



*IM TruePoint Perspective*

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# The Learning Serpent

*Designing Adaptive Organizations for Continuous Change*



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### Designing Adaptive Organizations for Continuous Change

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#### Why this paper is important

In an increasingly volatile and uncertain environment, the ability to adapt has become a defining capability for successful organizations. As Martin Reeves and Mike Deimler argued in their widely cited work in Harvard Business Review, adaptability is emerging as a critical source of competitive advantage. Organizations that can continuously learn and adjust their strategies, structures, and ways of working are better positioned to respond to changing markets, technologies, and customer expectations. Michael Beer discusses this ability with the lens of being “fit to compete” – which does not only include performance of today but also has focus on learning to adapt for the future.

Despite broad agreement among leaders about the importance of agility and adaptability, many organizations still struggle to translate these aspirations into practice. Research suggests that while most organizations have mechanisms for defining strategy and executing work, they often lack systematic processes for learning across the organization and using those insights to adjust direction and organizational design.

This paper introduces the **Learning Serpent**, a framework for building adaptive organizations. The model highlights three interconnected domains that together enable continuous learning and adaptation:

- **The Strategic Domain** – where direction, purpose, and organizational design are defined
- **The Work Domain** – where operational and innovative work is performed
- **The Transformation Domain** – where insights from across the organization are synthesized and translated into strategic and organizational adjustments

While many organizations have well-established structures for strategy and execution, our research suggests that the **transformation domain is often missing**. Yet it is precisely this domain that enables organizations to learn systematically from experience and adapt their strategies and systems accordingly.

#### The Challenge of Organizational Adaptability

Over the past decade, the concept of organizational agility has moved from the margins of management thinking into the mainstream. Research published in Harvard Business Review, such as “**Agile at Scale**” by Darrell Rigby and colleagues and “**Nimble Leadership**” by

Deborah Ancona, Elisabeth Backman and Kathrine Isaacs emphasizes the need for organizations to operate with greater flexibility, speed, and responsiveness.

However, becoming agile at the level of the entire organization remains difficult. Many leaders acknowledge that their organizations still operate according to models designed for more stable environments.

Several patterns emerge consistently in research:

#### **Pressure for performance and efficiency**

Organizations today operate under intense pressure to deliver short-term results. While this focus on performance is essential, it can also reinforce silo behavior and discourage experimentation. Teams often prioritize immediate delivery over reflection and learning.

#### **Entrenched operating habits**

Most senior leaders have developed their careers in organizations optimized for efficiency and control. These models are effective for managing predictable operations but are less suited to environments that require continuous adaptation.

#### **Lack of practical models for adaptability**

Although concepts such as agility and innovation are widely discussed, many organizations lack concrete frameworks that translate these ideas into operational practices.

For organizations seeking to become more adaptive, the challenge is therefore not simply to introduce new processes or tools. It is to create **organizational mechanisms that connect strategy, execution, and learning in a continuous cycle.**

## **The Learning Serpent Framework**

The Learning Serpent framework proposes that adaptive organizations operate across three interconnected domains. Each domain plays a distinct role, yet their effectiveness depends on how well they are integrated.

The below figure shows an outline of the general idea of the Learning Serpent Framework.

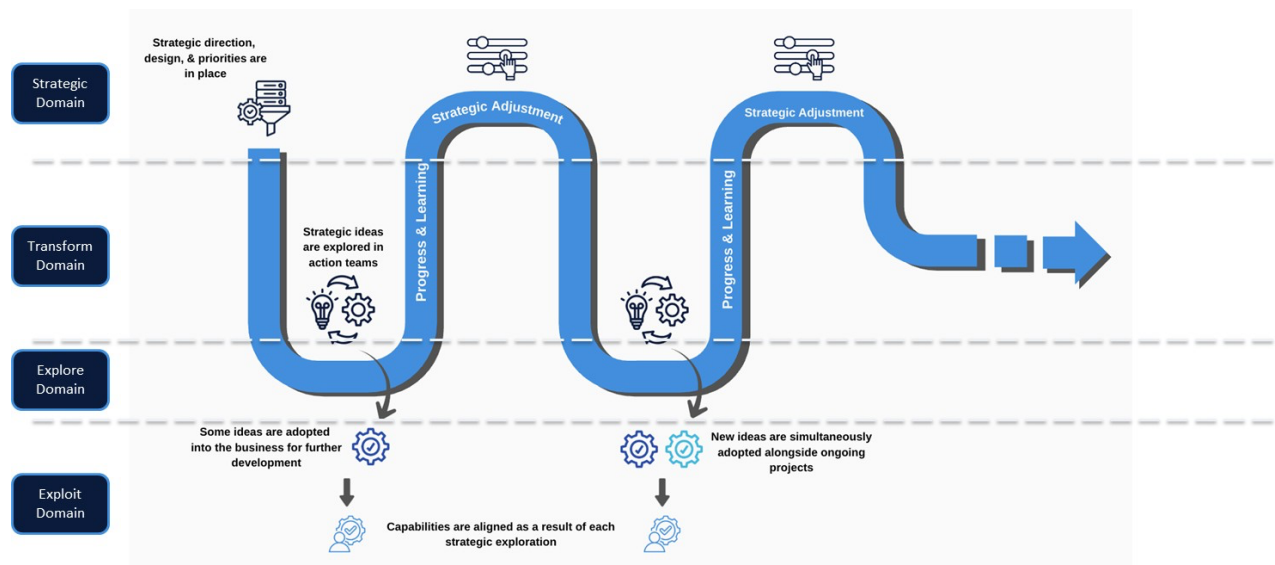


Figure: The Learning Serpent

## The Strategic Domain

The strategic domain defines the organization's **direction, priorities, and system design**. It is where leadership teams articulate the organization's purpose, long-term aspirations, and strategic choices.

In uncertain environments, purpose becomes particularly important. While specific strategies may evolve over time, a clear sense of purpose provides a stable orientation that helps guide decisions across the organization.

Within the strategic domain, leaders typically focus on questions such as:

- What long-term purpose and aspirations guide the organization?
- What strategic priorities should shape near-term action?
- How should the organizational system be designed to support these priorities?

In many organizations, strategy is revisited on an annual basis. However, as external environments become more dynamic, organizations increasingly need to revisit assumptions and priorities more frequently.

Yet strategy alone does not create adaptability. The effectiveness of strategic intent ultimately depends on what happens in the work domain.

## The Work Domain

The work domain is where the organization translates strategic intent into action. It encompasses the activities through which the organization delivers value today while simultaneously building capabilities for the future.

In most organizations, work can be understood as a combination of two complementary modes.

- **Exploitative work** focuses on operating and improving the current business model. It includes activities such as delivering products and services, optimizing operations, and improving efficiency.
- **Explorative work**, by contrast, focuses on developing new capabilities and future opportunities. It includes experimentation, innovation initiatives, pilot projects, and new business development.

In academic language, this need for organizations to simultaneously explore and exploit is often referred to as ambidexterity – using both hands equally well. Both modes are essential. Organizations that focus exclusively on exploitation risk becoming efficient but obsolete. Those that focus only on exploration risk losing operational discipline.

Importantly, both types of work generate valuable insights about what works, what does not, and what may need to change. However, in many organizations these insights remain localized within teams or departments. Without mechanisms for synthesizing learning across the organization, valuable lessons remain fragmented.

This is where the transformation domain becomes critical.

## The Transformation Domain: The Missing Engine of Organizational Learning

In research across organizations and leadership teams, it is consistently observed that the **transformation domain is both the most critical component of an adaptive organization and the one most frequently missing.**

Most organizations are relatively strong in two areas:

- Defining strategic direction
- Executing operational and project work

What is often missing is a **systematic mechanism that aggregates learning from across the organization and translates that learning into organizational adaptation.**

While many teams conduct retrospectives and performance reviews, these insights rarely travel beyond their immediate context. As a result, organizations often struggle to detect patterns that only become visible at the system level.

Examples of such patterns include:

- Recurring barriers to cross-functional collaboration
- Structural misalignments between strategy and incentives

- Emerging opportunities identified in multiple parts of the organization
- Unintended consequences of strategic initiatives

The transformation domain serves as the **organizational learning integrator**. Its role is to synthesize insights from across the system and translate them into recommendations for adjustments in strategy, priorities, or organizational design.

In effect, it enables the organization to move from **executing strategy to continuously improving how strategy is executed**.

## Snapshot: Institutionalizing the Transformation Domain

Short examples from practice help illustrate how organizations create this capability.

### *COMPANY A – The Program Approach*

A unit within a large global company identified that they improve execution speed. They designed a program where several important initiatives ran in parallel in fast cycles – 100 days from start to finish. The company did not stop, however, by following the project. They created a structure for learning between the projects and after 100 days the program management were ready, together with project leaders of each initiative, to share their aggregated learning with the unit management. This company approached the transformation by orchestrating a **program approach** to learning. The program ran once a year during several years and became a natural way to speed up change and execution while simultaneously picking up signals, barriers and enablers from organization.

### *COMPANY B – The Process Approach*

A retail company in Sweden designed a rotating Transformation Council consisting of high-potential leaders from different functions and regions. The council was tasked with synthesizing insights from business units and identifying systemic barriers to strategic progress. Their findings were presented directly to the executive team and frequently informed adjustments to organizational structure and decision processes. Thus, this company designed a new governance process that focused on learning. This could be seen as a **process approach** to securing learning in the transformation domain.

### *COMPANY C – The Intervention-Based Approach*

Company C identified that they need to accelerate their strategy execution and rapidly identify barriers and enablers. The company did not have a systematic process for synthesizing learning and hence had to orchestrate a way for truth to speak to power. They decided to work with the Strategic Fitness Process, an intervention designed by Harvard based Michael Beer and Russ Eisenstat. In this **intervention-based approach**, management probes their strategic intent by appointing a task force that does interviews in the organization and report back what they find out. The whole process takes about six to eight weeks from start to finish and is a rapid way to temporarily create a mechanism in the transformation domain.

### *COMPANY D – The Case-Based Approach*

An executive in a global tech company wanted had noted that two of the many units had done remarkable transformation journeys the last couple of years. Though not done yet, it was argued that this could be a good time to take stock, learn and spread the hard-earned learnings to other units. A scholar practitioner team was called in to use academically sound methods to collect data, write up Cases about the two units and cross analyze what seemed to be working. The identified principles and practices are transferred into workshop material in order for learnings to be spread to the executive team as well as to other units. This **case-based approach** allowed a for a targeted and well grounded transformation domain to occur – zooming in on system learnings from specific units to find principles and ideas that could be transferred throughout the organization.

#### *COMPANY E – The Leadership Development Approach*

Leadership development is part of the agenda for most larger organizations. However, it is often designed and implemented as a separate capability development activity, not explicitly connected to the strategic agenda. Company E decided to do the opposite: To design a leadership development program tailored to be a part of the strategy execution. The themes for the different modules were developed to fit the capability needs of the strategy. Between modules teams were formed to drive initiatives to either further the strategy execution or to explore new opportunities. In addition, every three months, the cohort gathered their system learnings and reported back to the top management team. In this way, the **leadership development approach** connected the strategic, work and transformation domain and actively created a high attention, well informed learning mechanism.

#### *COMPANY F – The DNA Approach*

Company F worked to establish the serpent framework as core of how they operate. In there structure, culture and in vocabulary, they actively work to encourage learning in the transformation domain – both in the overarching strategic journey and in smaller targeted issues. The DNA approach embeds transformation into the operating model itself, ensuring that learning, adaptation, and cross-functional alignment happen continuously rather than through episodic initiatives.

The below table summarizes the different approaches and key elements and mechanisms.

Company	Approach	Core Mechanism	How It Works	Key Benefit
A	Program Approach	Time-bound transformation program (for example 100-day cycles)	Runs multiple initiatives in parallel; structured learning captured during and after cycles; aggregated insights shared with management	Accelerates execution while continuously capturing organizational learning
B	Process Approach	Rotating Transformation Council	High-potential leaders synthesize insights across units; identify systemic barriers; report directly to executives	Embeds learning into governance and decision-making
C	Intervention-Based Approach	Strategic Fitness Process (6–8 weeks)	Task force conducts organization-wide interviews; findings reported back to leadership	Rapid, honest feedback loop (“truth to power”) without permanent structure
D	Case-Based Approach	Internal transformation case studies	Deep-dive analysis of successful units; extract principles; translate into workshops and materials	Scales proven practices across the organization
E	Leadership Development Approach	Strategy-linked leadership program	Leadership modules tied to strategic needs; teams drive initiatives; quarterly learning feedback to executives	Integrates leadership development with strategy execution and learning
F	DNA Approach	Embedded cross-functional learning as a practice	Ongoing practice to seek and gather insights and synthesize into learnings	Makes transformation learning a continuous, institutional capability

Table: Institutionalizing the Transformation Domain — Executive Snapshot

These examples illustrate that the transformation domain does not require a single fixed structure. What matters is the existence of a **dedicated mechanism for synthesizing organizational learning**.

## The Role of the Transformation Team

Regardless of structure, and regardless of approach to creating the learning, organizations seeking to establish a transformation domain often create a cross-functional group responsible for synthesizing insights across the system. These teams typically consist of trusted individuals with strong credibility across the organization. Their role is not to manage projects or implement initiatives, but rather to maintain a **system-level perspective**.

Their responsibilities typically include:

- Gathering insights from across the organization
- Identifying recurring patterns and systemic obstacles
- Synthesizing findings into a small number of strategic insights
- Presenting recommendations to leadership

Importantly, the objective is not to produce extensive reports. The most effective transformation teams focus on identifying a **small number of critical insights**—often two to five—that require attention at the strategic level.

Participation in such teams often becomes a valuable development experience. Members gain exposure to enterprise-level issues and develop the ability to think beyond functional silos. In that way, participating in a transformation team can also be seen as an effective leadership development experience.

## The Learning Agenda

For the transformation domain to function effectively, organizations need a simple and structured **learning agenda** that allows insights to surface from across the organization.

Drawing inspiration from the work of Michael Beer and Russell Eisenstat, organizations can frame learning conversations around a small number of guiding questions:

- How do we perceive the current strategic direction?
- What obstacles are blocking progress?
- What factors are enabling progress?
- What achievements should be recognized?
- What new ideas or opportunities are emerging?

Teams at each level of the organization can then consider:

- What issues can we resolve ourselves?
- What requires collaboration across functions?
- What should be elevated to the next level?

Insights that cannot be resolved locally become input to the transformation domain, where they are synthesized into system-level learning.

## Learning at the Pace of Change

Traditional strategy processes typically operate on annual cycles. While these cycles remain useful for long-term planning, they are often too slow for environments characterized by rapid change.

In our research, organizations experimenting with **quarterly learning cycles** have found that this cadence provides a useful balance. It allows enough time for teams to test ideas and generate insights, while still enabling leadership to adjust direction when necessary.

Within the Learning Serpent framework:

- The **work domain generates experience**
- The **transformation domain synthesizes learning**
- The **strategic domain adjusts direction and system design**

Over time, this cycle creates an organization that is capable not only of executing strategy but of **continuously improving how strategy is defined and implemented.**

## Toward the Adaptive Organization

Becoming an adaptive organization is not primarily a matter of adopting new management tools or innovation programs. It requires the ability to **learn as a system.** The Learning Serpent framework highlights an important insight: while most organizations have structures for strategy and execution, they often lack mechanisms for systematic organizational learning.

By institutionalizing the transformation domain, organizations can create a capability that enables:

- Faster identification of systemic barriers
- Stronger cross-organizational learning
- More responsive strategy adjustments
- Better alignment between strategy and organizational design

Though it is stated in this paper that the transformation domain might be most important to turn the focus on, it should be mentioned that the Learning Serpent as a framework will not work without a committed, open and mature leadership team, with a long term view and a system perspective – and that is ready to challenge themselves, their direction and assumptions on a regular basis.

Again, in a world characterized by uncertainty and rapid change, the organizations that succeed will not necessarily be those with the most detailed strategies, but those that **learn faster and adapt more effectively than their competitors.**

## About This Perspective

This paper builds on research over decades about how to successfully be fit to compete, accentuated by the fast-moving context organizations operate in today. The serpent model in its original design was first developed and published in 2019 and has been updated in several iterations thereafter. It connects closely with research on silent killers (also presented in a IMTP Perspective) and with IM TruePoint Perspective on the 45-degree zone. It is written as an executive perspective in the style of an IM TruePoint white paper: concise, practical, and aimed at helping leadership teams connect strategic ambition with organizational reality

### Prepared by

Johanna Pregmark, Partner in Göteborg

Magnus Finnström, Partner in Stockholm

Morten Lindholst, Partner in Madrid

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## About TruePoint Innovation in Management

In close collaboration, IM TruePoint brings innovative management knowledge and practices to leaders and their teams, so that they can navigate the complexities of today's world and build capabilities to learn and adapt faster than competition. We are convinced that leaders who manage to integrate both economic and social value, what we call Higher Ambition, will prosper in the long run.

Our expertise is to deeply understand the whole system – your purpose, strategy, organization and people. We help unearth the friction points in your system and get people talking about how to solve them so that actual solutions can be implemented. We partner with you as you align your leadership and build capability for continuously adapting and consistently delivering both short-term and long-term performance.

[www.imtruepoint.com](http://www.imtruepoint.com)

[LinkedIn](#)

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