

*Envisioning a learning culture:
history, self-governing citizens,
and no dancing elephants*

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Every learning project or initiative launched in the modern organization quickly devolves to one fundamental question: How can we create the culture that will support the transformation we need? Anyone who has ever taken up the challenge knows that, for all the leverage of technology, programs, or innovative new processes, the fulcrum is always the culture of the organization. Where does the culture of a learning organization come from? What does it look and feel like in the best possible example? How does the culture relate to all the other pieces that seem to be required for a true “learning organization”? This chapter proposes an answer quite outside the current boundaries of discussion, using an unusual case example drawn from the early history of Western civilization. It is not intended as a handbook but as a thought experiment—to visit a way of working and learning that is largely foreign to what we expect today and has everything to teach us about the future.

Dancing elephants

Before beginning that experiment, we need to paint some picture of the “current boundaries of discussion.” Let us start with a recent business bestseller. At the end of 2002, Lou Gerstner, the retired CEO of IBM, published his story of the successful turnaround of that computer conglomerate, which he led through the 1990s, and the book soon joined the ranks of must-read manage-

This chapter was developed with debt to my recent book (co-author, Josiah Ober), *A Company of Citizens: What the World's First Democracy Teaches Leaders About Creating Great Organizations* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003). See also B. Manville and J. Ober, “Beyond Empowerment: Building a Company of Citizens,” *Harvard Business Review* (January 2003), pp. 48-53.

ment tomes. The title of Gerstner's volume borrows from a well-known change management study by James Belasco from a few years before, *Teaching the Elephant to Dance*.¹ The metaphor suggests that both Gerstner and Belasco share an assumption about large organizations today, one not unlike that of most people who struggle to create major change—that any large entity requiring transformation is ultimately clumsy, intractable, and even a bit dull witted. Big companies are like big elephants that can be made to move gracefully and artfully, and indeed to “perform,” only through the most clever or authoritarian strategies.

Not surprisingly, the elephantine assumption frames most beliefs and developmental approaches of those seeking to create a “culture of learning” in organizations today; and similarly, those assumptions tend to frame debates about how to achieve that goal. Let us be honest: creating a learning culture in a business that is large, set in its ways, and has little history of or understanding for building human capabilities is no small task. Inevitably, the solution that is offered up involves some kind of top-down mandate and prescribed behavioral change: one must create a daunting combination of threatening imperatives and soaring incentives to (a) get people to share knowledge, invest in training, or otherwise take action to generally improve themselves, and/or (b) get managers to support training programs, install learning tools, initiate communities of practice, or whatever. In the best cases, leaders will also personally model the desired new behavior, visibly (and authentically) engage in particular training and professional development programs, and experiment with new ways of working with colleagues. And let us be clear: there are various successful examples of elephant-like companies that have, eventually, in some sense of the word, been made to dance the learning dance. Let us give Lou Gerstner some credit at IBM, and of course also Jack Welch at GE, John Brown at BP, and all the other usual suspects, who are well chronicled in books, articles, and conferences devoted to training, HR, knowledge management, and related industry disciplines.

I take nothing away from such heroic accomplishments, and my purpose in this chapter is not to belittle the dancing elephants. Circus trainers have their virtues, and no one should make light of leaders who successfully lead major transformational change. But such cases, at some level, often represent only incremental innovation. These are stories of rigid, siloed, and distrusting

¹ L. Gerstner, *Who Says the Elephant Can't Dance? Inside IBM's Historic Turnaround* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2002); J. Belasco, *Teaching the Elephant to Dance. The Manager's Guide to Empowering Change* (New York: Plume, 2002).

organizations that through force of will and threat of punishment became more open and oriented to cross-boundary learning and some kind of linkage between learning and performance. In most cases, the “culture of learning” is being layered onto something that already exists. At its best, that kind of program improves the situation, but the organization never seems to reach an optimum state; and more often than not, the “transformation” falls short of enduring change. Consider, here, another metaphor: the stand-alone automotive air conditioners in the 1950s that were bolted on to a car. They did cool the vehicle, but they were expensive, noisy, inefficient, and a serious drag on engine performance.

A more radical approach

Suppose, instead, that we wanted to envision a more radical solution for creating a learning culture, one that did not begin with the assumption that we are constrained within the fundamental industrial structure of a hierarchically organized, CEO-directed company, with a set of command-and-control incentives and restrictions, and with people who are considered replaceable parts. Can we envision a learning organization of the future, starting with some fresh assumptions, and look to discover a model in which learning is not just “layered onto” the status quo but is deeply embedded in the fundamental values, structures, and practices of the culture and community of the organization? What would that be like? How could we begin to understand that?

In pursuing such a vision, I am respectful of many others who have already asked a similar question. In the last decade, many portraits of the “learning organization” of the future have been sketched with the aid of various evocative metaphors, ranging from biological ecosystems to particle physics.² Here, too, I am happy to acknowledge the value and creativity of

² The literature on the learning organization and “organization of the future” is vast; important recent contributions that have influenced me include P. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1993), and “The Future of the Company,” *Economist* 22 (December 2001); T. Davenport and L. Prusak, *Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1998); C. Leadbeater, *The Weightless Society* (New York and London: Texere, 2000); J. Kluge, W. Stein, and T. Licht, *Knowledge Unplugged: The McKinsey & Co. Global Survey on Knowledge Management* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001); E. Wenger, R. McDermott, and W. M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002); and

such explorations, though I would argue that in envisioning what is fundamentally a human organization, images of beehives, rainforests, fractals, and sub-atomic pieces of matter can take us only so far.

My purpose here is to suggest a vision of the learning organization of the future and to describe a very vital and real culture of learning through the case study of an actual human organization in the past. I offer up a model based on what was arguably the Western world's first "learning organization": the democracy of self-governing citizens of ancient Athens. This was the city-state you learned about in high school, the community that flourished in the fifth and fourth centuries BC and produced some of the world's greatest art, literature, and other cultural and military achievements. This was Athens, the world of Sophocles, Pericles, Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle. At its height, its 30,000 citizens ruled over a vast—the equivalent of many billions of dollars—empire of tribute-paying subjects, reigned supreme with a powerful navy, sustained war after war with resilience and determination, and lasted more than two hundred years, while producing astonishing innovations in multiple spheres of human endeavor. It was indeed not only a learning organization but a "high-performing organization," and the linkage was not accidental.

Like all case studies, and organizational models derived from such, this one requires some leaps of faith to make the relevant comparisons. It also requires some patience to adjust for obvious differences between the actual case and the future application of its design principles and practices. Yes, ancient Athens was a political community and not a business or even an explicitly not-for-profit enterprise; no, the Athenians did not have computer networks, intranets, or Kirkpatrick levels of learning impact. And were it not for the fact that they spoke the Hellenic language fluently, I would be the first to admit that things like "ROI" or "systems thinking" would have sounded positively Greek to them. If we can put aside, for the moment, all the reasons not to make this kind of modern–ancient comparison, I can offer an explanation for why looking back at this community might yield some particularly interesting insights. So what, then, would the designer of the future learning organization have to learn from Athenians in the golden age of Greece?

M. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1992).

From modern to ancient

The case begins with certain fundamental trends in today's workplace, trends that will almost surely accelerate in the future. The study of the Athenian experience also addresses some fundamental dilemmas that any builder of a learning culture ultimately faces.

The first trend to note is the increasing "democratization" of the workplace and of society in general.³ For years we have been witnessing the "flattening of organizations" as managers increasingly are forced to rely on the judgments, creativity, and experience of knowledge workers, giving up traditional control and authority to those who have the real expertise and are creating the real value of a business. Add to this the increasing spread with which information is transported via rapidly evolving communications technology and the corresponding expectation of all of us for greater transparency in our dealings with one another, transactional or otherwise. Knowledge workers expect greater autonomy, freedom, and access to information about the world in which they live and work. Our own political system is driven by polling, our shopping by disintermediation and instant access to product information and price comparisons, and our healthcare is increasingly characterized by better-informed patients, challenging the paternalistic role of authoritarian doctors.

The second trend is the importance of values and the search for community. Surveys and studies continue to suggest that workers in today's knowledge economy are keen to align themselves with organizations whose values match their own, that stand for something they believe in, and in which they can align their activities and labor with certain principles shared by the other members.⁴ Consider, for example, some of the basic shifts in workers' assumptions. In the industrial age, work was exchanged for money; in the

³ Here again, the literature is vast. Some useful starting points: F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); R. Ackoff, *The Democratic Corporation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); C. Manz and H. Simms Jr., *Business Without Bosses* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1995); R. Purser and S. Cabana, *The Self-Managing Corporation* (New York: Free Press, 1998); P. Slater and W. Bennis, *The Temporary Society: What Is Happening to Business and Family Life in America Under the Impact of Accelerating Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), pp. 1-23; V. Postrel, *The Future and Its Enemies: The Growing Conflict Over Creativity, Enterprise, and Progress* (New York: Free Press, 1998).

⁴ See, for example, A. Wolf, "The Final Freedom," *New York Times Magazine* (March 18, 2001), pp. 48-51.

knowledge age, work is exchanged even more for meaning. In the industrial age, a company's brand was merely a marketing image; in the knowledge age, brand is personal and both flows from and adds to the identity of those creating and sustaining it. In the industrial age, workers assumed that executives were elite, different, and had their own code of behavior; in the knowledge age, we hold our leaders to high standards and do not want to follow people whose ethics or behaviors are at odds with our own. To use an increasingly common phrase, workers today are no longer "employees" but are more like "volunteer investors"—choosing with whom and where to invest their skills and experience in ways that make some kind of difference and in contexts that reinforce and develop their own sense of personal values and identity.⁵

A third trend, indeed the focus of this volume, is the importance of learning in the workplace. Knowledge workers today look for organizations that can give them the opportunity to grow continually, and more and more leaders have come to understand that the company that develops its people and generally learns faster than the competition will fare better than others.

Despite such trends, there remains a fundamental misalignment in today's workplace: between, on the one hand, knowledge workers' aspirations, professional goals, and contributions, and, on the other, the culture of industrial age thinking that is still the norm in most corporations. Though many elephants have been taught to dance, they are still mostly elephants—big, awkward, and dumb. Most people in organizations are still ultimately underappreciated for the value they create, are told what to do, have little opportunity to develop themselves in ways that benefit both them and the organization, operate in workplaces characterized by less-than-full transparency and questionable or inconsistent cultural values, and often live with a good dose of fear. Though the last thirty years have seen much of "empowerment" for working people, the freedom and equality implied in that term are still relatively limited. There are indeed examples of democratically managed companies.⁶ Most managers, however, would tell you that if there is democracy in a business, it must be carefully limited and that any large-scale attempt to let people govern themselves will yield a vastly inefficient or even chaotic environment that cannot meet the demands of today's rigorous, intensely competitive marketplaces.

⁵ For good discussion of new language reflecting such changes, see T. O. Davenport, "The Human Capital Metaphor: What's in a Name?" *Learning in the New Economy e-Magazine* (Spring 2001), <http://www.linezine.com/4.2/articles/tdthcmwian.htm>.

⁶ References in Manville and Ober, *A Company of Citizens*, p. 187 n.3.

Similarly, learning in most organizations today operates as a disconnected function: a training program here, a training program there, perhaps an intranet of information to choose from when needed. But none of it is central to the strategy of the company, nor is it rewarded or encouraged with the same fierceness, say, as staying within one's budget or hitting one's revenue quota. Even more important, few companies can truly claim to have a culture of learning grounded in the deepest DNA of what their organization is all about. The "learning organization" and the "democratic company" are seen either as unreachable ideals or as impractical and difficult models. And most managers will see no obvious connection between organizational learning and the processes of decision-making implied in self-governance.

Athenian genius

The genius of the ancient Athenians, and the reason they merit study as a model for the learning organization of the future, was their creative solution to exactly the kind of dilemmas discussed above: how to give people the freedom and autonomy they demand but still find ways to align their efforts and interests for the good of the whole and thus create knowledge that scales. And perhaps more important than the solution *per se* were the results that it delivered: massive organizational performance. To achieve the astonishing things that they did, the Athenians began with the premise that there would be better results, motivation, and indeed "results-oriented learning" if every member of the community had a real stake in making decisions.⁷ They designed their organization believing that every process and structure of the community had to reinforce the value of building and contributing knowledge to the common

⁷ A common criticism of Athenian democracy was its limitation of citizenship to adult males; and indeed beyond the 30,000 or so citizens of Athens, there were thousands of noncitizens in the form of women, children, resident foreigners, and slaves. This is not the place to engage in the moral debate about the rightness or wrongness of the "citizen elitism"; it is likely that the eventual downfall of the community was exactly because of the Athenians' inability to extend citizenship more widely. My purpose in advancing the Athenian model as a "learning organization" should be distinguished from the ancient prejudices about who could or could not be a citizen; and readers should not accept this discussion, or my reference to Athenian citizens with masculine pronouns, as a judgment on what should be in any given "community of citizens." The model proposed is not intended to be taken in all literalness from the historical record. For more discussion, see Manville and Ober, *A Company of Citizens*, pp 149ff.

good and to provide the means for every individual to make himself better at the same time. Instead of seeing their state as an elephant that had to be made to dance by some king or tyrant, they envisioned and created an organization in which there was a fundamental unity between individual and society; an organization whose values were founded and cultivated by the members themselves; an organization that governed itself and thus accepted full accountability for its decisions; an organization in which public participation and dialog created active, real-time learning, and aligned that learning with the needs of the overall community. They created a company of citizens, and indeed citizens of a very special kind.

It is difficult to grasp, on any kind of emotional or intellectual level, the essence of the ancient Athenian citizen culture. Before discussing its constituent elements, some comments at the whole-system level and some basic comparisons of modern and ancient assumptions might be helpful. The modern organization (e.g. corporation) typically exists as an abstract and formal entity; it is usually some kind of legal structure, owned by either proprietors or shareholders, with managers in charge. Workers are paid to play well-identified roles, and if someone leaves or needs to be fired, another is found to replace him or her. If a certain skill is needed, it is hired in; if that is not possible or feasible, existing people are trained. The company exists and operates independently of the employees, who are ultimately fungible.

By contrast, the Athenian democratic community was a member organization. No privileged individual or elite was in charge—just the members themselves. Citizens were born and died, but with every change, the community itself changed. The community prospered on the basis of the growth of every individual, both alone and as a member of a collective body. Leaders came from the body of citizens, and everyone had to learn how to rule and be ruled in turn. There was no separate class of managers, no legal abstraction or impersonal corporation. Nobody got trained, but everybody was learning all the time. Learning was living in the community, and the community by its nature and organic life was a constant and insistent teacher.

So how did they do it? How did the ancient Athenians build a culture of learning grounded in the fundamental assumptions and processes of the organization? It is a complicated story, spanning hundreds of years, but the essential principle, as we have already suggested, was the powerful linkages these people made between learning and democracy and between individual and community. At its core, their culture of learning was a culture of democratic citizenship, a concept they called *politeia*. Let us now unpack this idea

and understand why the Athenian notion of citizenship was intimately the same as a culture of learning.

Politeia

Like all rich concepts, *politeia* is not simply translated. We call it “citizenship,” but in today’s world that tends to imply a sort of passive legal status—having the right to carry a passport, having the obligation to pay taxes. For the ancient Athenians, the word meant many things at the same time, including for example, “membership in the city-state,” “a constitution,” even “a way of life.” Ultimately, however, the term carried much more meaning than a single phrase can communicate. Looking more deeply at the concepts and traditions behind *politeia* will be a more fruitful approach.

Athenian citizenship in the democratic age was an organic and dynamic combination of three dimensions: values, structures, and practices. We will look at each of these in turn and in each case also see how knowledge and learning were deeply ingrained in the essence of these dimensions. Taken together, the three dimensions represented a vital and living system of self-governance that was inseparable from both individual and collective learning and growth.

Communal values

Let us begin with the values of *politeia*. Here again the dissection is difficult because of the complexity and interconnectedness of many of the ideas. For convenience, we might call them “communal values” because they embodied everything important that the community, and membership in it, stood for. They represented three sets of overlapping beliefs. There were communal values of the individual—every citizen’s right to self-determination, to freedom, to equality of opportunity, and to security against harm. Every citizen was believed to have some spark of goodness, something to contribute to the public welfare.

Every citizen was at the same time free to—and expected to—engage in public debate and deliberations that directly affected him; but he was also free to pursue private interests and usually not obliged to participate, particularly when his skills or needs did not dictate. On the other hand—and here lies one of the many deliberate paradoxes of the culture—the citizen was always expected to engage and band together with others when some kind of risk or

harm was present, when any citizen was threatened, either internally or externally, or when the security of the entire community was in danger.

This notion of security bleeds into a second piece of the value set—the values of community *per se*. As we have already mentioned, the core concept here was that the “citizens were the state” or, to use a more contemporary phrase, “the people are the organization.” The Athenians did not imagine an abstract entity separate and separable from themselves; there was no eternal “corporate center,” no brand name distinct from those who lived it. Symbolically, “Athens” was only the name of a particular place; the political community was always called in Greek “the Athenians.” Thus the historian Thucydides famously quotes one general with the eternal phrase, “Not ships, not walls, but men make our city.”⁸ The Athenian city-state was simultaneously all about the individual and all about the community: the personal was communal and the communal was personal.

The key to this fundamental paradox was a third set of communal values, and it is here where learning shines forth in the essence of what the Athenians stood for. We call this third set of communal values “moral reciprocity”—the all-important link between “what’s in it for me” and “what’s in it for us.” Moral reciprocity was a set of mutual expectations between individual and community: the individual owed allegiance and participation to the community if he were developed and made better through that participation; and similarly the community could expect to be made better by the collective growth of all who engaged. Stated otherwise, and more simply, *politeia* was education for one and for all simultaneously, and learning was the win-win of both citizenship and state.

It is important to distinguish the Athenian value of “moral reciprocity” from what today is called “the employability contract”; that is, when the employer promises to develop the employee during his tenure as long as the employee promises to perform at the highest possible level. Note, however, some critical differences between modern employability and ancient moral reciprocity: the former fosters no long-term loyalty, whereas the latter takes much of its power from a long-standing commitment to membership. And similarly, employability is simply a quid pro quo transaction agreed to by those in power, whereas moral reciprocity emerges from the members themselves, who are steering their own destiny. In its values, ancient Athens was a study

⁸ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 7.77. Translation adapted from Penguin edition, tr. R. Warner (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1972); used by permission.

of balanced paradox, made possible by heartfelt and enduring commitment on the part of both the individual and the community to make each other better.

Participative structures

The second dimension of *politeia* was the participative structures of decision-making; the organization was about as “flat” as it could be. Laws were made by all citizens, who deliberated and voted as a governing assembly that met regularly and who also took turns serving as jurors in popular courts to judge one another in matters of conflict or transgression. Leadership positions numbered in the hundreds, ranging from the council that steered the deliberative assembly, to the generals who led in battle, to the functionaries who administered things like the treasury, the outfitting of ships, and the organization of public festivals. Turnover in all executive roles was regular, and selection was made either by election or lot or some combination of the two. Demographic analysis tells us that during his lifetime, every citizen must have served in some leadership capacity in the community at least once, and that does not include the leadership roles that Athenians often played in local neighbor organizations. Indeed, one of the ingenious dimensions of the overall design was to establish central institutions that drew from the memberships of regional and local ones. Rotation through roles in the central institutions had the effect of reinforcing knowledge-sharing relationships and building “networks of networks” across the city-state.

The democratic structure and institutions treated knowledge in a special way. Expertise brought forward by relevant citizens in deliberations or executive roles was always welcome—indeed expected—but institutionalized professionalism had no place in the system. The Athenians preferred a broadly amateur approach to governance, valuing the participative engagement by all more than the privileged knowledge of a few. Courts had no professional lawyers, assembly delegates were only as permanent as those who chose to attend, and generals had to give up their commands to others in the regular rotation of positions.

These participative structures—assembly, courts, councils, executive positions—represented the tangible mechanisms of democratic decision-making and citizen engagement, but they also had a profoundly educational purpose. By design, it was through these mechanisms that citizens practiced the values of *politeia* and had reinforced to them the meaning of membership in the community. Because of the way the assembly was constructed and run, and the way courts were designed and managed, every citizen every day saw and

acted out the values of equality, freedom, and security; the choices they made every day in those institutions played out the tension between individual and community, and helped create a “both/and” mindset of managing that paradox. The shoulder-to-shoulder debates, decision-making, and shared accountability built deep trust in the notion of collective and mutual respect for one’s fellow citizens.

Practices of engagement

If values and structures provided the overall framework for *politeia*, practices of engagement, the last of the three dimensions, are what gave it life. The values played out in institutional settings and processes must be finally expressed in action: “doing citizenship” in a very particular way, in the same way that it has been said that “organizational culture” is “how we do business around here.” Once again, it is difficult to separate this dimension from the others, and indeed values, structures, and practices are intimately interwoven. Think of values as more abstract and general, structures as tangible and operational. The practices of citizenship are somewhere in between; they are the daily assumptions, behaviors, and ways of engaging that reflect a way of thinking and being (at the same time) a citizen.

We can identify different groups of practices, each of which exemplified and contributed to this culture of citizenship: practices of access, reflecting free and equal opportunity for participation in self-governance for all Athenians; practices of process, reflecting a bias for well-intentioned deliberation, fair play, transparency, timely execution, and collective support in all deliberations and decisions; practices of consequence, reflecting a focus on merit as the ultimate criterion, the need to achieve results, the right to challenge, and the need to be accountable—good or bad—for all outcomes. The Athenians also practiced what we can call jurisdiction—ensuring that whenever a decision was made (sometimes locally, sometimes centrally, often in some combination of the two), it was made closest to those with the most knowledge and with the greatest stake in the outcome. In every case, practices were part of the overall framework of “public teaching”—reinforcing a way of acting consistent with the spirit of *politeia*.

Citizenship and the learning organization

Taken together, these values, structures, and practices of citizenship represented a holistic organizational system—and indeed a deep culture of learning. Even in ancient times, the great Athenian general and statesman Pericles

echoed that idea, proclaiming that the city and *politeia* were “an education to all of Greece,” even as he had implied they were an education to each and every citizen himself. Having described *politeia* in its constituent (though admittedly interrelated) dimensions, let me now step back and summarize why this system was such a powerful learning organization. Let us understand how it generated so much creativity, power, and wealth in the course of two centuries.

First, this system and culture created an unprecedented “marketplace of ideas.” The freedom and equality reflected in its values, the forums for public debate and deliberation, the networks of networks, the idea of constant rotation among leadership roles, the processes to encourage challenges but also focus action—all these together created an environment that engaged thousands of people in collective problem-solving, fostered innovation, and ensured that if knowledge was had by someone and needed by another, it would flow freely and quickly between “buyers and sellers,” horizontally, vertically, from region to region.

Second, the system created intense collective focus and ongoing alignment—in both the development and deployment of ideas. The culture and practices of *politeia* encouraged every person to pursue individual excellence zealously and at the same time, through the shared values and processes of governance, to pursue passionately the common good. The “both/and” thinking of individual and community meant that every problem for the city was the problem for the citizen, and vice versa.

Third, the culture inspired high motivation—the passion for excellence and achievement coupled with the knowledge that one was steering one’s own destiny. This created an enormous pull—instead of push—for learning. Unlike modern knowledge-management or learning programs, there was no need to provide incentives for people to share information or sign up for training—learning was everyone’s business, because knowledge was how you got ahead and how your city got ahead with you. Furthermore, learning was not just about success; Athenians had their own share of failures, and these were played out, discussed, and debated—vigorously and transparently—in the public forums of assemblies, councils, and courts. From failures came greater wisdom, which, coupled with the pursuit of excellence, also resulted in great organizational resilience—the ability to come back from defeat and reinvent oneself on the strength and determination of the collective citizenship.

Fourth, the culture made no real distinction between learning and work. Learning was coded into the civic culture, both in the practices that taught and

reinforced ways of thinking and behaving, and in the institutions that shaped and formed the people who participated in them. Learning was part of citizenship, and citizenship always meant learning for both your own and everyone's sake. Learning was both doing and talking, just as doing and talking were learning.

This culture of learning embodied by the Athenian *politeia* was an unprecedented form of political and social organization in the ancient world. Never before had such military power been wielded without the power and riches of a monarch; nor had previous empires ever achieved the cultural and scientific innovations that Athens also displayed. As boastful and proud as the Athenians themselves could be about their achievements, they were not alone in admiring their peculiarly entrepreneurial "learning culture." In a famous speech preserved by Thucydides, we hear the Corinthians speaking enviously and even somewhat fearfully about the Athenians, hoping to inflame the Spartans to go to war in 431 BC. The Corinthian rhetoric enshrined the manifestations of this very special *politeia*:

An Athenian is always an innovator, quick to form a resolution and quick to carry it out...their daring will outrun its own resources; they will take risks against their better judgments, but in the midst of danger, remain confident...While you [Spartans] are hanging back, they never hesitate; while you stay at home, they are always abroad; for they think that the farther they go, the more they will get...If they win a victory, they follow it up at once, and if they suffer a defeat, they scarcely fall back at all...They regard [their bodies] as expendable for their city's sake, as though they were not their own; but each man cultivates his own intelligence, again with a view for doing something notable for his city. If they aim at something and do not get it, they think that they have been deprived of what belonged to them already; whereas if their enterprise is successful, they regard that success as nothing compared to what they will do next...Of them alone, it may be said that they possess a thing almost as soon as they have begun to desire it, so quickly with them does action follow upon decision.⁹

Building a company of citizens

The question that inevitably comes next in looking at this unusual learning culture is how the Athenians came to create it. That, alas, is a subject for a

⁹ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 1.70-71.

separate essay; space does not allow any kind of real treatment here. Suffice it to say, however, that the process was not accomplished overnight; that it reflected hundreds of years of experiment, failure, and re-experiment; that it was indeed achieved with lots of help from visionary leaders but ultimately succeeded only because the people themselves—the citizens—made the commitment to find a better and more effective way to organize, a way that gave every member of the community a heartfelt and honest stake in governing the organization, whose success depended on each and every person's knowledge, skills, and even, finally, his life. This community, as history shows, was no elephant made to dance; it was a fierce lion that taught itself to run, jump, and leap with all its own self-discovered agility.

Well, “Good for them!” you might say—and then very reasonably ask, “What about us?” Supposing we are stuck with elephants, and supposing we do not have, say, a couple of hundred years of experimentation to reinvent—or rediscover—the glory that was Greece? Remember that this chapter was not intended as a handbook but as a “thought experiment.” But even a mere thought experiment can point to some practical implications once we start to imagine an entirely different way of thinking about a problem. Let me conclude with a few suggestions about bringing the world of this very special learning organization into a modern context—understanding that every enterprise is its own unique case and that there is never a blueprint that can be imposed unilaterally with guaranteed success. None the less, for those who would go boldly forward, I offer the following suggestions.

Reconceive the idea of a “learning organization” around self-governance. That is, rethink the usual notion that training, development, and sharing knowledge are independent goals for organizational design. Instead, see them as dependent variables that flow from an overarching identity of citizenship—an organization made up of members whose individual and collective success are grounded in the continual betterment of all and the life of “public engagement” and decision-making for one's own future.

Build the culture with the “citizens” themselves. The Athenian lesson is the ur-chapter of what every good organizational consultant has always known: change cannot be imposed from above; it must be invented and owned by those who must live the new order. Leadership and facilitation can obviously play important roles—but without bottom-up design and development of key values, structures, and practices, self-governance will be but a false shadow. Understand who is a member, who is not, and then work to-

gether to invent the organization that is the people themselves and only the people.

Begin where there is organizational readiness and the greatest need for enhanced performance. The history of the Athenians shows that the revolution that produced their democracy grew in patches at first and then expanded to scale through a process of “networking networks”; it also shows that a steep performance challenge—which required faster learning and deeper collaboration—drove positive change. A citizen-style learning culture might begin at a team level, or a business unit, or within a virtual community—the proposition need not encompass an entire enterprise, especially at first. And similarly, some contexts might make more sense for this approach than others; groups or units of relatively autonomous knowledge workers are perhaps an easier place to develop a citizen model than an existing hierarchy of, say, industrial production (though the latter might be appropriate, depending on its business objectives and challenges).

Pursue the triad of values, structures, and practices. Learning cultures are complex and organic systems, never admitting a silver-bullet approach to development. The Athenian model demonstrates the subtle and mutually reinforcing strands of beliefs such as liberty, equality, and reciprocity; the institutions and processes for engagement and conflict resolution; and the constellation of behaviors and beliefs such as participation, meritocracy, transparency, and deliberation. No learning culture, and especially this citizen model, is built by a single process, or technology, or leader.

Be—and work only with those—willing “to both rule and be ruled.” This simple phrase of Aristotle lies at the heart of democratic citizenship for any organization and opposes so many of our modern workplace assumptions. Leadership must be both embraced by everyone and limited for everyone; taking turns builds knowledge and experience, both bottom up and top down. As the Athenians first showed, doing is learning and learning is doing; and so is debating, voting, and teaching one another for the public good. The experience of making decisions and living with the consequences among one’s peers is as powerful a learning strategy as has ever been invented. How many of today’s CEOs would really step up to that challenge?

Blend revolution with evolution. Building a citizen learning culture will shatter many traditional assumptions and break many standard molds—but for all the blood and glory, Athens was not built in a day. Know that for every transformative advance, there will also be failures and slippage; and forward motion will always be punctuated by doubts and digressions. Keep your cour-

age, and remember—you are not leading a project; you are creating a new way of work-life. And that takes time, not to mention an inevitable share of false starts and bumps along the road. *Politeia* is not for the one-minute manager but for hardy organizational adventurers who take the long view. And who else but an ancient historian could tell you that?

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