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Book Review

Building an Innovative Learning Organization: A framework to build a smarter workforce, adapt to change, and drive growth – A Book Review

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Introduction

Russell Sarder is the founder of Sarder TV, which is an online media company that provides programmes on leadership, learning environment, and airs motivational videos. He is the Chief Executive Officer (C.E.O) of Netcom Learning. Netcom Learning is primarily concerned with providing learning services to individuals and companies who are desirous of understanding their survivability in the current marketplace. Sarder has written a great number of books on learning including *Effective Learning Methods: How to develop the most effective learning methods*; *Learning: steps to becoming a passionate lifelong learner*; and, *Building an Innovative Learning Organization*. This book review will critique and comprehensively evaluate the book of this caption.

Having pursued the background of Russell Sarder, it provides a rationale for the current book '*Building an Innovative Learning Organization*'. Sarder is a learning specialist who has dedicated much of his life to examining issues in the areas of learning, motivation, and leadership. The book is clearly an expression of the author's interest in the areas of learning and leadership. The book comprised of 251 pages, large print (at least 16 font), low readability, many diagrams, personal illustrations, acronyms, and simple language that can be read by even those at the primary/elementary level.

Unlike many books around learning and/or leadership [1-11], this does not have the scholastic style, and as such, is like a novel. At the beginning of his book, Sarder used reviews of the manuscript by scholars, business leaders, and authors. Eight pages at the beginning of the book were dedicated to personal summaries and these set the platform for the proceeding chapters. In fact, we found one review to be enlightening as well as set the framework for the book. The President of Blue Print SMS opined that "Russell Sarder's love of learning is a contagious energy that gets into the bones of anyone who encounters him" [12]. On reading the book, it is easy to

understand why Bellantoni penned those words. The book is written like a carefully designed lesson plan of the teacher who has pre-knowledge of his/her study and as such, chart a path for learning with each page, appropriate illustrations, large print, simple sentences, and fittingly placed diagrams to reduce boredom and insight reflections. This review seeks to provide justice to the logically and carefully designed plan of words of Russell Sarder that intends to result in learning for the reader.

The essence of the text *Building an Innovative Learning Organizations* is to provide insights into organization culture, step-to-address necessary changes in organizations, and how successful organization must be coalescing around 1) learning a culture, 2) learning plan, and 3) learning operation. Sarder used potent and detailed practical examples as instructions for business survivability in the 21st century and beyond. He used the leader as the driver in the training, change process, and planning that will bring about an effective organization. The book was not only about educational (or learning) organizations but was centered around learning and education in an organization that process lifelong learning and the necessary plans for continuity.

Chapter 1: Why Become a Learning Organization?

The first chapter is entitled "*Why to become a learning organization?*" and this sets the focus for the entire book. This chapter sought to address three important concepts: 1) key changes that affect success, 2) the learning advantage, and 3) a framework for building the learning organization. Sarder starts with a quotation from David Garvin that encapsulates what constitutes a learning organization. This reads "With tougher competition, technology advances, and shifting customer preferences, it's more crucial than ever that companies become **learning organizations**. In a learning organization, employees continually create, acquire, and transfer knowledge-help-

helping their company adapt to the unpredictable faster than rivals can” [12]. A learning organization is an entity in which the staffers are continuously employing their skills, knowledge, and competencies to ensure relevance, survivability, effectiveness, productivity, efficiency, and competitive advantages in a higher competitive market environment. Hence, a learning organization is not limited to an educational institution; but its gamut extends to manufacturing, construction, and service entities, privately and publicly owned. It is for this very reason why Sarder gave examples of Google; Alliaz Life Insurance Company, SAS, Edward Jones, Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta, and Amazon.com. Those were illustrations of businesses that understood the current and future market-

place and were able to effectively implement strategies to grow in a changing marketplace.

On the other hand, the author pointed out that businesses such as UPS, Circuit City, FedEx, and Best Buy are organizations in which leaders (or management) held onto historical practices and as such had to close because of changing conditions that were not taken into consideration. To give an example of how resistance to change can adversely influence a business’ ‘bottom line’, Sarder noted that Circuit City was a successful company with over 700 stores and sales of US 12 billion and this like Best Buy became bankrupt. This provided the platform for the author to introduce a diagram that presented key changes that affect success in an organization (Figure 1).

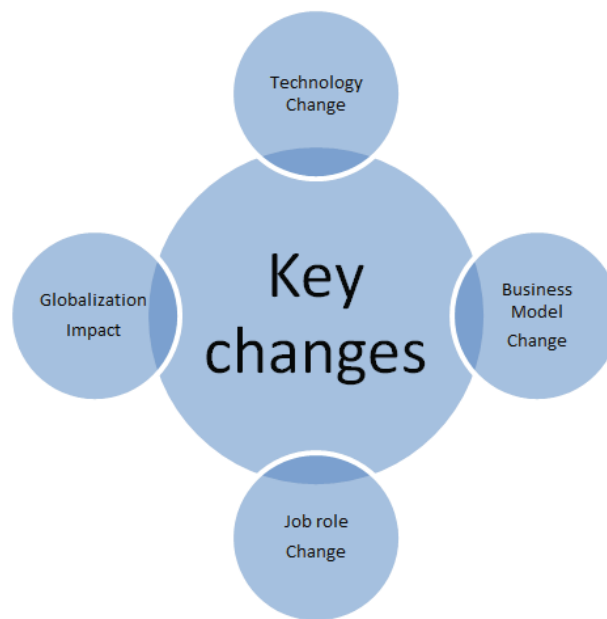


Figure 1: Key changes that affect the success [12].

Having provided examples of organizations on both extreme of the spectrum of survivability, Sarder used Figure 1 as an introduction to how business continuity can be had in a complex market environment [12]. He outlined that entities such as Google and Netflix understand the four fundamental keys to change and how these affect the success or failure of the business. The author believes and shows how the four components hold the key to business survivability. Sarder indicated that "Change comes in various forms. Our business model and strategies, which may have worked just fine for years, may no longer keep us relevant in the face of a global economy and change customer preferences" [12]. He continued that "We can no longer count on a stable, malleable workforce because today's workers are quick to change jobs in search of new opportunities" (p. 3). It can be deduced from Sarder's perspective that in the 21st century, leaders must understand the outside and inside environment in which the company operates to survive [12]. By merely understanding past situations will not be sufficient for a company in the future. In fact, Sarder indicated that the employee is key to the success of the business and not

only outside forces, such as globalization, as well as the business model and technology [12].

With the importance of key changes to success or failure, Sarder dissected each key and provided detailed explanations and illustrations so that their significance can be understood by the reader [12]. Key for 'Job Role Change', Sarder argued that leaders must understand technology, the marketplace, changes in the environment, and that there is also the importance of job-related roles to carry out the needed function of the entity. Sarder emphasizes and re-emphasize the importance of adaptability of leaders and employees in the highly competitive marketplace and warned against complacency [12]. Hence, he added that "They [learning organization] are better able to keep ahead of the competition by coming up with innovative products and services" [. He continued that "Crucially, they are far more likely to attract and retain the best employees" (p. 10), suggesting that leaders must understand complex nature of business operations and importance of all key elements toward meeting contemporary trends and demands. The aforementioned reality sets the stage for learning and education in an organization. This

explains why five pages were dedicated to different areas of learning to include 1) learning advantage, 2) innovation advantage, 3) investing in learning is good business, 4) what is learning, and 5) learning organization.

The concept of *learning organizations* runs many times throughout chapter 1 and one page was used to provide more information on this. Sarder aptly summarized what is a learning organization this way “In a learning organization, the leaders continuously demonstrate by their words and actions their belief that learning is crucial to the organization’s growth and ability to compete” (p. 14). Such a perspective brings the leader clearly in the discourse of a learning organization and in fact central to the process. The leader is not merely a manager of

resources; he/she must be able to influence and motivate employees’ desire to learning and be a crucial element in demonstrating the importance and practice of learning in the organization. A framework for building a learning organization proceeds this by Sarder “The leaders of a learning organization continuously strive to communicate their vision and promote the value of ongoing learning. By that, they do far more than just talk. They actively demonstrate that they care about employee’s learning and development by providing the necessary resources. They share information openly and involve employees in the decisions that affect their work and their lives” (p.p. 14-15). With this said, Sarder used a diagram to introduce a framework for building a learning entity (Figure 2).

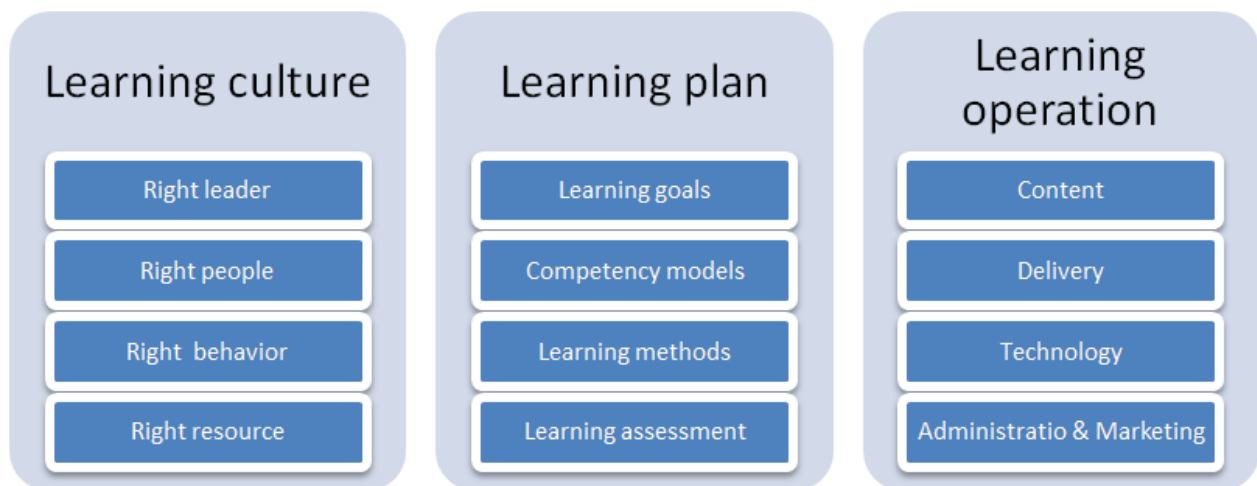


Figure 2. Sarder’s Framework for building a learning entity Building the Learning Organization [12].

The three elements that constitute Sarder's framework for building a learning organization was encapsulated in a diagrammatic form (Figure 3-5). A concise overview was done of each within the components. In fact, chapters 2 to 4 were dedicated to a detailed explanation of three elements within Sarder's framework for building a learning organization.



Figure 3. The Components of a Learning Culture [12].



Figure 4. The Components of a Learning Plan [12].



Figure 5. The Components of a Learning Operation.

Building a Learning Culture

This chapter detailed ‘building a learning culture’ which is the first element of the Sarder’s framework for building a learning organization. The author introduced this chapter with a diagram listing the components of building a learning entity. He highlighted that a ‘learning culture’ must be present in the organization and this holds a key to framing a learning entity. As such, the issue really began with a quotation from Michael Marguardt that read “Just as nations have distinct cultures, organizations have distinct ways of believing, thinking, and acting that is manifested by symbols, heroes, rituals, ideology, and values. The nature of learning and the way it occurs are determined in large measure by organizational culture [12]. Clearly, an organization is a living organism and because it can be likened to humans, it has the whole set of apparatuses that explain its functioning. This Sarder referred to as organizational culture [12].

To explain organization culture Sarder used a Turkish custom which goes like this “[People] greet with kisses on the cheek. Elders are respected by kissing their right hand, then placing the forehead onto the hand...The concept of sharing a bill is alien...Best is to graciously thank the host then later invite them to a restaurant [and] inform the manager not to accept payment from them” [12]. The essence of usage of the Turkish custom is to illustrate functionalities of culture, which is no different in organizations. To further illustrate organizational culture, Sarder used two different case studies that aptly explain organizational culture. One organization had an open space concept in which employees work in cubicles and the manager has his/her private office. Another was where both employees and manager work in the same open space that is separate by chairs, and a conference room is located on the periphery for meetings.

Sarder detailed all components of learning the culture. He starts with having the right leader who sets the parameters including the vision, sharing the vision to the

others, framing a model to carry-out this vision followed by explaining the other components such as the right people, the right behaviour, and the right resources. Although evaluation was not listed as a component of learning the culture, Sarder indicated that this provides an assessment for feedback on the workings of the plan of the action executed by the leader. It is the assessment that provides critical data upon which the leader can make decisions including modifications, exclusions and changing of things in the business plan. To aid in the reader’s understanding of assessment, Sarder placed a survey that can be used to collect data on the learning organization’s functioning [12].

Chapter 3: Developing a Learning Plan

This chapter dealt with the learning plan. The components of the learning plan were 1) goals, 2) competency model, 3) learning methods, and 4) assessment. The four components of a learning plan were summarized by Sarder. He outlined that learning goals dealt with the desired measure purpose for the team including individuals. The competency model looks at a description of the needs of the organization, the strategic goals, and mission that are created to be accomplished. The learning method examines ways, tools or techniques that employees should accomplish to attain the desired competence. Following the synopsis of the components, the author provided at least two paragraphs of explanation on each as well as fitting illustrations to concrete the issues. Furthermore, in this chapter, Sarder detailed outline with appropriate illustrations of the learning plan to include the five primary learning methods (Figure 6).

Because assessment was a component of the learning plan, Sarder briefly reviewed data collection methods as this would provide the information upon which the evaluation will be carried out. For data collection, he wrote four paragraphs that concisely examined the issue. This was not enough to provide an understanding of the

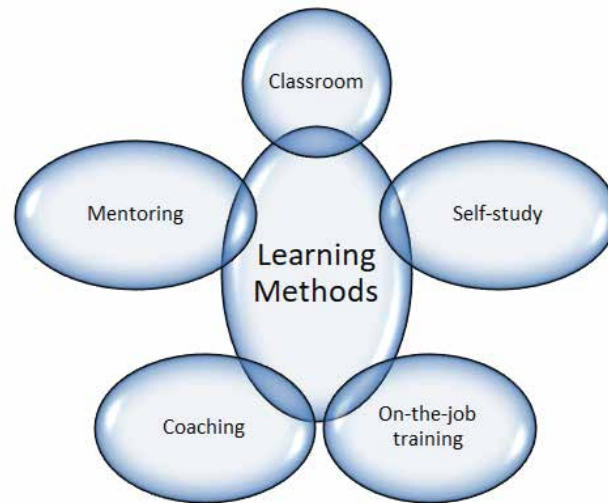


Figure 6. The five Primary Learning Methods [12].

approaches and techniques of data collection, a subtle encouragement to the reader to research for additional information. In fact, Sarder captured the entire complex data collection and method paradigms in two paragraphs. The two constitute the definition of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Despite this weakness, a platform was set that would provide the reader with the importance of research methods in the learning plan process.

Chapter 4: Setting Learning Goals

In this chapter, Sarder begins by presenting a framework of how to build a learning organization. First, he outlines the steps in building a learning culture. These include having the ideal leader, the right people with the right behaviors and resources. Then he outlines the steps in building a learning plan. These include having your learning goals, competency models, learning methods then learning assessments. He also outlines the steps involved in the Learning Operation. These include content, Delivery, Technology Administration and Marketing.

It is believed that for an organization to be highly effective and successful then it must set quality goals. Sarder describes a goal as a written statement that states where we are going, what we will do to get there and what will finally happen when we get there. According to him, goals help to keep us focused and prevent us from wasting our time on things that are unnecessary. Without you knowing where you are going then you won't realize when you got there. This statement simply describes an organization or an individual without a goal.

Sarder refers to what is called strategic goals. He described these goals as direct action the organization will undertake to be successful in a specific venture.

Sarder stated that in top performing organizations both teams and individual goals flow from the organizations' goals and ensures that everyone is heading in the same direction with activities linked to the organizations' values mission and the overall strategies. This I believe is

important because when members feel they are a part of something they will be more willing to work towards achieving it. He also thinks that Learning goals that flow from the strategic goals of the organization will establish the content necessary to ensure that everyone knows what is needed to be learned and why the learning is important.

Some may think that a goal is just a statement, but I agree with Sarder when he stated that "Useful learning goals are not just a statement, but it describes an intention, action to be taken to achieve the goal and finally how the success will be measured. It's all important to have goals but the timeframe by which to accomplish the goals are very important.

I like the acronym Smart which Sarder used to describe a useful goal. The meaning of smart is:
S = Specific. Concrete verbs are used to describe actions that will be taken to achieve desired goals."

M = Measurable. These goals described actions that can be measured.

A = Attainable It described something thing that can be accomplished.

R = Relevant. A smart goal is meaningful. It describes something that is worth doing within the context of the situation.

T = Time Based. A smart goal is given a specific time frame when the action should be completed, or results accomplished.

This acronym will mean that for goals to be meaningful and effective it must match these criteria. Our goals should be specific, measurable, attainable, and relevant and time-based. I'm quite happy that time is a major factor Sarder used in setting a goal. A goal that is not time based can have it dragged out, so much so that the goals can lose their relevance, people become demotivated and some of the goals may never be reached or they might be abandoned.

Sarder pointed out that there is a distinction between performance and learning goals. According to him, the performance goals frame the instruction, so the focus is

on task performance. While a learning goal frames the instructions in terms of knowledge or skill acquisition.

He also said that performance goals are not always learning goals and some performance are achievable without much or any learning. He said that a learning goal helps people to gain the knowledge they need to increase their understanding and can apply what they have learned. They also help people to grow and expand. They also help employees to think for themselves, develop new ways of doing things and feel more empowered at work.

According to Sarder, a learning goal may be a target for improving special skills or knowledge or abilities an employee needs to meet or exceed the requirement for the present job. Although developmental goals are learning goals they help people to go a little further, like moving up in their career, take advantage of job opportunities or even enter a new field of study.

These are the reasons why people learn simply because they want to gain new knowledge to uplift themselves and others and be more equipped for a better position or job opportunity. I think Sarder did a very good job of differentiating learning goals from performance goals.

How to set learning goals

Sarder pointed out that learning goals are not developed in isolation, but they result from collaboration among employees, their managers and human representatives who will see gaps between competencies and what is needed to fill these gaps. He also stated that your learning plan also needs to include your developmental goals and ways to support or reward developmental efforts.

According to Sarder, one will know whether their goals have been achieved because a well-written goal contains a description of how things will be when the goal has been achieved.

This chapter captures most, if not all the things one needs to know about setting learning goals. The language was quite simple and clear that almost everyone could understand the content.

The distinction between performance goals and learning goals was very good. The performance goals tell what the organization plans to do, but the learning goal goes a step further in not only telling what the organization wants to achieve but what they must do to achieve it.

The learning goals framework at the beginning of the chapter is written to capture the reader's attention. It is quite simple, and one can look at the framework and follow it to apply it to the needs of the organization.

Chapter 5: Creating Competency Models

Traditional competencies are founded on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to successfully do a specific job, and the contribution of theories such as Bloom's 3 domains of learning (cognitive, psychomotor, and effective) set the early stage for the development of job descriptions, performance standards, learning objectives and design of learning methods. These knowledge, skills, and attitudes provided the basis for the prediction

of success in a job. However, the need for clear competency criteria prompted the research and analysis of successful performers, leading to the development of competency models. These models identified critical success factors for job accomplishment and were used to drive several human resource and organizational development goals.

The author presents four broad competency models which are developed from the different types of learning which include:

1. core competencies which facilitate understanding of organization mission, values, products, services, strategies, requiring competencies and values which connect one's job to the broader organizational goal.
2. Functional competencies needed for achieving departmental goals such as marketing
3. Job competencies required for the specific job
4. Leadership competencies which permeate all levels of the organization.

The author further differentiated between contemporary and traditional competencies based on the impact of technology, globalization, and the volatility of the new environment in which organizations operate, requiring new understandings, literacies, and intelligence. The book contrasts the silo-type compartmentalized models as presented by traditional functional with job competency models born out of the paradigm of a long-term strategy. The author further showed the requirements needed for contemporary models to work effectively and the practical use of the competency model.

Chapter 6: Selecting the Right Learning Methods

This chapter examines various methods by which individuals acquire knowledge. The author first set out to distinguish between formal and informal learning. He highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of these two main types of learning, showing the flexibility of informal learning and pointing out new aspects of informal learning that may not have been deemed informal by normative standards. Both types of learning were shown to have their values and importance in the development of mind and the acquisition of knowledge, however, the author showed individuals difference in how comfortable they feel in working in these various environments. As the author suggests, "Much of our most valuable learning is the informal learning that takes place as we go about our daily activities, often unaware that we are learning." A powerful point is made when the author further suggests the various ways we engage in informal learning through our interaction with books, articles, and social media.

It is noteworthy that facilitators of formal learning are constantly engaged in informal learning to qualify themselves as capable facilitators. At all levels of the learning continuum, it was shown how learners are encouraged to engage in informal learning through various medium. The author describes five primary learning methods that are used by good organizations in com-

bination. These learning methods describe the various medium through which learners receive knowledge and skills. I agree with the concept that classroom learning is not limited to a physical space but can be extended to the virtual space where learner and instructor can meet. The limitations of the physical space are overcome by utilizing the virtual classroom. I appreciate and see the value of the following quotes:

- Coaching – “[People] can come to a class and get some skills, but someone needs to reinforce what they learn: “How are you implementing these behaviors? What kinds of actions have you taken?” For the behaviour change really to happen, I think there needs to be one-to-one coaching.” Jennifer Alesia
- Mentoring – “Mentorship is a word that encapsulates the core of positive networking behaviour, which is to find people who are ahead of you and learn from them so that you always raise the level of your game to the people around you.” Lewis Schiff
- On-the-job-training – “We learn by example and by direct experience because there are real limits to the adequacy of verbal instruction. Malcolm Gladwell
- What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing.” Aristotle

The author demonstrates various ways to combine learning methods. As this chapter is read we guess the reader can come up with even more ways that could enhance the content of this chapter. The chapter continues by looking at the driving force behind the selection of learning methods. The learning goals, urgency and time, budget and your learners. We concur with the author’s quotes, “learning is about building the capacity to create that which you previously couldn’t create. It’s ultimately related to actions, which information is not.” – Peter Senge. Practice isn’t the thing you do once you’re good. It’s the thing you do that makes you good. We would not have gained anything from this reading if we do not intend to put what we learn into action.

Chapter 7: Assessing the Results of Your Learning Plan

The author of this chapter examines the process of assessment, evaluating results. According to the author if the assessment is not measured correctly recurring failures could spell disaster for any organization. The subtopic on key assessment questions is a must read for organization leaders and any individual who has an interest in the development of minds. Six key essential questions summarize this section.

The author's five Levels of Evaluation covers Satisfaction, Learning, Impact, Results, and Return on Investment. On reading this section, readers can make intelligent decisions with regards to the methodology to be used in making a relevant and meaningful assessment of the success of their organization to prevent failure and enhance growth.

Chapter 8: Managing Your Organization’s Learning Operation

The subtle use of a relevant quote from Jack Webb makes a fitting foundation for the eight chapter. “You’ve got to eat while you dream. You’ve got to deliver on short-range commitments, while you develop a long-range strategy and vision and implement it ... walking and chewing gum if you will. Getting it done in the short-range, and delivering a long-range plan, and executing on that. The author fittingly associates the managing of one’s learning plan with the managing of a family. This gives the readers a practical insight into how organizational managers can get things done.

Having defined and giving a brief overview of Learning Operations in chapter one, the author now goes into much more detail concerning this aspect of the organizational learning model. The chapter further outlines administration and marketing tools needed for enhancing learning operations within the organization, these are denoted as Content, Technology, Administration & Marketing and Delivery. This chapter is a must-read for managers who want to implement a meaning learning plan for their organization.

The Components of a Learning Operation

Sarder presents his usual graphic organizer to illustrate the components of the Learning Operation. The learning operation is grouped into four functions: content, delivery, technology and administration and marketing.

The section “What’s Next” notes the following, In the past, a limited set of skills were sufficient to build a successful career, but today’s workforce needs more than just a small set of skills. [12]. A great point on which to end that chapter.

Chapter 9: Call to Action

The chapter “Call to Action” is a compelling command to inspire others to make the best of their educational opportunities and to become lifelong learners. The author wrote this book (chapter) because he cares about learning and passionately believes that learning is the key not only to career success but also to health and happiness. Together we can make a difference. This chapter Call to Action is part of a text, scholarly, yet un-orthodox, written for organizations, learning organizations, and businesses, and is highly recommended.

Conclusion

This book by Russell Sarder is nothing short of craft and artistry of words that are so carefully interwoven to inform, educate, inspire, motivate, enlighten and transform the space of leadership. The material is reader-friendly and lends itself to fun reading because of the use of simple words, diagrams, and appropriate examples that are current such as 1) Microsoft; 2) Google; 3) Alliaz Life Insurance Company, 4) SAS, Edward Jones, 5) Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta, and 6) Amazon.com. It is totally worth being a gift like the present.

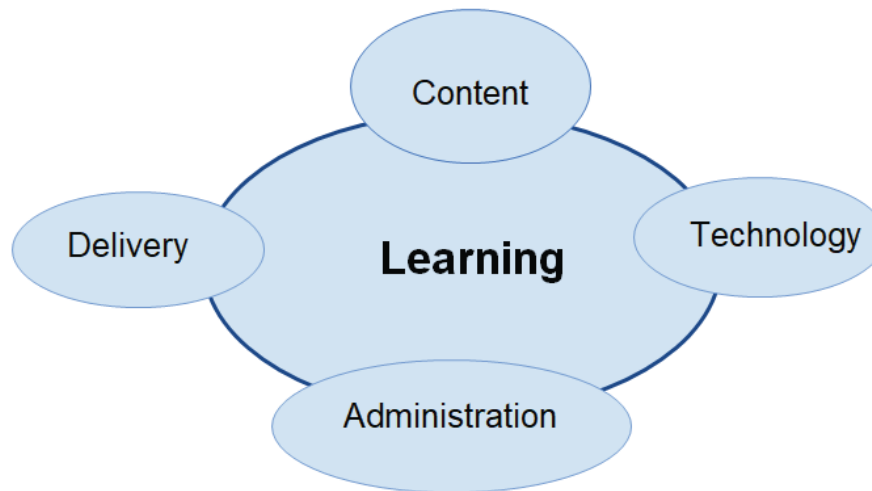


Figure 7: Sarder's Components of a Learning Operation

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