



Praxis Paper No. 3

Organisational Learning in NGOs: Creating the Motive, Means and Opportunity

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Key Words: organisational learning, NGOs, knowledge management, organisational change, capacity building, partnership

Executive Summary

NGOs work in an increasingly demanding environment characterised by growing competition for shrinking aid budgets. They are under pressure to demonstrate that the resources they are given make a visible and lasting impact. This makes them very action-oriented. But most NGOs also realise the need to learn from their own experience and keep up with new practices in the field if they are to remain relevant and effective. To be a learning NGO requires organisations to simultaneously balance the need to take a strategic approach to organisational learning (at the highest level of organisational planning and management) with the recognition that learning is also an intensely personal process that goes on in the minds of individuals. Clearly, like so many good intentions, organisational learning is easier said than done. While it is tempting to leave organisational learning at the comfortable level of a headline organisational objective, this is not enough for those NGOs who really want to achieve their missions. We need to learn from NGOs that have grappled with the messy realities of implementation and find out more about how to translate good intentions into systematic practice.

Clearly, like so many good intentions, organisational learning is easier said than done

This Praxis Paper explores the importance of organisational learning in NGOs drawing on examples gathered from interviews mainly with Northern NGO staff and from an extensive review of the literature. In this Paper we examine why NGOs need to provide the motive, means and opportunity for organisational learning, and introduce practical examples of how pioneering NGOs are doing this. We then go on to suggest how to combine these elements in planned and emergent organisational strategies for learning. The Paper concludes that, although much has been written on the conceptual frameworks for organisational learning and knowledge management, most of these are 'Western'-orientated and people are still concerned about how to translate these theories into practice. The Paper recognises that learning is understood differently across cultures and contexts but that most current models are based on a Western understanding. There is therefore a need to engage with capacity building practitioners to explore innovative approaches which are relevant, appropriate and accessible across a wide range of cultures and contexts.

1 Introduction

Learning covers all our efforts to absorb, understand and respond to the world around us. Learning is social. Learning happens on the job every day. Learning is the essential process in expanding the capabilities of people and organisations ... Learning is not just about knowledge. It is about skills, insights, beliefs, values, attitudes, habits, feelings, wisdom, shared understandings and self awareness.¹

Learning is a developmental process that integrates thinking and doing. It provides a link between the past and the future, requiring us to look for meaning in our actions and giving purpose to our thoughts. Learning enriches what we do as individuals and collectively, and is central to organisational effectiveness, to developing the quality of our work and to organisational adaptability, innovation and sustainability.

No-one would deny the importance of learning to our development as individuals and yet we often find it difficult to apply our understanding of learning to our work together in NGOs. In some ways the importance of learning to NGOs seems obvious and yet we are surrounded by evidence of how organisations find it difficult to translate understanding into practical action.

This Praxis Paper provides a summary of current thinking on organisational learning and knowledge management drawing on examples gathered from interviews – mainly with Northern NGO staff – and from an extensive review of the literature. In the Paper we examine the different contexts within which NGOs work and explore why learning is important for NGO effectiveness and organisational health. We explore why it seems that many organisations consider ‘learning as a crime rather than a behaviour we are trying to encourage’² and, in continuing this analogy,

We examine the importance for NGOs of providing the *motive*, *means*, and *opportunity* for organisational learning

examine the importance of providing the motive, means and opportunity for organisational learning. This is supported with practical examples of how Northern NGOs are putting organisational learning into practice. Using a model for understanding strategy development, we examine the importance of combining a planned approach to organisational learning with creating the conditions necessary for ‘emergent’ learning. The paper concludes with an indication of the challenges that need to be addressed if organisational learning

is to be put into practice effectively in the NGO sector across different cultures and contexts.

¹ Chetley and Vincent (2003)

² As one particularly exasperated organisational learning specialist exclaimed during the course of an interview.

2 Organisational Learning in the NGO Sector

2.1 The NGO Context

The relevance and effectiveness of Northern NGOs have been facing a growing challenge from both donors and organisations in the South. There has been increasing competition between NGOs and with public and private sector organisations for shrinking aid budgets. Many NGOs have also shifted their focus away from direct project implementation and towards advocacy and policy influencing, civil society strengthening and partnership-working.

Donors, whilst increasingly requiring evidence of impact and learning, still use the delivery of outputs and financial probity as the bottom line measure for their 'return on investment'. Most donors require the use of Logical Framework Approach (LFA) as a planning framework and there is significant evidence that this acts as a constraint to learning³ at least at the project and programme level. The constant pressure for NGOs to demonstrate results generates an understandable concern about publicising or even sharing lessons learned from programme experience. The reluctance to be

open about learning may be particularly strong where a programme has not achieved what was promised in funding applications for fear of the repercussions that may result.

These pressures have led most NGOs to adopt an action orientation or 'adrenalin culture' where the delivery of outputs is seen as the main measure of success

At the turn of the 21st century many NGOs have also been facing significant levels of organisational change. These changes have included rapid organisational growth (often through mergers and 'swallowing' competition), organisational re-structuring (and particularly decentralisation of decision-making), greater emphasis on partnership working, and technological changes (particularly improvements in information and communications technology). Each of these creates a potential learning agenda for the NGO, some of which may overlap or even conflict. For example, orthodox thinking suggests that flat organisational structures with fewer management layers and increased delegation of decision-making will provide an environment that is more supportive of the lateral exchange of knowledge. However, the evidence from some larger NGOs is that decentralisation creates disconnected 'silos' which have little lateral contact and no longer have the channels of exchange once provided through specialist advisers based at head office.

These pressures, combined with the sheer scale of the task facing them, have led most NGOs to adopt an action orientation or 'adrenalin culture' where the delivery of outputs is seen as the main measure of success. According to the NGO Tearfund, the problem is so endemic that they refer to it as 'the NGO disease'.

³ For a critique of LFA see Earle 2002.

2.2 Knowledge and Learning: A Growing Agenda

In the mid to late 1990s the NGO world became aware of the concepts of organisational learning and the learning organisation from the corporate world. These seemed to provide NGOs with a practical framework for responding to the learning agendas generated by their evolving role in development. There is now a general recognition in NGOs that organisational learning is 'a good thing' but major challenges remain about exactly what it is and how to ensure that it happens. Drawing on a body of literature that has been written mostly with business organisations in mind has not provided easy answers for NGOs.

In the absence of clearly described ways of putting the theory of organisational learning into manageable practice, NGO managers began to look for more practical answers to some of the basic problems they faced. The first and most easily described was that of organisational memory – that is how knowledge is retained for future use. Many NGOs admit that they suffered from a lack of organisational memory that bordered on clinical amnesia. At the time, their information systems, particularly those in programme departments were, at best, difficult to access and at worst fragmented, inaccurate, incomplete or virtually non-existent. Early attempts to use information and communication technology (ICT) seemed at times to make these problems worse by generating information overload on an unprecedented scale.

By the end of the 1990s, NGOs were increasingly turning to another evolving professional field in the corporate world – knowledge management – for ideas about how best to organise and manage their information and recover their collective memory (See Table 1). NGO managers hoped that knowledge management might hold the promise of helping to solve the problems of organisational amnesia.

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Additionally they hoped it would unleash the power and promise of ICT to achieve the 'magic' of turning raw information into the knowledge that would deliver solutions to the new problems and challenges they faced. The reality, once more, did not live up to expectations.

In NGOs over recent years we have seen the proliferation of document management systems, intranets, extranets and other manifestations of ICT – many of which have helped to deliver at least some of the initial promises. This 'first generation' knowledge management architecture is able to help us keep better track of what we know – in other words it is able to help us create the organisational memory that seemed so elusive in earlier years – and knowledge management processes can help us design more effective ways of talking to each other. However, knowledge management is decidedly weak when it comes to helping us to make judgements about the value of knowledge: that is to apply what we know or to generate genuinely new ideas. Also, there is a real concern that an uncritical approach to knowledge management can lead to the commodification of knowledge, as has happened in the corporate world through the development of intellectual property rights, with the associated implications of who

has power over access to that knowledge. Unless we are careful, this can lead to an extractive approach to knowledge acquisition which, in the context of South–North partnerships may push partners further apart rather than enabling closer collaboration.

Knowledge management provides a seductive answer by suggesting that learning can be captured as a commodity that can apparently be easily managed (acquired, distilled, shared, stored, retrieved and used). However, there is a danger that NGOs are losing sight of the nature of knowledge and as a result managing knowledge becomes an end in itself rather than a way of enabling organisational learning.

Table 1: Links between organisational learning and knowledge management

<p style="text-align: center;">Organisational Learning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ is the intentional use of collective and individual learning processes to continuously transform organisational behaviour in a direction that is increasingly satisfying to its stakeholders. ▪ provides a purpose for the use of knowledge. ▪ is always context-specific. The purpose of learning is to solve problems or address challenges and knowledge is selected because of its utility in the specific circumstances. ▪ is usually demand led. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Knowledge Management:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ is the systematic processes by which the knowledge required by an organisation is acquired, distilled, shared, stored, retrieved and used. ▪ is a means to enable organisational learning. ▪ can be context-independent. For example, good practices can be developed and disseminated without awareness of the circumstances in which it may be used. ▪ is usually supply driven.

Where knowledge management has made an important contribution it has usually been because the NGO has taken a ‘second generation’ approach focusing not simply on the technology of developing an organisational memory but also on the people who are central to the organisation and the processes that help them share and use their collective knowledge. Here there has been an important emphasis on the development of such mechanisms as Communities of Practice and networking (both tangible and virtual).

3 Why is Learning Important in NGOs?

Where is the life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

*Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*⁴ (T.S. Eliot, 'The Rock').

It is all too easy to assume that by gathering *information*, storing it and making it accessible that we have somehow increased our knowledge and learning. This overlooks the fact that knowledge is information that individuals have reflected on, understood, internalised and are able to use. Likewise concerning wisdom, which cannot necessarily be gained simply because we have expanded our knowledge. Wisdom *requires* knowledge but wisdom is much more; it is 'the ability to think and act utilising knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense and insight'.⁵

Eliot's words make an eloquent argument for recognising that the real focus of knowledge, learning and wisdom in NGOs is people. We will now go on to remind ourselves about why learning is particularly important in NGOs though focusing on: 1) the nature of development itself; 2) increasing organisational effectiveness; 3) developing organisational capacity; 4) the need for NGOs to make the best use of their limited resources; 5) strengthening partnerships; 6) the gap between M&E and planning; and 7) the contribution that learning can make to organisational health.

3.1 The Nature of Development

Development involves change in human systems at individual, family, community and wider societal levels. More conventional approaches to development, particularly project-focused approaches, are based on questionable linear, cause-effect models of change in human systems.

More recent thinking emphasises the complex, uncertain and unpredictable nature of development⁶. This understanding of the nature of development makes new demands on NGOs and those that work in them: the need to understand and work within complex systems, the need for flexibility, adaptability and innovation and a genuine commitment to multiple lines of accountability. By increasing people's ability to understand the intended and unintended consequences of their actions, and to adapt and change the way they work in the light of their colleagues' and other organisations' experience⁷, organisational learning is widely recognised as an essential requirement for enabling NGOs to respond to the new and often unpredictable challenges that face them in a complex aid environment.

3.2 Increasing Organisational Effectiveness

One of the most important reasons for NGOs to invest in organisational learning is to increase the effectiveness of their organisation. This has meant that finding ways of measuring the effect of investments in organisational learning has become a priority

⁴ I am indebted to Brian Pratt from INTRAC for bringing my attention to this extract.

⁵ from quote in Edwards, M. (2004), *Future Positive: International Cooperation in the 21st Century*, London: Earthscan.

⁶ For example see Groves and Hinton 2004.

⁷ This area will be explored further in the forthcoming Praxis Paper 'Building Analytical and Adaptive Capacity for Organisational Effectiveness' by Mia Sorgenfrei.

for many organisations. Improved organisational effectiveness is increasingly seen as the 'bottom line' for learning – for investment to be justified in many organisations, learning must be primarily a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Understanding what programme approaches work in what circumstances is at the root of NGO effectiveness and requires both the ability and the willingness to learn from experience – whether that experience comes from the organisation's staff, partners and beneficiaries or from other sources. Learning can and should lead to improvements in programme design based on these different sources of experience. There is little excuse these days for NGOs designing and implementing programmes based on largely discredited ideas.

It is important for NGO staff to recognise that learning is not just about developing innovative new programme designs or policies, important though these are. Learning is equally importantly about what may seem like more mundane matters, for example identifying the small but important improvements in project effectiveness that come about by paying careful attention to the data from project monitoring. In this sense, learning provides a real purpose for gathering monitoring data – indeed many would argue that learning directed at creating immediate improvements to project implementation constitutes the most important purpose for monitoring.

3.3 Developing Organisational Capacity

The importance of organisational capacity for programme effectiveness is now almost universally accepted. As a result of this, and other factors such as the increased emphasis on partnership working and donor interest in civil society strengthening, organisational capacity development has become a major area of NGO activity. While there are many models for organisational development, INTRAC opts for a 'systemic' approach – that is, an approach which explores the inter-relationship between different elements and environments, both internal and external. Organisational capacity building interventions therefore aim to holistically explore different dimensions of organisational life (its internal functioning, programme of work, relationships and evolution) and to facilitate an analysis of how any one dimension influences another.

Capacity development strategies are often based on a process of organisational assessment (OA) which, in simple terms, is an evaluation (usually a self-evaluation) of the organisation's capacities. Carrying out an organisational self-assessment and then translating the results of the OA into practical plans for capacity building requires the ability to reflect on and learn from the organisation's experience. In this sense, the competences for organisational learning are an essential means to identify and develop NGO capacity.

3.4 Making the Best Use of Limited Resources

NGOs face a constant dilemma of having ambitions far greater than the resources they have to achieve them. This, together with the human focus of their work and the conditions attached to the uses of their funding places NGOs in the position of having to be careful stewards of their limited resources. The need to work efficiently as well as effectively generates an important learning agenda for NGOs by requiring

them to understand and leverage their organisational strengths by developing partnerships with other organisations and placing an increasing emphasis on advocacy and policy influence.

3.5 Strengthening Partnerships

Much of the work of NGOs is carried out in the context of partnerships. In theory, Southern/Eastern NGOs and Northern/Western NGOs form partnerships to achieve mutually agreed goals. Of course, the reality of partnerships covers a wide range of relationships from 'coercion under a different name' through to genuine solidarity and collaboration. This has led many people to question whether the word 'partnership' is so abused as to be meaningless. Nevertheless, the term is still widely used and, given its relationship to ideas of participation, shared ownership and capacity building, partnership provides an important setting for organisational learning⁸.

Assuming NGO partners are aiming for more 'balanced' power relationships working towards the achievement of mutually agreed goals, then the issue of trust becomes very important. Trust is built, amongst other things, on open relationships, transparent decision-making, mutual respect and positive experiences of co-operation. Learning has an important part to play in building trust as the humility that underpins an openness to learning also encourages each partner to value and respect the other's experience. The skills of reflection upon which learning is based can also help each NGO to assess carefully and value what each can contribute to the partnership, thereby balancing the relationship by taking the focus away from the financial transactions that are often at the root of power imbalances. In short, by valuing organisational learning there is a greater likelihood of building stronger and more balanced partnerships.

3.6 Closing the Gap between M&E and Planning

Most development work is based on a cyclical process of identification/design, planning, implementation/monitoring and evaluation. However, it is a frequently expressed concern that the information provided by monitoring and evaluation neither influences decision-making during the project implementation nor the planning of ongoing project development and new initiatives. This is despite large amounts of resources being invested in the various stages of the planning cycle. In other words, there is often a perceived gap between generating information through monitoring and evaluation and using this for future planning.

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What this gap represents is often the absence of mechanisms for learning in the design of M&E systems. Even when learning mechanisms exist, they are often of a lower priority than accountability mechanisms, so the gap may remain and important opportunities for learning from experience and using this learning are missed. In order to close the gap NGOs have to overcome a number of challenges, not least of

⁸ See Brehm et al. 2004 for more wide-ranging discussions of the notion of partnership.

which is the most commonly used planning tool, namely the Logical Framework Approach (LFA), the use of which is now a funding requirement of most donors. LFA has the advantage of emphasising the importance of the planning cycle but its acknowledged rigidity makes it difficult to apply a learning approach which requires openness to the unexpected and flexibility to embrace change. A further challenge is ensuring that the NGO has the necessary competence to analyse and make use of the information that emerges from its monitoring and evaluation systems⁹.

Four main purposes for monitoring and evaluation can be identified¹⁰:

- *accountability* (to donors and to project users)
- *improving performance* (to show how resources are being used, to highlight and address problems as they occur, improve management and ensure the desired results are achieved)
- *learning* (by making lessons from one piece of work available to others who are implementing or designing initiatives in the same sector or location so that they are helped to repeat successes or avoid failures)
- *communication* (between stakeholders). Learning is the bridge that can span the gap between M&E and planning but building the bridge requires skills, vision and resources.

3.7 Creating a 'Healthy' Organisation

A healthy NGO is more likely to be an effective and adaptable NGO. Importantly it is also more likely to be an organisation where people want to work and are motivated to stay longer and contribute more. There is growing evidence that organisational

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learning has an important overlap with emerging ideas about achieving organisational health. In other words there is evidence of a two-way relationship between organisational learning and organisational health/well-being with each mutually reinforcing the other. On the one hand, organisational learning can be seen as a necessary *requirement* for organisational health: if an organisation is not learning it cannot be regarded as healthy as it is failing to recognise, value and capitalise on the experience and contributions of its staff and stakeholders. On the other hand, a healthy organisation can also be seen as a necessary

context for organisational learning: individuals and teams will be less able or unwilling to contribute their ideas and experience if they are overworked, undervalued or lacking in motivation.

Many of the mechanisms and processes associated with organisational learning are primarily concerned with developing and strengthening interpersonal connections for the purpose of creating, sharing and using information and knowledge. Their intended goal is usually improved organisational effectiveness, but there is increasing evidence that they have a valuable unintended consequence: building healthier

⁹ These ideas are further discussed in Praxis Paper 2: 'Rising to the Challenges: Assessing the Impacts of Organisational Capacity Building' by Hailey et al. which is available to download from www.intrac.org.

¹⁰ Taken from Bakewell et al. 2003.

organisations. The nature of the link between organisational learning and organisational health is still under examination. However, the anecdotal evidence suggests that it is worth exploring the importance of organisational learning not just as a means of improving organisational effectiveness but also as a way of developing NGOs as supportive and fulfilling places in which to work.

4 Nurturing Organisational Learning in NGOs

4.1 Organisational Learning as a Crime

Despite the increasing amount of writing and discussion about organisational learning and some pioneering attempts to engage with organisational learning (examples of which are examined later), most NGOs still find it difficult to put their ideas into practice and give learning the profile it deserves in their organisations. In discussions with those with specialist responsibilities for organisational learning and knowledge management in Northern NGOs, the problem of overcoming organisational barriers to learning comes up as a regular theme. 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.

Why is this the case?

It is 'almost as if my organisation considers learning as a crime rather than a behaviour we're trying to encourage'.

One particularly exasperated organisational learning specialist exclaimed during the course of an interview that it is 'almost as if my organisation considers learning as a crime rather than a behaviour we're trying to encourage'. This rich metaphor raises an intriguing question: 'If organisational learning *were* a crime (and in some NGOs it is almost treated as such) – how would we investigate it?' Criminologists emphasise 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, it only needs to deny its staff *one* of the three MMO 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 was 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 NGO we should on no account provide staff with a *motive*. Organisational learning would be viewed as an unnecessary luxury and not part of the 'real' work; it would attract no reward, praise

or even acknowledgment. If possible, contributing to organisational learning would 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. 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. Finally, fears would be created about the future personal and professional repercussions if anything but positive outcomes were to emerge from the learning process.

Secondly in our attempt to create our 'organisational learning free NGO' 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 competences (knowledge and skills) by minimising our investment in training, coaching and action-learning; we should deny them access to useful information to develop their 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. Compartmentalising 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 an NGO agrees that organisational learning is desirable then it must ensure that all three – the *motive*, *means* and *opportunity* – are reinforced with its staff.

If these descriptions are not so much amusing 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 pattern¹¹ 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 NGO agrees that organisational learning is 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 NGO must provide the motive, the means and the opportunity for learning if it wishes to take organisational learning seriously. In the next three sections we will examine each of the three

¹¹ What the Canadian writer on organisations, Henry Mintzberg, would call an 'emergent strategy'.

factors – motive, means and opportunity – in terms of the needs that they generate for NGOs and some examples of how these have been addressed to enable organisational learning to occur.

4.2 Creating the *Motive*: Understanding learning and why it is important

A motive is a reason for doing something. Having a reason to support or contribute to organisational learning is a complex issue that involves many factors. These include knowing how your role fits in to the wider organisation, sources of individual motivation, having confidence that your contribution will be given due consideration and receiving acknowledgement of your ideas even if they're not taken up. Managers will not prioritise organisational learning and staff will not willingly contribute unless they have a clear conceptual understanding of what it is, why it is important to their NGO and what is expected of them.

The challenge of providing compelling reasons for managers and staff to support organisational learning is mentioned by more NGOs than we might expect

The challenge of providing compelling reasons for managers and staff to support organisational learning is mentioned by more NGOs than we might expect – after all we might ask 'isn't everyone interested in the development of their organisation and its work?' It is clear that NGOs can't take this for granted.

According to Wheatley (2001), there are a number of principles that organisations need to take into account when devising a strategy for knowledge management. The same principles may also apply to organisational learning. First, it is natural for people to create and share knowledge because they are constantly looking for meaning in what they do. Second, everybody in an organisation – not just a few selected individuals – is likely to be a source of useful knowledge and third, people will *choose* whether to share or withhold that knowledge. People will more willingly share their knowledge if they feel committed to the organisation, value their colleagues, respect their leaders, are given encouragement to participate and don't fear negative repercussions.

Developing a motive for organisational learning can be supported by developing a strategy which pays attention to the following factors:

- 1) ensuring supportive leadership;
- 2) developing and sustaining a culture supportive of learning

These factors are described in more detail in the next sections with examples of how they have been addressed in practice.

4.2.1 Ensuring supportive leadership

Leadership is seen by almost all of those concerned with organisational learning as vital in creating an NGO that plans for, encourages and values learning. The challenge facing many organisational learning specialists is to move leaders and managers from passive acceptors to passionate advocates of learning by

demonstrating its tangible results and benefits (Wright 2004). One of the reasons why managers may be unwilling to support the idea of organisational learning is if they view it as a potential threat to their authority. Ultimately learning is about organisational change and those who may feel they have potentially most to lose in any change are those with overall responsibility for the organisation.

It has also been suggested that some senior managers are suspicious of organisational learning because of the importance it attaches to process as well as product. This may help to explain the popularity of knowledge management as it appears to deal with a resource (knowledge) rather than a process (learning). Leadership clearly plays an important role in stimulating, encouraging and demonstrating, through personal example, how individuals can contribute to organisational learning. The following leadership factors seem to be particularly important:

- **Prioritisation:** Organisational learning is given priority by being part of the NGO's overall strategy. Corporate indicators are developed and used to ensure accountability and maintain organisational learning on the senior management agenda.
- **Communication:** The strategic importance of organisational learning is understood and communicated by the leadership.
- **Legitimacy:** Learning at all levels (individual, team, organisational and inter-organisational) is acknowledged as a worthwhile use of time and resources.
- **Example:** The leadership models good practice in terms of personal commitment to learning and involvement in collective work practices that support and encourage organisational learning. Leaders provide a source of inspiration to staff. The leadership team takes a learning approach to strategy development.
- **Recognition:** Staff are given recognition for their contribution to the development of new organisational knowledge and their application of organisational knowledge to address new problems and challenges.
- **Culture:** Leaders recognise their responsibility for managing a culture that supports learning at all levels (see 4.2.2). This includes monitoring and managing internal rivalries and conflicts and encouraging the 'risk taking' of critical thinking.

Experience from Practice 1: Providing Leadership Support

Because they recognised the importance of leadership support *CAFOD* arranged briefings by organisational learning and knowledge management specialists for their leadership team. *Skillshare* and *Swedish Mission Council* included organisational learning in their Board development programmes in order to ensure that their leadership was clear about the issues and had an opportunity to discuss the potential benefits and practicalities. *OXFAM GB* included sessions on organisational learning in their strategic leadership development programme for senior managers.

4.2.2 Developing and sustaining a culture supportive of learning

If organisational learning is to be a collective, organisation-wide activity it must become part of the organisation's culture. An organisational culture supportive of learning is one that enables, encourages, values, rewards and uses the learning of its members both individually and collectively. NGOs 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***. Mechanisms for rewarding, valuing and acknowledging organisational learning act as a significant incentive for staff to invest time and resources in learning at both organisational and individual levels. These can include: building learning responsibilities into job descriptions; acknowledging contribution throughout the year and not only at annual performance appraisals; ensuring that learning is seen as enhancing career prospects.
- 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.

Indications of a learning culture can be seen when colleagues are confident to express their thoughts and feelings and share their knowledge; when colleagues ask questions of one another, listen to each other and constructively challenge each

To create a learning culture it is clearly important to start where the energy and interest is in the organisation ... to identify zealous advocates of learning and build on their enthusiasm

other's assumptions; when mistakes are rarely repeated; when long-standing colleagues are not cynical about their work and when problems are exposed and dealt with without blame. At an organisational level, a learning culture would be indicated when there is a sense of progression in new initiatives improving on previous ones and when the organisation's leadership recognises and prioritises learning as an expected aspect of good practice.

To create a learning culture it is clearly important to start where the energy and interest is in the organisation. One approach is to involve staff in identifying and acknowledging unsupportive characteristics and then working on ways to address these difficulties to create the kind of organisation they wished to be part of. Another is to identify zealous advocates of learning and build on their enthusiasm.

Experience from Practice 2: CAFOD and Christian Aid – Learning Culture

By identifying those people who were supportive of organisational learning and interested to find out more no matter where they were located in the organisation, *CAFOD* was able to build a critical mass of support for a wide range of organisational learning initiatives starting with the organisation's opinion leaders. *Christian Aid* identified those with a passionate interest in organisational learning and created a cadre of 'Corporate Revolutionaries' who are located at different levels and locations in the organisation.

4.3 Creating the *Means*: Models, Methods, Competences and Support

In order to contribute to organisational learning, NGO staff need more than a motive for learning, they also need the means to do it. The 'means' for organisational learning include:

- 1) ensuring conceptual clarity;
- 2) supporting the necessary competences to learn;
- 3) providing a range of methods and tools that can be used;
- 4) providing specialist support; and
- 5) investing adequate financial resources.

NGOs place different emphases on what they believe are the most important means for organisational learning. In the following section we will examine these needs and how some NGOs are addressing them¹².

4.3.1 Using appropriate conceptual models for organisational learning

Conceptual models are simplifications that provide individuals with a range of ways of making sense of themselves, their organisation and their wider world. In short, exposure to new and challenging conceptual models can help us to think and act differently about the way we learn individually and collectively in the context of our organisations.

Since the late 1990s there has been an explosion in writing on the subject of organisational learning and knowledge management in the field of international development. One of the particularly interesting aspects of organisational learning is that it draws on a wide range of bodies of thinking. In the literature on organisational learning, conceptual frameworks from organisational development (OD) can be found alongside insights derived from behavioural psychology, knowledge management, systems thinking, change management, M&E, impact assessment, capacity building, human resources (HR), chaos and emergence theory,

¹² For a very useful introduction to a range of methods and tools see Chetley and Vincent (2003). Available for download from www.healthcomms.org

inter-personal communications, the 'New Science'¹³, and even spirituality. This can be likened to a river with a number of small tributaries flowing into it. The tributaries represent the various sources of ideas that combine together in 'currents' that have unique effects on each organisation. For most NGOs the passage down the river has involved dealing with 'white water', being stuck in quiet eddies, getting lost in stagnant backwaters, paddling against the flow and negotiating rocks and whirlpools as well as periods of steady progress. Although every organisation's journey is different, much can be learned from the early explorers who have navigated the river.

Despite the cross-cultural nature of development organisations the most commonly used models of management and organisational development come from a Western cultural perspective

Despite the international and cross-cultural nature of development organisations, the most commonly used models of management and organisational development come from a Western cultural perspective. How applicable these models are to 'non-Western' development organisations has been called into question by a number of writers including Alvarado (2004) and Jackson (2003). The literature is also based largely on a Western understanding of both organisations and individual psychology.

In this section we provide a summary of commonly used conceptual models for understanding organisational learning and knowledge management and a few that are not commonly used but have proved to be helpful for a number of NGOs – for example CAFOD's organic garden metaphor below. The models are presented in Table 2 in relation to the main fields from which they originate, these being: behavioural psychology; organisational learning and organisational development (OD); strategy development; and knowledge management. Further information and illustrative diagrams of some of the models presented can be found in the Appendix.

Experience from Practice 3: CAFOD – Organic Garden Metaphor

In a paper presented at CAFOD's Learning Think Tank, Cosstick¹⁴ developed the metaphor of an organic garden to describe the learning organisation. The metaphor emphasises that an organisation can nurture, tend and even prune the growth (learning) but does not, primarily, try to plan or control the growth. In an organic garden there is a wide variety of plants some of which are resilient and others of which are fragile. All are nourished by the application of compost – a rich fertiliser made from apparently waste garden material that is usually hidden from public view (and represents the shadow side of the organisation). The value of metaphors such as the organic garden is in their ability to engage the organisation in vibrant and creative discussions that encourage innovative thinking.

¹³ 'New Science' refers to the recent developments in the fields of science that challenge the fragmented Newtonian world view and replace it with a holistic systems perspective drawing heavily on quantum physics, chaos theory and evolutionary biology.

¹⁴ Vicky Cosstick, personal communication.

Table 2: Conceptual models for understanding organisational learning and knowledge management	
Conceptual Model	Description
Behavioural Psychology	
Experiential Learning Cycle ¹⁵	In 1984 David Kolb developed a four stage 'Experiential Learning Cycle' model (see Figure 1 in the Appendix) of how individuals learn from experience. In the 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 widespread adoption of the experiential learning cycle in NGOs may be partly explained by its similarity to the almost universally adopted four stage planning cycle. Its importance has been 1) in helping NGOs to recognise that space needs to be created for all four stages of the cycle in order to enable learning to take place and 2) introducing the idea of individual 'learning styles'.
Single, Double and Triple Loop Learning ¹⁶	<i>Single loop learning</i> can be thought of in terms of generating <i>improvements</i> to the way existing rules or procedures for working in an organisation are applied in practice. It is often called 'thinking inside the box' and poses 'how?' questions but almost never the more fundamental 'why?' questions. <i>Double loop learning</i> is often called 'thinking outside the box' because it may question the underlying assumptions and principles upon which the rules and procedures are based. The consequences of double loop learning are potentially far-reaching and may lead to what has been called <i>triple loop learning</i> – challenging the organisation's principles and assumptions which may no longer be relevant given changes in the organisation and its environment. This requires an open and often robust exchange of views. The characteristics of these forms of learning are further explored in the Appendix.
Organisational Learning and Organisational Development (OD)	
Senge's Five Disciplines	Peter Senge's book <i>The Fifth Discipline</i> is referred to in almost every discussion of the subject. Senge focuses on the importance of leaders in the process of organisational learning and identifies five key competences or 'disciplines' that he suggests all leaders must have in order to build and lead a learning organisation. These competences are personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking. Although often referred to in the literature, Senge's model based on leadership characteristics is not widely adopted in the NGO world (though <i>Oxfam GB</i> has involved Senge himself in their internal deliberations on organisational learning).
Levels of Learning ¹⁷	A typology commonly used by NGOs to help them plan their approach to organisational learning argues that learning takes place at five successively more complex, collective learning levels: Individual, Team, Department, Organisation and Inter-organisation. The model emphasises that learning in organisations is highly social but that the root of learning is the individual. Implicit in the levels of learning model is the importance of collaboration and team-work and the need for organisations to invest in mechanisms and processes that encourage communication and cooperation both within and across organisational structures.

¹⁵ Kolb, D. (1984) *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

¹⁶ Argyris, C. and Schon, D.A. (1996) *Organisational Learning II: Theory, Method and Practice*, Boston, MA: Addison Wesley.

¹⁷ For further information see Watkins, K. and Marsick, V. (1993) *Sculpting the Learning Organization: Lessons in the Art and Science of Systemic Change*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

The Learning Organisation	The idea of the learning organisation has been very influential in shaping policy and practice in both the corporate and NGO worlds. There are many diverse definitions of learning organisations, for example ‘an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself’ ¹⁸ , an organisation that is ‘skilled at creating acquiring and transferring knowledge and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights’ ¹⁹ and ‘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’ ²⁰ . What underpins most is the desire to create an organisational environment characterised by change, adaptability, a holistic approach, vision and renewal. Experience from Practice 1 provides an example of how CAFOD have developed this approach.
Eight Function Model ²¹	Incorporating insights from organisational development and systems thinking, the Eight Function Model was developed primarily with an NGO audience in mind (See Figure 2 in the Appendix). The model suggests that in order to learn effectively, an NGO must attend to eight key functions: Gathering Internal Experience; Accessing External Learning; Communication Systems; Drawing Conclusions; Developing an Organisational Memory; Integrating Learning into Strategy and Policy; Applying the Learning and Creating a Supportive Culture. Each of these functions is interconnected to the others. The model forms the basis of a self-assessment tool (The Learning NGO Questionnaire) which enables NGOs to examine their strengths and weaknesses under each of the eight headings using a series of indicators.
Strategy Development	
Planned and Emergent Strategies	Mintzberg and Quinn’s model (see Figure 3 in the Appendix) makes a very enlightening distinction between planned and emergent strategy. Strategy which is actually <i>realised</i> (implemented) by an organisation is rarely exactly what was originally <i>intended</i> (planned). Some elements of strategy <i>emerge</i> from its response to opportunities and threats that the organisation faces as it carries out its work. Some may be even be <i>unrealised</i> for whatever reason. Many NGOs use this model because of its practical approach to strategy development and its recognition of the dynamic and unpredictable environment in which they work. It obliges them to be open to, and reflect on, the various elements of <i>emergent</i> strategy (ie unplanned but implemented), <i>deliberate</i> strategy (i.e. planned and implemented) and <i>unrealised</i> strategy (i.e. planned but not implemented) and learn from each of them so that they can better respond to new opportunities and threats as they emerge.
Knowledge Management	
The Knowledge Hierarchy	This five level model illustrates the progressive value that is added to data as it is transformed into wisdom (see Figure 4 in Appendix). In the model, data is assumed to be simple isolated facts. When facts are placed in a context, and combined together within a structure, information emerges. When information is given meaning by interpreting and internalising it, it becomes knowledge. As people use this knowledge to choose between alternatives, behaviour becomes intelligent. Finally, when values and commitment guide intelligent behaviour, that behaviour may be said to be based on wisdom. In this way, each transition adds value through human effort.

¹⁸ Pedler, M., Burgoyne, J. and Boydell, T. (1991) *The Learning Company: A Strategy for Sustainable Development*, London: McGraw Hill.

¹⁹ Garvin, D. (1993) ‘Building a Learning Organization’, *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1993, 78–91.

²⁰ Taylor, J. (2002) ‘On the Road to Becoming a Learning Organisation’ in Edwards, M. and Fowler, A. (2002) *The Earthscan Reader on NGO Management*, London: Earthscan.

²¹ Britton, B. (1998) ‘The Learning NGO’, Occasional Papers Series No 17, Oxford: INTRAC, Available for download from <http://www.intrac.org/Intrac/docs/OPS17final.pdf>

Tacit and Explicit Knowledge ²²	Dividing knowledge into two main categories – explicit and tacit – has been very influential in the way organisations have approached knowledge management. Explicit knowledge can be expressed in words and numbers and shared between people using written or verbal means. Tacit knowledge is highly personal and has two dimensions: the <i>technical</i> dimension or ‘know-how’; and the <i>cognitive</i> dimension which consists of beliefs, ideals, values, and mental models which are deeply ingrained and shape the way we perceive the world. Although tacit knowledge may be unconscious and is difficult to communicate verbally it can be shared and learned through personal observation or shared experience e.g. working alongside (shadowing) an experienced colleague or going on field visits (more detail on tacit and explicit knowledge can be found in the Appendix).
People, Process and Technology Model	This model (see Figure 5 in the Appendix) identifies three main elements for successful knowledge management: 1) the importance of connecting people who have the knowledge to help each other, and developing their willingness to ask, listen and share; 2) processes to simplify sharing, validation and distillation of knowledge, and 3) a reliable, user-friendly technology infrastructure to facilitate communication. NGOs have made a significant advance in the last two – developing ‘knowledge banks’ and ‘resource databases’ – but have found that these do not deliver what was intended unless there is adequate focus on people and process. This provides a useful reminder that the processes and technology should be planned and developed to serve the people who will use them and not the other way round.
Three Generations of Knowledge Management	Knowledge management has gone through three stages or ‘generations’ of development. The first generation was focused on information sharing and organisational memory. The second generation brought in the importance of relationships by introducing the concepts of tacit knowledge, collective learning and communities of practice and emphasising that knowledge management is about a systems approach to organisational change. The third generation of knowledge management is in its infancy but emphasises the link between knowing and action: the emphasis is on creating the conditions for knowledge creation and innovation which themselves are based on managing uncertainty. Each of the three generations is built on the foundations of the earlier generation and requires staff and managers to hold different competences. Most NGOs focus on first or second generations.
Gartner’s Enterprise Matrix	This model is little known in the NGO world but provides a useful analytical tool for understanding how the three main phases of knowledge management (knowledge sharing, knowledge application and knowledge creation) are subject to two sets of barriers in organisations (process barriers and cultural barriers). The model (see Figure 6 in the Appendix) suggests that there is a progressive process leading from knowledge sharing, through knowledge application to knowledge creation. For an organisation to be able to create the new knowledge necessary for what it calls increased ‘business value’ (what NGOs might call greater ability to meet future challenges), as well as share and apply existing knowledge, it must recognise and overcome all of the cultural and process barriers.
Knowledge Creation Spiral	Nonaka and Takeuchi (2001) developed an interesting and useful model to describe the four processes which they argue are necessary for organisations to generate and use knowledge. They argue that knowledge creation in organisations involves the interactions between tacit and explicit knowledge. These interactions form part of a four-stage spiral: socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation (see Figure 7 in the Appendix).

²² Polanyi, M. (1966) *The Tacit Dimension*, London: Routledge.

4.3.2 Learning competences

Learning in organisations starts with individuals who are skilled, enthusiastic learners, who are curious and unwilling to 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 – who are, in short, reflective practitioners. However, the importance of individuals' learning competences is often overlooked in NGOs. There is an assumption that all members of staff already know how to learn because most have gone through formal education up to tertiary level. This is a dangerous assumption as even those who have postgraduate degrees may be used to a formal non-experiential approach to learning that does not prepare them for learning from their experiences at work. Those whose formal education has not extended to tertiary level may undervalue their potential contributions because they mistakenly believe that learning requires developing profound new ideas whereas what may be more valuable is simply improving routine practices.

There is an assumption that all members of staff must know how to learn because most have gone through formal education

Many NGOs see the development of individuals as 'reflective practitioners' as the answer to the 'means' issue – their argument is that each member of the organisation should be enabled to take greater individual responsibility not only for their own learning but for contributing to collective learning processes in the organisation. This requires a focus on the development of the individual's competences – their knowledge, skills and attitudes.

The ongoing debate about the relationship between individual learning and collective learning is becoming increasingly sophisticated. There is a growing recognition that much of the most significant and influential learning occurs in the context of relationships – between individuals and between organisations²³. This raises the importance of developing inter-personal and inter-organisational relationships with the qualities that are needed to encourage learning. Creating communities such as the almost ubiquitous 'Communities of Practice' and networks (both tangible and virtual) is probably the most 'talked about' strategy for collective learning but improving inter-personal communication skills and building effective team-working practices can be equally important.

It is therefore important to consider what competences individuals need for reflective practice. These will, to a large extent, depend on the individual's role in the NGO and the nature of the organisation's work but some generic competences can be identified. In order to learn effectively, individuals need the following competences:

- **Knowledge about how people learn** and what they can do to be more open to formal and informal learning opportunities.
- **Understanding their role** and how it fits in to the wider organisation. Orientation programmes which enable new staff to see how their work contributes beyond the boundaries of their immediate role are important, e.g. a mentoring scheme that links new recruits to experienced staff.

²³ See for example Pasteur and Scott-Villiers (2004). Available at <http://www.livelihoods.org/lessons/Learning/lrelations.pdf>

- **Good inter-personal communication skills** such as active listening, sensitivity to others' needs and culture, demonstrating respect and building trust.
- **Using different levels of thinking** to move up the knowledge hierarchy (see Table 2) e.g. the ability to analyse the outputs from monitoring and use these to identify trends or problems that require action.
- **Ability to work in teams** and take different roles in the team as required. At times this may mean being able and willing to take a leadership role based on knowledge and skills rather than status.
- **Humility** to recognise the need to look to others for answers to questions. This should extend to those who might make useful contributions rather than simply the status of the person and recognising the value of local knowledge.
- **Networking and relationship building** i.e. to develop their own networks and make use of and contribute to other networks – both formal and informal.
- **Basic facilitation skills** to help colleagues to use their time together effectively.

Experience from Practice 4: WWF UK – Developing Facilitation Skills

WWF UK implemented a training programme to develop an internal network of facilitators skilled in helping their colleagues to use meetings and workshops more effectively by clarifying the purpose of the meeting, designing a suitable process to achieve the purpose and facilitating the meeting itself. The facilitators have also received specific training to facilitate learning workshops. This has had very positive outcomes for both the organisation and the individuals concerned.

These competences are very different to the technical knowledge and skills that specific jobs require but there is evidence that these generic learning and communication competences are essential requirements for working in NGOs. A key challenge for NGOs is how to develop individual learning plans to ensure that every member of staff is given the opportunity to develop these competences.

The use of individual competence frameworks such as those developed by the *SPHERE Project*²⁴ when linked to performance appraisal and staff development programmes can be a powerful way of recognising the importance of building individual competences. Individual development plans can use the 'A to E' framework (Wright 2004) for developing competence:

- | | |
|---|---|
| A | Aware ('I know what this is') |
| B | Basic ('I can do this with support') |
| C | Competent ('I can do this well in my own job') |
| D | Distinguished ('Others look to me for input on this') |
| E | Expert ('I write/speak on this externally') |

It is important to ensure that individuals are not put under pressure to move to 'Expert' status in every area of competence.

²⁴ For more information visit www.sphereproject.org

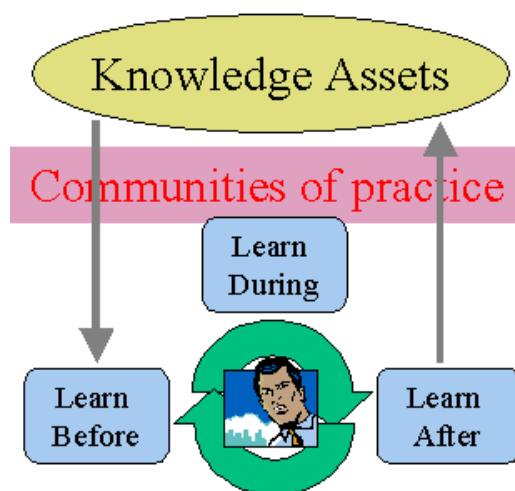
4.3.3 Methods for organisational learning

A method is a particular procedure for accomplishing or approaching something. Methods help organisations to bridge the gap between theory and practice; between the neatness of conceptual models and the messiness of organisational reality. Since the mid 1990s, many NGOs have experimented with a range of methods for organisational learning.

Learning Before, During and After (LBDA) (Collison and Parcell 2001): The LBDA approach has its origins in the US Army but was adopted by the oil company BP-Amoco before making the transition into the NGO sector. The LBDA model is deceptively simple yet can have powerful effects. It is a knowledge management method with an explicit learning purpose that can be applied to any activity. The purpose of the LBDA approach is to avoid the reinvention of existing knowledge by creating knowledge 'assets' which can be accessed by anyone in the organisation. The main features of the LBDA method are illustrated below (Figure 1).

Learning *before* is facilitated by having a shared understanding in the organisation of 'who knows what' and by a process called 'peer assist', which is a meeting or workshop where people who are thought to be experienced or knowledgeable about an issue are invited to share their experience and knowledge with an individual or team facing a particular challenge, for example designing a project or planning an advocacy campaign. Learning *during* can be helped by a system of after action reviews (AARs) that bring colleagues together after a specific event to discuss what happened, why it happened, and how to sustain strengths and improve on weaknesses. The learning *after* is captured by learning reviews leading to the agreement of specific actionable recommendations (SARs). The LBDA model Communities of Practice form a crucial part of the process which focuses on interpersonal relationships but these are supported with ICT, such as databases.

Figure 1: Learning Before, During and After



Learning Workshops: (based on the learning review part of the LBDA method described earlier) have been developed by *WWF UK* as a formal way of capturing

learning. The learning workshops have been particularly successful in capturing the learning from the time-limited cross-functional teams brought together for specific campaigns. Learning workshops are used as an alternative to formally writing up lessons learned from campaigns and have included video interviews with the individuals and groups concerned.

Communities of Practice: Communities of practice are working fellowships of individuals (either within organisations or across a number of organisations) who are united by shared interests and tasks such as fundraising or M&E. Communities of practice exist to share know-how, to improve the competence of each member, to develop and verify good practices, to foster innovative ideas or to support collaboration towards achieving a common objective. These networks may meet face-to-face from time to time but more often they are 'virtual', using a range of ICT to keep in regular contact.

Action Learning: Action learning sets are the mechanisms for using an action learning approach. Action learning sets are fixed-membership small groups comprising usually 5–8 people. Members may be drawn from the same organisation or may include staff from a number of organisations. 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' issues 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 not to give advice. Action learning sets have been promoted with considerable success by BOND where set members reported significant and sometimes revelatory learning.

4.3.4 Tools for organisational learning

A tool is a device used to carry out a particular function. A common response among NGOs when asked to embrace a new management concept or approach to work is to look for tools. This is an understandable reaction to what can otherwise seem like an overwhelming task of translating unfamiliar concepts into practical organisational reality. There is a danger, however, that some of the complexities that are inherent in organisational learning and change are oversimplified in tools. Indeed, what can make tools so reassuring is that they communicate an unintended message that the organisation simply needs to follow a blue-print in order to achieve the desired change. When choosing or developing tools, NGOs need to maintain a balance between the dangers of oversimplifying learning and the need to demystify it. There is also a need to develop the capacity to adapt the tools to suit the organisational and cultural context in which they are to be applied.

A range of tools are introduced here with references for further information provided where these are available.

Advice Network Maps (Krackhardt and Hanson 2001): 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 can be mapped to identify which colleagues individuals turn to most regularly for help or advice in their organisation and may bear little or no resemblance to the formal organisational organogram. However, the maps can pinpoint important individuals whose expertise may be formally unrecognised but who may play a crucial role in the organisation's memory.

Case Studies²⁵: 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 illustrates a series of issues for further discussion. A case study describes events in the form of a story. The text enables readers to reflect on insights into the dilemmas or problems faced by the actors in the story. Case studies often include key learning points which should be devised with the audience in mind.

Individual Performance Indicators: Producing performance indicators can be a useful way of linking organisational learning with individual job responsibilities. A set of indicators for establishing an individual's performance concerning knowledge management was produced by ITDG. These indicators are used as part of the organisation's individual performance appraisal system.

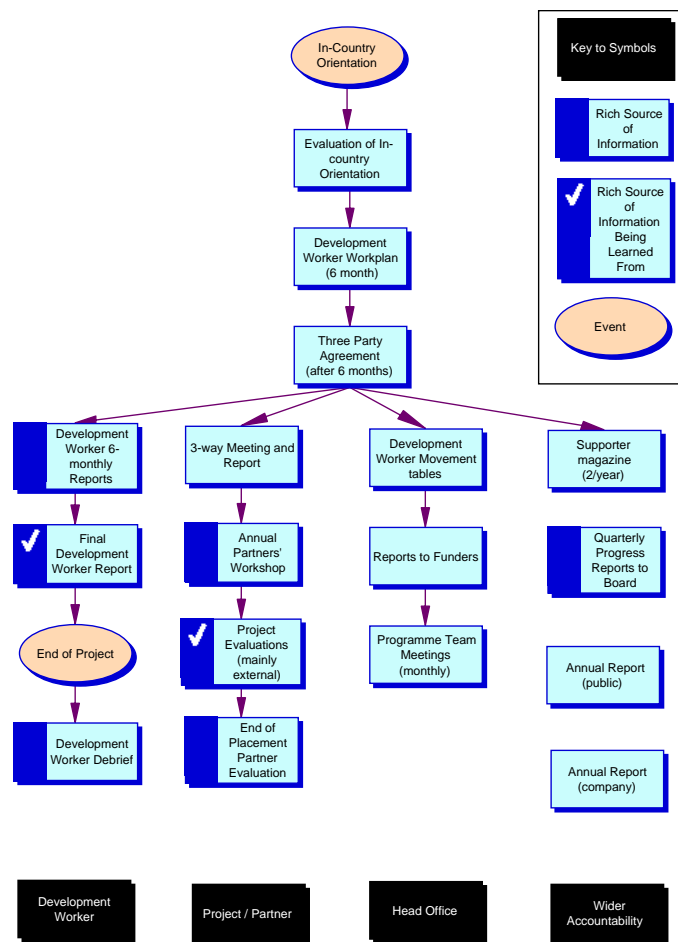
Organisational Performance Indicators: Some NGOs use performance indicators to measure progress in achieving knowledge management and organisational learning in relation to their strategic plans. Tearfund, for example, uses a system of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) – some of which are explicitly concerned with organisational learning and knowledge management – to monitor and hold managers to account for progress on achieving their strategic goals.

Learning Maps²⁶: Learning maps 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. The next stage is to brainstorm onto cards 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 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 2).

²⁵ Further guidance in preparing case studies can be found in Taylor et al. (1998).

²⁶ For further information contact the author at bruce@brucebritton.com

Figure 2: An Example of a Learning Map



Learning NGO Questionnaire: The Learning NGO Questionnaire²⁷ enables development organisations to assess their existing learning capacity. It uses the eight functions model referred to earlier 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 Questionnaire has been adapted and used by many organisations in the fields of human rights, environmental issues and international development. An 'automated' version²⁸ of the questionnaire has also been developed.

Information and Communications Technology (ICTs): Many NGOs use a wide range of ICT tools such as: organisational 'Yellow Pages' that provides a directory of brief 'bio-data' on staff to help them identify 'who knows what' in the organisation; searchable databases; document management systems; and partner databases.

²⁷ For a copy of the questionnaire that can be downloaded from the internet see Britton (1998).

²⁸ Thanks to Mark Steinlin from Helvetas in Switzerland who produced an automated version using a spreadsheet that totals the scores for each of the eight functions and then plots them automatically on an eight-axis 'spider diagram'.

4.3.5 Specialist support for organisational learning

The need for specialist support has been acknowledged by many NGOs as an important requirement for organisational learning. Many larger NGOs provide specialists whose job is to help individuals and teams learn, develop and apply 1) the competences they need to learn from their experience both individually and collectively; 2) the processes such as facilitation and team-working that enable this to happen and 3) the tools such as 'After Action Review' that can make the process of organisational learning more systematic, understandable and manageable.

The challenge in providing specialist support is to avoid the rest of the organisation abdicating their own responsibility for learning by viewing it as the sole responsibility of the specialists. Another of the difficulties experienced with adviser posts is that they are 'spread very thinly' across the organisation and hence it can be difficult to gain access to them.

An increasingly common support strategy, at least in larger NGOs, is to establish small teams or individual posts to coordinate and support learning across the organisation. Unlike their predecessors, these teams and individuals focus more on the processes of learning rather than its content. The assumption underlying this strategy is that learning is everyone's business so everyone needs support and coordinating all of their efforts is particularly important.

Experience from Practice 5: Christian Aid – Specialist Support

Christian Aid through its Programme Learning and Development Team created an organisational focus for supporting staff on organisational learning, capacity development, gender, M&E, impact assessment and partnership building.

Experience from Practice 6: Save the Children UK – Learning Team

Save the Children UK have established a Policy and Learning Team with a remit that brings together the issues of child rights programming, diversity, learning and impact assessment. An explicit purpose of the learning and impact assessment advisor is to lead organisational processes to assess, learn from and improve the organisation's programme activities.

A common problem, however, is deciding where in the organisation the learning support should be located. In larger organisations this has led to the creation of two or even three separate sources of support: 1) focusing on learning related to operational programme activities often involving specialist advisers based in the programme section; 2) concerning knowledge management and ICT which is often located in the administration section; and 3) focusing on individual learning competences which often falls under the HR section. Lack of coordination between these teams can create confusion, especially when each is approaching

organisational learning from a different perspective. Tearfund has worked to overcome this problem by creating a learning forum that brings together its learning specialists from programme work, HR and ICT.

In organisations that are too small to justify investing such significant resources in a team, organisational learning is often allocated to an individual programme learning adviser. In very small organisations an individual with other responsibilities may be expected to champion organisational learning on behalf of her or his colleagues. Individuals working in this way rely more heavily on informal and formal networks for their own support and professional development.

4.3.6 Investing adequate financial resources

Some organisations identify the lack of 'unrestricted' funds as one of the main barriers to providing adequate resources for learning. Because they see organisational learning as a core activity and it is difficult to raise funds for non-programmatic work, organisational learning is constantly 'strapped for cash'. NGOs have developed wide-ranging strategies for overcoming this problem including bi-lateral dialogues to influence donors' willingness to fund organisational learning. Others have used umbrella bodies (such as BOND in the UK) as their spokespersons. NGOs are increasingly building learning objectives into their funding agreements with donors – in longer-term 'frame' agreements as well as project and programme funding. A small number of NGOs collaborate with third party researchers in academic institutions to leverage funding for studies aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of their work.

4.4 Creating the *Opportunity*: Opening a 'Space' for Learning

In overworked and under-resourced NGOs, the most commonly identified unmet need concerning organisational learning is 'creating the space' (which, in effect, means prioritising the time) for learning. Space for learning can be understood in two ways. Firstly, space is needed for both individual and collective learning. Secondly, formal and informal space is needed.

The importance of providing informal physical spaces where colleagues can meet, network and keep each other informed should not be underestimated.

Everyone needs space to reflect on their work, get exposure to new ideas, and test out new thinking with others. Space for individual learning may be provided formally through HR processes (e.g. induction, supervision and appraisal), individual mentoring arrangements, field visits and exchanges. Space may also be created informally by enabling individuals to take some uninterrupted time for reflection on the understanding that this use of their time is sanctioned by the leadership as a legitimate activity.

Despite the attractiveness of communication technologies such as email, instant messaging and on-line communities, there seems to be no real substitute for face-to-face discussion for building relationships that encourage genuine dialogue and the

possibility of creative thinking. Space for collective learning can be provided formally by setting up training courses, workshops, conferences and meetings, building collective learning requirements into existing organisational processes and procedures such as monitoring and evaluation. The importance of providing informal physical spaces where colleagues can meet, network and keep each other informed should not be underestimated. Many people admit that one of their most important sources of information is through what might otherwise be overlooked as the 'grapevine'. It is important to recognise the need for psychological safety when creating spaces for learning and the trust and understanding of what this requires.

A number of NGOs have recognised the importance of identifying the places and times in the organisation's calendar and management processes where learning can have the biggest effect. This is what CDRA call being aware of the organisations 'rhythms'. By being aware of these rhythms NGO staff can plan formal organisational

A number of NGOs have recognised the importance of identifying the places and times in the organisation's calendar and management processes where learning can have the biggest effect.

learning activities such as learning reviews to feed into and support the NGO's decision-making cycles. Identifying opportunities when the organisation is most receptive to change can be one of the most productive strategies for enabling learning to have a real impact. For example, in the project management cycle, reviews and evaluations may provide this opportunity but in some NGOs this is when people are at their most defensive about justifying 'results'. The challenge then becomes 'how can evaluation be made more useful for learning purposes?' For example, some NGOs now require those submitting funding

proposals to state which documents they have referred to and which people they have spoken to in order to ensure that learning from earlier experience is always given due consideration. Table 3 summarises a range of formal and informal mechanisms by which NGOs can create space for both individual and collective learning.

	Individual	Collective
Formal	<p>Organisations can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legitimise learning by building it into job descriptions. • Manage workload planning to avoid overload. • Use HR mechanisms such as staff supervision and appraisal to monitor and evaluate individuals' contributions to organisational learning. • Ensure that each person has an individual plan for their own learning and development. • Develop 'reflective practitioner' competences. • Set up individual mentoring and coaching schemes. • Encourage and enable attendance at training 	<p>Organisations can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build learning objectives into project and programme plans and organisational strategy. • Develop team work as a required way of working. • Develop mechanisms for establishing collective responsibility for results. • Set up action learning sets, learning groups and communities of practice. • Organise training courses, workshops, conferences and meetings. • Introduce 'no-travel' times, 'homeweeks'²⁹ and 'reflection periods'.

²⁹ CDRA introduced a system of 'homeweeks' which are described in Soal, S. (2001) 'Making the learning organization literal – CDRA's Homeweek'. Available for download from www.cdra.org.za

	Individual	Collective
	courses, workshops, conferences and meetings. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create opportunities for individuals to represent the organisation in networks. • Encourage individuals to write articles for publication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commission learning reviews to examine themes of work. • Create cross-functional teams to develop guidelines, procedures or policies. • Include an explicit 'lessons learnt' section in all regular reporting formats.
Informal	Individuals can: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build in time for reflection at the end of each day and at significant stages of pieces of work. • Engage in informal networking. • Join and use on-line discussion forums. • Develop 'habits' that support reflective practice (eg keep a learning journal). 	Organisations can: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide physical space that encourages informal networking. • Set up intranets, newsletters or other ways of keeping people informed about each other's work.

While these mechanisms provide useful ideas there is also a question of whether it is possible to identify an organisational learning life-cycle model – similar to the models that are used in organisational development – that can guide the development of organisational learning in NGOs? Unfortunately, the answer seems to be 'No' because the paths taken by different organisations are very different and don't seem to follow an identifiable pattern. However, there is value in identifying a series of characteristics/factors which, when combined in different ways, can contribute towards providing the opportunities for organisational learning – rather like the sliding controls on a recording studio mixer desk which can be moved to different levels³⁰. These might include:

- 1) Raising the profile of organisational learning by making it a strategic goal;
- 2) Integrating learning into the planning and evaluation cycle;
- 3) Investing in knowledge management infrastructure;
- 4) Building relationships of trust.

In the following sections we will examine these factors/characteristics and how some NGOs are addressing them.

4.4.1 Raising the profile: organisational learning as a strategic goal

By including organisational learning in their strategic goals, NGOs can signal to staff, partners and other stakeholders that they take learning seriously. The following examples illustrate how some organisations have achieved this:

³⁰ Thanks to Raja Jarrah from CARE UK for this analogy.

Experience from Practice 7: Tearfund – Long-term Strategy

Tearfund has signalled the strategic importance of organisational learning and knowledge management by including the concepts in their long-term strategy for organisational development. Tearfund developed a programme to translate its aspirations into practice by setting up a 'Knowledge Management Corporate Project' involving a small cross-departmental team under the guidance of a member of the organisation's leadership team. Tearfund used the Learning NGO Questionnaire tool to engage key individuals in the assessment of the organisation's strengths and weaknesses and developed a plan for 'Light Touch Learning' based on methods such as the Learning Before During and After (LBDA) approach.

Experience from Practice 8: ITDG Group Strategy

ITDG's group strategy emphasises the importance of Knowledge, Impact and Influence as the cornerstones of the organisation's work. Sharing knowledge and learning are described as being integral to the effectiveness of ITDG's work by enabling the organisation to demonstrate practical answers to poverty and to scale up success through publishing, providing a technical advisory service, young people's education and networking.

4.4.2 Integrating learning into the planning and evaluation cycle

Many NGOs face a significant problem in closing the gap between monitoring and evaluation and planning. There is a need to view monitoring and evaluation systems as important learning opportunities and design them with learning in mind³¹. However, NGOs often acknowledge one or more of the following problems: limited competence in analysing the results of monitoring; structural barriers to making changes in projects that are underway because of the constraints created by over-rigidly applying the logframe; and ineffective mechanisms to discuss and identify action points arising from monitoring and evaluation data. Sometimes the information is available but what is lacking is the courage to make changes based on a balanced judgement of the findings or to challenge the organisation's orthodoxies.

Some basic principles for improving the usefulness of evaluations for learning purposes were proposed in a study by Carlsson et al. (undated): the intended users must be identified at the beginning of an evaluation process; the evaluation should be planned and designed with utilisation in mind; stakeholders should be involved in the whole evaluation process not just at the data collection stage; recommendations should make clear who should act on them and results should be widely distributed.

³¹ These ideas are further discussed in Praxis Paper 2: 'Rising to the Challenges: Assessing the Impacts of Organisational Capacity Building' by Hailey et al. which is available to download from www.intrac.org.

Broadening the role of staff with an M&E function to include responsibilities for organisational learning is an increasingly common structural solution.

Experience from Practice 9: Health Unlimited – Sharing Evaluation

Health Unlimited recognises the importance of a learning approach to evaluation by involving, whenever possible, members of one programme in the evaluation team of another programme. Health Unlimited has also established a technical working group which reviews all evaluation reports and feeds back key points to regional and project managers.

Experience from Practice 10: Christian Aid and ActionAid – Integrating Learning and Planning

Both Christian Aid through its Partnership Appraisal, Monitoring and Review (AMR) system³² and ActionAid through its Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS) (David and Mancini 2004) have focused on the central importance of integrating learning with organisational systems for programme planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Their well-documented experiences provide a wealth of ideas and lessons for interested NGOs.

4.4.3 Investing in knowledge management infrastructure

Every NGO can benefit from well-designed, responsive and user-friendly infrastructure for communications and knowledge management. In its search for a suitable infrastructure, the discipline of knowledge management has gone through three generations of development. As mentioned earlier, first generation knowledge management did not deliver all of its earlier promises because it focused almost exclusively on the technology and failed to recognise the importance of people and processes in designing the infrastructure and making it work. The result was many NGOs with sophisticated databases that nobody used. Second generation knowledge management thinking has learned from this experience and there is now a much better understanding of how people, process and technology have to be considered together. The infrastructure developed should enable anyone in the NGO to answer at least these questions:

What information is documented in the organisation and where can I find it?
What expertise is in the organisation and where can I find it?
What important expertise is outside the organisation and where can I find it?
How can I get access to the information I need?

The design of a knowledge management infrastructure should be based on an understanding of where individuals turn to for ideas or information when they are faced with an unfamiliar problem. A summary of the main sources of ideas and information referred to by NGO staff and key implications these have for the design

³² See Christian Aid (undated) Making us more effective: Christian Aid's Partnership Appraisal, Monitoring and Review system.

of a knowledge management infrastructure can be found in Appendix 2. Third generation knowledge management (3GKM) takes these ideas a stage further. 3GKM emphasises the link between knowing and action, and infrastructures are designed to enable organisational learning, knowledge creation and innovation.

4.4.4 Building relationships of trust

The importance of inter-personal relationships in organisational learning both within and between organisations emerged as one of the most important lessons from discussions with NGO staff. The quality of these relationships depends on mutual respect and trust. Trust influences both individual and collective learning and is one of the main factors that guides who individuals choose to talk to or even whether they will admit to having a problem they can't solve themselves.

Developing trusting relationships between organisations creates particular challenges, especially between NGOs that also share a funding relationship or may be competing for the same sources of funding. Recent work on learning in the context of North–South partnerships³³ suggests the importance of the following five principles for developing effective partnership relationships that support mutual learning:

- **Purposes and principles** of the partnership need to be explicit and negotiated.
- **Expectations, rights and responsibilities** should be clearly negotiated, defined and agreed.
- **Accountability** demands should be clear, particularly where funding arrangements may skew the accountability process for Southern organisations³⁴. For example ActionAid's ALPS³⁵ helps to create a 'downwards' accountability to balance the use of conventional indicators that focus on outputs and funding measures.
- **Long-term processes** are more conducive for trust to develop, especially where partnerships are broader than project funding arrangements. Working together towards common goals requires partners to think in new ways about planning their work together. It also requires open communication and the exchange of experience and learning.
- **Networks and communities of practice** – NGOs should encourage the development of relationships between their partners. The aim should be to build strong networks of relationships rather than 'spoke and hub' arrangements of bilateral relationships. Networks offer the potential for innovative ways of collaboration which are freed from the overshadowing effects of funding.

³³ See Byrne, A. and Vincent, R. (2004) 'Learning in Partnerships', London: BOND/Exchange. Available for download from www.bond.org.uk

³⁴ See Brehm, V. (2001) 'NGOs and Partnership', NGO Policy Briefing paper No.4, Oxford: INTRAC. Available for download from www.intrac.org.

³⁵ See David and Mancini (2004).

5 Implications for Practice: Combining Motive, Means and Opportunity

The importance for organisational learning of motive, means and opportunity has been explored in earlier sections of this paper. So, how can NGOs use this understanding to develop a coherent picture of what they can do to encourage, support and enable learning – both collective and individual – in their organisations? The key lies in developing a practical strategy for organisational learning that unites motive, means and opportunity i.e. a ‘strategic approach to learning’.

Mintzberg’s ‘planned and emergent strategy’ model described earlier (and in Appendix 1) provides some useful ideas for how this can work in practice. For example, whilst an NGO may develop a long-term plan for its organisational learning (its planned strategy), in practice many of the most significant elements of the strategy may be emergent – in other words the result of a series of apparently disconnected decisions taken in response to unforeseen threats or opportunities which together form an identifiable pattern. This simple realisation provides a useful framework for enabling NGOs to create the optimum conditions for organisational learning: NGOs need to both plan for organisational learning and also create the conditions that encourage emergent possibilities.

The more conventional ‘planned’ approach, used by many larger NGOs, involves establishing a policy and strategic objectives for organisational learning, building learning into the organisational structures, systems, procedures, standards and resource allocation. This is what might be called an ‘instrumental’, vertical approach where learning is seen largely as a means to an end – the end being greater organisational effectiveness. This approach is important – particularly for harvesting existing knowledge and making it available to others. However, on its own this planned approach is unlikely to stimulate creativity and generate new insights and innovative practices. Unless planned learning is balanced with creating unplanned

The path less often followed requires a more speculative, opportunistic approach focusing more on the values, vision and culture of the organisation.

opportunities for emergent learning it may even run the risk of creating what Shiva (2001) calls ‘the monoculture of the mind’ – a blinkered approach to learning where certain approaches dominate thinking and organisations are closed to challenging new ideas from outside.

The path less often followed requires a more speculative, opportunistic (some might say risk-taking) approach focusing more on the values, vision and culture of the organisation. This creates a rich ‘ecosystem of possibilities’ by encouraging a passion for learning and sharing knowledge among staff, developing staff learning competences, creating opportunities for sharing, and developing a culture of learning. The ‘ecosystem of possibilities’ provides a fertile environment for the seeds of learning to grow but with no clear, pre-determined plan for what will emerge. This can be characterised as a more ‘developmental’, horizontal approach where learning is recognised as an end in itself. Such an environment is not as likely to produce such intensive short-term yields as taking the planned approach. However, the greater possibilities for

increasing the diversity of ideas and richness of knowledge are, in the long term, likely to have a greater effect on organisational creativity, adaptability and sustainability.

The two approaches – planned and emergent – are, of course, not mutually exclusive and the balance struck between them in any organisation will be influenced by a large number of factors such as its size, resource base, the nature of its work, how risk-averse it is and its level of decentralised power and authority. The challenge for each NGO is therefore to develop and implement its own strategy which finds a workable balance between the planned and emergent approaches and provides its staff with the necessary motive, means and opportunities for organisational learning. Table 4 summarises what NGOs can do to develop a strategy for organisational learning drawn from the suggestions made in earlier sections of this Paper.

Table 4: Developing a strategy for organisational learning

Develop a planned strategy	Create conditions for 'emergent' possibilities
Motive	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Create a clear vision for the organisation of how organisational learning can contribute to the organisation's effectiveness, capacity, sustainability and health. ▪ Identify barriers to learning and develop ways of overcoming them. ▪ Build learning goals into plans at all levels: individual, project, programme and strategic. ▪ Demonstrate the value of investing in organisational learning by monitoring and evaluating the outcomes and impact of organisational learning initiatives. ▪ Develop systems for acknowledging and rewarding learning. ▪ Develop mechanisms for establishing collective responsibility for results. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Share practical examples of the benefits of organisational learning. ▪ Share and celebrate successful initiatives. ▪ De-mystify learning by familiarising staff with useful conceptual models. ▪ Emphasise the importance of 'small scale' learning.
Means	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Map out where expertise lies in the organisation. ▪ Develop team-working. ▪ Introduce a range of methods such as mentoring, coaching, action-learning and communities of practice. ▪ Build an appropriate knowledge management infrastructure. ▪ If appropriate, create posts for supporting organisational learning or knowledge management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop individual competences. ▪ Recognise the importance of cultural dimensions of learning when building competences and developing methods and tools. ▪ Strengthen inter-personal relationships and build trust.

Opportunity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Create the 'space' for learning. ▪ Build learning into existing systems and procedures. ▪ Build learning requirements into project design, monitoring and evaluation. ▪ Build time and resources for reflection and learning into project and programme proposals. ▪ Use a system of annual studies on 'what have we learned from evaluations?' ▪ Use thematic learning reviews. ▪ Involve staff/partners alongside external consultants in review and evaluation teams. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Build a rich web of interconnections within the organisation and with other organisations by encouraging networking and the development of communities of practice. ▪ Introduce 'no-travel' times, 'homeweeks' and reflection periods.

6 Concluding Remarks

For effective organisational learning, NGOs need to attend to the motive, the means and the opportunity for their own and their partners' learning. Organisational learning strategies also need to recognise that organisations are complex systems. As Margaret Wheatley explains:

To bring health to a system, connect it to more of itself. The primary change strategy becomes quite straightforward. In order to change, the system needs to learn more about itself from itself. The system needs processes to bring it together... People need to be connected to the fundamental identity of the organisation or community...to be connected to new information...to reach past traditional boundaries and develop relationships with people anywhere in the system (Wheatley 1999).

Learning in organisations is both deeply personal and strongly influenced by socio-cultural factors. It is easy for donor organisations to assume that Western conceptual models that describe the management and organisational functioning of NGOs are universally applicable. However, a number of recent studies³⁶ demonstrate the need

Assumptions about the universal applicability of Western conceptual models about knowledge and learning ... may have overlooked not only the cultural dimension of learning but also the importance of power relations.

to challenge the complacent assumption that Western models of management and organisation are equally applicable to NGOs no matter where they are located culturally or geographically. Even neighbouring European countries seem to have a differing understanding of these issues as a recent study of capacity building in the French NGO sector suggests (Sorgenfrei 2004).

Many writers on organisational learning (including this author) have made similar assumptions about the universal applicability of Western conceptual models about knowledge and learning – both individual and collective – and have therefore

³⁶ See Alvarado (2004) and Jackson (2003).

overlooked not only the cultural dimension of learning but also the importance of power relations in shaping the purpose as well as the process of learning in NGOs. This is deeply ironic for 'the development field has its own traditions to draw upon – such as popular and adult education – that see learning, in part, as a process of revealing and transforming power relations. Paulo Freire's widely influential approach to literacy saw personal and collective critical reflection as instrumental to the process of social change' (Chambers and Pettit 2004). The potential for organisational learning to have an equally significant effect on organisational transformation has yet to be fully explored but could potentially bring about genuine shifts in the balance of power in North–South NGO partnership relationships.

While this Praxis Paper does provide an overview of organisational learning and knowledge management in the context of aid and development it can be concluded that major challenges remain to be addressed. Firstly, there continues to be a significant appetite amongst NGO staff for practical examples of how to translate theory into practice. Associated with this is the need to measure the impact these practices have on organisational capacity and effectiveness.

Secondly, it is recognised that most of the models and practices currently available are based on a Western understanding of individual and collective learning that is not necessarily relevant to practitioners from different cultures and contexts. The following experience from VBNK in Cambodia provides an example of an approach to organisational learning that has been developed in response to the local context. The challenge is to build on experiences such as this and to identify and explore a wider range of methods and tools that are relevant and appropriate to different cultural and organisational contexts.

Experience from Practice 11: VBNK's Cultural Approach to Learning

The experience of the NGO VBNK (a training institute for managers of development organisations) in Cambodia³⁷ demonstrates the importance of being sensitive to the cultural and historical context and also a willingness to use innovative approaches, wherever they may originate, to ensure that cultural factors do not become an unnecessary constraint to individual and collective learning. The consequences of Cambodia's tragic history run deep in the individual and collective psyche and have had huge effects on the way civil society has developed and is seen by the population. VBNK has developed its approach to organisational learning in a cultural context that discourages challenging, questioning and holding dissenting views, where people's experience of childhood education is rote learning and is characterised by an understandable lack of trust between the population and those in authority. Through the organisation's innovative CHART Project (Creative Holistic Action-research for Relationship Transformation) VBNK has developed training modules that concentrate on providing a safe environment for learning, use an action-learning approach to encourage reflection on experience, and include a wide range of less conventional methodologies including drama, sculpting and art that allow people to express themselves in ways other than verbally or in writing.

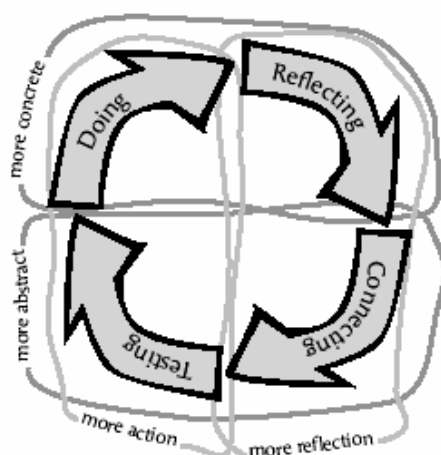
³⁷ I am grateful to Jenny Pearson, VBNK's Director and to Conor Boyle for providing information on VBNK's approach. For further information visit www.vbnk.org.

Appendix 1: Description of Conceptual Models

Experiential Learning Cycle

Kolb's four stage 'Experiential Learning Cycle' models how individuals learn from experience through doing, reflecting, connecting and testing. 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 cycle is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Experiential Learning Cycle



Single and Double Loop Learning

The concepts of single and double loop learning were introduced by the behavioural psychologists, Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, and have subsequently been adapted by other writers to include triple loop learning (see Table 1).

Single loop learning can be thought of in terms of generating *improvements* to the way existing rules or procedures for working in an organisation are applied in practice. It is often called 'thinking inside the box' because the theories, assumptions, principles and policies which underpin the organisation's rules and procedures are rarely if ever questioned. 'How?' questions are posed 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 and procedures are based. For this reason double loop learning is often called 'thinking outside the box'. The consequences of double loop learning are potentially far-reaching and may even lead to what has been called triple loop learning – challenging the organisation's principles and assumptions, requiring an open and often robust exchange of views. The questioning nature of double loop and triple loop learning and the way they challenge strongly held positions and organisational power structures are reasons why many organisations may deliberately discourage this type of learning (or at least make it difficult). In simple terms, people (usually managers) may avoid the organisational problems exposed by double loop and triple 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

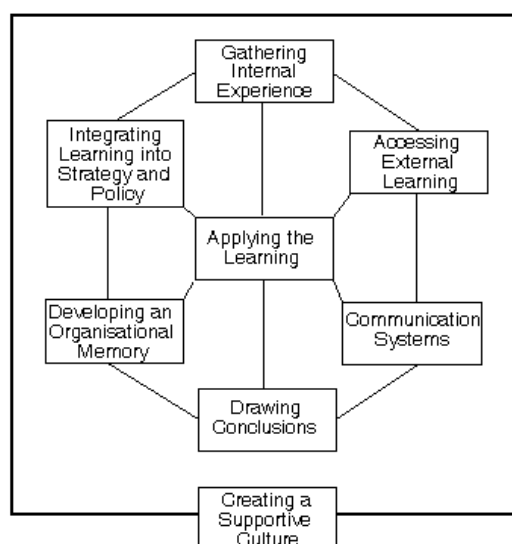
problem unsolved. Restructuring the organisation is a commonly used tactic for giving the appearance of change whilst often leaving the underlying power structures untouched.

Table 1: The characteristics of single, double and triple loop learning			
	Single Loop Learning	Double Loop Learning	Triple Loop Learning
Involves	Apply existing rules/procedures Deal with symptoms of problems Thinking 'inside the box'	Question assumptions and rules/procedures Examine underlying causes of problems Thinking 'outside the box'	Examine core values and identity Rethink fundamental purpose and principles Thinking 'about the box'
Intended outcomes	More efficient ways of working Improved application of rules/procedures	More effective ways of working New knowledge and insights Improved rules and procedures Improved systems and strategies	Renewed statement of core values and purpose Renewed identity

Eight Function Model

The Eight Function Model suggests that in order to learn effectively, an NGO must attend to eight key functions: Gathering Internal Experience; Accessing External Learning; Communication Systems; Drawing Conclusions; Developing an Organisational Memory; Integrating Learning into Strategy and Policy; Applying the Learning and Creating a Supportive Culture. Each of these functions is interconnected to the others. Creating a supportive culture embraces the other seven because without an organisational culture supportive of learning, there is unlikely to be commitment to the other functions. Central to organisational learning is applying the learning. The underlying assumption of this model is that learning can only be said to occur when it results in action. The aim of the model is to create 'learning NGOs'.

Figure 2: The 'Eight Function' Model

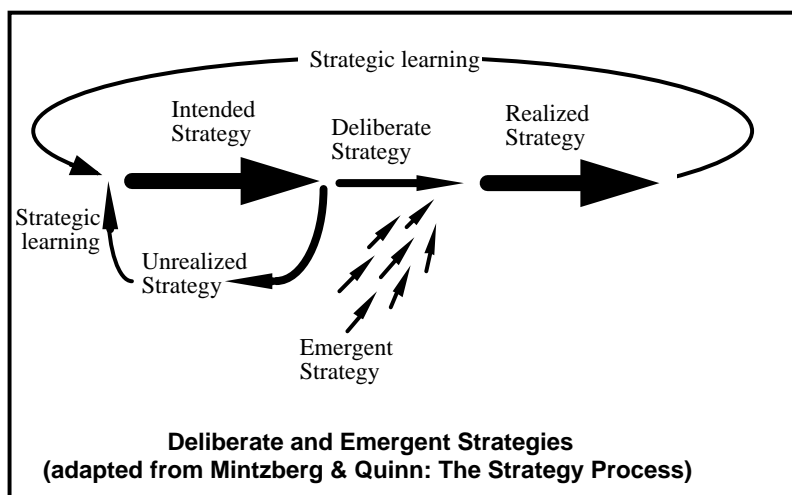


The Key Functions of a Learning Organisation (based on Slim, 1993)

Planned and emergent strategy³⁸

Mintzberg and Quinn introduced a model to explain their understanding of the reality of strategy development. The model (see Figure 3) makes a very enlightening distinction between planned and emergent strategy. The authors argue that the strategy which is actually *realised* (implemented) by an organisation is rarely exactly what was originally *intended* (planned). Some elements of strategy *emerge* from its response to opportunities and threats that the organisation faces as it carries out its work. Some of the organisation's strategic intentions may be *unrealised* for whatever reason – maybe the window of opportunity passes before the organisation can respond; maybe the organisation prioritises some emergent strategic goals over others which are abandoned or allowed to 'fade away' into obscurity. These elements can be describe as: *emergent* strategy (i.e. unplanned but implemented); *deliberate* strategy (i.e. planned and implemented); and *unrealised* strategy (i.e. planned but not implemented). An organisation can learn from each of them in order to better respond to new opportunities and new threats as they emerge in the future – hence the 'strategic learning' arrows in the diagram.

Figure 3: Planned and Emergent Strategy



The Knowledge Hierarchy³⁹

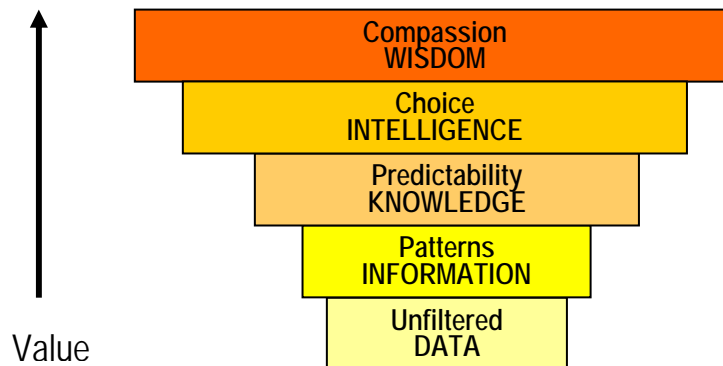
The knowledge hierarchy is a five level model which illustrates the progressive value added as data is transformed into wisdom (see Figure 4). In this model, data are assumed to be simple isolated facts. When facts are placed in a context, and combined together within a structure, information emerges. When information is given meaning by interpreting and internalising it, information becomes knowledge. At this point, data exists within a mental structure that can be consciously used, for example, to predict future consequences, or to make decisions. As people use this knowledge to choose between alternatives, behaviour becomes intelligent. Finally, when values and commitment guide intelligent behaviour, that behaviour may be said to be based on wisdom. In this way, each transition adds value to the original data through human effort. The view underlying the model sees the construction of

³⁸ Mintzberg, H. and Quinn, J.B. (1992) *The Strategy Process: Concepts and Contexts*, London: Prentice-Hall.

³⁹ For a critical introduction to the knowledge hierarchy, see Tuomi (1999).

knowledge as somewhat similar to using letters to build words that are subsequently combined to meaningful sentences and hence to stories that can guide behaviour.

Figure 4: The Knowledge Hierarchy



Tacit and Explicit Knowledge⁴⁰

Knowledge can be divided into two main categories: explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge can be expressed in words and numbers and shared between people using written or verbal means. It can be divided into two categories: *codified* explicit knowledge that is written down in documents or stored in databases and; *personalised* explicit knowledge that is not written down (although it could be) and is communicated verbally between colleagues, more commonly called 'knowledge in practice'.

Tacit knowledge is highly personal and hard to formalise, making it difficult to communicate or share with others. Tacit knowledge has two dimensions. The first is the *technical* dimension which encompasses the kind of personal skills or crafts often referred to as 'know-how'. The second is the *cognitive* dimension which consists of beliefs, ideals, values, and mental models which are deeply ingrained in us and which we often take for granted. While difficult to articulate, this cognitive dimension of tacit knowledge shapes the way we perceive the world. Although tacit knowledge may be unconscious or is difficult to express verbally it can nevertheless be shared and learned through personal observation or shared experience which is why working alongside (shadowing) an experienced colleague or going on field visits can be such powerful ways of learning.

The People, Process and Technology Model⁴¹

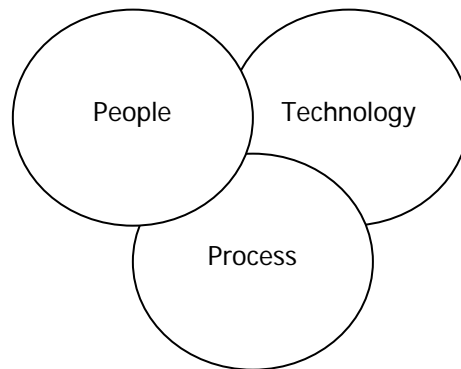
This model (see Figure 5) identifies three main elements for successful knowledge management: 1) the importance of connecting people who have the knowledge to help each other, and developing their willingness to ask, listen and share; 2) processes to simplify sharing, validation and distillation of knowledge, and 3) a reliable, user-friendly technology infrastructure to facilitate communication. Although one might reasonably expect NGOs to focus primarily on the people dimension since it is inside people's minds that knowledge is created, many NGOs have made a significant investment in technology and process – developing 'knowledge banks' and 'resource databases' to capture organisational memory.

⁴⁰ Polanyi, M. (1966) *The Tacit Dimension*, London: Routledge

⁴¹ Collison and Parcell (2001).

The experience of many NGOs has been that a technology-driven approach does not deliver what was intended unless there is adequate focus on people and process. The model provides a useful reminder that the processes and technology of knowledge management should be planned and developed to serve the people who will use them and not – as often seems to be the case – the other way round.

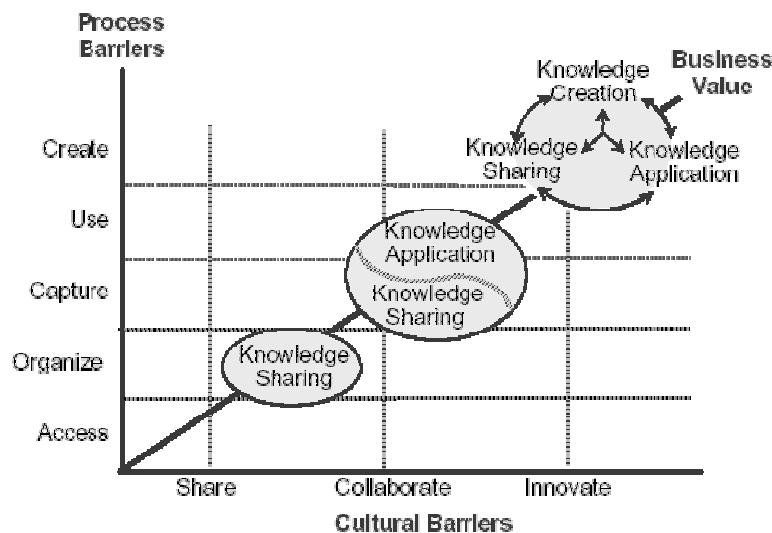
Figure 5: The People, Process and Technology Model



Gartner's Enterprise Matrix

Gartner's enterprise matrix provides an important reminder about the effect of organisational culture and the need to address not only the technical processes but also create suitable conditions for organisational learning and change. In the model three main phases of knowledge management are described (knowledge sharing, knowledge application and knowledge creation) which are subject to two sets of barriers in organisations (process barriers and cultural barriers). On the X axis are the main cultural barriers – creating the conditions to share, collaborate and then innovate. On the Y axis, the main process barriers are how to access, organise, capture, use and create knowledge. The model suggests that there is a progressive process leading from knowledge sharing, through knowledge application to knowledge creation. For an organisation to be able to create the new knowledge necessary for what it calls increased 'business value' as well as share and apply existing knowledge it must recognise and overcome all of the cultural and process barriers.

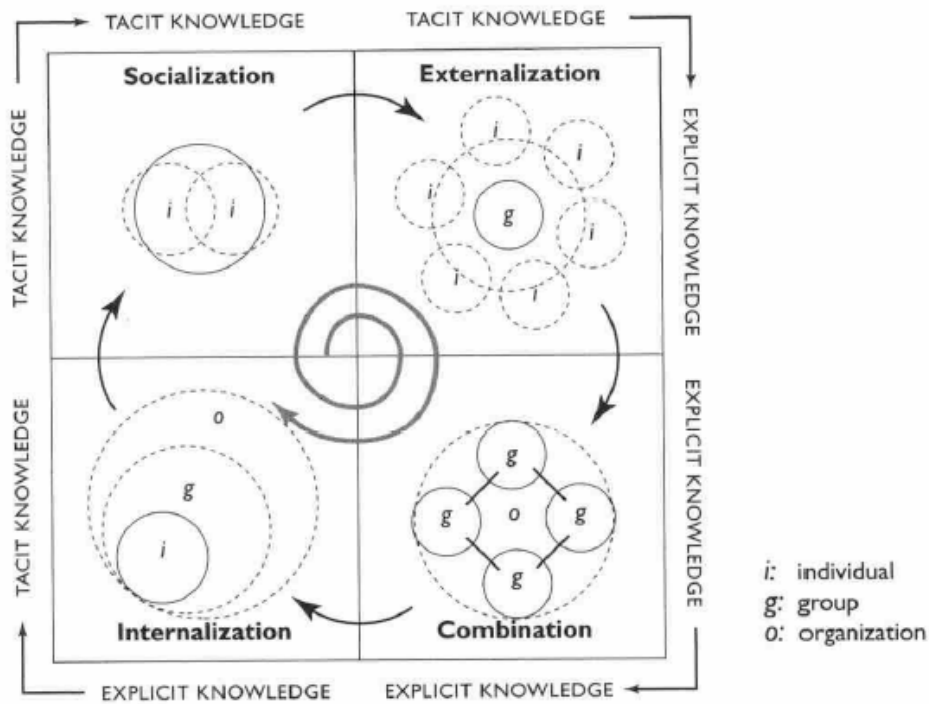
Figure 6: Gartner's Enterprise Matrix



The Knowledge Creation Spiral⁴²

The Japanese authors on organisational learning, Nonaka and Takeuchi, developed an interesting and useful model to describe the four processes which they argue are necessary for organisations to generate and use knowledge based on interactions between tacit and explicit knowledge. These interactions form part of a four-stage spiral comprising socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: The Knowledge Creation Spiral



Socialisation involves individuals sharing their tacit knowledge by being involved together in joint activities. In NGOs this would include time spent together in team meetings or away-days and time spent shadowing or observing colleagues as they carry out their work. In practice, socialisation means people to people and face to face contact, usually two at a time. It is essentially a 'horizontal' process between peers.

Externalisation makes an individual's tacit knowledge explicit. The process of externalisation requires interaction between individuals in order to articulate their understanding in the form of images, models, or words (often as stories or metaphors). For externalisation to happen, individuals need to have confidence and trust that their ideas will be taken seriously by their colleagues. Communities of Practice are important settings for the externalisation of knowledge because they are built on trust. Importantly, externalisation also involves enabling beneficiaries to articulate their tacit knowledge. In NGOs, the externalisation of knowledge is often encouraged through the use of non-written forms such as story-telling and PLA techniques.

Combination involves the conversion of different bodies of explicit knowledge into more complex systems of explicit knowledge that can be made available widely in the organisation

⁴² Nonaka and Takeuchi (2001).

and beyond. So, for example, the analysis of findings from research or evaluations may be combined to develop 'lessons' or may be written down as internal guidelines or procedures which can be applied in different settings. Combination involves collecting, processing, validating, testing and then disseminating knowledge. Combination is the phase in the knowledge creation spiral where knowledge management approaches such as Communities of Practice and the use of ICT can be of particular value.

Internalisation involves the internalising of explicit knowledge into tacit knowledge so that the new knowledge becomes 'second nature' for individuals or, in Senge's organisational terms, part of the organisation's shared mental models and culture ('the way we do things'). Internalisation can be helped through dialogue and training but is most powerfully reinforced through 'learning by doing'. The process of internalisation is helped if the knowledge can be made available in the form of documents, manuals, models and stories.

Appendix 2: Designing Knowledge Management Infrastructure

This table describes where NGO staff look for ideas and information and examines what implications this has for the design of a knowledge management infrastructure.

	Accessed through...	Requires...	Helped by...	Notes
Own experience	Reflection	Memory Skills of reflective practice	Development of skills of reflective practice. Culture that encourages reflection and learning.	Can be enhanced by keeping a learning journal.
Colleagues' experience	Dialogue Correspondence	Knowledge of who knows what / who to talk to. Systems that enable and encourage formal and informal communication and the sharing of knowledge.	Longer-term involvement in the organisation Organisational 'Yellow Pages' Culture that encourages learning and the sharing of ideas.	Includes work groups, teams and internal 'advisers'.
Documentation of other projects	Documentation Reading	Awareness of documents. Availability and relevance of documents. Access to documents. Willingness and time to read.	Document management system (including searchable database). Documents that refer to important lessons learned. Documents that point towards individuals with knowledge and experience. Culture that permits/creates time for reading (i.e. it's not seen as 'slacking')	Documentation could include proposals, plans, implementation reports, reports of monitoring, review and evaluation.
Policies, Procedures, Guidelines and Standards	Documentation Reading	Awareness of documents. Availability and relevance of documents. Access to documents. Willingness to read.	Document management system.	Clarify agency requirements or understanding of 'good practice'.
Partners	Dialogue Correspondence Documentation	Awareness of relevant partner experience. Active involvement of partners in contributing to knowledge base.	Valuing knowledge generated from partner experience. Partner database.	
Communities of Practice (CoP)	Discussion	Awareness of CoP Membership of CoP	Willingness to share ideas. Trust	CoP may be internal to one's own organisation or external involving members from many organisations.

	Accessed through...	Requires...	Helped by...	Notes
'Experts'	Discussion Correspondence	Awareness of potentially helpful 'expert' Willingness of 'expert' to help.	Personal recommendation Previous contact.	Involvement of expert may involve fee.
Other NGOs	Face to face dialogue Access to website Correspondence Visits Secondments	Awareness of individuals or organisations with potentially useful experience. Opportunity / invitation to visit.	Good personal networking Searchable websites Making publications available for download on the internet.	
Networks	Face to face discussion 'Virtual' communication	Awareness of networks. Membership of networks.	Willingness to share ideas and ask for advice.	Can be 'real' or 'virtual'
Conferences and workshops	Involvement in event	Awareness of events. Resources to attend event. Access to report and other documentation.	People willing to organise events. Making documentation available for download on the internet.	Requires a considerable amount of organisation. Can be expensive.
Publications	Library searches Internet searches Reading!	Awareness of relevant publications. Publication of relevant materials. Ability to search for relevant publications.	Individuals / organisations willing to publish their ideas. Making publications available for download on the internet.	Can be 'academic' rather than practical.

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Oliver Cromwell once said 'A man is wisest when he knows what he does not know'. As a result of this research, but by Cromwell's measure only, I can now count myself as a truly wise individual.

List of abbreviations

AAR	After Action Review – a part of the LBDA method.
ALPS	Accountability Learning and Planning System of ActionAid
BOND	British Overseas NGOs for Development based in London
CAFOD	The official overseas development and relief agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales
CDRA	The Community Development Resource Association based in South Africa
HR	Human resources
ICT	Information and communications technology
INTRAC	The International NGO Training and Research Centre in Oxford
ITDG	Intermediate Technology Development Group
KM	Knowledge management
LBDA	The 'Learning Before, During and After' method – developed originally by the US army, adopted by the oil industry and subsequently adapted and used in many NGOs.
LFA	Logical Framework Approach
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MMO	Means, motive and opportunity
OD	Organisation Development
PLA	Participatory Learning in Action
SMC	The Swedish Mission Council
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas

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 brings about learning. Action learning was devised by Reg Revans ⁴³ . For further information see also Pedler ⁴⁴ and Weinstein ⁴⁵ .
Community of Practice	A group of individuals sharing a common working practice even though not part of a commonly constituted work team.
Competence	Competence is the capacity to use knowledge and skills for specified purposes. In the context of an NGO, an individual's competence is related to their ability to fulfil the requirements of their work.
Facilitation	An approach to guided learning, growth and development that involves drawing out and building on the existing knowledge of others.
Knowledge	Knowledge is the outcome of adding sense or meaning to information or experience in order to make it useful. Meaning is not something that is provided to people, it is made by them through intellectual effort. Hence, knowledge is the product of an active intellectual process which goes on in the minds of individuals. Individuals may be conscious of some of their knowledge and unconscious of other aspects. Of their conscious knowledge, they may be able to articulate some aspects and be unable to articulate others.
Knowledge management	Knowledge management is the planned combination of 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 <i>knowledge creation</i> – the use of innovation to create new knowledge.

⁴³ Revans, R. (1983) *The ABC of Action Learning*, International Foundation of Action Learning.

⁴⁴ Pedler, M. (1994) *A Learning Company Guide to Action Learning*, Learning Company Project.

⁴⁵ Weinstein, K. (1995) *Action Learning: A Journey in Discovery and Development*, London: Harper Collins.

Learning	Learning is the social process by which we develop knowledge, skills, insights, beliefs, values, attitudes, habits, feelings, wisdom, shared understanding and self-awareness. Learning occurs through our active engagement with the world around us. Learning can occur through structured reflection on personal or shared experience, through instruction or through study. An important outcome of learning is increased competence. Because learning involves the creation of connections between previously unrelated knowledge it is also an important way in which new knowledge is generated.
Learning organisation	An 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.
Lesson	A lesson is useful knowledge distilled from experience that establishes principles for guiding action. In the context of organisations such as NGOs, the term 'lesson' often refers to knowledge that someone (usually in a position of authority) believes others should learn in order to attain agreed standards, achieve objectives or improve an organisation's effectiveness.
Organisational learning	Individual and collective learning in an organisational context that contributes to changed organisational behaviour.
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. Reflective practitioners are skilled in single and double loop learning.

Praxis Paper No. 3

Organisational Learning in NGOs: *Creating the Motive, Means and Opportunity*

By Bruce Britton

NGOs work in an increasingly demanding environment characterised by growing competition for shrinking aid budgets. This makes them very action-oriented. But most NGOs also realise the need to learn from their own experience and keep up with new practices in the field if they are to remain relevant and effective. To be a learning NGO requires organisations to simultaneously balance the need to take a strategic approach to organisational learning (at the highest level of organisational planning and management) with the recognition that learning is also an intensely personal process that goes on in the minds of individuals.

This Praxis Paper explores the importance of organisational learning in NGOs. It examines why NGOs need to provide the motive, means and opportunity for organisational learning, and introduces practical examples of how pioneering NGOs are doing this. The Paper recognises that learning is understood differently across cultures and contexts but that most current models are based on a Western understanding. There is therefore a need to engage with capacity building practitioners to explore innovative approaches which are relevant, appropriate and accessible across a wide range of cultures and contexts.

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