

Title	Orienting Newcomers into the Learning Culture of the British Columbia Ministry of Environment.
Key Words	Freelisting, Learning Culture, British Columbia, Ministry of Environment, business results, employee engagement
Reference and Acknowledgement	<p>Keller, M. and Smith, D. 2007. Orienting Newcomers into the Learning Culture of the British Columbia Ministry of Environment. Social Analysis Systems (SAS²) http://www.sas2.net/. The authors wish to acknowledge Marie Mac Donald, who helped co-design and co-facilitate the session with the authors. The Learning Culture work is a component of an initiative that began in 2001 with Marie Mac Donald Consulting.</p>
Context	<p>In late 2004, the British Columbia (BC) Ministry of Environment decided to engage all regional offices of the Environmental Protection Division of the Ministry in a process of leadership and organizational performance development. This became the framework for building a Learning Culture (LC) in order to enhance adaptability and responsiveness to rapidly changing internal human resources and emerging public/political and community demands for services. To strengthen internal capacity for LC development continuity, a team of Champions was created to support the unique efforts of each of the six Regional Managers and staff. As Champions alone would not be able to sustain such an extensive cultural shift interested staff were invited to join their team. Many of the staff were new or not aware of much of the LC foundation work that had occurred in the organization over the previous 2 years.</p>
Purpose	To identify elements of the Learning Culture (LC) that contribute directly to achieving business results, engage newcomers, and co-create a Charter of behavioural practices for upholding LC success.
Process Summary	The BC Ministry of Environment, Environmental Protection Division, held a two-day workshop session with a total of 34 participants. The first day, the original (11) Champion team members and the (10) newcomers to the Champion team (now comprised of 9 women, 15 men) met for the purpose of (1)

orienting new folks, (2) identifying specific ways the Learning Culture (LC) contributed to achieving business results, (3) identifying Principles and Operating Practices for the LC, (4) clarifying the role and purpose of the LC Champions, and (5) identifying specific ways that the LC can continue to be supported effectively by Regional Managers across the Province and, thereby, (6) reinforcing the internal capacity to sustain the LC without reliance on external consultant support. Participants included representatives from front line staff, Section Heads, and Regional Managers. Freelisting was used in several creative ways to achieve the designated outcomes.

The first round of freelisting was focused on the question: *How does the Learning Culture get us business results now?* Each of the 24 participants completed 3 (5x7”) blank cards with their responses. Participants individually shared each of their cards with the group as they placed them on the floor, sorting for similarities into stacks. Discussion was encouraged so that everyone knew the reason for placing cards together in particular piles. The conversation was, at times, quite engaging as the group members compared various points of view as they came to shared conclusions on where cards most appropriately belonged. This round resulted in 5-7 primary piles with 8-9 outlying individual cards/topics. The group discussed what this revealed and drew an important conclusion regarding the individual outlying card topics: Each of those cards represents an element of their Principles and / or Operating Practices – which was also one of the designated outcomes for the day – and had already been achieved very efficiently within the first 2 hour period.



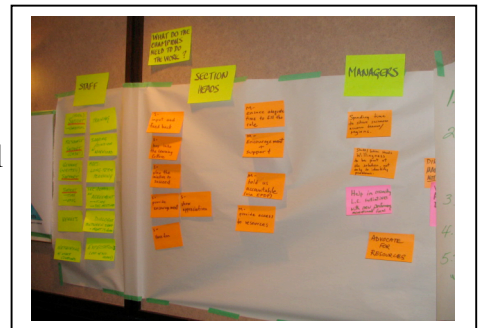
The second round consisted of members self-organizing into small groups around each of the primary card pile topics, taking the stack of cards with them to review and discuss first: (1) *What does this ‘mean’ to you in your role as a Champion of the LC initiative?* and, second (2) *In order to carry this work forward, what do we (as Champions) need to do?* Each small group captured their responses

onto post-it notes which they used for reporting out their results to the large group – placing the post-its onto a roll of newsprint posted on the wall. After reporting out, the large group clustered and themed all of the post-it notes, creating a wall display and gallery of their results. At this point, energy was high and participants were excited to see so much progress in such a short period of time.



The third round emphasized identifying and appreciating what Champions already were doing that contributed to success of the LC. Small groups focused on *What are we doing now that works well?* and writing their responses onto large post-it notes. Each group gave a short summary of their results as they posted their post-its onto the wall; sorting the post-its into general themes and topics with open group discussion.

The fourth round explored what was still needed in order to do the work of the Champions in supporting the LC. Once again, mixed small groups focused on the question: *What do we need – from Managers and Staff -- in order to do the Champion's work?* and writing their



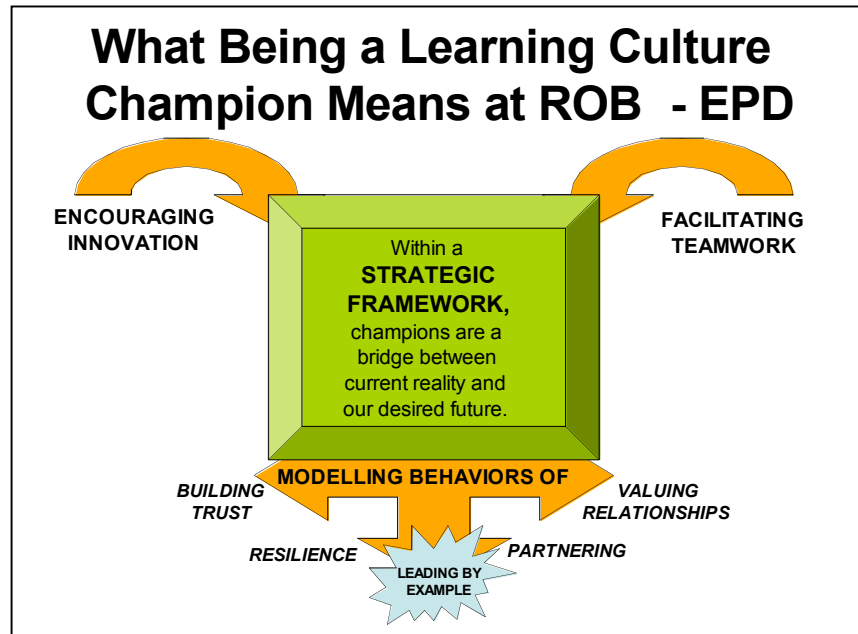
responses onto large post-it notes. Again, each group gave a short summary of their results as they posted onto the wall; sorting the post-its into general themes and topics with open group discussion.



The first day concluded with a general dialogue around what had been accomplished and how best to present their conclusions to the Regional Managers who would be joining them the next day. They concluded that the wall display could best be utilized as a 'gallery walk' for the incoming Managers (see next photo). Individual Champions volunteered to host a station, representing a piece of their work

during Day 1, to explain the purpose and outcomes as well as link to the previous and subsequent stations along the wall. In short, this group achieved their objective of both orienting new folks while generating renewed enthusiasm and commitment to furthering the

Learning Culture as a way of doing business. The newcomers each identified how well oriented they had become and how clear they were now on the role and purpose of both the LC and their role as Champions.



Analysis

The primary objectives for this session were (1) orienting new folks, (2) identifying specific ways the Learning Culture (LC) contributed to achieving business results, (3) identifying Principles and Operating Practices for the LC, (4) clarifying the role and purpose of the LC Champions, and (5) identifying specific ways that the LC can continue to be supported effectively by Regional Managers across the Province and, thereby, (6) reinforcing the internal capacity to sustain the LC without reliance on external consultant support. Participants identified that they had achieved the first four objectives and part of the fifth the first day; with number (5) being completed only after the Managers became involved on the second day. Objective (6) could not be accurately assessed for at least 6 months or more of operating without consultant support.

The use of file cards allowed for the capturing of specific attributes and characteristics that otherwise may not have been recognized. These afforded deeper exploration and conversation amongst participants and allowed ease in identifying specific behaviours and

actions that will comprise the core elements of their Charter. The use of cards afforded rapid and reliable transfer of details and comments into computer formats for accurate report writing and summaries. In addition, photos were taken of all processes and final wall displays to maintain information accuracy as well as supporting improved recall later by participants.

In addition and along with the participants, the Director – who had only been with the Ministry for less than one month – was very excited and enthused by the amount and quality of work accomplished in such a relatively short period of time. She marvelled at the positive impact this process had on orienting new folks in ways that honoured their unique perspective as newcomers while validating their new role as supporters of the LC – all voices were heard and included; no one and no aspects were marginalized. The Managers – whose support is critical to on-going success – were quite impressed by the comprehensive detailing of the LC results and specific ways identified to ensure sustainability in daily workplace practices.

Interpretation

The five (of six) objectives were all achieved by a combination of intentional design constructs: (1) all information was elicited directly from and by participants; individual voices were included and encouraged; (2) meaning-making emerged from shared conversation, collectively agreed upon and, thereby, validated by the participants themselves; (3) activities were staged progressively so that the output of one became the input for the next, evolving the complexity in manageable ways that participants could hold easily without becoming overwhelmed; and (4) focusing on real-work, tangible outcomes that were recognized as solid productivity – as time well invested in advancing the Learning Culture itself.

Action

The participants in this workshop took ownership and responsibility for moving forward in the three focal points that emerged from the first round of freelisting: fostering innovation, contributing to team development, leading by example and modelling behaviours. These actions will be crucial in embedding the learning culture into their everyday work and decision-making approaches. As stated above, the freelisting process was grounded

in their perceptions and priorities, which led to strong commitment and a shared action plan.

Observations on the Process

The freelisting provided a ‘common ground’ on which both new and experienced champions could contribute meaningfully and without reservation. Everyone felt that they were valued for their perspectives.

Using freelisting early in the process created a climate of participation and shared ownership, which built momentum and deep inquiry into shared meaning and impact. In addition, many participants only knew each other a little, if at all, in advance and the very experience of sharing individual perspectives brought folks together in ways where they became comfortable / safe to be honest, sharing their real thoughts and feelings openly.

Determining the focusing question is a critical role for facilitators. The freelisting process built momentum among staff and middle managers to share powerfully and clearly the benefits and role they could play in moving a learning culture forward.

It would be valuable to consider how we might have used [or can in the future] other SAS tools to complement freelisting.