

The motive, means and opportunity (MMO) for learning

The problem of overcoming organisational barriers to learning comes up as a regular theme in discussions with those with specialist responsibilities for organisational learning and knowledge management in organisations. Specialists and practitioners voice frustration about initiatives that have been put in place to stimulate organisational learning but somehow fail to deliver the desired outcomes. Indeed one exasperated organisational learning specialist exclaimed during the course of an interview with a researcher that it was "almost as if my organisation considers learning as a crime rather than a behaviour we're trying to encourage".

So, if organisational learning *were* a crime (and in some organisations it is almost treated as such) - how would we investigate it? Criminologists emphasize the importance of understanding three key factors in solving crimes: the *Motive*, the *Means* and the *Opportunity* (MMO). Motive is the reason for committing the crime, means are the tools or methods used to commit the crime; and opportunity is the occasion that presents itself to allow the crime to take place. For someone to become a suspect in a criminal investigation, all three must be established. So let us examine what happens when we apply forensic science to organisational learning by imagining that organisational learning is, like crime, an *undesirable* behaviour.

If an organisation wanted to prevent the 'crime' of organisational learning, the importance of understanding MMO is that it only needs to deny its staff one of the three factors. By failing to provide a strong enough motive for learning, by withholding the means to learn from staff or denying them the opportunity to contribute to the organisation's learning, the 'crime' of organisational learning is unlikely to happen. If the organisation were really serious about 'learning prevention' it would arrange to withhold two or, better still, all three of the factors.

So if we wanted to design organisational learning out of an organisation we should on no account provide staff with a *motive*. Organisational learning should be viewed as an unnecessary luxury and not part of the 'real' work; it should attract no reward, praise or even acknowledgment.



If possible, contributing to organisational learning should not feature in job descriptions so that it is not linked to individual performance appraisal systems or staff supervision arrangements. It should certainly not appear as an objective in project documents because that would require accountability (if we wanted to be subtle about learning prevention, the need for organisational learning can be mentioned in policy documents but only in ways that do not make it clear what action staff are expected to take). If the organisational culture can be designed to ensure that organisational learning is not spoken about at all or, if it is mentioned, this is done in a critical way – so much the better. Finally, staff could be encouraged to think that what they can contribute is unlikely to be of value to the NGO as this can help to extinguish the flame of interest by building on self-doubt.

Secondly in our attempt to create our 'organisational learning-free organisation we should also ensure (at least as far as we can) that staff don't possess the *means* to learn or use their learning: we should make sure they don't have the chance to develop the necessary competencies (knowledge and skills) by minimizing our investment in training, coaching and action-learning; we should deny them access to useful information and knowledge; we should not provide them with tools for learning or the technology of communication that encourages learning.

Finally staff should not be provided with the *opportunity* to contribute to organisational learning. Overloading them with what is referred to as the 'real' work through badly designed or unrealistic job descriptions or allocating unachievable workloads is a good way of doing this. Creating hierarchical structures with little opportunity for peer communication is another. Compartmentalizing people doing similar jobs but in different departments can make learning more difficult. One particularly subtle strategy is to create the impression that organisational learning is someone else's responsibility.

If these descriptions are not so much funny as very familiar it is probably because many NGOs seem to operate as if they are implementing a strategy of 'organisational learning prevention'. This, of course, is unlikely to be a deliberate, planned strategy but one that emerges as a result of a number of small but significant decisions about priorities and resource allocation taken independently, often over a period of years. Together, those small, separate decisions form a pattern¹ and that pattern communicates a message. Whatever the organisation *says* about the importance of organisational learning, what it actually *does* (or doesn't do) sends a louder message to its staff that organisational learning is not a high priority.

If, on the other hand, an organisation agrees that organisational learning is very desirable then it must ensure that all three of the MMO factors are reinforced with its staff. As we have seen earlier, focusing on two is not enough – the organisation must provide the motive, the means and the opportunity for learning if it wishes to take organisational learning seriously.

Adapted from: Britton, Bruce (2005) Organisational Learning in NGOs: Creating the Motive, Means and Opportunity, Oxford, England: INTRAC

¹ What the Canadian writer on organisations, Henry Mintzberg, would call an "emergent strategy"

