorough analysis of their past mistakes in order to learn and grow from them. Some companies choose to conduct formal retrospective meetings to analyze the challenges encountered and develop plans for improvement. To learn from others, these companies vigorously study competitors, market leaders in different industries, clients, and customers. By benchmarking against industry best practices, leadership can constantly find ways to improve their own operations. Learning organizations are also good at studying consumer habits to generate ideas for improvement. For example, Xerox uses anthropologists to understand and gain insights to how customers are actually using their office products. By using these techniques, learning organizations facilitate innovation and make it easier to achieve organizational change.

By setting up a dynamic feedback loop, learning can become a regular part of daily operations. If an employee implements a new method or technology that seems to be successful, a learning organization is in a good position to adopt it. By constantly being aware of how employee actions and outcomes affect other workers as well as overall company productivity, the inevitable small changes throughout organizations can be rapidly absorbed and tailored for daily operations. When an organization understands that change occurs constantly, it will be in a better position to make use of good changes and intervene if a change seems detrimental (Carpenter, 2009).
Finally, it is imperative for organizations to develop leaders through capturing the educational experience and providing practical usage of skills and knowledge into the workplace. Employees often come to the ACS with a didactic education of the necessary tools for being a leader; however, they do not always come to the position with practical, field experience. Developing a mentor and/or on-the-job training curriculum to enhance leadership qualities is necessary for organizations to further develop the attributes required by the most effective leaders of an organization.
Chapter III: Methodology

Using a qualitative action research method, the overall goal of this study is to conduct a program that enhances leadership practices within trauma programs at the ACS. To reiterate, the following three research questions guided this study:

1. Will an OL style of training and development result in better leaders based on an improvement in key leadership competencies?
2. What is the effect on a company's performance having better trained and developed employees?
3. Will this six-month project be perceived as a catalyst for change?

Hypotheses

Expected improvements based on participation in this study included: 1) a department that communicates effectively and motivates individuals to create high-achieving outcomes; 2) staff members whose focus is on a reflective mindset that continuously drives the leader to acknowledge the immediate solution, yet recognize the opportunity to determine what larger solution is best for the individual and as the group as a whole; 3) a developed resilient leadership approach that empowers any individual to lead regardless of position or role.

The expected outcomes should result in these key leadership competencies:

- To become more empowered as leaders, no matter what their position/role is in the company;
- To become stronger decision makers;
• To become change agents for their respective areas;
• To become more effective communicators;
• To become more detailed and organized project leaders;
• To become more confident, innovative thinkers; and
• To become resilient when faced with challenges.

Site Selection

The ACS’ strategic priorities have always been to identify the best method to achieve leadership training and sustain skills within ACS. Therefore, this study capitalizes on company-wide training to further enhance effective leadership within the college, mainly focusing on cultivating leadership practices across trauma programming. The main projected benefits of bringing an OD model to the ACS was fourfold: 1) to encourage professional growth by creating paths for achieving positions of greater responsibility; 2) to provide practical use of learned skill set in various positions; 3) to cultivate leadership practices across trauma programming and to successfully implement newly learned abilities into current role; and 4) to provide a deeper understanding for effective leading.

Study Design

Six OD and leadership training sessions with modules were conducted at the ACS from January until June 2018. This curriculum provided additional instruction and deep discussions about leadership skills, qualities, and ideas that had potential for implementation within the organization. Each session was held for two hours, once a
month, with a total of seven employee participants, also referred to as change agents. The participants’ learning challenge from the training was to share their newly-acquired knowledge with the rest of their office staff in an effort to promote organizational change. Specifically, participants committed to demonstrating one or two of the leadership qualities taught in the session after its conclusion.

Participants and their managers signed a letter acknowledging their roles as change agents and commitment to being an active member of the ACS TDFLP cohort (see Appendix B). Additionally, they committed to the vision, goals, objectives and strategies of the ACS, and to take the time necessary to fully participate in the training sessions.

During their performance discussions, change agents relayed back to their immediate supervisors the practical implications that could be useful to their development and daily processes. They also provided feedback about the TDLFP training sessions to help further develop the curriculum with the goal of empowering all staff with improved leadership capabilities. Benedictine University Institutional Review Board approved this study.
Leadership Foundations Program

The following narrative describes each of the sessions of the TDFLP curriculum.

Session 1 – Leadership 101

This session focused on developing critical and reflective thinking abilities. It helped the participant’s exhibit responsible decision-making and personal accountability. The facilitators demonstrated an understanding of team dynamics and effective teamwork, while developing a range of leadership skills and abilities. The discussion included the following four topics: 1) effectively leading change; 2) resolving/embracing/facilitating conflict; 3) motivating others; and 4) values alignment.

Session 2 – Decision Making

This session was designed to help participants develop a critical thinking mindset and to use knowledge, facts, and data to effectively solve problems and make decisions. Material was presented to teach the participants to think quickly and efficiently, assess problems, and create solutions. In addition, this session provided techniques to efficiently facilitate decision making, providing the steps to development a well thought out solution within a reasonable timeframe.

Session 3 – Effective Communication

This session focused on discussing the different approaches, frameworks, and tools for communicating effectively as a leader; how inclusive leadership and effective communication are intertwined. This session also initiated discussions on
everyday communication roadblocks and introduced strategies to create space for transparent and authentic communication, where people with differences feel safe to speak up and share ideas. The participants discussed examples of how managing up is important and how to best lead their managers, as well as developing concepts of management styles for example, followership, social capital and leadership alignment.

**Session 4 – Change Management**

In this session, the focus was on implementing change, within individual roles and departments, and how that change would impact other projects, and/or staff members. The term “change agent” was reintroduced and how it could have influence. Participants were led to understand pushback and provided steps to find a plausible solution. This session also broke down the varying “actors” encountered by a change agent, and how they could encourage others to be part of the change, owning the change, and ultimately adopting the change. The session was used to reinforce how creating a change environment could facilitate positive changes that result in happier “actors”. Change management also incorporated ideas including managing up, leader dynamics, setting expectations, appreciative inquiry, effective communication and conflict resolution/management.

**Session 5 – Leading Projects**

This session provided an understanding of the basics of project management and how the participants could use the skills to improve accountability and efficiency. In addition, the session used the skills within project management to integrate the
Leadership Foundations surrounding projects, such as: planning, delegation, follow-up, corrective actions, schedules, and managing up. The session concluded with a project management case study, providing work place examples so that the participants would be able to apply the concepts.

Session 6 - Resilience in Setbacks and Presentations

This session helped participants focus on their leadership experiences with an emphasis on resiliency in the workplace. This topic was an essential characteristic of leaders facing the stress, uncertainty, and change impacting organizations of every size. The participants left with an understanding that resilience is the capacity to recover from failure and obstacles. This session transformed the participant’s stress reactions into valuable feedback, enabling the participants to measure their stress level with failure in hopes to build cognitive endurance. The goal was for the participants to value failure for the part it plays in reaching personal and organizational goals, with an understanding of how successful failures can provide growth in leadership.

Participants also gave presentations on the overall TDFLP, describing what resonated with them the most and lessons learned during the training. They also shared what they took back to their area and explained what worked for them, what did not work and why, and any recommendations for improvement of the program. This was a comprehensive exercise of all materials provided and a test of gained knowledge and practical use of information. Upon completion of this session, participants were also provided with a certificate of completion (see Appendix D).
Participants

The seven participants, or change agents, in the study were employees of ACS. They were volunteers who were committed to spreading the message about change within the department. Change agents could be in any of position such as: coordinators, program managers, or assistants. For the purpose of this study all participant data was de-identified.

Data Collection

Feedback

Participants and their managers were asked to provide qualitative feedback through direct observation of the leadership practices learned in the TDFLP (see Appendix C). To draw conclusions about how the implementation of OL-based programs improve leadership qualities, staff productivity, staff position ownership, staff retention and overall job satisfaction, participants and their managers the following questions. To participants:

1. Which skills or tools were you able to apply from the last module this month?

2. In what way did you apply the tools/skills in your daily job function? How were the tools taught, applied?

3. Did you seek out opportunities to share learned leadership practices with peers?

To managers: Did you observe a change within your department/staff within the last month? Please elaborate.
Pre- and Post-Assessments
The participants were given the same self-assessment at two different intervals – before the first session (Session 1 – Leadership 101), and at the completion of the last session (Session 6 – Resilience). These assessments measured their leadership growth, their ability to handle situations based on what was learned in the sessions, and if they are more willing to take initiative and be innovative. The assessment was used to better understand how the participant views their leadership capabilities, rating themselves using Likert-scale response options, including: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, and not sure.

Survey
Lastly, the participants took a survey to evaluate the overall success of the training sessions, whether they learned for them, and/or did change happen within the office because of their newly learned efforts. The survey consisted of 16 questions and answers with the options of “Yes”, “No”, or “Undecided”. (See Appendix B).

Data Analysis
The pre-assessment was to measure what they thought of themselves as a leader. The post-assessment was to evaluate if there were changes in responses compared to the first time the assessment was given. Calculations of percent change were done to obtain results. To obtain feedback results, a codifying data for action research process was employed, following the streamlined scheme as illustrated in Figure 4. By employing Saldana’s basic process for Codes-to-Theory, outcomes of the study will be defined based on the observed coding themes.
Figure 4. A Streamlined Codes-to-Theory Model for Qualitative Inquiry
(Saldana, 2003)
Chapter IV: Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to apply the methods of action research in order to investigate the impact of OL for an originally designed training course taught at the ACS. Participants completed feedback questionnaires, surveys, and self-assessments, and the data were analyzed to identify themes.

The overall findings show that the incentive for implementing OL was strong and that it was influenced by both internal and external factors. There were sufficient methods that encouraged the application of material, fostered desired practices, and positively influenced OL within the organization, including having engaged leadership and the instructors’ open availability. This study inspired change that will not only assist participants in remaining as change agents for the department and utilizing what they have learned to make the department better overall, but it also allowed their performance and the productivity of their work to increase.

Data Analysis

Feedback

Participants and their managers were asked to provide qualitative feedback through direct observation of the leadership practices learned in the TDFLP. Here are examples of the answers provided from participants for each feedback item:

1. Which skills or tools were you able to apply from the last module this month?

   “Change Impact Analysis.”

   35
2. In what way did you apply the tools/skills in your daily job function? How were the tools taught, applied?

“In preparation for the launch of some new functionality on our TQP account center, I reviewed the upcoming changes with the internal staff that would be most affected. We discussed the current process, how it will change for participants, and the resulting changes that will occur for ACS trauma staff. I provided a demonstration of the upcoming changes to help staff visualize what was to come and answer any questions. While the changes are positive for both participants and staff, the change does present some challenges in identifying learning new processes.”

3. Did you seek out opportunities to share learned leadership practices with peers?

“Indirectly - during a ‘Lessons Learned’ meeting when debriefing a recent project that was completed, I identified a few ‘quick wins’ for areas that can be changed and improved upon for future projects.”

Manager Question:

1. Did you observe a change within your department/staff within the last month?

Please elaborate.

“I have certainty seen the participant take more initiative over the last month or so and has taken on the vast majority of the communication around the Aptify launch. She has done an excellent job leading and communicating the change around this project.”
Thematic Analysis

Based on participants’ responses, the following interconnected themes were observed: project leadership, empowerment, being change agents, team builders, innovative thinkers, resilience, effective communicators, and taking initiative. Although the participants self-reported increases in these abilities throughout the program, each of the themes became more prevalent as the sessions progressed. According to responses from managers, there was an increase in staff productivity, improved leadership qualities, staff position ownership, and overall job satisfaction.

The answers from the participants and their managers led to the consensus that OL, by and far, proved effective. Themes for all participants and sessions were organized in a table format and general, summative results were developed. Figure 5 displays each session (by title), what each participant learned, and what their managers observed as a change in the participant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Participant Learned to be:</th>
<th>Manager’s Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership 101</td>
<td>Empowered</td>
<td>Improved Leadership Qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>Taking Initiative/Project Leaders</td>
<td>Staff Productivity/ Improved Leadership Qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Communication</td>
<td>Effective Communicators</td>
<td>Staff Position Ownership/Improved Leadership Qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change Management</td>
<td>Project Leaders/Change Agents</td>
<td>Staff Position Ownership/Improved Leadership Qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading Projects</td>
<td>Project Leaders</td>
<td>Staff Productivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>Resilient</td>
<td>Staff Productivity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5. Feedback Questionnaire Themes

Leadership Foundations Program Results

The following narrative provides a summary of the responses obtained from both participants and managers.
Session 1 – Leadership 101

One participant gave an example of how they were able to apply newly learned tools from Session 1:

“I empowered a team member who expressed concern about some inefficiencies, I discussed the process, explained how to think critically about that process and identify gaps/pain points and offer suggestions for improvement."

A manager noted:

"The participant exhibits a greater sense of empowerment to voice opinions, especially when they may be contrary to the group’s common thinking. She understands the significance of speaking up and sharing, especially in areas where she may have more detailed knowledge or accountability."

Their managers observed improved leadership qualities in their demeanor and how they conducted themselves in their work. One manager pointed out:

“After the first leadership session, I have noticed an improvement within our team. The participant specifically has displayed leadership qualities which include suggesting process improvement solutions for reoccurring problems. This has significantly impacted our team positively especially at our recent annual meeting and global symposium."

As stated earlier, the participants felt more empowered as leaders. Although some individuals were not managers, they soon realized that they too were capable of being leaders.
Session 2 – Decision Making

The Decision-Making session encouraged participants to take further initiative and become more detailed project leaders. Managers saw an increase in the participants overall productivity; the quality of work continued to get done quickly yet efficiently. When a participant was asked did they share what they learned in this session, they answered:

"Yes, though somewhat indirectly. When a colleague mentioned having some difficulty communicating with another person about next steps for a project, I recommended that the two first make sure they are in alignment and had the same sense of what the schedule and priorities for the project were."

A manager noted after this session:

"The participant has found her ‘voice’. She feels more confident in sharing her opinions, building her case and soliciting feedback, rather than just listening or taking direction. Her interactions with staff are evening out, becoming collaborations rather than mere support. She is asserting leadership and ownership, as well as mastery of her area, when it relates with other areas. Great growth to see, confidence increasing."

Session 3 – Effective Communication

In this session, participants discussed examples of how “managing up” is imperative to best lead their managers, and learned about developing concepts of management styles such as followership, social capital, and leadership alignment. A participant explained how his communication skills were improved:
“The biggest takeaway I had from this session was how I prepared for meetings/leadership opportunities. I wanted to prepare fully fleshed out ideas that explained our motivation and objective which each project prior to each meeting. An emphasis for me was displaying social capital to those I spoke with. I've often found that even when I am an expert on a topic, if I can't communicate my thoughts/ideas clearly. It diminishes my appearance as an owner of a project.”

He also explained that he applied tools learned:

“Instead of outlining my ideas ahead of each meeting, I tried to come up with an elevator speech for each project. The objective for these short introductions was to establish our goals, provide a timeline, and explain expectations of each project we embark on. This method has been helpful but has required more additional preparation time ahead of meetings.”

One manager stated:

“Team collaboration is higher, and we are working on more projects all together than ever before. Communication is great right now and we are able to all bounce ideas off each other to find what procedure works best.”

These quotes demonstrate that the participants growth in communication positively affected their areas within the department and further exemplifies that their leadership qualities improved.
Session 4 – Change Management

The concept of Change Management was particularly new to the participants and it was evident that the concepts learned in this session improved their leadership qualities as they became change agents within their departments. A participant was able to use tools taught in this session:

“Change in the way Liaisons/Consultants are submitted for approval. Staff in certain areas was completely opposed to the improved formal application process, but this module taught me to be mindful of "The Kubler-Ross Change Curve" as acceptance to change comes in different phases and that everyone deals with that change in their own unique way. Continued mutual positive communication through the use of tools, resources, open debate, solicitation of suggestions and support as needed, will ensure the success of every team member during the transition.”

A manager reported their outlook, stating:

“The participant's awareness of different approaches to change has enabled her to think about and alter her requests for change and now the way she engages peers in discussions regarding change. She demonstrates management and direction of change, rather than just reactions to change.”

Session 5 – Leading Projects

One participant stated:

“I enjoyed learning about knowledge areas of leading projects. Too many times we take on projects with our committees and that stems off new ideas. I
now want to use the idea of scope and time management to make sure that we stay focused and complete one task first, before moving onto other projects within a committee.”

This participant displayed the desire to become a better detailed project manager and realized that the more detailed they are, the more productive they will be.

Another participant describe how they were able to apply newly learned concepts:

“Our invoicing process is still undergoing changes and is a project in itself. As we hope to implement full automated invoicing, understanding how to manage and analyze the project has been and will continue to be beneficial.”

Session 6 – Resilience

From this session, participants left with an understanding that resilience is the capacity to recover from failure and obstacles. They also learned to value failure for the part it plays in reaching personal and organizational goals, with an understanding of how successful failures can provide growth in leadership. One participant stated:

“This was my favorite module - I am continuing to develop my mindset like a rubber band, finding ways to bounce back from failure and seeing the success that comes even when the end result is not ideal.”

A few managers were able to see a change in their staff’s resiliency right away. One stated:

“The participant has found the confidence the steps back and regroup when a desired outcome has not been achieved. She has always been accountable
(when/if something goes wrong) but how she owns the development and negotiation of the solution as well. This has boosted her confidence and overall ownership of her success.”

Another added:

“We have ahead a few issues with the automated system with not sending invoices as it should. She did not give up or get upset. She was resilient, looked for a solution, set up meetings with our IT department and was able to come to the solutions. Although it took her more time, in the end we had a positive result.”

As the findings from this study suggest, there is emerging evidence that the practices examined here may lead to increased levels of motivation for learning, which is an important element in supporting participants in learning activities, such as the leadership program resulting in increased performance.

**Pre- and Post-Assessment Results**

Here are a few examples of the responses received:

1. “I use the performance improvement process to anticipate problems and improve on current and future projects.”

2. “I am an innovator, looking for ways to implement new ideas and methodology.”

3. “I consider myself a leader.”

Interestingly, some participants that generally considered themselves to be strong leaders before the session gave themselves lower leadership scores after the
course, acknowledging their room for growth. On the contrary, a few participants indicated that they were not leaders at all before the sessions, but throughout their experience, learned that they were leaders no matter what position they held and scored themselves higher on the final assessment. Based on a comparative analysis there was a 52% change in answers from the first assessment (see Figure 5 below).

![Change](image)

**Figure 5. Percentage of Change from Pre- to Post-Assessment**

**Survey Results**

Based on the survey, everyone found the sessions helpful, learned new skills, and will continue to use the tools to continue to grow and increase productivity in their areas. Figure 6 below displays the overall rating of what the participants gave the course based on a 1 – 5 scale, 5 being excellent and 1 being poor. Some of the comments included: “I really enjoyed this course, learned a lot and will carry this knowledge continuously”; “Great!!! Informative!”; “Empowering for sure!”
With an overall average of 4, the survey exhibits that the training was useful and the participants found it constructive. OL has influenced the participants in a way that they will continue to use the teachings in their everyday work, embracing the new concepts on the job, and in their personal lives.

### Research Questions

1. **Will an OL style of training and development result in better leaders based on an improvement in key leadership competencies?**

   The participants reported taking what they learned and using the new concepts in their everyday work, providing feedback on what they used, if it worked, and if there was a change. This pilot program caused them to really take in to account the methodologies and learn from themselves and experience in general.

2. **What is the effect on a company's performance having better trained and developed employees?**
This course gave participants the confidence and empowered a sense of growth. They now understand that they are leaders, no matter what position they are in. Participants described specific personal areas for improvement, including: 1) leading with decisiveness and continuing to improve communication; 2) leadership skills to continue practicing active listening; 3) building a team that plays to individual strengths yet still offers opportunities for growth and learning new skills; and 4) incorporating diversity of skills, background, and perspective when possible.

One participant stated:

“The trauma department is special. We had a group of fun, hardworking individuals and I’ve enjoyed the opportunity to work more closely with some people that I don’t normally get the chance to work with; we learned that there is not one single path to success, and understood what a leader really is, how to apply this concept to our job and everyday life, and to be the kind of leader we would want to have.”

3. **Will this six month project be perceived as a catalyst for change?**

One of the participants stated:

“Each module gave me applicable tools in my in role as well as in my personal life, which I loved! My favorite module was Resilience in Setbacks. We all experience setbacks or go through change. This module taught me that setbacks or change enables us to adapt, and to respond to risks as well as opportunities. We are able to learn and grow, which ultimately is what we all want one way or another.”
This was just one example of feedback that was received over the entire course. The change within the organization started with the participants growing in their understanding of leadership and how they can grow in that capacity. Beyond this course is where the real test of knowledge comes into play, testing their new leadership methods through taking what was learned and applying it to work and life; setting standards of excellence for personal growth and development; and seeking to constantly re-shape and re-define leadership techniques to adapt to an ever-changing environment.

**Action Research Results**

Before each session, modules were updated based on suggestions and feedback from department leaders, the co/instructor, the participants, as well as the Human Resource (HR) Director. Making these changes was an important part of delivery effectiveness and the action learning process. Making these changes also helped interpret the next session for better understanding and ensuring compliance with IRB stipulations, ACS regulations, and participants’ needs. It also guaranteed that continuous learning would be cultivated unremittingly. Here is a list of changes made after each session:

**Session 1: Leadership 101**

A participant asked for the incorporation of more discussions in which other participants could share their experiences. This function was integrated into all of the modules thereafter. Real world experiences from peers made the concepts easier to
understand. It also allowed the cohorts to get to know each other more than just on a professional level.

**Session 2: Decision Making**
The HR director recommended adding the ACS mission statement and the five values of success to all slides and correlate the topic to our mission statement. This idea was immediately implemented so that participants would always remember what our mission here at ACS is and as leaders how we can uphold that mission, which is: “The American College of Surgeons is dedicated to improving the care of the surgical patient and to safeguarding standards of care in an optimal and ethical practice environment” (ACS, 2018).

**Session 3: Effective Communication**
The HR Director also suggested condensing the modules. The modules seemed pretty long, and the goal was to employ more discussion and cohort engagement than formal instruction. She stated she could see participants as being bored. The objective was to motivate and teach participants new concepts that they would be excited to learn. If they are uninterested, they may not remember the lessons.

**Session 4: Change Management**
Participants explained they would like to hear more real world experiences from the instructor’s stand point, especially when teaching a new concept. So for every new concept discussed, instructions explained how they could, or have used that concept in their own professions.
Session 5: Leading Projects
The HR Director added that we need to establish more hands-on activities. Games/role play would help participants understand concepts more quickly. For the sixth session, a team building games was added to the module content that related to the session’s content.

Session 6: Resilience in Setbacks
One participant added that “both [instructors] were knowledgeable but one was better able to demonstrate the material in practice with real world explanations.” Co-instructors realized that when working on material for the new modules, they both need to correlate their real world experiences in to the discussions.

Summary
During the TDFLP sessions, participants discussed, learned and understood new concepts that forced them to think about what leadership meant, and how they were indeed, leaders. It gave them the platform to use what they learned on the job and in turn caused positive contributions seen by themselves, managers, staff and peers. This study cultivated a department that communicates effectively and motivated individuals to create high-achieving outcomes. The results overall were a more developed staff whose focus is on a reflective mindset. This quality continuously drives the leader to acknowledge immediate solutions while recognizing the opportunity to determine what larger resolution is best for the individual and the group as a whole. Most importantly, this experience has expanded a resilient
leadership approach that empowers any individual to lead regardless of position or role.

Figure 7 below displays the frequency of each competency that was coded to each quote received from participants for all sessions. With the highest frequency, participants learned to be more established project leaders; they have learned to grow in all areas as evidenced.

![Key Leadership Competencies](image)

**Figure 7. Key Leadership Competencies Frequency Graph**

Outcomes demonstrated that the following nine leadership competencies were obtained through participation in the TDFLP:

1. Participants became more empowered as leaders, no matter what their position/role is in the company;
2. Participants became stronger decision makers;
3. Participants became change agents for their perspective areas;
4. Participants became better effective communicators;
5. Participants became more detailed and organized project leaders;
6. Participants became team builders, no matter the position/role;
7. Participants became confident innovative thinkers;
8. Participants became resilient, when the tough gets going; and
9. Participants obtained the courage to take more initiatives.

Figure 8 shows the participants’ managers’ perceptions of change. Based off of the manager’s feedback I was able to code their quotes to these themes; with the highest frequency being they observed “Improved Leadership Qualities” within the participant that they managed. They also observed change in all of the other themes. Participants showed an observed developed change in improved leadership qualities, staff position ownership, staff productivity, overall job satisfaction, and staff retention.
Figure 8. Observed Change Frequency Graph
In short, the TDFLP was developed for this study for a selected few staff as well as the documents that would be able to capture the measurement of progress. The participants retained the information and used what they learned within their jobs. Results from participants and their managers demonstrated that OL is more than just teaching staff new principles; it requires substantial follow-through, understanding and examination on the participants end.
Chapter V: Discussion

This chapter provides a summary of the conclusions that were drawn as a result of this study. This includes a discussion of the connections between these findings and the literature that advocates for OL. Included will be theoretical implications of the findings for TDFLP, and this chapter will conclude with recommendations for future study.

The results of an OL program indicated elevated learning outcome at the ACS. The collective narrative from the participants in this study showed that there was evidence of an individual awareness of the “big picture”, tolerance for mistakes during learning, a trusting and collaborative climate, a shared and monitored mission, and ongoing professional development at ACS.

Theoretical Implications

This study depended on the author as the insider action researcher, who fully immersed themselves into the concepts being taught, not letting reservations about current inefficiencies negate participation. An insider action researcher is defined as conducting a study within one's own organization or community with the goal of making positive change (Coghlan, 2017).

“Insider action researchers need to confront the issues pertaining to preunderstanding, role duality and organizational politics. Attention to experience, understanding and judgement which leads to action, provides a methodology through which they can affirm what and how they know. They
need to do so in a critical realist approach which challenges them to transcend their own subjectivity through the quality of how they are attentive to the data, intelligent in their understanding, reasonable in their judgements and responsible in their actions. Such transcendence provides the criteria for a rigorous epistemology and quality action research” (Coghlan, 2007, p. 343).

“Preunderstanding plays a vital role in how an insider action researcher conceptualizes new situations, and as such, can use that understanding to avoid negative outcomes. According to Gummesson (2000), “preunderstanding refers to such things as people’s knowledge, insights and experience before they engage in a research program” (p. 57). Coghlan and Brannick (2005) expounds on the knowledge that research can bring, stating,

The knowledge, insights and experience of the insider action researcher apply, not only to theoretical understanding of organizational dynamics, but also to the lived experience of your own organization. Some misunderstand the notion of preunderstanding and equate it with tacit knowledge. Preunderstanding includes both explicit and tacit knowledge. Personal experience and knowledge of your own system and job is a distinctive preunderstanding for the insider action researcher (p. 61).

As an insider-researcher at the ACS, the author had beneficial knowledge about the cultures and informal structures within the organization. Organizations lead two lives. The formal, or public life, is presented in terms mission statement, goals, assets, resources, annual reports, organizational chart, and formal documentation. The
informal, or private life, is life as experienced by its members – the cultures, norms, traditions, power blocs, and beliefs that shape the individuals who make up our organization.

This study engaged three types of research methods to build data: 1) first-person-research, which requires using a preunderstanding of organizational knowledge and organizational studies for personal and professional development; 2) second-person-research, which involves working on practical issues of concern to the organization in collaboration with colleagues and relevant others; and 3) third-person-research, which results in generating understanding and theory extrapolated from the experience.

The influence of being an inside action researcher allowed positive results in the limited pilot study. In turn, this study improved leadership qualities for managers; improvements that could be observed by their managers, peers and staff. Due to the positive contributions and outcome of the TDLFP, permission has been given to expand this program to other departments within the organization and incorporate more participants.

Clearly, many researchers in the field have devised their own types and definitions of OL. This study employs Dawes’ types of OL – more specifically, experiential learning. The participants developed knowledge, values and skills from direct experiences. They reflected on those experiences (through feedback questionnaires), they took initiatives and made decisions based on new lessons learned within their scope of work, they engaged with me as their instructor as well as other participants on how the process was and what they were able to use and learn,
and finally the ability to learn from setbacks and successes as discussed in the sessions.

**Conclusion**

After the success of the first group, more employees within ACS are asking to be in the next to participate; however, the small size of the groups mean the process will take time. Participants are more comfortable in small groups; they create leadership resources within each cohort and encourage participants to seek help from other members of their group instead of going directly to their manager. These participants do not necessarily work together daily and the course created leadership resource groups to help understand how individual projects apply to what others are working on.

To capitalize on current ACS training, researchers focused on tools that could be implemented by junior team members in their everyday work. The training concluded with impressive participant presentations and has received many accolades within the organization (i.e., a raise, bonus, and interview in the college-wide newsletter).

There were many factors that were identified as impactful to the success of the OD intervention, which included readiness for change, capability to change, cultural context, and capabilities of the change agent. Regarding readiness for change, managers chose the participants based on of who they knew would implement new ideas to improve the Trauma Department’s efficiency. Related to capability to change, HR, department management and directors, as well as peers and staff were
supportive of this effort to initiate change. In terms of cultural context, it was evident that the atmosphere at ACS is continuously changing in the areas of professionalism, excellence, innovation, introspection, and inclusion. In order to keep up with these changes, it was imperative to develop new leaders and build teams in order to accomplish the broader mission of the organization. Lastly, the ideas and concepts brought to the job, the presentations, and continuous support from management made it clear that these participants are committed to the role of change agent in their department. Many are now in other training sessions, gaining new insight in to their jobs, and sharing these insights with their peers and staff.

Evidence of these changes is reflected in the participant’s final presentations at the end of the program. All participants, the ACS HR team, Director of the Trauma Department, and managers were invited to observe the presentations. The participants gave an overall summary of what they learned in the program and discussed new concepts that impacted their work outcomes. They explained how they implemented new concepts on the job and if they shared these concepts with peers/managers/staff within the department or company as a whole. The presentations concluded with the participants describing to their direct managers what they wanted them to know about the program and how they were impacted professionally and personally.

One participant stated in their presentation:

“What have I learned? I have identified areas for future self-improvement. I have developed new interpersonal leadership skills that I will continue to use; building a team that plays to individual strengths yet still offers opportunities
for growth and learning new skills, incorporating diversity of 

skills/background/perspective when possible”.

Another participant stated,

“*We started the course taking a self-assessment. This self-assessment showed that I was unsure about 4 huge components of leadership. Luckily, over the next couple of months, while completing these modules, I was able to better understand what these above 4 points meant as well as how to execute them using different leadership skills - such as listening, effective communication, and project management strategies. I love the fact that anyone can lead regardless of what role they are in or the duties they have. Embrace what you do best and become a change agent within that aspect.*”

Another participant noted:

“*Leadership embodies many aspects including accountability. Beyond this course is where the real test of our knowledge comes into play where it is imperative to: take what we’ve learned and apply it to work and life; set standards of excellence for personal growth and development; and seek to constantly re-shape and re-define leadership techniques to adapt to an ever-changing environment.*”

The OL intervention was implemented to enhance the organization’s performance and empower managers and leaders to better manage their organizations teams and culture. OD interventions, in general, focus on the issues that an
organization might be facing, such as performance, process, knowledge, skill, appraisal, technology, career development, top talent retention, attrition and so on.

Limitations

The ACS is an association for surgeons in various fields. One of the main functions of our association is to travel to exhibition halls, and conferences. One challenge was finding a mutually convenient and regular time to convene the training. There is also limited space to conduct sessions, especially when board members have priority. These findings may be different in another type of organization, provided that the participants, organization, and organizational culture are particularly dynamic and progressive at the ACS. The study utilized participants who were novice managers in the organization. Senior managers and directors may view the same experiences inversely.

Suggestions for Future Research

As this program curriculum continues to be developed, hopefully participation grows as well. With more participants, a larger sample size would be available for a quantitative or mixed-method study. Conducting and developing a similar leadership course in a startup non-for-profit and focusing on a comparison study between that startup and another one who did not partake in the same course. The two startups would have to have the same controls, to ensure an accurate comparative analysis.

“The single biggest way to impact an organization is to focus on leadership development. There is almost no limit to the potential of an organization that recruits
good people, raises them up as leaders and continually develops them.”  -John Maxwell
November 9, 2018

Shavonne Elelede
Manager, Business Management
Trauma Programs
American College of Surgeons
633 N. Saint Clair Street
Chicago, IL 60611
selelied@facs.org

Dear Shavonne,

On behalf of the American College of Surgeons, I grant you permission to use the “American College of Surgeons/ACS” name to be published in print, on the web, and electronically in your dissertation, An Investigation of Organizational Learning Theory using Action Research: A Qualitative Study of the American College of Surgeons’ Leadership Foundations Program, for your PhD in organization development from Benedictine University, Lisle.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Lynn D. Kahn
Director, Division of Integrated Communications
American College of Surgeons
Appendix B: Letter of Commitment

Participant

I, ______________________, am committed to being a “Change Agent” and an active member of the American College of Surgeons, Trauma Department Leadership Foundations Cohort.

I am committed to the vision, goals, objectives and strategies of ACS. I am committed to take the time necessary to participate fully in the training sessions. This experience will be part of my performance discussions with my immediate supervisor on the practical applications from the course towards my development and daily processes.

I am committed to providing feedback about the Leadership Foundations training sessions to help develop the course towards the goal of empowering all staff with improved leadership capabilities.

Signature_____________________________   Date ______________

Manager

I, ______________________, am committed to supporting ______________ as they participate in the Trauma Department Leadership Foundations Cohort.

I am committed to the vision, goals, objectives and strategies of ACS. I am committed in allowing the participant the time necessary to participate fully in the training sessions. The participant and I will discuss this experience as part of the participant’s performance discussions on the practical applications from the course towards their development and daily processes.

I am committed to providing feedback about the Leadership Foundations training sessions to help develop the course towards the goal of empowering all staff with improved leadership capabilities.

Signature_____________________________   Date ______________.
Appendix C: Data Collection Instruments

Self-Assessment

- (SA) Strongly Agree
- (A) Agree
- (D) Disagree
- (SD) Strongly Disagree
- (N) Not Sure

1. I consider myself as a leader.
2. There is a difference between a leader and a manager.
3. I am committed to achieving the ACS’s Seeds of Success.
4. I lead by example.
5. I motivate others to do their best on the job, regardless of position.
6. I contribute to the development of improvement at ACS.
7. I practice great followership.
8. I have the leadership skills and resources necessary to perform my tasks effectively.
9. I continuously elicit feedback from others to include my team, other leaders, etc.
10. I can resolve conflict as it occurs, and consider the best interests of all concerned.
11. I recognize optimal performance, and express appreciation in a timely manner.
12. I use constructive feedback to optimize the productivity of team members.
13. My decision making process is consistent with corporate policies, procedures, and objectives.
14. I make decisions with input from others.
15. I am not afraid to make a decision.
16. I am persistent with follow-up and follow-through, seeing a task to completion.
17. I manage my time efficiently and can carry out several tasks simultaneously.
18. I am capable of leading both up and down the organizational chart.
19. I create an atmosphere of growth.
20. I support the decisions of others and provide input when elicited.
21. I provide opportunities for others to take on leadership responsibilities and facilitate growth.
22. I develop efficient and organized plans to accomplish my job.
23. I communicate a vision to motivate my staff and others.
24. I am an active listener and seek to listen to diverse points of view.
25. I am an effective communicator and organize my thoughts to be efficient and beneficial for others.
26. My vision is in alignment with the company's mission.
27. I am capable of accepting failure with an assignment and learn from mistakes.
28. I praise others for jobs well done and provide positive reinforcement/encouragement.
29. I set a personal example of my expectations for others to follow.
30. I am an innovator, looking for ways to implement new ideas and methodology.
31. I encourage participation with decision making and try to implement the ideas of others.
32. I use the performance improvement process to anticipate problems and improve on current and future projects.
33. I am a champion of change.

Monthly Feedback Questionnaire

Participant Feedback Questions

- Which skill or tools were you able to apply from the last module this month?
- In what way did you apply the tools/skills in your daily job function? How were the tools taught, applied?
- Did you seek out opportunities to share learned leadership practices with peers?

Management Feedback Questions

- Did you observe a change within your department/staff within the last month? Please elaborate.

Leadership Survey

(Y) Yes
(N) No
(U) Undecided

1. Would you recommend this training course to a colleague?
2. Please provide rationale for your answer to question #1.
3. Did the content that was delivered in the sessions correspond to what you understood when you registered?
4. Was the structure of the training sessions conducive for learning and flowed naturally?
5. Did the training you receive meet your personal leadership expectations?
6. Was the time allocated for each session sufficient for you to understand materials presented?
7. Did you learn new information/skills in the training course?
8. Leadership topics covered were relevant to you and your career path.
9. Will you be able to utilize the skills learned in your current position and/or future positions?
10. Were the objectives of the course material clearly defined?
11. Were the objectives sufficiently met?
12. Was material presented relevant to your career objectives? If no, Explain
13. Were the instructors engaged in what they were training? If no, Explain.
14. Were the instructors well informed regarding materials taught? If no, Explain.
15. How do you rate the Overall Training (1 Poor– 5 Excellent)
16. Comments/Questions/Suggestions
References


Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2001). Action learning and action research: Paradigm, praxis and