

# Choral Memory Over Time: An Indicator of a Healthy Learning Organization

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## Introduction

As the title of this paper implies, the concept of choral memory—or the development and sustainability of a distinctive sound within a choir over a period of time—may be one indicator of the health, longevity, and continuing growth of a choral group. But, what do the terms, *choral memory* and *learning organization*, signify or contribute to the study of choral music? How do these two terms—terms that are used in the literature on change within organizations—add to our knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon of singing? I begin this paper with a brief narrative account of my own experience.

In 1990, Bevan Keating and I began a boys' community choir program in our city of 300,000 because there seemed to be a number of young boys wanting a place to sing. The only community youth choir at the time was the five-year old, award-winning Amabile Youth Singers, conducted by John Barron and Brenda Zadorsky, where membership was restricted to girls and young women from 10 to 21 years of age. After determining the need for a boys' choir and the sense that there would be adequate interest, we auditioned almost 100 males. What we had not ever anticipated were the number of young men with changed voices who wanted to join a male choir. And, it soon became apparent that we would need either one large SATB choir or a treble choir and a tenor-bass choir. Although the SATB male choir seemed the most common in our research, we decided to try developing two choirs in an attempt to better accommodate the boys' musical and aesthetic needs because this was to be a community program, not a religiously-based or school program. While numbers were healthy, parental and community support was high, the choirs achieved some success, and our enthusiasm was mounting, the first few years were a struggle musically. Each season, half or more of the treble choir would leave as their voices began the slow change process and we would start developing a sound all over again with 8 and 9 year non-readers and inexperienced singer musicians. At the same time, the newly changed voices with their extremely limited range and unpolished tone quality would move into the developing TB choir. As a result both choirs continued to sound young and immature. Each time he heard us perform, John Barron would tell me that the choirs would develop a sense of choral memory and then there would be some consistency over time. With patience, he said the sound that we were seeking would begin to emerge, and once it was there, even the new choristers would almost automatically pick up *our sound*. Coincidentally in our third season, four young men, who were studying at the local university and had sung with various choral groups previously, auditioned for the TB choir. Even though they only represented four of 30, their more mature sound provided a solid foundation on which to build the choral sound and provided examples for the younger adolescent boys to emulate. In particular, Jason, a robust tenor in his fourth year of voice performance, immediately coloured and deepened the tenor section. That season people would comment how they could hear Jason's presence in the choir. The next season, Jason was off to study voice in Germany and there was no one of similar voice, stature or maturity to replace him. During that

season we recorded several selections and, even though Jason was long gone to Germany, listeners commented on how they could hear his voice in that recording. In fact, some eight years later, Jason's voice is still imprinted on the Amabile Tenor-Bass Choir: the tenor section continues to strive for and sing with a more mature sound than their years would indicate.

Choirs are organizations that are always in the process of change. In fact, lack of continuous change only results in their weakening and eventual demise. A choir's organizational productivity, in terms of musical excellence, is determined simultaneously by its participants (e.g., conductor, singers, accompanists), the external community (e.g., audience, financial supporters, local government, etc.), and the environment in which the choir is situated (e.g., support for the arts locally and nationally, state of the economy, etc.). John Barron's sage advice several years ago and the incident with Jason have stayed imprinted in my mind, and caused me to wonder if there is such a thing as choral memory. A search through the choral literature yielded no clues. But, I did recall studying about organizational learning and organizational memory in my doctoral work in Theory and Policy Studies, and remembered that theories of organizational learning may help us to understand why certain choral organizations grow and flourish, while others remain static and/or unremarkable. This framework has the potential to help us think about the process of change and growth processes in the choirs with which we work and to question the assumptions about what it is we do. In this paper, I begin by exploring the concept of organizational learning in relation to learning in choirs. I review what is meant by the term learning, and then relate that to the literature on organizations. Just as organizational memory is part of a healthy organization's growth and sustainability, I posit that choral memory is an integral component of a viable and ongoing healthy choral program.

## Organizational Learning

The process of generating change in an organization is known in the literature as *organizational learning*. Learning occurs when organizations interact with their environments and grow or improve through increasing their understanding of what it is they do. While the actions an organization takes may be experimental, imitative, adaptive or carefully planned, an organization's ability to learn may make the difference between its thriving or perishing in the years ahead. But, can an inanimate object, such as a business, a farm, a school, or a choir do something as personal as learning? The literature on organizations would indicate that an organization's growth—or lack thereof—becomes a collective of the people who work within that organization, and cumulatively, each person's action—or inaction—leads to or away from organizational productivity or what is called learning in the literature. In other words, it is the notion of a *community of learners* that emerges in relation to organizational and cultural structure and change emanates from the understandings about the nature of learning. But, organizational/community learning is not merely the sum of the individual member's learning. In fact, it is—and this is a fact most applicable to choir development—the lowest common denominator in organizational learning. The research shows that individual learning, instead of guaranteeing learning, may indeed inhibit or prevent organizational growth (Cousins, 1996; Hedberg, 1991). It is critical that the whole organization learn, not merely rely on one expert's knowledge but to rely on social interaction for group learning.<sup>1</sup> The relationship, then, between individual and members within the community is critical and is based on an interactional model

of causation in which personal factors associated with individuals, environmental events and behaviours operate as interacting determinants of one another. Human learning in the context of a particular community of learners is not only influenced by the organization, but has consequences for it and produces phenomena at the organizational level that go beyond anything we could infer simply by observing learning processes in isolated individuals. Human rationality complicates the concept even further (Cousins, 1996) Knowledge, then, is represented in symbolic form in abstracted similarities and shared meaning rather than details of discrete events. Collective learning or problem solving is not the same as problems solved by various individuals. Organizational learning occurs if any members (i.e., individual singers, conductor, or accompanist) and units (i.e., sections) acquire knowledge that can change the range of behaviours of the organization.

Organizational learning theory fits the context of the personal example with which I began this paper. In relation to tonal development in our two beginning male choirs, John Barron was wisely advising me about the concept of organizational learning. He told me to have a concept of sound in my mind and to continue working toward it even though the environment (i.e., the constantly changing membership due primarily to the nature of the adolescent male and his constantly changing voice) was always in a state of flux. It makes sense that Jason, the mature tenor, contributed to learning and growth within the organization while providing individual learning to some of those around him. He contributed both an event and a process to our organizational learning because the choir as a unit was ready to learn from him and they worked together to develop a sound that not only began to emulate and complement him, but also began to emerge as a cohesive sound unit. How this learning occurred is interesting and vital to understanding how choirs develop.

For the purposes of this paper, then, learning needs to be defined.

Learning takes place when learners integrate new constructs into existing cognitive structures and, in the process, reconcile incongruent experiences and beliefs. . . . Learning, in this sense, arises from the positive feedback between learners and their environments. (Hedberg, 1981, p. 4)

Knowledge is a socially constructed phenomenon and learning is simultaneously both individual and social. We construct personal knowledge bases and understandings often through social interaction and social arrangements. Hedberg discusses four kinds of learning that are relevant both to learning about singing and choral development:

1. learning that cumulates, maintains and restructures knowledge;
2. learning that enslaves and learning that liberates;
3. learning that changes environments; and
4. learning as a result of both adaptive and manipulative behaviour.

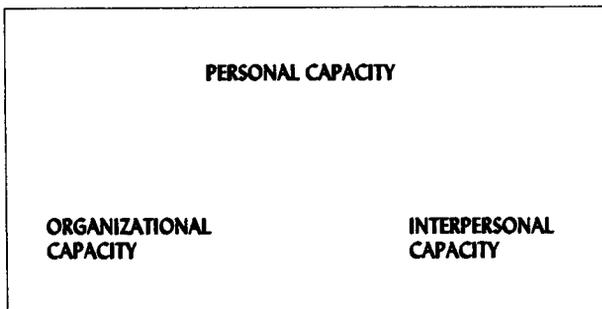
Every theorist who writes about the phenomenon of organizational learning notes that individuals' learning is of utmost significance. In fact, Hedberg states, the only minds and brains that an organization possesses are those of its members and these actually become its information-processing system. However, organizations like choirs, do not drift passively with its members' learning. Rather, organizations influence their members' learning and they retain past learnings even after the original learners have gone (such as the example of Jason used at the beginning). Hedberg uses an apt metaphor to describe learning in that he likens

organizations to repertory theatres where plays are performed by individual actors. While the actors can be somewhat creative, they are directed, assigned roles, given a script, and socialized into the theatre's norms, beliefs and actions. Even when the plays change or new actors or directors arrive, the rich tradition and standards are retained even as time passes. This metaphor is helpful to relate organizational learning to choral organizations.

Gherardi (1999) sees learning as an inseparable part of all organizational practices, making special note that organizational learning is a heuristic device used to study how knowledge is socially constructed in organizing practices which do not halt at the organizational boundaries of formal organizations. Furthermore whether learning leads to knowledge that will benefit colleagues depends a great deal on what kind of professional learning community has been established within the organization. Learning takes place when organizations interact with their environments: organizations increase their understanding of reality by observing the results of their acts. This may not always true in choral organizations where singers are often silenced and required to imitate by rote. However, to honour the social constructivist view of learning means to create conditions that will support and promote individual learning that grows out of interactions with others. The literature would have us consider the idea that leaders—i.e., conductors—have to relinquish control over singers' learning in order to achieve results. In addition, for an organization to be a true learning organization, the learning of leaders—i.e., conductors—is equally important to that of singers, accompanist, executive board, and so on.

Mitchell and Sackney (2000) note that the capacity to learn can be developed and/or strengthened, and they propose a useful model for choral musicians to consider. It is a recursive model in which three capacities mutually influence one another. Growth in each category is premised on simultaneous growth in the other two categories, building a foundation for subsequent growth (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.



*Personal capacity* has to do with active and reflective construction of knowledge. It begins with confrontation with the values, assumptions, belief systems and practices that individuals embrace. Personal capacity is a profoundly personal and potentially transforming phenomenon. As knowledge and understanding is gained, they gain some mastery over what they know and need to know. Their knowledge empowers them to begin a new search for knowledge and to

reconstruct their personal narrative. Building personal capacity means that individuals have a caring attitude, conscientious stewardship, a calling for one's work, and creative energy.

*Interpersonal capacity* means that people work together on shared purposes taking both individual and collective responsibility for the well-being and learning of others. They operate in a spirit of mutual respect and psychological safety and the core is comprised of collegial, human relationships and collective practice. Mitchell and Sackney emphasize that these human relationships are critical to a sustainable context. Interpersonal capacity is about collective meaning: the communal nature of knowing depends on functional relationships that allow people to make meaning together. The members have to build capacity for openness, because as candour increases, sensitive issues become explicit. If people cannot deal with each other openly in the face of attendant emotions when open and honest discourse occurs (which it must), then there is a gap between what is being said and what can be accommodated.

*Organizational capacity* is concerned with building structures that create and maintain sustainable organizational processes. It entails creating a flexible system that is open to all sorts of new ideas, welcoming diversity and embracing novelty—opening doors and breaking down walls. Individualism and solitude need to be embraced in the midst of community and collaboration. Organizational capacity invests heavily in professional learning and relationship building. A learning community is supported when organizational structures, power dynamics and procedural frameworks support professional learning for individuals (both singer and conductor) and for the group.

Mitchell and Sackney (2000) note that intersections of these three dimensions in the model signify that creating and sustaining a learning community requires attending to many different aspects of life and work within the structure and context. One cannot build capacity in each area and expect that to suffice; rather focused, direct, sustained attention is needed in each of three areas. This allows for synergy to develop as each capacity builds on and extends the others. Increased capacity in one area exerts pressure for growth in other areas. For example, without extended personal capacity, the choral director educators may not be able to deconstruct the implicit elements of their professional narrative or have access to new ideas with which to reconstruct it. Without extended interpersonal capacity, the socio-cultural elements in a choir may override any attempt to change the status quo. And, without extended organizational capacity, the choral director and his/her singers are likely to have little incentive or support to undertake the deep, reflective, analysis and reconstruction that can lead to profound improvement.

Ten interrelated dimensions and constructs have been identified in the literature that describe the reciprocal, mutually influential and interactive phenomena related to learning processes. They are:

1. Principles of social learning (interactive, interdependency in learning)
2. Organizational knowledge representation (the 'organizational code' as embodied in routines, policies and procedures)
3. Behavioural versus cognitive learning distinctions (actionable knowledge which can be implemented, tested, and refined)
4. Levels of learning within the organization (single loop, double loop, deutero)
5. System structural versus interpretive learning systems (interpretive perspective that considers context, climate, environment, political power, values, self-interests give meaning)

- to transmitted data)
6. Organizational memory (to be discussed in more detail below)
  7. Knowledge management (strategies concerned with how knowledge is framed, stored, retrieved, communicated within the organization: innovative/creative, transfer, allocation/filtering, coordination) Learning needs to be understood in terms of community being formed.
  8. Experiencing (that may be real or simulated, planned or incidental, retrospective or concurrent; when leaders/singers are willing to deviate from standard practices they consider optimal)
  9. Knowledge acquisition from the environment (searching, noticing and discovering from those around you in rehearsal/other choirs in concerts)
  10. Dysfunctional learning habits, organizational routines and responses that limit organizational capacity. (Cousins, 1996, p. 610)

The administrative literature is in agreement that optimal growth, development and sustainability, as well as continued growth only seem to occur when most, if not all, of the criteria listed above are in place. What is applicable about these ten principles or organizational learning for choral directors, is their leaning toward and reminder to us of the significance of the affective and interpretive as opposed to the cognitive, procedural and rational.

## Organizational Memory

Organizational memory has been continually recognized as an integral component of an organization's ability to learn. Throughout this paper, reference has been continually made to the cumulative results that occur when the individual members assume leadership for their own learning under the guidance of a transformative leader who is also seen as an active learner.<sup>2</sup> Even when seemingly critical members leave the organization, enough collective wisdom or memory is left behind for incumbents and new members to make the organization continue to grow (think of Jason's contribution to the male youth choir, for example). Thus, a significant component of organizational learning is that of organizational memory.

Organizational memory is grounded in information acquisition, storage, and transmission rooted in the beliefs, theories and ideologies of the culture which are conserved through systems of socialization, experimentation and control. Memory is knowledge stored in indexes and encyclopaedic form and choirs (i.e., conductors, accompanists, singers) have vast stores of such information. Organizations have repertoires of activities for acquiring the information and improving what organizations can do. Building and modifying the repertoire are fundamental activities because they embody learning in routines, thus constituting a major form of organizational memory. Even when the participants in the structure leave, organizational memory protects the organization so it can survive and grow further. Building upon and modifying the repertoire constitute a major form of organizational memory (e.g., repetition of an existing piece of repertoire). Participants in an organization are the ones who decide on the worthiness of information that emanates from the leader and organizational memory is represented by the structures used to retrieve, organize, modify, and/or even make use of that knowledge. Participants decide how the information is coded, processed and even retrieved. Past experience is of utmost importance in creating change in an organization because

memories of previous successes tend to invoke further risk-taking and dynamic innovation.

Also relevant for choirs is the reference in the literature to the process of forgetting key and not so important information as well as intentional *unlearning*. Unlearning means forgetting or discarding previously needed knowledge and skills in order to alter belief structures. In fact, the process of unlearning can lead to improved growth and development. Again relevant for this discussion, artistically-based organizations tend to rely more on tacit and ambiguous information which may effect more experimentation and risk-taking. Unlearning requires a more complex and critical thought structure and is essential not only to organizational growth but restructuring. As Nystrom and Starbuck (1984) claim:

Organizations succumb to crises largely because their top managers, bolstered by recollections of past successes, live in worlds circumscribed by their cognitive structures. Top managers misperceive events and rationalize their organization's failures. (p.58)

Organizations can only learn if they can also unlearn. This information is especially relevant to musical and artistic directors who may fall into a trap of assuming one direction or method for creating and defining choral achievement and success. They may forget that it is an aesthetic, indeterminate and flexible medium replete with potential in which we function.

How does this information on organizational learning—policy information which may seem too bureaucratic for the world of music education—relate to aesthetic development in a choral situation?

## Choral Memory

All theories involving organizational growth and/or restructuring are based on images or metaphors that help us to understand how things work. While choral organizations are seen as instruments of the aesthetic, they are often based on a rationale and rigid structure that is linear, involves chain-of-command decision-making, differentiation of tasks, hierarchical supervision above and within the choir, formal rules and regulations, and professes certain ideologies. While social relationships are seen as an integral component of choirs, collaborative decision-making is not. Development may be based on repeated practices—regardless of participants—and change is both cosmetic and short-lived. But second order change or penetrating, intensive restructuring requires a deeper level of organizational management. Choral memory is a multi-faceted phenomenon that seems to evolve in a choir even in its first year of existence and is essential for choral growth. There is the memory that serves the bureaucratic structures of the choir, the memory that serves as a foundation for a music education program and applies to the individual level of each singer in the choir, and there is the choral memory of the *sound* that emerges and becomes idiosyncratic to the choir. As expert choral conductors work to transform vocal technique, musicianship and pedagogy into their concept of sound within the ensemble, the tonal quality develops and settles as a basic constant and consistent foundation over time. While the distinctiveness and singularity of that tone is a requisite to most conductors, it is maintained through continuous chorister development as well as conductor growth. Most conductors and their singers, however, are never totally satisfied with the sound even at its most mature level. Nor can they afford to be complacent in this regard because it is the ongoing development in technique, repertoire, and

so on, that not only sustains the foundation of the sound but keeps on honing it. It is this ongoing development in learning that ensures the choir is a healthy learning community. There are two factors at work here then: it is the sustainability of the particular sound that indicates a healthy community of learners; and, it is the ongoing strengthening and maturing of that choral sound that indicates longevity.

At the beginning of a new season, conductors of seasoned choirs often report that, even though a large percentage of the membership may have changed, it is always amazing yet ameliorating to hear the first warmups and recognize the distinctive but familiar choral sound of the choir. How does this happen? One would think that a choir's sound is based on the distinctive voices of the immediate singers and coloured by the personalities within the group. But, initial research findings are showing that this is a false assumption. The indicator seems to be choral memory. At this point, we are just beginning an in-depth study with about a dozen choral conductors of children's, youth, adult, school and church choirs who seem to have developed a distinctive sound within their choirs. Data gathered from a preliminary questionnaire, followed by interviews about the phenomenon of their choral sound form the basis of the study. At the end of the study, conclusions will be drawn about the essence of choral memory over time and how it may or may not contribute to the metaphor of a choir as a learning community. Preliminary findings show that the overall sound in elite choirs is coloured by the conductor's ability to train and develop that sound based on a particular preference that s/he has. Even idiosyncratic voices can be honed into a definitive sound that is particular to that conductor and this process begins with the advent of a new program or new conductor. Experienced conductors seem to be saying that choral memory involves learning vocal technique and then unlearning certain technique as new and more advanced information and/or abilities replace preliminary instruction.

The concept of choral memory has the potential for helping us understand how healthy musical organizations develop. Initial findings point to a need for further research to explore the fit between organizational theory and choral development.

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**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Social learning theory is a phenomenon developed by Bandura (1977,1986) that relates here. His work is based on an interactional model of causation in which personal factors associated with group socialization are critical.

<sup>2</sup> The role and type of leader (i.e., choral conductor) are an integral part of this discussion on organizational learning but have been omitted from this particular discussion due to space limitations.

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