Change, Growth, and Learning Organizations

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What does it mean to say that a group or association is a “learning organization”? This concept was originally developed by Peter Senge, a lecturer at MIT and author of several books on business strategy, management, and leadership. His book “The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization” was first published in 1990. Senge defines learning organizations as those “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.” He believes that in situations of rapid change, only those organizations can excel in which the commitment and capacity to learn is encouraged at all levels.

Is IONA a learning organization according to this definition? If not, does it possess the capacity or potential to become such an organization? Should IONA even aspire to achieve the qualities that Peter Senge ascribes to a learning organization? What is the relationship, if any, between a modern theory of organizational effectiveness on the one hand and IONA’s stated goals and methodology on the other hand—derived as they are from scriptural and prophetic guidance?

These are some of the questions that will be considered in these pages. This essay is only an invitation to think and exchange ideas, rather than the final word on this subject. The next essay in this issue of SIGNS provides a summary of Peter Senge’s book, “The Fifth Discipline,” which is definitely worth reading by all the members of IONA.

Among other activities, IONA is involved in the tarbiyyah of its members. There is, though, some confusion as to what exactly tarbiyyah means in practical terms, what the means and ends of tarbiyyah are, and in what ways this benefits you and me. In other words, what’s the point of all this stress upon tarbiyyah? In the present essay, I will try to explain what I think tarbiyyah means in the context of IONA, as well as what I believe it should mean, before relating it to the capacity and potential of IONA to become a true learning organization.

We routinely use the word “training” as if it were a satisfactory English synonym for tarbiyyah, but this does not eliminate the potential for confusion; in fact, “training” has connotations of physical exercises or kinesthetic skills, e.g., we may refer to “physical training” for children in public schools, or we may say that someone is “training” to participate in the next Boston Marathon. Of course, these connotations are far removed from what the word tarbiyyah is intended to convey when used within IONA circles.

Due to these connotations, when the word “training” is first mentioned by a speaker in the context of the revolutionary manhaj of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), the image that it is likely to create in the minds of the audience is that of military training; or, in light of the contemporary obsession with terrorism, the word might even conjure up the idea of terrorist training. The speaker then has to exert some effort in clarifying as to exactly what it is that the word “training” means in this context; but even after that clarification the speaker must go on using the word “training” simply due to the lack of an English equivalent that can convey the richness of the Arabic tarbiyyah.

The truth is that the actual meanings of tarbiyyah within the Islamic tradition are much broader and deeper, and more significant, than what “training” generally implies. The Arabic word has to do with education, but the verb “teaching” does not even begin to exhaust its meanings. More importantly, tarbiyyah implies nurturing, mentoring, encouraging, fostering, supporting, cultivating, counseling, and guiding. It has the connotations of an ongoing process, a virtually lifelong affair. Consequently, it does not denote the nature of the relationship between a lecturer and his/her audi-
ence; or that between a writer and his/her readers. Instead, tarbiyyah denotes the nature of the relationship that typically develops between a parent and his/her child; or that between a wiser, older person and a young, eager disciple. To use another metaphor, tarbiyyah refers to the relationship between a dedicated gardener and the plants or trees for which the gardener is responsible.

Indeed, tarbiyyah has to do with carefully, painstakingly enhancing the overall wellbeing, development, and progress of whoever is the object of tarbiyyah—a child, a plant or tree, a friend—by means of continuous and sustained effort. It involves a sense of commitment, sincerity, love, as well as a willingness to offer one’s own self— one’s time, energy, attention, experience—to others, without expecting to receive favors or even gratitude.

The goal of tarbiyyah is not to mold another person’s mind and life according to one’s own preferences; it is rather to help another person so that his or her inherent potentialities can realize themselves, and his or her dormant virtues can come to fruition. This is why a gardener does not force a mango plant to grow into a peach tree; the gardener only makes sure that whatever kind of desirable qualities or benefits are hidden in a sapling or a seed are ultimately actualized to the maximum extent possible.

In this sense, the best of all “gardeners” is Allah (SWT) Himself, for He wishes for each human being—who is like a seed that He has planted on His earth—to be able to grow and express his/her best qualities to the maximum extent possible. In this context, it is important to remember that there are two derivations of the word rabb—the first means “lord,” but the other is related to tarbiyyah and signifies “the one who nurtures,” i.e., one who facilitates an object’s natural unfolding or development in a step-by-step fashion, providing what it needs at each stage, with the aim of actualizing all of its hidden goodness to the fullest.

The basic meaning of tarbiyyah, then, has to do with healthy, desirable growth. The idea of growth, however, is intimately linked with the notion of change. It is important to understand, therefore, how growth, change, and the process of tarbiyyah are related to each other within the context of following the revolutionary manhaj of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). It will then be possible to grasp the meaning of tarbiyyah as it pertains to IONA as a learning organization.

To begin with, we note that one of the most fundamental rules of the created universe is that nothing in it ever remains the same. Allah (SWT) has created the world in such a way that constant change is inherent in its very structure and functioning. Everything changes; nothing stays the same. Some changes we find desirable and wish that they would occur more often; other changes we don’t like and wish they won’t take place. Some kinds of change happen so slowly that we are sometimes deluded into thinking that they do not happen at all; but they do. Change is our companion, whether we celebrate or bemoan it, and whether or not we even perceive its existence.

Within this world of incessant change, what does Allah (SWT) want from us? One thing is obvious: He does not want us to remain the same. Since He is our Rabb, He wishes each one of us to change, but only in a way that is best for us and most pleasing to Him. Allah (SWT) wishes us to change in a manner that is conducive to our maximum growth, so that the good and virtuous possibilities that He has placed in each one of us can have the full opportunity for expressing themselves. He wants us to grow and actualize our gifts and blessings—which are unique to each one of us—so that we can become what He intends us to be.

Allah (SWT) created Adam as His viceroy on earth; as sons and daughters of Adam, we carry that honor within us as a potentiality. In each one of us, that potentiality has to be realized—made real—so that we may carry out His worship and become His representatives on earth in a manner that pleases Him.

All of this is meant to say that Allah (SWT) wants us to become the best possible specimens of humanity—which is the same thing as becoming His devoted servants, or surrendering ourselves completely to Him. But the important point is that there is no end to this process; whatever we are, we can always become better. The good news about being imperfect is that we can constantly become less imperfect; since we can never become perfect, there can be no end to our growth!

Only the most arrogant and deluded person would reject the need for self improvement; only the most conceited would imagine that his/her growth has reached its full extent. As sons and daughters of Adam, we are the recipients of a special gift from Allah (SWT)—the potential for unlimited growth. In a world that constantly changes, we have the option either to constantly grow in a way that actualizes our inherent good and virtuous qualities and makes us increasingly better servants of our Lord; or we can choose to stop growing. Unfortunately, to stop growing does not mean that we would remain stationary or static or stable. Since the world is constantly changing, being fixed and rigid actually implies degeneration, regression, decay, or falling back.
In a continuously changing world, we can either grow or deteriorate; there is no standing still. According to the way in which Allah (SWT) has created us and this world, we have not been given a third option.

Now that we know something about change and growth, where does tarbiyyah fit into all this? Recall the fact that tarbiyyah involves the facilitation of healthy growth. This growth must happen both at an individual level and at the organizational level. The good news is that growth at an individual level and growth at a communal or organizational level are mutually supportive processes. In fact, they are so intimately related that one cannot happen without the other.

When we grow individually and become better servants to our Lord, we also become better human beings—better heirs to our father Adam; as we become better human beings, we also contribute to the overall growth of the community or organization of which we are a part. Similarly, as a community or organization grows, it offers its members more and better opportunities to grow individually. It is a truly win-win situation.

Since both the individuals and the community or organization they comprise must function within a world that is constantly changing, it is imperative that they, too, constantly come up with new ideas, look at things with ever fresh perspectives, and try innovative solutions. Here lies the key to organizational and individual effectiveness—both must constantly learn. For learning, being open to new ideas and fresh possibilities, is the most important prerequisite for growth.

Growth is a sign of life, while stagnation is an indication of imminent death. To refuse learning is to reject the God-given opportunities for growth; to reject growth is to choose degeneration and ingratitude, for it is a refusal to carry out the duties of vicegerency on earth.

Unfortunately, people do tend to become complacent. After thinking in a particular way or doing things in a specific manner for a long time, they become accustomed to certain patterns. The convenience of inertia, the familiarity of long established habits, make them feel smug and satisfied. New learning requires investment of time and energy, and can even evoke anxiety due to the challenges it may create to one’s old habits and taken-for-granted beliefs. A tendency develops, therefore, to unconsciously or deliberately avoid learning. This leads both organizations and individuals into a dangerous place called stagnation.

If both the individuals and the organization were to consistently think and act only in familiar and habitual ways, they would soon become dysfunctional and ineffective in the ever changing world. On the other hand, an effective organization is one that is dedicated to growth—both of itself as a whole and of its members individually. This is another way of saying that an effective organization must be a learning organization.

In this background, the institutionalization of tarbiyyah is precisely what makes IONA a learning organization; or, rather, the institutionalization of tarbiyyah holds the promise of transforming it from a stagnating or degenerating organization into a growing and learning one. Yet, tarbiyyah is only one side of the equation, the other being the desire and capacity for learning. An organization can try to facilitate learning in its members, but this will be an exercise in futility if they lack any desire to grow.

One learns at many different fronts, in many different levels, and through many different avenues. The effectiveness of IONA is directly related to the amount and quality of learning that its members are able to achieve in their religious and spiritual lives as well as in their understanding of themselves and their world. Within an organization, individuals are able to bring together a wide variety of learning styles, talents, approaches, and experiences. This diversity at an individual level contributes to the overall richness within the organization, for different levels, styles, and ways of learning can have a synergistic effect when they are made to work together. Even interpersonal conflicts within the organization can become a source of further growth rather than occasions of acrimonious exchanges.

The most important prerequisite for the above benefits, of course, is the conscious decision to make individual and organizational learning one of the top priorities. Once such a decision is made and its implications are understood and accepted, virtually any negative or potentially explosive situation can be reconfigured as a set of learning opportunities. More importantly, it will institutionalize the idea that if anything is worth doing, it is worth doing well—that we can always learn new and more effective ways of solving problems and achieving desired results.

The decision to imagine, lead, think about, and manage IONA primarily as a learning organization will be consistent with the vision of activism as presented in “Islamic Renaissance: The Real Task Ahead.” In terms of tarbiyyah, such a step will also be commensurate with the revolutionary manhaj of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) that IONA has chosen for itself. On another level, it will be in accordance with the duty to become the vicegerents of Allah (SWT) on earth.