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# Learning for Change:

## Principles and practices of learning organisations

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# Contents

# Introduction

Member organisations have a strong commitment to expressing solidarity through international development.

During more recent years, the churches have received extensive government support for their development aid work. Since 1980, SMC has had a framework agreement with Sida (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency). The task as co-ordinating agency for this agreement entails assessment of the organisations and their capacity for development work, assessment and decisions concerning individual projects as well as evaluation and follow-up of completed projects.

SMC has taken a pioneering approach among its members and other NGOs in Sweden in promoting the concept of organisation development (OD). As a result of its interest in this field, SMC has sponsored a number of workshops for its members which have included sessions on organisational learning. These workshops were the subject of a study: *Strengthening Organisations North and South* (Goold and Britton, 2000).

Internally, SMC has examined its own approach to organisational learning through two workshops held in 2000 and 2001 and facilitated by the author of this book.

This book was commissioned by SMC as a way of further developing an understanding of organisational learning in church-related organisations involved in international development. It builds on an earlier paper written by the author, Bruce Britton, in 1998 (Britton, 1998) and includes examples of how practice and thinking in the field of organisational learning have evolved since then.

By publishing this document, The Swedish Mission Council wants to encourage its member organisations and their partners to continue to build a practice that is truly developmental.

Sundbyberg October 2002
General Secretary
Göran Sturve

# Learning in Development Organisations

The enormous resources invested in development work generate an imperative for learning. Yet, major studies commissioned by donors concerning the effectiveness of humanitarian relief have called into question the ability of agencies to learn from their experience and avoid repetition of disastrous interventions such as in Rwanda and the Balkans[1]. With donors increasingly question the value added by Northern Civil Society Organisations in the aid chain, the stakes for demonstrating the use of learning to improve organisational performance have never been higher. However, it also seems that over the past few years development organisations have taken serious notice to this 'wake up call' from donors.

> "In the aid business, doing good isn't enough. Setting an example isn't good enough in itself either, if the example doesn't translate into more widespread improvements. If aid agencies feel their operational work is good and offers lessons worth emulating, they must ensure that others learn from and build on those lessons… All agencies, then, must be learning organisations – not just organisations that learn well, but agencies that successfully disseminate those lessons and promote uptake of good practice."
> (Thin, 1997)

An indicator of the increasing recognition of the importance of learning in development has been the World Bank's reinvention of itself since 1996 as a "knowledge bank" for development. Although this is partly a re-branding exercise, the World Bank has made a considerable investment in both people and technology to build on its credentials as a focal source of data and analysis on development issues. This has led the World Bank to develop two high-profile initiatives: the **Global Development Network** and the **Development Gateway.** Whilst the motives behind these initiatives are, quite understandably, the subject of considerable debate[2], the fact that the World Bank has placed such emphasis on knowledge as well as money as assets for development has been very influential in the thinking of other development agencies, including Civil Society Organisations.

1 Minear, 1998
2 Wilks, 2001 and King and McGrath, 2000

Before embarking on an examination of the nature of learning organisations we need to have a basic understanding of what we mean by learning and particularly what learning means in the context of organisations.

## What is learning?

Despite its apparent simplicity there is a remarkable range of contrasting views about what learning is. Most of the debate is of mainly academic interest but for practical purposes a useful distinction can be made between 'learning that' and 'learning how'. **Learning that** involves acquiring information. Here, learning is seen as a **product**: learning has taken place when information is acquired, whether the information is used or not. **Learning how** involves developing an ability to do something. Here, learning is seen as a *process* leading to an outcome: learning only takes place when the ability is used in practice. Within the **process** approach, judgements about whether an individual has learned are based on whether there are observable improvements in the individual's performance.

"In Chinese, the word "learning" is represented by two characters. The first character means to study and is composed of two parts: a symbol that means to accumulate knowledge, above a symbol for a child in a doorway. The second character means to practice constantly, and it shows a bird developing the ability to leave the nest. The upper part represents flying; the lower symbol, youth."
Senge et al (1994)

The **process** approach to learning is the one that has found the greatest resonance in development work because both are based on the idea of **change**. According to the process approach, assessments about whether a development organisation is learning must be based on whether there are observable improvements in its own development practice or its ability to influence others.

Before moving on to examine the learning organisation concept in more detail, it will be useful to pause and consider the ideas of individual and collective learning.

## Individual learning

Contrary to what we may be told in our earlier years, learning is not about 'knowing the answers'. It is not just about studying and achieving qualifications. Learning is not measured by examinations (which test only our understanding of theories) but is tested by judging its usefulness through experience.

Individual learning is about personal growth and development; it is about increasing our self-confidence and ability to solve problems; it is about increasing our effectiveness, improving our performance and making the most of our experience.

In 1984 David Kolb developed a four stage model of how individuals learn from experience which involves doing, reflecting, connecting and testing in a continuous cycle (see Figure 1). In this model, learning starts by taking action, then reflecting on the outcomes of the action, making connections with what we already know and understand and then testing those connections and new ideas through further action. The **doing** and **reflecting** stages of the cycle belong more to the concrete real world whereas **connecting** and **testing** are more abstract. The **doing** and **testing** stages are more action-oriented whereas the **reflecting** and **connecting** stages are more reflective in nature.

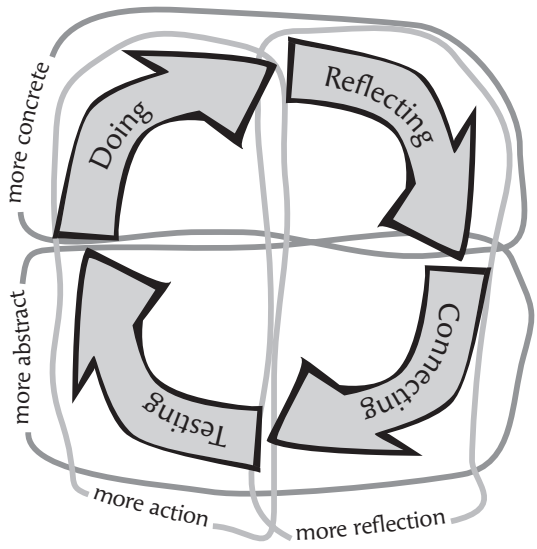



Figure 1: Kolb's Learning Cycle [3]

The learning cycle model underpins the concept of individual 'learning styles': the idea that each person has preferences for one or more stages in the learning cycle. For example, when asked to take on a new area of work, some people will read as much theory as possible in order to make connections with what they already know (Theorists), whereas others will "jump in at the

3 For a comprehensive review of articles on experiential learning see Tim Pickles (1996)

deep end" and try things out in practice first (Activists). By being aware of their preferences, individuals can choose to strengthen their ability to use all stages in the learning cycle in order to make themselves better 'all round' learners. A useful questionnaire exercise for identifying individual learning styles is available[4]. It can be used to introduce the learning cycle and help individuals develop practical strategies for understanding and strengthening their learning skills.

Individual learning is the starting point of the learning organisation. Learning organisations need individuals who are skilled, enthusiastic learners; who are curious and unwilling to simply accept things as they are; who are willing to take risks and challenge assumptions and who are driven by the desire for doing things better.

## Collective learning

It is an obvious but important point that organisations cannot, themselves, learn; it is the individuals within them who learn. However, there is more to a learning organisation than simply a collection of individuals who are learning. Learning must be happening on two levels: the individual level and the collective level. Collective learning in an organisation is what we call organisational learning. Indeed, organisational learning can be defined as 'the changing of organisational behaviour which occurs through a **collective** learning process'.

So "without individual learning there can be no question of organisational learning. On the other hand, an organisation has not automatically learned when individuals within it have learned something. Individual learning is a **necessary** but not a **sufficient** condition for organisational learning"[5].

The practical implications of this understanding of organisational learning are important but require a brief examination of three important concepts: information, knowledge and wisdom (see Box 1).

Learning can be understood as the process that transforms information into knowledge and then into wisdom. Information only has **value** when it is converted into knowledge. Knowledge becomes **useful** when it is combined with experience to create wisdom which can be used to

4 Honey and Mumford (1986)
5 Swieringa and Wierdsma (1992, p 33)

guide action. However, even wisdom has limitations if it is locked in the minds of individuals and not shared with others.

Wisdom which is personal and available only to the individual and not shared is what Ikujiro Nonaka[6] calls **tacit** wisdom. Tacit wisdom is highly personal and may be difficult to communicate to others. Making personal wisdom available to others is the central activity of the learning organisation. This process is called **articulation** and it is the basis of organisational learning.

A learning organisation, therefore, supports its members to translate information into knowledge and wisdom and then converts the **tacit** wisdom of its individual members into **explicit** wisdom which can be accessed and used by others both within and outside the organisation. The process of articulation involves helping people express what may initially appear to be inexpressible – their subjective insights, intuitions and understanding developed through experience. Individuals may need considerable support and encouragement to make their wisdom available to others. Organisational learning, therefore, requires what Donald Schon[7] has called ***reflective practitioners*** working in a supportive learning environment (a learning culture).

**Box 1: Information, Knowledge and Wisdom**

**Information**

This is the simple fragmented raw material of facts, opinions and ideas of which knowledge is made.

**Knowledge**

Systematically organised information which, by the processes of analysis, comparison, testing and generalising can be used to answer complex questions.

**Wisdom**

The combination of the facts and insights of knowledge with practical experience in a way that can usefully guide action.

Reflective practitioners are individuals who are skilled in the process of reflecting on their practice **whilst they are acting**, and doing so in a way that enables them to do their jobs more thoughtfully and effectively. Learning organisations need reflective practitioners who are able and willing to continuously challenge their own assumptions and the assumptions of their colleagues in a constructive way which generates new insights and leads on to the development of explicit wisdom.

6 Nonaka (1991)
7 Schon (1987)

# What is a Learning Organisation?

The term 'learning organisation' first emerged in the late 1980s. Despite its origins in corporate sector management thinking, it is an idea that immediately had a resonance in the world of international development.

"Whilst there are still relatively few NGOs which would call themselves 'learning organisations', examples of good practice in NGOs are not hard to find. Indeed, as NGOs become more aware of the concept and its application, we are likely to see more NGOs consciously adopting the underpinning ideas of the learning organisation in their approaches to work."

When I wrote this in 1998 I underestimated the enthusiasm with which not only NGOs but many other Civil Society Organisations involved in development work would embrace the concept of the learning organisation. Nowadays almost every type of organisation has taken on not only the underpinning ideas but also the terminology of the learning organisation. For example, churches and their development organisations are increasingly recognizing the importance of learning to enable them to adapt and change and have the capacity to rapidly acquire and use new knowledge when faced with emerging challenges. In short, as one church has declared:

"To accomplish our mission we must learn. Both as individuals and as Church organisations, we must learn to be more effective each day than the day before. The significance of our vision and values needs to be heard and felt by church members. A complete understanding of facts, trends and skills – a mission transformed by what God has taught us through His grace – is the end result of being a learning organisation."[8]

8 Source: Valenzuela, Denise (April 1999) Helping the church become a learning organisation, Visitor magazine, Columbia Union Conference of the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

## Definitions

The search for a single all-encompassing definition of the learning organisation whilst attractive is frustrating and, in the end, may even be misguided. It can be argued that the most useful definition of the learning organisation is the one that each organisation develops for itself. However, it would be profoundly ironic if we did not examine and reflect on the fruits of the experience of others in our search for an understanding of what it means to be a learning organisation.

One of the earliest definitions is that of **Peter Senge** who, in his ground-breaking book 'The Fifth Discipline' describes learning organisations as *"organisations 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".*[9]

**Mike Pedler**[10] emphasises the importance of learning for change in his definition of the learning organisation as *"an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself".*

**David Garvin**'s definition of the *'learning organisation'* as an organisation which is *"skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights"*[11] emphasises the importance of internal processes.

**Aiken and Britton**[12], writing specifically about NGOs see the learning organisation as *"An organisation which actively incorporates the experience and knowledge of its members and partners through the development of practices, policies, procedures and systems in ways which continuously improve its ability to set and achieve goals, satisfy stakeholders, develop its practice, value and develop its people and achieve its mission with its constituency".*

Finally, **James Taylor** from the South African Community Development Resource Association, CDRA, defines the learning organisation as *"The organisation which builds and improves its own practice consciously and continually devising and developing the means to draw learning from its own (and others') experience".*[13]

9 Senge (1990)
10 Pedler et al (1991)
11 Garvin, 1993
12 Aiken and Britton (1997)
13 Taylor (2002)

Each definition has something valuable to contribute to our understanding but clearly there is no single all-embracing definition of precisely what is meant by the learning organisation. So, how should we better understand the concept of the learning organisation?

## Characteristics of a Learning Organisation

A more practical way to understand the learning organisation is to consider what its key characteristics might be – in other words, what is it that makes learning organisations different?

One way of summarising the learning organisation is to say that it:

- Recognises the need for change
- Provides continuous learning opportunities to its members
- Explicitly uses learning to reach its goals
- Links individual performance with organisational performance
- Encourages inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people to share openly and take risks
- Embraces creative tension as a source of energy and renewal
- Is continuously aware of and interacts with its environment.

An important feature of learning organisations is that they are organised so that learning happens at five levels[14]:

- individual learning
- team or work group learning (sharing lessons between individuals working together in permanent work groups or temporary teams)
- cross functional learning (sharing lessons between departments or sections eg between fundraising and operational staff)
- operational organisational learning (focusing on improving practice, increasing effectiveness and efficiency)
- strategic organisational learning (learning to deal with significant changes in the environment which affect the overall strategy of the organisation)

In practice, there will be and should be considerable overlap between these levels.

14 Pearn, et al (1995)

## A Learning Approach to Development

The idea that development is itself a learning process was originated by David Korten and Rudi Klauss as long ago as 1984. In their influential book *People Centered Development* they maintained that learning is a necessary and integral part of any development organisation's approach to sustainable development. Indeed, they went as far as to propose a 'learning approach to development' comprising three phases:

- **Learning to be effective** The organisation must first learn about the most effective ways of working in order to achieve its goals with the communities in which it works. This involves setting up projects as 'learning laboratories' in which staff of the development agency work with members of the community to develop an understanding of their needs and devise an appropriate programme of assistance. Experimentation, risk-taking, creativity and an ability to build on experience are crucial at this stage. Some tolerance about the inefficient use of resources and the making of 'mistakes' is also required.
- **Learning to be efficient** The organisation must then learn to use its resources efficiently so that it can achieve its goals at an acceptable cost. Ideally this will require the organisation to reduce its costs to the point where local communities can sustain the benefits of the work indefinitely.
- **Learning to expand** Finally, organisations must learn to expand or 'scale up' their work so that the maximum number of people can benefit from the programmes which have been piloted. This involves generalising from particular experiences in order to apply successful approaches to development in new settings offering different challenges.

Each of these phases emphasises learning as an integral component of the development process. Increasingly, development organisations are addressing the three areas of learning at the same time rather than in sequence.

# Understanding the Learning Organisation:

# The Eight Function Model

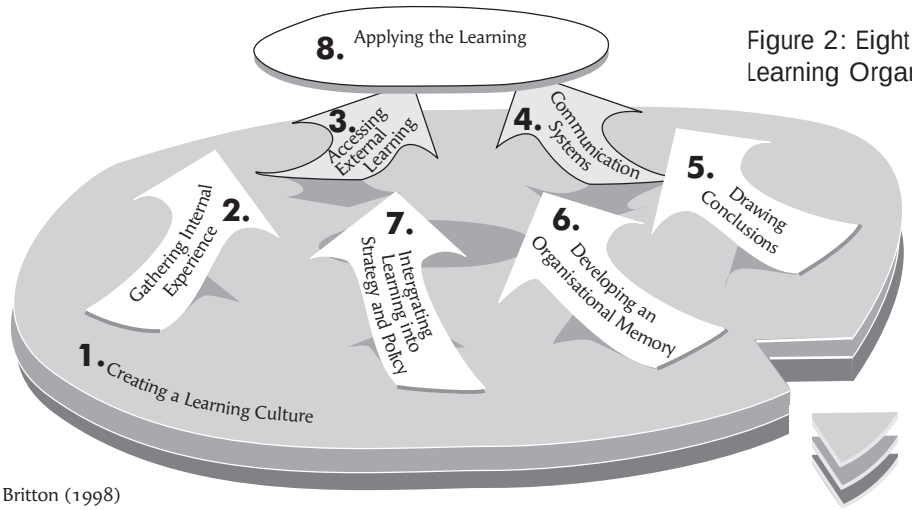
Earlier, we examined definitions of the learning organisation and noted that some emphasise the importance of internal processes that enable collective learning. In this section we will explore this further by posing the question: 'What does an organisation need to do in order to learn?'

The Eight Function Model[15] for organisational learning attempts to answer this question by identifying the eight key functions that any organisation must master in order to learn effectively. These are:

1. Creating a Learning Culture
2. Gathering Internal Experience
3. Accessing External Learning
4. Communication Systems
5. Mechanisms for Drawing Conclusions
6. Developing an Organisational Memory
7. Integrating Learning into Strategy and Policy
8. Applying the Learning

The eight key functions are summarised in Figure 2 and are examined in turn.

15 Britton (1998)




Source: Britton (1998)

Figure 2: Eight Key Functions of a Learning Organisation

## Creating (and Sustaining) a Learning Culture (1)

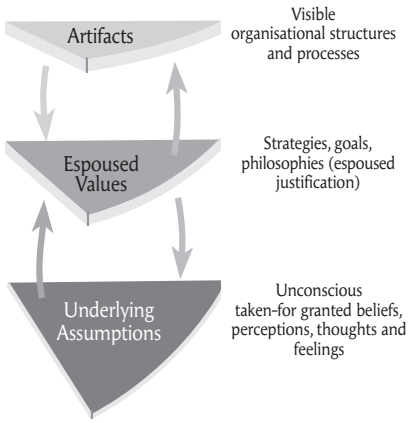
If organisational learning is to be a collective, organisation-wide activity it must become part of the organisation's culture. Organisation culture means the shared assumptions that an organisation's members learn and pass on to new members.

Edgar Schein proposes a three-level model for understanding organisational culture (see Figure 3).

The most obvious level of organisational culture are its **artifacts** – the observable structures, systems, processes and documentation of the organisation and the behaviour of its members.

Underpinning the artifacts are the **espoused values** – the strategies and goals of the organisation and what its members say to explain how the organisation works and their own behaviour within it.

Figure 3: The Three Levels of Organisational Culture



At the most fundamental layer of organisational culture are the **underlying assumptions,** often unconscious, that shape the organisation's beliefs.

A **learning culture** is an organisational environment which enables, encourages, values, rewards and uses the learning of its members both individually and collectively. It is a culture which has integrated a learning approach to its work at all of the three levels of culture described above.

Organisations with a learning culture demonstrate that...

- learning is a **legitimate activity.** In other words, learning is seen as an integral part of each individual's work responsibilities, not something to be done in the individual's own time;
- learning is **encouraged and supported.** Managers make it part of their responsibility to ensure that their colleagues are given personal encouragement to contribute to the development of the organisation's practice and policy;
- learning is given **adequate resources.** There is a recognition that learning takes time and it may also require other resources, including funding;
- learning is **rewarded.** Individuals who contribute to the organisation's evolution are given recognition for their efforts and are provided with opportunities to represent the organisation's thinking to others;
- the organisation aims to **overcome its internal barriers** to learning. Strategies for addressing internal barriers to learning, based on a systematic analysis, are devised and made clear to all members of the organisation.

Indicators of a learning culture can be seen when colleagues ask questions of one another; when colleagues constructively challenge each other's assumptions; when colleagues openly discuss problems and mistakes and convert these into learning; when mistakes are rarely repeated more than once; and when problems are exposed and dealt with without blame.

Indicators of an organisational culture that is *not* supportive of learning would include: colleagues giving way to the views of others simply because of their status; colleagues being over-cautious about trying out new ideas; when the organisation is continually repeating the same mistakes; blaming others is common-place; and individuals 'burying' problems so that they do not come to the attention of others.

## **Tools** and strategies for Creating and Sustaining a Learning Culture

What practical lessons can we learn from the experience of other organisations about how organisations can develop a learning culture? Some ideas that have worked well are:

- Ensure that there is top level management support for organisational learning
- Help individuals to learn how to learn
- Recognise that all organisations learn but not all organisations learn consciously and effectively – this is the key to organisational learning
- Demonstrate positive learning behaviours through example
- Devise an organisational policy on learning
- Encourage thinking 'outside the box' leading to **double-loop learning**
- Reward individuals for the contribution they make to the organisation's learning and performance improvements (often, simple recognition is enough)
- Make available resources and infrastructure for individual and collective learning
- Build learning reviews into existing organisational procedures such as individual supervision and appraisal sessions and team meetings.

## Gathering Internal Experience (2)

Organisations have two major sources of knowledge: the organisation's own internal experience and the lessons learned from other organisations, including community based organisations, multi-lateral agencies, academic and research institutions and other Civil Society Organisations.

The process of gathering internal experience and changing it into practical and accessible lessons learned is at the centre of the learning organisation. An understanding of implicit and tacit knowledge and how the two inter-relate is essential to carrying out this function.

The British NGO Tearfund has introduced a system of Learning Reviews to identify lessons learned after pieces of work have ended.

Action Aid uses two systems to capture learning within their organisation. An Annual Review Reflection Process (ARRP) is used at field, country, regional and international levels to identify lessons learned. The development of case study material is a key ingredient.

Many organisations are taking advantage of the power of information and communications technology (ICT) to enable a more effective sharing of learning between their members. For example, organisational intranets are now commonplace. However, intranets are only a tool and must be designed so that they are accessible, navigable and have genuinely useful content.

Documents are a more common source of information. Indeed many organisations are awash with reports, memos, minutes, project materials and other notes to the extent that staff don't have time to read them all let alone identify what is useful from what isn't. As a result, a great number of valuable lessons are undoubtedly lost. The value of these internal, unpublished documents (sometimes called 'grey literature') can be greatly enhanced if it is made clear on each: its purpose and content (key words can help subsequent document retrieval), who should read it, who wrote it, what are the actionable recommendations, who has responsibility for implementation and how and when progress will be measured.

## **Tools** and strategies for Gathering Internal Experience

Organisations have found the following practical ideas useful for gathering their internal experience:

- Ensure that all monitoring, reviews and evaluations have an explicit learning function (as well as an accountability function)
- Regularly review the wider use made of monitoring, review and evaluation data
- Build systems for making explicit the tacit knowledge of individuals
- Build in enough spare capacity to allow time for individual and collective reflection
- Use the **Learning Before, During and After Model**

- Ensure that documents include specific actionable recommendations
- Use ICT to enable greater accessibility of 'grey literature'
- Develop an internal database of staff/partner expertise. Use **Advice Network Mapping** to identify informal sources of expertise valued by staff
- Ensure that work proposals include a section on who and what have been consulted during their preparation
- Establish internal **Action Learning Sets.**

## Accessing External Learning (3)

Learning in development organisations has two major sources: the organisation itself and lessons learned by others. It is not enough to be clear about what the organisation itself has learned from its own experience, it must actively seek out learning from elsewhere. This requires a genuine open-ness and willingness to enter into dialogue with a wide range of organisations in the corporate and public sectors as well as Civil Society (which, in turn, means being willing to share the learning from failure as well as success).

Partnership work with other organisations is becoming more

**Box 2: WWF Exchange Programme**

The WWF Exchange Programme is a vehicle for sharing technical and managerial expertise between environmental and conservation organisations. It forms part of the 'Across the Waters' capacity-building initiative coordinated by Marc Sanjuan of the WWF Mediterranean Programme Office.

By developing agreed learning objectives and a programme of focused activities, individuals from different organisations are linked together for short-term visits of 5-14 days or longer term 'stages' which may last from three weeks to three months. Exchanges are rigorously debriefed and evaluated by the 'guest' and the 'host'. Learning gained from the Exchange programme is made available through the 'Information Hub' element of the Across the Waters capacity-building programme.

Further details of the programme can be found at www.atw-wwf.org

common and this approach opens up the boundaries of organisations to learn from one another. Common ways of accessing learning from other organisations are: attending (or organising) training courses, attending (or organising) workshops and conferences; organising secondments or exchanges; developing and joining networks (virtual or tangible); and developing or joining **communities of practice** (either tangible or on-line)

## Tools and strategies for Accessing External Learning

In order to enable learning from outside the organisation, the following ideas may be useful:

- Value the learning potential of all contacts with the 'outside world'
- Ensure that mutual learning with 'partners' is built into partnership agreements
- Develop organisational Yellow Pages – an accessible organisational database of individual and organisational contacts
- Link in to a range of networks, and **communities of practice** (real-world and virtual)
- Seek out opportunities for joint working with organisations that have specific areas of expertise, including academic institutions
- Organise regular staff visits, exchanges and secondments. Ensure that these are well-planned, focused, recorded and debriefed.

## Communication Systems (4)

If knowledge is the lifeblood of the organisation then it requires a circulatory system to enable it to constantly reach and stimulate its component parts. Communication systems – both formal and informal are the circulatory system for knowledge and provide life-support for learning.

With today's availability of information and communication technology, there is an increasing assumption that organisational learning simply requires the communication of information. The danger is that the illusion of 'more is better' encourages greater and greater emphasis on moving information and less on identifying and exchanging knowledge. Internal email networks that encourage the thoughtless sharing of information are more likely to add to the organisation's problems by overloading recipients than helping those individuals to find solutions.

What is needed is a focus on quality and relevance of what is communicated rather than simply increasing its quantity and availability.

## **Tools** and strategies for Communication

In these days of Information and Communication Technology, it has never been easier to share information, but we should not fool ourselves into thinking that this is the same as sharing knowledge. The following ideas recognise the importance of 'people-based' as well as 'technology-based' tools and strategies.

- Review and develop the learning potential offered by existing communication systems.
- Encourage and support the development of channels for South-North, South-South as well as North-South and North-North communication
- Develop 'listening' as well as 'telling' communication skills
- Use **Learning Maps** to illustrate the flow of information and knowledge and to identify bottle-necks and potential areas for strengthening communications
- Develop a knowledge management strategy[16] and recognise the difference between knowledge and information
- Encourage a discriminating approach to the use of email. For example, request all email authors to clearly state what is required of each message recipient.

16 For help on this see Powell (1999)

## Mechanisms for Drawing Conclusions (5)

The process of drawing conclusions and identifying lessons learned is the main characteristic which differentiates organisational *learning* from simple information exchange. Drawing conclusions converts information to knowledge, through a process of **knowledge creation.**

Identifying lessons learned requires clarity about their nature and scope. For example, are the lessons learned location/culture-specific; are they sector-specific; do they relate to 'our' organisation only or do they have wider application?

Drawing conclusions is a process which needs to be seen as the responsibility of the whole organisation and should, ideally, happen as near to the source of the experience as possible. However, individuals may need support in the process of reflecting on and drawing conclusions from their experience. Access to organisational learning specialists can greatly enhance the value added through organisational learning and may help to explain why, particularly in large organisations, specialist posts and teams are increasingly common. One such example is Christian Aid's CLEAR Team (see Box 3).

**Box 3: Christian Aid's CLEAR Team**

Christian Aid is a large UK-based development NGO. In 2000 it established its CLEAR Team. CLEAR stands for **C**oordinated **LE**arning **A**nd **R**eview. The team promotes and facilitates improved learning; develops a commitment to and understanding of partnership approaches to work; facilitates ownership of capacity building across the organisation's international work and enables others to identify and embrace good practice in all their work.

The CLEAR team comprises eleven members, organized in three main Units: the Capacity Building (CB) Unit, the Communications Management (CM) Unit and the Planning Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) Unit. The PME and CB Units hold a wide range of resources for internal use by Christian Aid staff.

The CLEAR Team also administers a Learning Initiatives Fund (LIF) which is used to facilitate and promote exchange and reflective practice across Christian Aid's International Department. To date it has been used to facilitate South-South exchanges, collective learning events, documentation and sharing of case studies, exploratory research and training events.

Source: Aidan Timlin, personal communication

## Tools and strategies for Drawing Conclusions

- Build intended learning into project/programme plans. Use an action-learning approach to projects/programmes to generate and test hypotheses
- Build 'lessons learned' as a heading into all monitoring systems, reviews and evaluations[17]
- Strengthen links between existing processes of monitoring, review and evaluation and organisational lesson learning[18]
- Prioritise particular areas of activity for more in-depth lesson-learning using thematic reviews and research studies (field or desk)
- Use **Learning Reviews t**o identify lessons learned
- Introduce action learning approaches which encourage action learning set members to work towards practical solutions to identified problems
- Ensure that staff supervision systems include a requirement to identify learning contributions and learning needs.

## Developing an Organisational Memory (6)

Remembering is a crucial element of organisational learning. Although some would say that organisations, as such, cannot learn, no-one would deny that organisations can forget. If learning is locked inside the heads of individuals, the organisation becomes very vulnerable if those individuals leave the organisation. The old African proverb that "when an old person dies, a library is lost" should no longer apply within organisations in these days of information & communication technology. A learning organisation needs mechanisms which enable an individual's memory to be 'down-loaded' into a knowledge management system so that everyone can continue to access that person's knowledge long after the individual may have moved on from the organisation.

17 For a particularly useful exploration of lesson-learning see Thin (1997)

18 Save the Children Norway has developed a useful questionnaire tool to examine their use and utilisation of evaluations (Jon Kristian, Save the Children Norway, personal communication, 2002)

Many organisations have recognised the importance of unlocking each individual's memory but few have, as yet, developed systematic ways of ensuring that this knowledge and understanding are made widely accessible to colleagues both in their own organisation and beyond. Some organisations now require all departing staff to go through an **exit interview** which parallels the induction required at the beginning of an employment contract. A few organisations link departing staff with trainers to develop training materials based on their experience (sometimes using **case studies**) which can be used either in-house or with other organisa-

**Box 4: The Worldwide Fund for Nature K-Zone**

The WWF K-Zone is an interactive knowledge zone which was established by the organisation's 'Capacity Building Unit' (now called the Organisation Development Unit). Set up as an intranet, the K-Zone is accessible to members of the WWF network and their partner organisations worldwide. The K-Zone acts as a customized store of information, know-how and experience on diverse issues ranging from organisational development and communication to detailed practice issues. The K-Zone is based on three principles:

**new data** – it hosts the most up-to-date information fresh from the fields of operation

**relevance** – the information comes direct from those living and working in the field and so offers tried and tested solutions to practical, cultural and real problems.

**interactivity / collaboration** – to ensure it is a valuable, vibrant and versatile practical resource.

The site includes reports, tools, case-studies, specially commissioned theme papers and research studies. Currently in a three-year pilot, the K-Zone is already proving its worth. As Debbie Heaney, the Knowledge Management Programme Officer of the K-Zone says:

"Harnessing ICT enables information to be posted onto the K-Zone from anywhere in the world. The K-Zone encourages staff to take a pro-active approach by sharing their experiences and lessons learned with their colleagues - wherever those colleagues are in the world. By learning from each other's experiences can help reduce the risk of re-inventing the wheel and repeating mistakes. One of the K-Zone's greatest strengths lies in it's partnership approach to information sharing to support WWF offices in their ability to deliver environmental solutions and bring about social change. The technology enables staff to post up and manage the information that they have identified to share themselves, and, or course, it can be easily kept up to date."

tions. At the very least, departing staff should be encouraged to 'tell their story'[19] of their time in the organisation in whatever way feels comfortable to them. This story can then be screened for specific lessons that may be of more general interest.

The development of information communication technology has rapidly expanded the possibilities for gathering, analysing, storing and sharing information. The use of email, on-line discussion groups, databases, web-sites, downloadable documents, organisational intra-nets and the creation of virtual learning communities and on-line learning provide an exciting, if sometimes bewildering, range of opportunities for organisational and individual learning. It has also spawned the field of **Knowledge Management**_which is particularly relevant to establishing and maintaining organisational memory.

An excellent example of how ICT has been used in a deliberate and well-planned way to improve organisational learning is the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) 'K-Zone' (see Box 4)

19 The benefits of using narrative (story-telling) as a tool for knowledge management are becoming more widely recognised. Further information on the use of narrative can be found at www.creatingthe21stcentury.org

## Tools and strategies for Developing an Organisational Memory

- Ensure that developing and maintaining organisational memory is a key element of a knowledge management strategy
- Ensure that the organisation minimises its vulnerability to the loss of knowledge through the loss of individuals (using mechanisms such as **exit interviews**)
- Using ICT, develop a system for storing and accessing grey literature that may otherwise be lost to the organisation
- Develop a systematic and accessible database of the organisation's staff expertise, projects, programmes and partners to encourage 'know-whom' as well as 'know-how'
- Make the organisation's memory more widely available to others through the use of downloadable documents, content-based web-sites and the publication of resource materials

- Develop 'thematic groups' that **collectively** act as a source of organisational learning on key areas of organisational activity
- Don't rely **only** on a 'database' approach to organisational memory. Build networks to facilitate formal and informal connections between those possessing knowledge and those seeking it
- The most recent research on 'emergence theory' suggests that much of the most creative thinking occurs as a result of chance encounters with others. Organisations can benefit in powerful but unpredictable ways from the creation of opportunities for the development of rich networks of informal contact.

## Integrating Learning into Strategy and Policy (7)

One way of building lessons learned into the fabric of an organisation is to develop strategies and policies which embody the lessons it has learned. This provides the organisation with a framework for decision-making and resource allocation which is grounded in the organisation's own experience and what it has learned from other agencies. If policy-development is seen as a participatory learning process in itself, this strengthens the process of integration and build commitment for implementation.

The development by The Commonwealth Foundation[20] of their resource pack 'Non-Government Organisations: Guidelines for Good Policy and Practice' is an example of an organisation (in this case inter-governmental) which has drawn together its experience of supporting NGOs into good practice guidelines which can be used by NGOs to benchmark their own practice.

People in Aid, a group of UK-based development organisations, pooled their experience to develop 'The People in Aid Code of Best Practice'[21] which benchmarks exemplary practice in the management and support of aid staff.

Integrating learning into organisational strategy is more challenging but potentially rewarding. Strategy development in Civil Society Organisations is often a more flexible process than the

20 Ball & Dunn (undated)
21 People in Aid (1997)

strategic planning procedures used by many large-scale private and public-sector organisations. Henry Mintzberg and James Quinn[22] developed a useful model of strategy development which emphasises the importance of 'strategic learning'. This is illustrated in Figure 4.

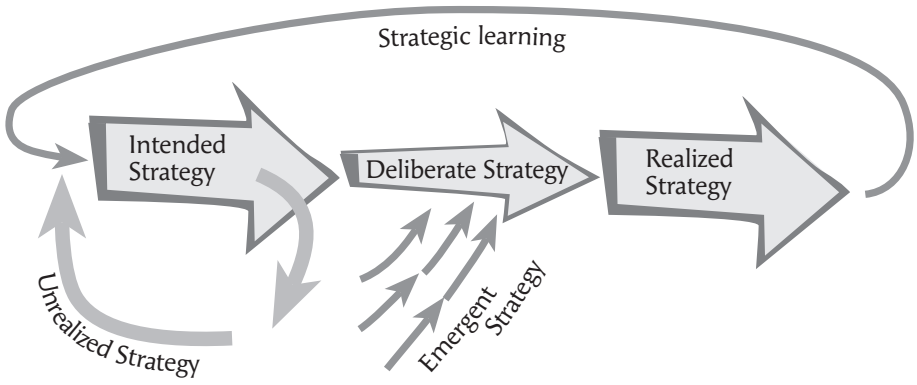



Figure 4: Deliberate and Emergent Strategy (adapted from Mintzberg & Quinn: The Strategy Process)

Without going into unnecessary detail about the terms used, Mintzberg and Quinn's argument is that the strategy which is actually implemented (realised) by an organisation is rarely exactly what was originally intended. Some aspects of strategy emerge from opportunities and threats which the organisation faces as it carries out its work. Some of the organisation's strategic intentions may never be realised for whatever reason - maybe the window of opportunity passes before the organisation can respond; maybe the organisation prioritises other strategic goals over others which are allowed to 'fade away'.

The importance of this model is that it recognises that organisations develop strategy within a dynamic environment. Gone are the days of meticulously prepared five year strategic plans – the current external environment is too dynamic and unpredictable for these to be worthwhile. Crucial to the success of the organisation is that it reflects on the various elements of emergent

22 Mintzberg and Quinn (1992)

and unrealised strategy and learns from them in such a way that it can better respond to new opportunities and new threats as they emerge in the future - hence the 'strategic learning' arrows in Figure 4.

In the context of development work, a particularly interesting initiative has been the **Learning and Development Policy Project** at the University of Edinburgh. This three year project has examined new approaches to development co-operation policy making with special reference to knowledge-based aid.

## Tools and strategies for Integrating Learning into Strategy and Policy

Integrating learning into strategy development and policy development is one of the most challenging areas of organisational learning and the most difficult to accomplish.

- Recognise that effective organisations are likely to be those that adapt well to the changes in their complex external environment. One of the main requirements of adaptability is the ability to learn
- Be aware of and develop the core competencies of the organisation to solve existing problems and meet future challenges
- Develop strategic thinking skills that enable the organisation to balance the flexibility necessary to respond to new opportunities with the stability and continuity required to maintain relationships and organisational identity
- Use tools and processes of organisation self-analysis to develop a systematic understanding of the organisation's existing capacities and its needs for planned capacity building interventions
- Apply the Mintzberg and Quinn model to identify strategic learning during the process of organisational strategy development and strategic review
- Board members can play a special role by requiring an annual learning audit on the organisation and using the results to assess and update organisational strategy and policy.

## Applying the Learning (8)

The ultimate test of organisational learning is the ability to **apply** what has been learned. Only when learning is applied in the work setting can we say that a continuous learning cycle has been created.

For many organisations, the application of learning is not limited only to their own organisation but also to the practice and policy of others through the processes of capacity building, scaling up and advocacy.

As a recent study of 'Learning in Development Co-operation' points out, "If the purpose of learning is improving the effectiveness of aid, then learning becomes an issue which cannot be confined to one party only. Effective learning does require that both parties learn and that they have an opportunity to share their experiences and jointly work out an agenda for action."[23] This has important implications for understanding and developing the learning capacities of all 'partners' in a development enterprise.

## Tools and strategies for Applying the Learning

- Take a conscious learning approach in project cycle management by ensuring that all project proposals make explicit reference to documents referred to and individuals consulted in their development
- Involve recognised 'experts' from inside or outside the organisation to appraise and give feedback on project proposals
- Build in a budget line for organisational learning into all projects, programmes and head office budgets.

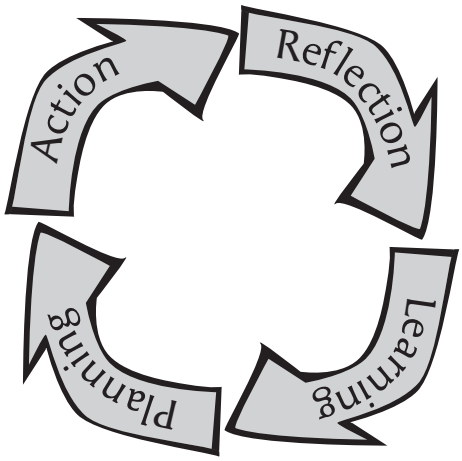
23 Carlsson and Wohlgemuth (undated, p8)

# Learning and the Planning Cycle[24]

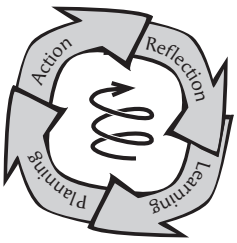
Earlier in this paper we looked at the individual learning cycle. The individual learning cycle comprises four stages: Doing, Testing, Reflecting and Connecting. In this section we will examine its organisational equivalent: the planning cycle.

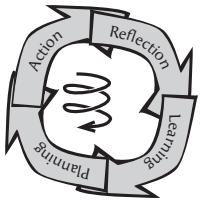
The organisational planning cycle is normally thought of as a three stage circular process of planning, action and review. By integrating learning into the planning cycle(see Figure 5), learning becomes a powerful force for organisational change and development.

Figure 5: The Organisational Planning Cycle




When the action-learning cycle is working in a positive way, it creates an upward spiral leading to increasing organisational effectiveness – what Alan Fowler calls a 'virtuous spiral'[25]. On the other hand, the cycle can sometimes be repetitive and stay at the same level where no new insights arise and the organisation continues to repeat the same patterns of behaviour or, worse, can lead to a demoralising downward spiral.




24 This section draws heavily on the work of Taylor et al (1997)
25 Fowler (2000)

## Planning

Unlike the individual learning cycle which focuses on action as the first stage, in organisations, most large-scale action such as setting up a new project or developing a new phase of a programme is preceded by a planning process. Indeed, in order to provide funds for any significant piece of work, most donors require a rigorous proposal (often based on a Logical Framework Analysis approach).

Even at the initial stage of a new piece of work, planning should involve learning from previous experience (both internal and from others) in order to generate a proposal that has the highest likelihood of success.

For example, Oxfam GB require that the authors of every proposal for new work must list the material and people they have consulted about similar work carried out in the past. "This offers whoever is evaluating the proposal some idea of how thoroughly it has been researched .."[26]

The process of planning draws on previous learning and applies it to new or changing situations in order to better predict what might happen as a result of future action. As James Taylor puts it "Planning helps us to be more proactive, to anticipate situations before they happen, rather than just reacting to what happens."

Because it is impossible to anticipate exactly what will happen in the future as a result of our actions and variables that are outside our control, plans may need to be revised in the light of changing circumstances. However, this should not be seen as an excuse for including vague or unrealistic objectives in a project or programme plan.

## Action

Action involves the implementation of plans. In organisational terms this may mean the implementation of a new project or programme or other activities such as lobbying or capacity-building. Often, action is taken in partnership with other organisations or with communities.

In development work there is an imperative about taking action that is seductive. The scale of

26 Powell, (1999: 40)

the problems the organisation is attempting to address are usually so enormous, sometimes overwhelming, that taking any action (however badly thought out) is seen as better than taking no action or delaying action. Whilst, as Goethe has said "Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now." it is also worth remembering that "Fools rush in, where angels fear to tread"!

Taking action can have unintended as well as planned consequences. The process of reflection should be open to both.

## Reflection

Reflection involves re-examining and thinking systematically about a piece of work. Reflection starts when we start to apply questions to the work through the processes of reflective practice, review and evaluation.

Elliot Berg argues that evaluation should be a major instrument of organisational change and concludes that, to date, evaluation of development assistance has not performed these functions well[27] . One of the main challenges facing development organisations is how they can get the most out of evaluations – both in terms of accountability and, particularly, organisational learning. Jerker Carlsson argues that the dominant donor-centric accountability function of evaluation means that the majority of local stakeholders find little of value for them in evaluations. He makes the following recommendations for improving the usefulness of evaluations for learning purposes:

- The intended users must be identified at the beginning of an evaluation process and the evaluation should be planned and designed with utilisation in mind
- Most stakeholders are used simply as providers of information and are rarely involved in the whole evaluation process
- Recommendations, produced together with stakeholders as part of an evaluation, should make it clear who should react to the recommendation, and should be adapted to the situation of the organisation
- Results should be distributed to a wider audience among the stakeholders.

27 Berg (2000)

**Box 5: Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB)**

Using an innovative approach to organisational learning, Rick Davies worked with the **Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB)** to introduce a nine-step approach to participatory monitoring that deliberately avoided the use of indicators. The system is based on helping people to tell stories using their own selected 'domains of change'.

## Learning

Reflection does not automatically lead to learning. For this to happen, lessons must be consciously identified, generalised and used to improve future action.

In the context of the planning cycle, learning requires:

- Accurate information from two or more sources
- Rigorous analysis
- Comparison and testing against experience
- Identification of lessons learned
- Development of recommendations that are specific and actionable
- Revision of plans to take into account recommendations.

# Barriers to Learning in Organisations

Since organisational learning is widely recognised as an important function for effective development practice, why is it that so few organisations are demonstrably good at it?[28] One reason is that development organisations may face formidable barriers to both individual and collective learning.

The barriers or challenges to effective learning can be divided into two main categories: those which are **internal** to the organisation and those that are **external**.

## External Barriers

External barriers to learning are those which arise from the organisation's external environment and over which the organisation may have little or no influence, far less control. A useful starting point for identifying external barriers to learning is to look at the organisation's key stakeholders such as its funders, other organisations, the general public and even its supporters.

- The nature of **donor priorities** often enforce on development organisations a fragmented project framework which can inhibit learning or even make it almost impossible
- The pressure to demonstrate **low overheads** to donors may make development organisations reluctant to invest the time and other resources necessary for effective organisational learning
- **Competition for funding** with other organisations may create a perceived pressure to generate uncomplicated success stories for the public and even some of the organisation's supporters. Mike Edwards of the Ford Foundation speaking about development

28 This question has been addressed by a number of authors, particularly Edwards (1997), Van Brabant (1997) and Berg (2000).

NGOs suggests that competition for funding "detracts from the depth of self-criticism and analysis required if NGOs are to be serious about learning; rising competition for public funds leads NGOs to prioritise public relations over genuine learning (i.e. highlighting the good and burying the bad)".[29]

## Internal Barriers

The staff of many development organisations will readily acknowledge (with varying degrees of frustration) that their organisation has characteristics which make the process of organisational learning difficult. These are often expressed in terms of "If only our organisation..., was structured differently..., seemed to value learning..., put enough resources into learning..., did not have a 'blame' culture..." and so on. These are a recognition that the organisation itself may have built-in barriers to learning.

Speaking about development NGOs, Mike Edwards has said "We all know that, in practice, learning in NGOs is very difficult. Often the characteristics and behaviour of NGOs are not favourable to the requirements of learning... In addressing barriers to learning the first step is to identify what they are." His summary of some of the main internal barriers to organisational learning in NGOs is shown in Box 6.

29 Edwards (1997)

**Box 6: Internal Barriers to Learning in NGOs**

- An **activist culture** may see learning as a luxury, separate from and secondary to the "real work"; time and space for learning may be difficult to find and protect; differences in learning styles and languages are an inevitable feature of a large, dispersed, multi-cultural staff.
- **Hierarchical, centralised, control-oriented structures** are inimical to learning; the "tunnel vision of the project system" (Smillie, 1995) restricts learning as timescales are compressed and experimentation discouraged; different parts of the organisation (and different individuals within them) may guard information jealously rather than exchange it freely.

- **Incentives and rewards for learning are weak** and diffuse; failures are disguised or punished; inertia, defensiveness, complacency and territoriality may override NGO values of openness; "risk aversion" is commonplace; and job insecurity and short term contracts make staff less amenable to learning.

- **Systems for accessing, storing, transferring and disseminating learning are underdeveloped, under-resourced and inefficient**. Information overload is common - there is a huge amount of information around, but too little of a structure to ensure that the right people get what they need at the right time. Indeed, there is too much information generally, and not enough learning i.e. information that is systematised into knowledge-in-action.
- NGOs are not very good at **dealing with "discordant information"** i.e. learning which challenges the organisational consensus or threatens short-term institutional interests, particularly about roles and responsibilities, and especially if (as an NGO based in the North) it is wedded to an operational role in the South … NGOs are never immune to the learning disabilities that plague all bureaucracies."

Source: Edwards, Michael (1996) [my emphasis]

In addition to the internal barriers to learning which Edwards has identified, there are a number of other powerful forces which may block the learning process, some of which operate at an organisational level and others at an inter-personal or even psychological level.

One particularly significant organisational barrier to learning is the very nature of development work itself which makes measures of organisational performance difficult to establish. As a result, it can be almost impossible for development organisations to know "when the right things have been done, in the right place and at the right cost"[30] .This creates major challenges for the design and implementation of monitoring, review and evaluation systems.

30 Carlsson and Wohlgemuth, (undated, p12).

As Alan Fowler reminds us , "Learning has much to do with the attitudes of leader/managers, their degree of personal security and an understanding of how they can be most effective"[31] . For these reasons, one of the most significant internal barriers to learning can be what are called defensive routines[32] . Defensive routines are the entrenched habits that we use to protect ourselves from the embarrassment and threat that come from exposing our thinking to others. Organisations as well as individuals can evolve defensive routines through the development of unwritten and unspoken rules which not only make certain subjects undiscussable but also make their undiscussability itself undiscussable! These unspoken rules become deep-seated parts of an organisation's culture.

The psychological energy which is required to maintain defensive routines can take a considerable unconscious toll and this alone is a strong argument for trying to sensitively identify and addressing them.

Finally, individuals may experience psychological barriers to learning as a result of:

- **pride** ("I am ashamed to admit that I don't know or understand")
- **self-image** ("I am a competent person who does not need to learn" or "I am too old to learn")
- **old habits** ("It's always worked that way in the past")
- **lack of confidence** ("I will never be able to understand")
- **lack of motivation** ("What is the point of learning, it won't make any difference in this organisation")
- **lack of time** ("I'm too busy doing things to sit around wasting time thinking")
- **cynicism** ("It's just another passing management fad. Ignore it and it will go away.)
- **need for simple solutions** ("Just give me a straight answer")
- **previous bad experiences** ("I don't want to be humiliated again like I was at school").

Individuals and colleagues may need help to identify their personal barriers to learning and work out strategies for overcoming those barriers.

31 Fowler (1997)
32 Argyris and Schon (1990)

## Tools and strategies for Overcoming Barriers to Learning

- Collectively identify the intended benefits of organisational learning for all stakeholders (particularly beneficiaries) and ensure that this is used as the bottom line for all learning initiatives
- Examine structural causes and work towards web-like, flat organisational structures rather than hierarchical, multi-layered pyramids
- Assess the organisation's learning capacities
- Identify the barriers to learning specific to the organisation
- Encourage 'early adopters' who are already convinced about the value of learning to bring about 'infectious commitment'
- Deal with individuals' psychological barriers with sensitivity
- Build awareness of defensive routines.

## The Role of the Senior Manager

Senior managers play a crucial role in developing and sustaining learning organisations. It is they who have overall responsibility for ensuring that there is a clearly understood organisational purpose and the strategies to achieve it.

Peter Senge identified five 'disciplines' that must be embraced by the managers (and staff) of learning organisations. The five disciplines he identified are: personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, team learning and systems thinking. Of these, it is the fifth – the holistic approach of systems thinking – that Senge believes holds the key to unlock the learning potential of organisations.

**Personal mastery** focuses particularly on the individual's ability to learn and adapt to change. Personal mastery is the discipline of 'continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience and of seeing reality objectively'. Mastery is described by Senge as a kind of calling which emphasises both the individual's humility and their self-confidence.

**Mental models** are 'deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations or even pictures and images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action'. 'The discipline of mental models starts with turning the mirror inward; learning to unearth our internal pictures of the world, to bring them to the surface and hold them rigorously to scrutiny. It also includes the ability to carry on 'learningful' conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others. Developing robust and adaptable mental models requires double loop as well as single loop learning which, in turn, require a culture of open-ness and trust.

**Building shared vision .** Peter Senge starts from the position that if any one idea about leadership has inspired organisations for thousands of years, 'it's the capacity to hold a share picture of the future we seek to create'. Such a vision has the power to be uplifting – and to encourage experimentation and innovation. Crucially, it is argued, it can also foster a sense of the long-term, something that is fundamental to organisational learning.

'When there is a genuine vision (as opposed to the all-to-familiar 'vision statement'), people excel and learn, not because they are told to, but because they want to. But many leaders have personal visions that never get translated into shared visions that galvanize an organisation... What has been lacking is a discipline for translating vision into shared vision - not a 'cookbook' but a set of principles and guiding practices.

'The practice of shared vision involves the skills of unearthing shared 'pictures of the future' that foster genuine commitment and enrolment rather than compliance. In mastering this discipline, leaders learn the counter-productiveness of trying to dictate a vision, no matter how heartfelt.'

Visions spread because of a reinforcing process. Increased clarity, enthusiasm and commitment rub off on others in the organisation. 'As people talk, the vision grows clearer. As it gets clearer, enthusiasm for its benefits grow'.

**Team learning** is described as 'the process of aligning and developing the capacities of a team to create the results its members truly desire'. It builds on personal mastery and shared vision – but these are not enough. People need to be able to act together. When teams learn together not only can there be good results for the organisation, members will grow more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise.

The discipline of team learning starts with 'dialogue', the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine 'thinking together'. To the Greeks *dia-logos* meant a free-flowing if meaning through a group, allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually.... [It] also involves learning how to recognize the patterns of interaction in teams that undermine learning.

When dialogue is joined with systems thinking, Senge argues, there is the possibility of creating a language more suited for dealing with complexity, and of focusing on deep-seated structural issues and forces rather than being diverted by questions of personality and leadership style. Indeed, such is the emphasis on dialogue in his work that it could almost be put alongside systems thinking as a central feature of his approach.

**Systems thinking** is the conceptual cornerstone ('The Fifth Discipline') of Senge's approach. It is the discipline that integrates the others, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice. Systems theory's ability to comprehend and address the whole, and to examine the interrelationship between the parts provides both the incentive and the means to integrate the disciplines. Senge's insistence that organisations take the 'long-term view' required by systems thinking is particularly important.

# Tools for Learning in Organisations

Every organisation is unique so the learning organisation 'recipe' for each will be different. This section describes some practical tools that are currently being used by development organisations to encourage and enable organisational learning.

## Action Learning Sets

Action learning sets are the mechanisms for using an **action learning** approach within or between organisations. Sets are fixed-membership small groups comprising usually 5-8 people. Members attend voluntarily and decide how many meetings to have, where, for how long when to stop, how to evaluate progress, and so on. Members get together to discuss 'live' issue or problems each individual is experiencing at work. The set may be 'self-managing' or have a facilitator (often called a set adviser). The sets begin by establishing ground rules, presenting the issues, sharing perceptions about the issues, supporting members, questioning, and reviewing progress. Set members are encouraged to not give advice.

## Advice Network Mapping

Every organisation has informal networks that are not visible on organisational organograms and yet are very influential in the way the organisation works. Understanding these networks and working with them can be a powerful way of giving recognition to individual expertise, solving problems and improving effectiveness. Advice networks form part of the informal organisation and understanding them can help to uncover importance sources of organisational expertise and influence.

Advice networks can be mapped[33] to identify which colleagues individuals turn to most regularly for help or advice in their organisation. Advice network maps may bear little or no resemblance

33 Krackhardt and Hanson (2001)

to the formal organisational organogram. However, the maps can pinpoint important individuals whose expertise may be formally unrecognised in the organisation hierarchy but who may play a crucial role in the organisation's memory.

## Case Study Development

The development of case studies can be a powerful way of encouraging a reflective approach to working. The process involves selecting a situation from the organisation's experience that examines the issues to be explored.

A case study describes events in the form of a story. The text reflects on insights into the dilemmas or problems faced by the actors in the story. The case study normally includes key learning points. The learning points can be identified in a number of ways: the story can be told from a personal perspective with the learning points at the end; the learning points can come at the beginning of the story, with events leading up to the points coming next; or the case can be told from the personal point of view of several individuals before the learning points are reached.

The following checklist[34] may be helpful when writing a case study:

- Don't present too many issues. Allow the learning points to stand out clearly
- Avoid over-generalisation and focus on the detail that underpins the learning points
- Creative ways of presenting information can help bring a case to life. It may help to introduce direct speech, pictures, drawings, illustrations or maps
- As with any writing, keep the potential audience in mind.

## Exchange Programmes

An exchange programmes is a way of sharing technical and managerial expertise between organisations. The use of agreed learning objectives and a programme of focused activities

34 Further guidance in preparing case studies can be found in Taylor, James, Dirk Marais and Stephen Heyns (eds) 1998 Community Participation and Financial Sustainability: Case Studies and Lessons from Development Practice, Wetta, South Africa: Juta and Co. / CDRA (ISBN 0 7021 4629 3).

enables individuals from different organisations to maximise the learning benefits of spending time in each others' organisations. Exchange programmes may last for a few days to a number of months.

## Exit Interviews

The exit interview is used to debrief staff or volunteers who are leaving the organisation in order to ensure that knowledge does not leave the organisation simply because an individual is leaving. The exiting process can be enhanced through the development of case studies and training materials based on the individual's experience in the organisation.

## Learning NGO Questionnaire

The **Learning NGO Questionnaire** was developed by Bruce Britton in 1998 to enable development organisations to assess their existing learning capacity. The **Learning NGO Questionnaire** uses the eight functions of a learning organisation as a basis for assessing the organisation's strengths and weaknesses. The questionnaire comprises forty statements describing key characteristics of learning organisations. The statements were developed from an extensive review of the literature on both effective NGOs and organisational learning.

The **Learning NGO Questionnaire** has been adapted and used by many organisations in the fields of human rights, environmental issues and international development. Mark Steinlin from Helvetas in Switzerland has produced an 'automated' version[35] of the questionnaire which is exceptionally easy to use.

A copy of the questionnaire can be requested from SMC.

## The 'Learning Before, During and After (LBDA) Model'

The 'Learning Before, During and After Model' was developed originally by the petrochemical company BP-Amoco and has subsequently been adapted for development organisations by

35 The automated version uses a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to total the scores for each of the eight functions and then plots them automatically on an eight-axis 'spider diagram'.

Bellanet, a Canadian NGO and Tearfund, a UK NGO involved in international development based on Christian values. The model states that before during and after any activity in an organisation there is an opportunity to learn. Learning requires the key actors in the activity to take part in structured, facilitated processes to identify key lessons learned and retrieve them again when they are next required. The main elements of the LBDA model are: **Communities of Practice, Peer Assist, After Action Review, Learning Review** and the **Knowledge Bank** and are described below.

## Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are working fellowships of individuals, both within organisations and across common disciplines, bounded by shared interests and tasks. For example, fundraising, project finance or M&E represent communities of practice that exist in many civil society organisations and often these communities are the source of new knowledge. Communities of practice are one of the main vehicles of learning within the World Bank.

## Peer Assist

The peer assist is a tool developed by Tearfund for the 'learning before' stage of their **Learning Before, During and After** model. Peer assist is a meeting or workshop where people are invited from other teams to share their experience, insights and knowledge with a team or individual who has requested some help.

**Box 8: Peer Assist in Action**

Bellanet recently organized a workshop on Knowledge Management in Thailand. It was a two-day workshop in which we introduced practical elements of KM, Communities of Practice, After Action Reviews, Peer Assists, etc. In general the participants were interested by the ideas and we had a number of good discussions. At the end of the first day, I thought the workshop was going fairly well.

It was at the end of the first day though that I was approached by a participant from Pakistan who, after hearing several examples of how KM is about peers in community helping each other, asked me whether I could give him some advice on how to cope with his situation in northern

Pakistan. He explained that his IFAD project had been very successful in organising the community to come together to make decisions about how money should be spent, where wells should be dug, etc. However, he said, the problem was that the locally elected officials felt undermined by the process and were quite firmly making the point that as "elected" officials, this sort of thing was their responsibility not the community's. Furthermore, the decision-making process was being subverted by the wealthier land-owners who were trying to influence the decision making to ensure that wells were dug on their land, etc, etc.

My first reaction was to feel quite inadequate as I didn't have a clue as to how to begin to help him. However, in discussing the issue later with my colleague, it occurred to me that this might be the ideal situation to carry out a Peer Assist. Peer Assists constitute the "before" part of BP Amoco's, Before, During, and After Learning strategy. They are quite simple and are designed to allow project manager's to convene a group of peers before initiating a project. The project manager presents his / her proposed project to the group and solicits input into how the project might be improved based on the experience of his / her peers. We decided to adapt the Peer Assist process to help the project manager from Pakistan with his problem and to try it out the following afternoon.

To start the process, we had all the participants (about 20 people) bring their chairs into a large circle. We then asked the participant from Pakistan to present his problem and describe what he had done to try to overcome the problem. We then went around the circle one by one to solicit input on how the issues might be resolved. Some of the answers focused on IFAD and how they might be brought on board to help and some focused on tips and approaches that had worked for other project managers in similar situations. It was a bit slow to start but within 5 minutes the discussion was buzzing. At the end of 40 minutes, the IFAD project manager from Pakistan had written down pages of ideas and suggestions that he planned to try to apply. The smile on his face at the end of the session said it all.

The great thing about this Peer Assist was that suddenly it became crystal clear to most of the participants why it was valuable for IFAD project managers to be members of a common community.... because they can really help each other. The challenge now is translate these relatively easy-to-do face-to-face events into an online community where Peer Assists are a regular part of the interaction.

Source Steve Song (posted on the km4dev-I List)

### After Action Review (AAR)

The After Action Review is a tool for the 'learning during' stage of the **Learning Before, During and After** model. The AAR process focuses on four questions (each of which has a series of subsidiary questions):

*What was supposed to happen?*

*What actually happened?*

*What were the positive and negative factors here?*

*What have we learned?*

*The process can either be self-managed or facilitated.*

### Learning Review

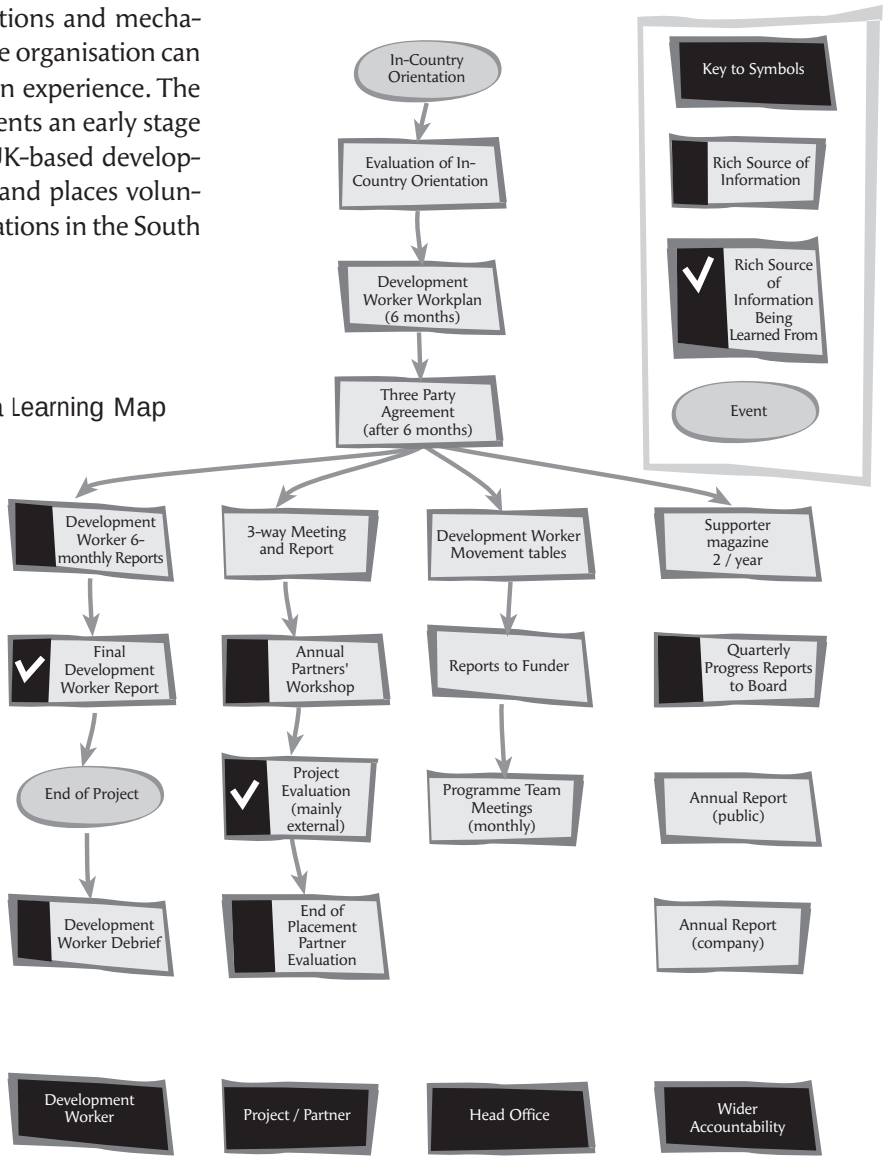
The Learning Review is a tool for the 'learning after' stage of the **Learning Before, During and After** model. Learning reviews are team meetings called after the completion of a piece of work which have the objective of capturing the lessons learned for the benefit of future teams. Tearfund recommend that the meeting is facilitated by a trained facilitator. The process of conducting a Learning Review is described in detail in Whiffen, (undated). The output from a Tearfund Learning Review is termed a knowledge asset.

## Learning Maps

Learning maps were devised by Bruce Britton to enable organisations to visually represent the internal creation and flow of knowledge and learning. Mapping learning involves examining the organisation from the perspective of a process, for example, the project cycle or the recruitment process, can be a fruitful way of using learning maps. The next stage is to brainstorm onto cards or large Post Its each of the stages of the process (including specific events such as meetings). These are then arranged on a flipchart or whiteboard to create a flowchart. The cards that represent rich sources of potential learning are marked and those that are currently the focus of organisational learning are also identified. The flow of information and lessons learned is added to the diagram by using connecting lines which are annotated to show **what** is flowing and **how**. Those cards that represent rich sources of potential learning which are not currently the focus of organisational learning are of particular interest. The map can be used to

identify potential connections and mechanisms for ensuring that the organisation can benefit more from its own experience. The following example represents an early stage of a learning map for a UK-based development NGO that recruits and places volunteers with partner organisations in the South (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: An Example of a Learning Map



## Learning History

The **learning history** concept was developed by George Roth (1995 & 1996) at the Center for Organisational Learning at MIT. A learning history is a written document that is used to enable an organisation to become better aware of an internal learning effort. The history is an enhanced form of 'story-telling', usually facilitated by an 'outsider' which gathers together and synthesizes a number of different perspectives on the same project. The learning history is therefore a "jointly told tale" of a particular piece of work or project which become part of the organisation's **knowledge bank.** Learning histories are created using a seven stage process which is described in Roth's paper ***Learning Histories: Using documentation to assess and facilitate organisational learning.***

## Yellow pages

The **yellow pages** facility is a structured collection of data and documents about people in the organisation. It includes an interface for obtaining information about the expertise, areas of interest, publications and some personal data of the project stakeholders and associated individuals. It also provides contact information. The purpose of yellow pages is to facilitate communication and knowledge sharing between individuals and groups of people. A short conversation or exchange of few messages with a knowledgeable colleague can sometimes save hours or days of hard work[36] .

36 Mikolajuk, Zbigniew (2002)

# Creating a Learning Organisation – A Checklist for Change

So, what have we learned about how to create and sustain a learning organisation?

1. **Discuss the concept** of the learning organisation across the organisation, including the Board. Get people excited about the possibilities.
2. **Identify the specific benefits** of learning to your organisation. Be honest with stakeholders about the complex nature of development. Providing simple messages to the public about development successes may be useful for short-term fundraising but may undermine public confidence in the longer term when the promised radical changes are not delivered.
3. **Assess the current state** of learning in the organisation. Identify current learning capacities and barriers. If it helps, use tools such as the *Learning NGO Questionnaire.*
4. **Develop an implementation plan** to build on existing strengths and address barriers. Build the capacity of the organisation in the eight key organisational learning functions.
5. **Develop individuals' abilities** to learn. Individuals are the starting point for all organisational learning. Suitable and adequately resourced mechanisms for their development – including induction/orientation, supervision, training, support, appraisal and exit interviews – should be part of every organisation's people-management systems.
6. **Develop opportunities** for group and team learning. These can be permanent or temporary, tangible or virtual, formal or informal.
7. **Enable managers** to encourage learning. Ensure that managers recognise the importance of their coaching and mentoring role.
8. **Provide adequate resources** and support for learning. Don't treat learning as an overhead cost – it is fundamental to the nature of development and should be budgeted accordingly.
9. **Mainstream learning**. Build it into organisational objectives, job descriptions, procedures and structures. Ensure that management and decision making responsibilities are located be as close as possible to those who will be affected by the decisions. Narrow the gap between head office and field operations. Clarify mutual rights and obligations through dialogue.[37] Develop and encourage the development of horizontal linkages within the organisation. The optimum organisational structure for a learning organisation should be a web, not a pyramid. Be selective and focused about learning, especially in smaller organisations. In order to gain the maximum from the organisation's experience choose particular issues for systematic study research and focus on these areas.
10. **Review progress regularly.** Apply the action learning cycle approach to the organisation as a whole.

37 Suitably modified, Fowler's 'Rights & Obligations' model of negotiating partnerships can be used to good effect (Fowler, 2000b) Morgan's (1993, pp 63-89) metaphor of organisations as 'spider plants' also provides a useful way of considering the relationship between different sections of an organisation.

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**km4dev-l** (Knowledge Management for Development List) To subscribe send a blank message to: join-km4dev-l@lyris.bellanet.org

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# Glossary

**Action Learning**

A method for personal, managerial and organisational development. Working in small groups (called action learning sets) people tackle important organisational issues or problems and learn from their attempts to change things. Action learning has four elements: (i) the individual, (ii) the **action learning set,** (iii) the issues or problems and (iv) action on the problems which bring about learning. Action learning was devised by Reg Revans (1983). For further information see Pedler (1994) and Weinstein (1995).

**Capacity**

An umbrella term for the knowledge and resources that exist or can exist within an organisation.

**Capacity Development**

Often called capacity building, capacity development is a planned intervention to improve an organisation's performance in relation to its purpose, context, resources and sustainability. Capacity development involves a self-managed process of organisational change based on a diagnosis of organisational strengths and weaknesses, identification of critical issues and devising, applying and assessing solutions.

**Competence**

The ability to do something with one's capacity.

**Defensive Routines**

The term coined by Argyris and Schon (1990) for the entrenched habits that we use to protect ourselves from the embarrassment and threat that come from exposing our thinking to others. Defensive routines are used to maintain a protective 'cocoon' around our fundamental assumptions and avoid them being opened to scrutiny. Organisations can also evolve defensive routines through the development of unwritten and unspoken rules which not only make certain subjects undiscussable but also make their very undiscussability itself undiscussable!

**Facilitation**

An approach to guided learning, growth and development that involves drawing out and building on the existing knowledge of the participants.

**Knowledge – Tacit and Explicit**

Knowledge is systematically organised information which, by the processes of analysis, comparison, testing and generalising can be used to answer complex questions. Knowledge can exist in two forms – explicit and tacit.

Explicit knowledge can be easily communicated. It is either written down in the form of reports, manuals, guidelines, policies or procedures or it expressed in a tangible form such as physical objects, organisational systems or organisation structures.

Tacit knowledge is understood but is highly personal and hard to formalize or codify. It is concerned with individual experience and takes the form of personal understanding, subjective insights or intuitions.

**Knowledge Bank**

A knowledge bank is a repository for knowledge – often stored in electronic form using information communications technology. Following the financial analogy, knowledge assets can be deposited in and withdrawn from the bank. Tearfund suggest that all knowledge asset should include:

- Specific actionable recommendations (SARs) which are clear and precise, stated in the form of something practical that can be done, and are future-oriented. Ideally, the SAR should be illustrated with a quote from a key person who can be contacted for additional information or support.
- SARs turned into generalized guidelines
- Examples from practice to illustrate the lessons learned
- Names and contact details of persons involved (including a key contact)

- Any other artefacts or raw data in support of the asset
- Key words that make it possible to access the knowledge asset.

Unlike financial assets, a withdrawal of knowledge does not deplete the assets deposited in the bank and these remain available for others to withdraw.

The 'knowledge bank' analogy has been championed by the World Bank. Their strategy is examined in detail by King and McGrath (2000).

**Knowledge Creation**

Organisational knowledge creation is a process that organisationally amplifies knowledge created by individuals and crystallises it as part of the knowledge assets of the organisation. One of the most thorough studies of knowledge creation was written by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995).

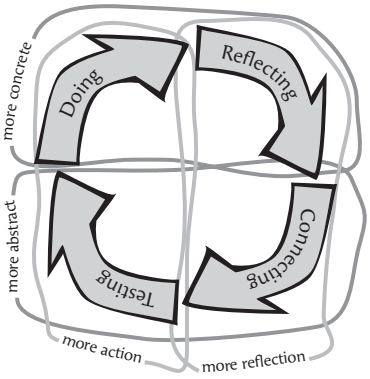
**Knowledge Management**

Knowledge management is the planned combination management awareness, attitudes and practices, systems, tools and techniques designed to release the power of knowledge within organisations. The main challenge in knowledge management is **knowledge creation** – the use of innovation to create new knowledge.

**Learning Cycle**

David Kolb (1984) developed a four stage model of how individuals learn from experience which involves action (doing), reflection (reflecting), abstract conceptualisation (connecting) and experimentation (testing) in a continuous cycle. According to Kolb, all stages of the cycle must receive adequate attention in order to ensure a rigorous approach to learning.

Honey and Mumford developed Kolb's model and used it to develop their concept of 'learning styles'. This is based on the




idea that each individual will have preferences for one or more stages in the learning cycle. For example, when asked to take on a new area of work, some people will read as much theory as possible in order to make connections with what they already know (Theorists) whereas others will "jump in at the deep end" and try things out (Activists). By being aware of their preferences, individuals can choose to strengthen their ability to use other stages in the learning cycle in order to make themselves better 'all round' learners.

**Learning Organisation** "An organisation which actively incorporates the experience and knowledge of its members and partners through the development of practices, policies, procedures and systems in ways which continuously improve its ability to set and achieve goals, satisfy stakeholders, develop its practice, value and develop its people and achieve its mission with its constituency". Aiken and Britton, (1997).

**Organisational Analysis** (OA) Organisational analysis is the process by which an organisation assesses its own capacity.

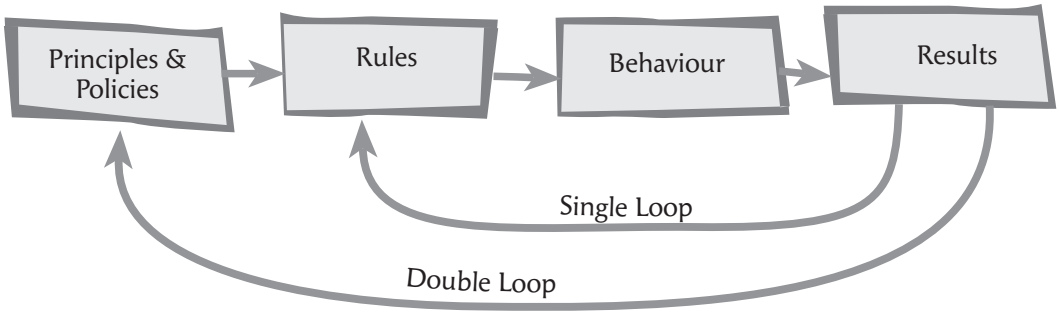
**Organisation Development** (OD) One form of capacity development related to changes within an organisation. OD is a planned change that aims to increase the organisation's capacity for learning, awareness and self understanding so that the organisation becomes better equipped to take over its situation, activities and future.

**Organisational Learning** The changing of organisational behaviour which occurs through a **collective** learning process.

**Reflective Practitioner** A reflective practitioner is an individual who is skilled in the process of reflecting on his/her practice whilst carrying out their work, and doing so in a way that enables them to do their job more thoughtfully and effectively (Schon, 1997). Reflective practitioners are skilled in both double and single loop learning.

**Single and Double-loop Learning**

We can only speak of organisational learning if one person's learning has an effect on the behaviour of others. So collective learning is a necessary requirement and indicator of organisational learning. The following diagram shows the two main types of collective learning identified by the American organisational learning specialist, *Chris Argyris:* single loop and double loop learning.




Single loop learning can be thought of in terms of **improvements** to existing rules for working in an organisation. It is often called "thinking inside the box" because the theories, assumptions, principles and policies which underlie the organisation's rules are rarely if ever questioned. Single loop learning poses 'how?' questions but almost never the more fundamental 'why?' questions.

Double loop learning not only requires changes in the rules and procedures of the organisation but may also question the underlying assumptions and principles upon which the rules are based. For this reason double loop learning requires "thinking outside the box". The consequences of double loop learning are potentially far-reaching, challenging the organisation's princip-

les and assumptions and requiring an open and often robust exchange of views. The questioning nature of double-loop learning and its challenging of strongly held positions are reasons why many organisations deliberately or unintentionally avoid this type of learning. In simple terms, people may run away from the organisational problems exposed by double-loop learning either by doing nothing (and hoping the problems go away), or 'escaping into action' which gives the appearance of change but leaves the real problem unsolved. Restructuring the organisation is a commonly used tactic for giving the appearance of change whilst leaving the underlying problems untouched.

# Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express his appreciation to the Swedish Mission Council for its continuing interest and enthusiasm in promoting organisational learning as a concept among SMC's members in Sweden and partners worldwide. By striving towards being a learning organisation in practice, SMC also aims through example to address the many challenges identified in this paper.

Many thanks are also due to all those organisations and individuals who have generously shared their ideas and experiences of putting organisational learning idea to work, particularly Rod Sterne and Debbie Heaney of WWF-UK, Paul Whiffen of TearFund, Marc Sanjuan of WWF Mediterranean Programme Office.

Thanks to INTRAC (the International NGO Training and Research Centre in Oxford) for publishing my paper on 'The Learning NGO' in 1998 at a time when organisational learning was not as high on the collective consciousness of NGOs as it is now. The response of readers of 'The Learning NGO' has been a continuing source of excitement and encouragement to explore the subject of organisational learning in more depth.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my colleagues at Framework (www. framework.org.uk) for encouraging me to practice in my own work what I preach to others!

The Swedish Mission Council is an ecumenical organisation whose membership is made up of Swedish Churches and Christian Development Organisations. SMC´s mandate is to promote co-operation, sharing of experiences and renewed reflection on the meaning of Christian Mission in our present time.

SMC has taken a pioneering approach among its members and other NGOs in Sweden in promoting the concept of organisation development (OD). As a result of its interest in this field, SMC has sponsored a number of workshops for its members which have included sessions on organisational learning. These workshops were the subject of a study: *Strengthening Organisations North and South* (Goold and Britton, 2000).

Internally, SMC has examined its own approach to organisational learning through two workshops held in 2000 and 2001 and facilitated by the author of this book.

This book was commissioned by SMC as a way of further developing an understanding of organisational learning in church-related organisations involved in international development.

By publishing this document, The Swedish Mission Council wants to encourage its member organisations and their partners to continue to build a practice that is truly developmental.

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