

*Sisters in Crime*  
*A Unique Learning Organization?*

**Preliminary results from a research study**

conducted by

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**Purpose of Study**

This study examines Sisters in Crime as a unique learning organization by:

- a) focusing on women's learning experiences within a unique organization dedicated to promoting women mystery writers
- b) exploring challenges and possibilities for developing learning organizations within "grassroots" organizations such as Sisters in Crime

### **Research Methods**

This study has used a combination of

- a) *content analysis* – reviewing websites, newsletters and publications from Sisters in Crime over a twenty year period
- b) *literature analysis* – of related research on learning organizations and women's learning and educational experiences
- c) *personal interviews* – with a number of members of Sisters in Crime in both Canada and the United States, including writers, booksellers, and readers

### **What is a "learning organization"?**

The term "learning organization" was popularized by Senge (1990) who argues that there are five components or "disciplines" to a learning organization:

- 1) *Personal Mastery*: individual strengths and capacities to be developed
- 2) *Mental Models*: examining informal theories within the organization
- 3) *Shared Vision*: joint sense of purpose and collective goals
- 4) *Team Learning*: different strengths of members to support growth
- 5) *Systems Thinking*: exploring underlying systems rather than just local issues

### **Findings**

- Emphasis on equity issues around gender discrimination
- Use of humour, "action research", and volunteer labour to achieve results
- Non-hierarchical structure with members from diverse groups
- Does not promote competition
- Has maintained its focus on women but has always allowed men to join
- Has grown tremendously in size, and now has multiple chapters

## Challenges and Possibilities of SinC as a Learning Organization

- “Personal mastery” – educational supports to foster individual learning developed by SinC include publications like *Shameless Promotions for Brazen Hussies*. Recently, specialized conferences on forensics and screen writing have been offered. There is some debate over who qualifies for “writer” status. While recognizing non-traditionally published authors might be excellent writers, SinC uses the Author’s Coalition criteria (around traditional parameters for publishing) to determine participation in some events. It was suggested that SinC members might benefit from education around financial implications of different publishing options to make informed decisions.
- “Shared vision” – some SinC members considered themselves to be feminist, while others would not self-identify as such. However, the organization has retained its original and shared focus on supporting women mystery writers and addressing discrimination, and most members still felt there was need for this. As the organization has grown in size there seems to be some differentiation in focus between different chapters. Some chapters attend more to readers, others emphasize established writers, while others provide more support to aspiring writers. Differing opinions exist on some issues ie. paying fees to “National” when joining a chapter, and whether Canadian members should be eligible for the Author’s Coalition revenues received by SinC to publicize authors.
- “Mental models” – there is an array of “informal theories” on the purpose of SinC and gendered nature of the mystery field. Some members believe women writers often get treated less seriously because their work is generally less violent and more character driven. There is speculation that while women authors are getting published more than in the past, they may not be receiving as much support regarding advances or publicity as male authors (as is seen in the decline of the “midlist” and popularity of “3 paperback” deals). Some members think the primary focus of the organization should be on obtaining publicity for established writers, while others believe that being loyal readers and promoting the enjoyment of mystery writing by women authors was the best support they could offer.
- “Team learning” – widespread recognition that individuals can bring different to strengths to the organization over the years. Strong commitment to volunteerism within the organization and very collaborative approaches towards leadership. Extremely positive comments by most members about the opportunity to work with other very talented women.
- “Systems thinking” – was evident in most members in the thoughtful gender analysis of mysteries and broader issues of morality. Writers and

booksellers, more than readers, were able to offer different assessments of the impact of new technologies such as POD (Print on Demand), and in discussion around how to best address sometimes contentious discussion around different publishing options. Many were also able to offer insights into the way the global marketplace has shaped the competitive nature of publishing industry and discussed the impact of this, particularly on women mystery writers and on independent bookstores.

## **Implications and Questions Leading from Research**

- Grassroots organizations may face challenges in maintaining cohesion as they grow in size, particularly when spread over wide geographic areas. Would SinC be a good example around how adaptations can be made to address some of these concerns effectively? For example, they are working for consistency around web presence of different chapters.
- Rapid advances in technology present both opportunities (ie. restricted on-line data base access instead of paper copies of membership), but also poses challenges (ie. how to address equitably the issue of “writer” status with the range of opportunities for people to self-publish on-line or through “vanity” presses now that POD is so accessible). How is technology shaping the traditional structures, membership, and functions of grassroots organizations?
- Globalization is shaping all aspects of the paid economy, including the publishing industry – influence of neoliberalism is seen in emphasis on individualism, flexibility, and competition – can collaborative organizations such as SinC counter some of these tendencies?
- Gender continues to be a concern, both at a financial level, with regards to who gets paid better for their work, and at a status level, with regards to whose work gets recognition – interesting that SinC has still been able to retain its focus on women and combating discrimination – perhaps because it is a grassroots organization not dependent upon government funding? Could it be that despite having many members who are feminist, this is not an explicit organizational mandate and men are allowed to join? How do organizations successfully maintain a focus on gender discrimination in a decidedly “post-feminist” political environment?

## **Feedback Loop**

I appreciate the time you have taken to read about the preliminary results of my research and look forward to receiving your feedback to help with the development of my final analysis. I am interested in finding out more about your

assessment of my study thus far, and if you have suggestions and/or alternative perspectives you would like to offer.