

# Learning Family



## LEARNING FAMILY

A Promising Message to Create A Better Future

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### Introduction

The idea of learning family sparked in the author's mind when studying an article by Marianne Knuth printed in Reflections, the SoL Journal, about a learning village (Knuth, 2006, PP. 55-68). In 2014 a large family, living in Tehran, invited the author to deliver a speech on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of their regular monthly meetings. This happening revived the idea and made the author decide to carry out a research on the topic. It is about two years that the research has begun and this is the first article as its result. The author hopes it will encourage researchers on human resources to step in and contemplate on the subject, so that subsequent research is initiated to found a new field of learning studies.

### Terms and Definitions

In the present article, there are a few words which are used in specialized meanings, as defined below.

- Nuclear family; consists of parents and their children who live together.
- Family; refers to a “nuclear family” and all relatives.
- Learning family; a community, where new and expansive patterns of thinking and doing, in value creation, is nurtured by the people together, through which new patterns of living are established continuously.

### Why Learning Family?

The Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution made a great power accessible to mankind, unbelievable before for its huge and ever-expanding dimensions. The power

was mastering the nature by means of knowledge; this resembled a coin one side of which was personal and group potentials exploited for the welfare of humans, and the other side, originated and grew simultaneously, were perils to their lives.

An immense danger threatens the life of humankind, at all times and all over the world, however subjected to negligence. From personal perspective, it is the vicious power of producing drugs, poisons and chemical bombs by average humans, stemming from knowledge and technology progresses. Is not it a great hazard alone to the public and unborn generations? From economic and social viewpoints, today fallacious ideas and beliefs can be easily propagated by the facilities of communication and interaction across countries, districts and families. Is not it considered a real jeopardy for all, especially the impressionable youth?

Learning family is a means for actualizing potentials individually and collectively, and at the same time, an answer to aforesaid threats. Hence, the author shares the idea in the hope of being an outset to form a secure shelter for family members. In a learning family, strong connections of youth with their families safeguard them, because families are built on love, affection, intimacy and on the connections of unbreakable and indecomposable nature. Having identified mentioned connections scientifically, this approach aims to apply them for the goodness of humankind and gradually create a much better future for persons and communities.

### **Sustainable Founding of a Learning Family**

Values are essential to provide a clean and blessed atmosphere for accomplishing jobs and building intimacy and mutual understanding. From point of sustainability view, relevant literature says that values may last long if they are rooted inside nuclear families. But where do values come from and who specify them? Values rise from prevailing traditions and beliefs, socially accepted, formed in the course of time. A learning family will flourish and last long, if it is supported by acceptable social values. So, when founding a learning family, sustainability is secured, if it is grounded on a sustainable social belief; e.g., institutional value of family.

There are genuine values related to families as social institutions, such as belonging to a family and bonds of family relationship which ensure their endurance. In this research, the idea of learning family is based on two values: (1) belonging to a family and (2) bonds or relationships between members of a nuclear family and between nuclear families.

### **Fundamentals of Learning Family Formation, Stability and Growth**

One human skill, highly emphasized in recent decades, is “dialogue”. As Edgar H. Schein proposed: “if problem solving and conflict resolution in groups is increasingly

important in our complex world, then the skill of dialogue becomes one of the most fundamentals of human skills” (Schein, 2003, P.28). Consequently, as dialogue defined scientifically, it is a universal skill. As a result, everybody needs to acquire it for personal growth. But a subject cannot expand widely in a country or world unless it is learned in childhood. Therefore and for this purpose dialogue has been known as a discipline of learning family. By this way dialogue as a universal skill will be learned and practiced from outset of everybody’s life.

In a nuclear family, parents are leverage points for commencing a dialogue. Parents have to make it customary by starting dialogue from themselves about subjects the nuclear family confronts. Initiating dialogue in a nuclear family and extending it gradually to the relatives’ gatherings are fundamentals of a learning family formation, stability and growth.

### **Scientific Look at Learning: Infrastructure of Learning Family Attitude**

In 1970s, “learning” was introduced as a scientific term to organizational management studies. Then the concept of learning organization was developed and today the terms “learning world”, “learning country”, “learning village”, and “learning organization” are discussed. This article intends to explore the notion of learning family and find answers to the questions of how to establish a learning family and how to promote its learning level, how family members to identify, foster and utilize their individual and collective potentials, and what is needed to protect them against relevant hazards. In order to approach the answers, first, family has to be compared to organization.

### **Comparison between Organizations and Families**

There are distinct differences between families and organizations as follows:

- Organizations are established to accomplish their missions and last as long as they are profitable compared to investment. In contrast, families are founded to fulfil natural needs of humans and chase non-economical purposes.
- Organizations have differentiating boundaries as they have different missions; but families are interwoven identities and have common origins.
- The building block of an organization is individuals; whereas for a family, including all relatives, the smallest unit is a nuclear family.
- In an organization, establishment of a team does not necessarily require founding another one and in the course of time, some teams dissolve and some new ones are formed. But a family is naturally extended by newborns and almost there is not any expiration for it.
- A family may bring one family business or more into existence; but it is not an obligation.

- Team building is a continuous process of learning organizations, deliberately run by their leaders; while forming nuclear families is an institutionalized component of a family.
- Teams, the smallest units of a learning organization, comprise of individuals who connecting them needs time and money; whereas members of a family/learning family link to each other inherently.
- For organizations, strong leadership is needed to facilitate interactions of teams' networks and they will be costly and time-consuming while families interact among family networks spontaneously and without any cost.
- In any country, organizations are crucially affected by environmental factors particularly economic conditions of the country; whereas, family life is not directly affected by country- level factors.
- Organizational power is originated in the level of decision making and resources in hand. Family power has origins in the ties connecting family members to each other, in particular love and affection. Other sources of family power are knowledge, expertise, forgiveness, magnanimity, and eldership.
- An organization operates in accordance with the 5-duty model of management, while inspired by the spirit of 5 disciplines to evolve as a learning organization. In a family, applying 5-duty model of management is not an obligation, but a choice/preference. Also, disciplines of learning families contribute to their evolution.
- A nuclear family is independent of connected families, while a family is dependent on nuclear families. In an organization teams are dependent on it and the organization is independent of teams.

## **Learning**

## **Family**

## **Disciplines**

Learning family is a society whose members develop their potentials continuously in order to create and foster human values among themselves, where co-thinking is customary and new patterns of thinking and value setting emerge. Learning family is a unit in which wishes of members are realized and where, to found uninterrupted growth, its members learn continually how to set values and implement them together. They govern certain disciplines.

Discipline is a profound concept manifested in a number of principles, laws, methods and techniques to be learned and dominated by practicing repeatedly, applied and implemented in lifetime; so that every instant it is enforced, a higher performance level is attained.

Applicable to the members of a learning family, there are six disciplines. They are systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, dialogue, and consultation as explained below.

## **Discipline I: Systems Thinking**

Systems thinking is a particular way of observing and thinking differentiated from other manners of thinking by following features:

1. Systems thinkers are holistic ones.
2. Systems thinkers concentrate on causal relationships within a system to explore its dynamics. The relationships are scrutinized to a degree which circular causalities of the system components are discovered.
3. Systems thinkers examine phenomena in relation to their environment and in the course of time. This provides them with an understanding of development and evolution patterns of the phenomenon under study.

Implementing systems thinking involves continual enforcement of the following 11 laws as proposed by Senge:

1. Today's problems come from yesterday's "solutions."
2. The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back.
3. Behaviour grows worse before it grows better.
4. The easy way out usually leads back in.
5. The cure can be worse than the disease.
6. Faster is slower.
7. Cause and effect are not closely related in time and space.
8. Small changes can produce big results—but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious.
9. You can have your cake and eat it too—but not at once.
10. Dividing an elephant in half does not produce two small elephants.
11. There is no blame.

## **Discipline II: Personal Mastery**

Humans are thinking creatures who select their ways and encourage themselves to pass it; while patience, perseverance and kindness are among provisions for that permanent journey. Elevated personal mastery results in an active and creative life and continuous development of abilities to achieve higher levels of excellence. Family learning needs individuals possessing personal mastery which is growing steadily.

Permanent growth of personal mastery calls for enforcing the following 5 laws as suggested by Senge:

- Developing/boosting the personal vision,
- Holding creative tension,
- Overcoming to Structural Conflict: the power of your powerlessness,

- Commitment to the Truth,
- Using the subconscious or you don't really need to figure it all out.

### **Discipline III: Mental Models**

There are some crucial questions everybody may confront with: Are behaviours of humans changeable? Is the change process manageable? Can it be directed to a desirable way?

It has been discovered that behaviours are the effects of mental models functioning which are parts of one's mind. They form and lead personal and collective behaviours and bound a person's thoughts and actions. Mental models are assumptions, judgments and beliefs formed in one's mind about an existing reality.

Discipline of mental model involves enforcement of some laws as follows:

- Planning as learning and internal boards
- Managing mental models throughout a community
- Scenario planning
- Managing mental models at personal and interpersonal levels: Cycle of surfacing, testing and improving
- Recognizing leaps of abstraction
- Balancing inquiry and advocacy
- Distinguishing espoused theory from theory-in-use
- Recognizing and defusing defensive routines

### **Discipline IV: Shared Vision**

Transformed viewpoint on family from a mechanical system into an organic unit which thinks and sets values leads to the belief that family is visionary by nature. In a family shared vision is considered a powerful incentive for learning from their own and others' experiences.

Vision is a picture of future that a person or group has decided to create; however, described in words for the time being. Vision statement indicates what person or group intends to create, where they want to go and how they will be after reached there.

Shared vision, as defined above, is applicable to families too, involving enforcement of the following laws, introduced by Senge:  
Encouraging personal vision

- From personal visions to shared vision
- Spreading vision: enrolment, commitment and compliance,

- Anchoring vision in a set of core values
- To prefer positive versus negative vision
- Holding creative tension and commitment to the truth

## Discipline

## V:

## Dialogue

Paying attention to “dialogue” by experimental sciences is limited to recent decades. Considerable literature has been developed addressing it; so that dialogue is going to be a new body of knowledge and an independent profession.

Dialogue as a solution for interpersonal and social problems has a long history among many nations including ancient Greeks and American Indians and south east communities of Asia.

According to Werner K. Heisenberg (1901-1976), outstanding figure of modern physics and founder of uncertainty theory, sciences arise from argument and dialogue. Interestingly, another pioneer of quantum physics contributed to theorizing dialogue is David J. Bohm (1917-1992) whose articles and lectures on the subject were later gathered and printed as the book “On Dialogue“(1996).

Edgar H. Schein, in one article pointed out at this fact. He wrote that "My goal in this article is to provide one perspective on dialogue, based upon my own direct experience with it. I hope to show that, dialogue is indeed not only different from many of the techniques that have been proposed before, but also that, it has considerable promise as a problem-formulation and problem-solving philosophy and technology. I will also argue that dialogue is necessary as a vehicle for understanding cultures and subcultures". (Schein, 2003, P.27).

“The purpose of a dialogue is to go beyond any individual’s understanding. In dialogue, the participants are not trying to win; they all win if they are doing it right. In dialogue, individuals gain insights that simply could not be achieved individually”. Briefly, dialogue aims are identifying mental incoherencies, revealing intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts, and achieving consensus type II.

Dialogue stands on two pillars: listening and speaking, each including four kinds. Four kinds of listening, as proposed by Adam Kahan are as below:

1. Downloading
2. Debating
3. Reflecting (on assumptions set forth)
4. ideas)Generating (new

Four kinds of speaking as suggested by Senge et al are as below:

1. Telling
2. Marketing
3. Consulting
4. Co-Creating

## **Principles and Skills of Dialogue**

In order to provide an interactive environment and protect it, 4 principles have to be observed:

1. Principle of participation through skill of Listening (Isaacs, 1999, PP. 83-109),
2. Principle of coherence through skill of respecting (Isaacs, 1999, PP. 110-133),
3. Principle of awareness through skill of suspending (Isaacs, 1999, PP. 134-158),  
and
4. Principle of unfoldment through skill of voicing (Isaacs, 1999, PP. 159-183).

## **Discipline VI: Consultation**

Capacity building consultancy, different from the common approach, has been developed by the author. In this approach instead of concentration on finding out and solving the problems, the consultant is placed in a position parallel to the client's people. In fact, the consultant becomes/is a member of the community and naturally they all together have their close interaction and cooperation.

To elaborate more in detail, an explanation has to be given about consultancy based on action research because it is the focal point of capacity building consultancy approach.

Action research was put on the desk by Kurt Lewin in 1940s and great researchers such as Chris Argyris, Edward H. Schein and Peter M. Senge followed his path and enriched it for consultancy of management in the second half of the past century. The author has also followed their precious scientific heritage and by enriching it, laid the basis of the new consultancy approach on it.

Author's work which has passed the experimental stage of generalization and qualification in various Iranian organizations and communities, has received the approval of people conveying the message that action research has been revitalized and have laid a new foundation for a capacity building consultancy approach in communities. In other word, entrance of learning concept in communities change has led to a sound method of consultancy, based on action research methodology.

## **Laws of Consultation Discipline**

Developed by the author in his PhD dissertation, consultation discipline, as a deep

concept applicable to every person and every collective, consists of 6 laws as follows:

- Law of theory-action logic
- Law of gradualism
- Law of ease
- Law of Loghmanic method
- Law of Socratic method
- Law of starting from oneself (Ajami, 2014, PP. 99-136)

### **Relations of Six Disciplines**

Description of relationships within a system aims at exploring internal dynamics of the system and clarifying governing mechanisms of the relations. There are 6 disciplines influencing a learning family. Moreover, 3 kinds of relations can be identified and established in learning family disciplines as below:

- Relations between every discipline and learning family as a whole and larger system,
- Relations among disciplines as a whole. This type of relations has two sides: (1) between disciplines one by one, and (2) among laws of one discipline and those of other ones.
- Relations among the laws of every individual discipline.
- Above relations are beyond mutual impressibility; in other words, to accomplish a discipline other ones have to be put into practice too. Considering the facts that every discipline reflects in its laws and disciplines have interwoven relations, it is deduced that laws of all disciplines have to be enforced integrally. (Ajami, 2014, PP. 138-146)

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Learning family is an attitude formed on the basis of unbreakable and imperishable links among family members. In fast and ever-changing world of today, it is a new way towards goodness of mankind, opening his unknown realms. In order to found a sustainable institution, it relies on the values arisen from believing in family as building block of community and bonds of family relationship. Acquisition of enlarging and enriching universal skills such as dialogue and putting them to work in families and in family gatherings are foundations of forming, stability and growth of learning families.

Learning family is also a community, where new and expansive patterns of thinking and doing, in value creation, is nurtured by the people together, through which new patterns of living are established continuously. Members of such societies are

equipped with 6 disciplines. They are: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, dialogue and consultation.

Learning family disciplines have interwoven relationships, a concept well described in triple relations of disciplines: relation among every discipline and learning family, relation among disciplines, and relation among laws of each discipline. Acting together, the relations mentioned above cause integrity of 6 disciplines and make them function as a united body.

As a reader in consultancy or in a client organization, consider what dialogues you might engage to build your own learning family – at home, at work, or with your professional colleagues.

## About the Author

Dr. Mahmoud Ajami has his PhD in Management from Teesside University, UK, his MSc in Industrial Management from Sharif University of Technology, Iran, and his CMC. He is a member of the Iran Management Consultants Association. He has contributed to/written numerous publications and books in Management for many years. He is founder and Managing Director of TeKCo a management consultancy company.

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