
The Learning NGO

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1. Introduction

Many NGOs are examining the relevance of management and organisational concepts from the corporate world in order to increase their effectiveness, efficiency and impact. The emerging use of ideas from organisation development (OD) in the NGO world is part of this trend (James. 1997). The recognition of the importance of management development in NGOs is another example of a concept which has its roots in private sector organisations but has been modified to suit the purpose, values and success criteria of the NGO sector. A more recent focus of attention in the corporate world — the importance of learning in organisations — has been the subject of many current books and has spawned the idea of ‘the learning organisation’. The ideas underpinning the concept of a ‘learning organisation’ have a generic appeal and, as a result, organisational learning is the subject of increasing interest in the NGO sector and the ‘not-for-profit’ world more widely.

This paper sets out to examine the relevance of the ‘learning organisation’ concept for NGOs and concludes that the ideas have significant relevance for the sector. The paper aims to provide NGO staff with a conceptual framework for the subject which is relevant to organisations which are value-driven, non-profit making and development-oriented. However, the purpose of the paper is not simply to describe the characteristics of learning organisations but to encourage NGOs to examine their organisations in the light of these characteristics. For this reason the paper includes a diagnostic tool (‘Learning NGO Questionnaire’) which NGOs can use to assess their current capacity for organisational learning.

Some may find the paper overly prescriptive. If this is the case I apologise in advance. The material, and particularly the questionnaire have been used with a number of NGOs of different sizes and in different locations and have evolved in the light of this experience. Feedback from these NGOs suggests that the ideas contained in the tools spark off a great deal of valuable discussion and reflection and sometimes lead in directions which were quite unanticipated.

Key principles underlying learning organisations are participation, empowerment, a willingness to embrace change and the acknowledgement of grass-roots experience. These are entirely consistent with good development practice. Alan Fowler lays down an enormous challenge for NGOs when he says:

An almost universal weakness of NGDOs is found within their often limited capacity to learn, adapt and continuously improve the quality of what they do. This is a serious concern because the future usefulness of NGDOs for the world’s poor will depend on their ability to overcome their learning disabilities. Crudely put, if NGDOs do not learn from their experience, they are destined for insignificance and will atrophy as agents of social change. NGDOs urgently need to put in place systems which ensure that they know and learn from what they are achieving — as opposed to what they are doing — and then apply what they learn. (1997: p 64)

I hope that this paper will help to stimulate ideas about how NGOs can rise to the challenge they face.

Bruce Britton
Edinburgh, May 1998

2. The Learning Organisation

2.1 Background

The concept of the learning organisation is one which has been popularised since the late 1980s. At a time of increasing unpredictability and competitiveness in the environment of most organisations, it is not surprising that writers on management have attempted to identify what enables organisations to cope with or even thrive in a changing world. A strong case has been established for the importance of learning as a means of improving organisational effectiveness even against the background of considerable change and unpredictability. The concept of the 'learning organisation' has become shorthand for an organisation which is 'skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights' (Garvin 1993).

The term 'learning organisation' was first used in relation to private and corporate organisations. However, it is an idea which has a resonance in the NGO sector. Whilst there are still relatively few NGOs which would call themselves 'learning organisations', examples of good practice in NGOs are not hard to find. Indeed, as NGOs become more aware of the concept and its application, we are likely to see more NGOs consciously adopting the underpinning ideas of the learning organisation in their approaches to work.

There are many different definitions of the learning organisation. One particularly influential definition is that of Pedler et al. (1991): 'an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself.' In their vision, the learning organisation has eleven key characteristics (see Box 1).

Box 1: Eleven Characteristics of Learning Organisations

1. **A learning approach to strategy** (encouraging flexibility by including strategic learning feedback loops).
2. **Participative policy making.**
3. **Informating** (using information technology to inform and empower people).
4. **Formative accounting and control** (structuring financial systems to assist learning).
5. **Internal exchange** (ensuring constructive, supportive relationships within the organisation).
6. **Reward flexibility** (using creativity in how people are rewarded for good performance).
7. **Enabling structures** (avoiding multi-level hierarchies and encouraging flattened, collegiate-style structures).
8. **Boundary workers as environmental scanners** (acknowledging the value of those who deal with the 'outside world' as sources of crucial information which can inform decision-making).
9. **Inter-organisational learning** (identifying opportunities for networking, strategic partnerships, benchmarking and joint learning activities).
10. **Learning climate** (facilitating experimentation and allowing mistakes providing they are used as learning opportunities).
11. **Self-development for all** (resources and encouragement for self-development are made available for all members of the organisation).

Source: Pedler et al. 1991.

Some authors, such as Michael Pearn (Pearn et al. 1995), caution against focusing on *the* learning organisation since, in his view, this tends to prompt the wrong kinds of questions.

- What is *it*?
- How can you tell if you are *one*?
- How do you become *one*?
- What do you do after you become *one*?

These questions, he says, assume that being a learning organisation is a steady state which one reaches and remains at unless there is a 'fall from grace'. Furthermore, Pearn emphasises the *process* of organisational learning rather than the state of being a learning organisation. His focus is a useful one to bear in mind. However, most people *do* ask the kinds of question listed above and hence a target describing what we are aiming for can be useful to help NGOs direct their energies and resources effectively.

2.2 What is a 'Learning Organisation'?

Gareth Morgan, in his book Images of Organisations (1986), points out that organisations cannot, themselves, learn; it is the individuals within them who learn. However, there is more to a learning organisation than simply a collection of individuals who are learning. Swieringa and Wierdsma (1992) define organisational learning as 'the changing of organisational behaviour' which occurs through a *collective* learning process. They point out that an organisation can only learn because its individual members learn. Without individual learning there can be no question of organisational learning. On the other hand, an organisation has not automatically learned when individuals within it have learned something. Individual learning is a *necessary* but not a *sufficient* condition for organisational learning" (ibid: 33).

Learning organisations are organised in such a way that learning is a prominent feature at a number of different levels:

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

A definition of a learning organisation which was specifically written with 'not-for-profit' organisations in mind is:

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

Key to a learning organisation is that it exists only in the sense of a complex set of practices, systems and relationships which link the organisation's vision, mission, values and behaviour

to desired outcomes and results. An effective learning organisation will constantly question its assumptions and review its objectives in the light of its own experience and changes in the external environment.

2.3 *Individual Learning and the Reflective Practitioner*

Whilst it is important to remember that learning organisations are more than simply ‘containers’ for individuals who are learning, one indicator of a learning organisation is that everyone, irrespective of their position, makes a valued contribution to the organisation’s learning. The concept of organisational learning itself requires an understanding of three important terms: information, knowledge and wisdom (see Box 2).

Box 2: Information, Knowledge and Wisdom

Information

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

Knowledge

Systematically organised information which, by the processes of analysis, comparison, testing and generalising can be used to answer complex questions. Organisations can act as containers for knowledge - either in the minds of individual members of the organisation (in which case the organisation is very vulnerable if the individual leaves); or in the organisation’s record keeping systems (which integrates the knowledge into the fabric of the organisation but may make it difficult to access); or, finally, in the physical objects or structures which the organisation uses (for example, an NGO could embody some of its knowledge in the design and construction of a particular type of tube well designed to meet local conditions).

Wisdom

This involves uniting the facts and insights of knowledge with the fruits of experience in a way which can usefully guide action (for example, through the development of procedures, policies, and particular approaches to work). An NGO may develop custom-designed PRA techniques as a result of its experience of working with local communities. In such a way, the knowledge of PRA is combined with the experience of using the technique with local communities so that the NGO’s staff have the wisdom to adapt the PRA approach to meet future requirements.

Organisations can be awash with information but still have very few of the characteristics which describe a learning organisation. Indeed, information overload is often cited as a barrier to individual learning.

Information only has *value* when it is converted into knowledge. Knowledge becomes *precious* when it is combined with experience to produce wisdom which can be used to guide action. However, even wisdom has limitations if it is locked in the minds of individuals and not shared with others.

Wisdom which is personal and available only to the individual and not shared is what Nonaka (1991) calls ‘**tacit**’ wisdom. Tacit wisdom is highly personal and may be difficult to communicate to others. However, making personal wisdom available to others is what Nonaka sees as the central activity of the learning organisation. He calls this process **articulation**.

A learning organisation, therefore, supports its members to translate information into knowledge and wisdom and then converts the **tacit** wisdom of its individual members into **explicit** wisdom which can be accessed and used by others both within and outside the organisation.

The process of articulation involves helping people express what may initially appear to be inexpressible - their subjective insights, intuitions and understanding developed through experience. Individuals may need considerable support and encouragement to make their wisdom available to others. Organisational learning, therefore, requires what Donald Schon (1987) has called **reflective practitioners** working in an enabling learning environment.

Reflective practitioners are individuals who are skilled in the process of reflecting on their practice whilst they are acting, and doing so in a way that enables them to do their jobs more thoughtfully and effectively.

Learning organisations need reflective practitioners who are able and willing to challenge continuously their own assumptions and the assumptions of their colleagues in a constructive way which generates new insights and leads to the development of explicit wisdom.

Learning makes considerable demands on the organisation. Most importantly, learning will only flourish if it is encouraged, and this requires an organisational culture with a number of important characteristics:

- learning is seen as an organisational asset and not a liability and, therefore, time is made available to legitimise learning;
- staff are rewarded for the learning they contribute to the wider organisation;
- the organisation is willing to be challenged even when this means that conventional thinking and practices may have to be changed.

3. NGOs as Learning Organisations

‘Good leadership and sound management, however they are described, are a precursor to, but not a proxy for good work’ ... ‘In order to be effective, development must be knowledge based. Knowing what works and why is essential to success. Knowing what does not work is equally important. Knowledge involves awareness, memory and the familiarity that develops with experience and learning, particularly true at an institutional level. The inability to learn and remember is a widespread failing of the development community as a whole. Among NGOs it is a particular problem, however, because there are few reasons to disseminate the positive lessons of development, and many more powerful reasons to conceal and forget the negative ones.’ (Smillie 1995)

3.1 *Characteristics of NGOs*

Much of the writing on learning organisations comes from the corporate world where performance is measured in terms such as ‘competitive advantage’, ‘market share’ and the ‘bottom line’ of profitability. In the NGO world, we use very different indicators of success - most of which are far less easy to measure. This raises a fundamental question about organisational learning in the NGO sector: ‘How can learning contribute to the success of the NGO?’ Or, in other words, ‘For what purpose should the NGO be learning?’ The answer to these questions goes to the roots of the purpose of NGOs in the development process. In reality, there will be many answers to the questions, each of which will reflect the mission and values of any individual NGO. The purpose of organisational learning in an NGO which is developing credit and savings schemes will be different to the purpose of organisational learning in an NGO advocating for sustainable natural resource management because each measures ‘success’ in different ways.

One way in which NGO managers can identify how learning might contribute to the success of their organisation is to use the concept of organisational **reputation**. When asked the question: ‘What kind of reputation do you wish your NGO to have?’, a group of Filipino NGO managers at a workshop on ‘learning organisations’ gave the following responses:

We would like our organisation to be seen as:

- honest;
- concerned for the people;
- effective;
- financially sustainable;
- participatory in its approach;
- a good employer;
- flexible;
- influential;
- creative and innovative.

None of these aspirations is likely to happen spontaneously. The NGOs, and particularly their managers, will have to earn the reputation they desire.

They need to demonstrate to their stakeholders that they are operating to ‘best practice’ standards. This, in turn, will involve the NGO in learning from its own experience and from the experience of other organisations which have already established excellent reputations for the desired qualities. This process is known as **benchmarking** and is explained in more detail below.

Each of the aspirations represents a potential focus for organisational learning. Learning provides a mechanism for developing the wisdom necessary to work towards and achieve desired goals, in this case related to establishing and maintaining a reputation for good practice and innovation.

However, there are other benefits which can arise from the encouragement of learning at all levels in an organisation and these range from the creation of a more satisfying work environment to beneficiary empowerment.

3.2 *How NGOs can Benefit from Becoming Learning Organisations*

A group of senior NGO managers was asked to list the benefits of becoming a learning organisation. Their responses are listed in Box 3.

Box 3: Senior UK NGO Managers' Views of Some Benefits of Organisational Learning

- improved cohesion - unity of purpose across different parts of the organisation is encouraged;
- increased adaptability - the organisation is better placed to take advantage of opportunities and deal with challenges and unpredictable events;
- increased impact of the organisation;
- increased effectiveness and efficiency - the organisation makes better use of its resources;
- increased staff motivation - staff feel more valued and influential;
- ability to retain staff and their knowledge - better systems for rewarding the contribution staff make to the development of the organisation;
- legitimises grass-roots knowledge and experience - learning is valued no matter where it takes place;
- greater opportunities to be creative - learning encourages creativity and team-work;
- increased ability to initiate change - learning provides the organisation with the confidence and information necessary to take initiatives and risks.

Clearly, there are many potential benefits to NGOs for becoming a learning organisation. However, the bottom line answer to the question posed above is that if NGOs do not learn they are likely to cease to exist as they will not be able to adapt sufficiently well to the changing circumstances in which they find themselves. This is the Action Learning expert, Reg Revans' 1983 classic L/C equation (where L, the rate of learning must be greater or equal to C, the rate of change).

Moreover, it is only by learning lessons and applying that learning will NGOs stand any chance of fulfilling their mission. Box 4 shows how Save the Children Fund (UK) has acknowledged the need to take organisational learning seriously.

As development organisations, it can be argued that NGOs have no option but to learn since knowing 'what works and what does not' is a major part of their currency. Korten and Klauss (1984) believe that learning is not simply an option for NGOs; they maintain that learning is a necessary and integral part of any NGO's plans for sustainable development. Indeed, they propose a 'learning approach to development' comprising three phases:

- **Learning to be effective.** The organisation must first learn the most effective ways of working in order to achieve its goals with the communities in which it works. This involves setting up projects as 'learning laboratories' in which staff of the NGO work with members of the community to develop an understanding of their needs and devise an appropriate programme of assistance. Experimentation, risk-taking, creativity and an ability to build on experience are crucial at this stage. Tolerance about the inefficient use of resources and the making of 'mistakes' is also required at this stage.

Box 4: Organisational Learning in the Save the Children Fund (UK)

Save the Children's mission is:

- to ensure that children everywhere are protected from harm and given the best start in life;
- to make a reality of children's rights as now defined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- to work with children, their families and their communities in order to build on their capacities to help themselves and take charge of their own lives;
- to listen to children, and to ensure that their voice is heard when decisions are taken that affect them.

Although learning is not mentioned explicitly in the SCF mission statement, it forms the invisible bridge between the organisation's practice experience and its ability to extend its influence. The following points make this process clear:

Save the Children carries out its mission in the following ways:

- We provide support and assistance to children, their families, and the communities in which they live, focusing our efforts whenever possible on those most disadvantaged and discriminated against.
- We learn from the experience this gives us, and we use our knowledge and authority to make the case both publicly and privately for changes that benefit all children, not just those that we work with directly.
- We seek to provide a variety of ways in which people wanting to offer voluntary support for our work can join with us in building a better world for children.
- We work, in particular with children and young people, to extend their sense of shared responsibility for upholding the rights and welfare of all children across the world.
- We raise funds from the public at large to finance our work and to preserve our independence of action, also using funds from other sources whenever this allows us to achieve more without compromising that independence.
- As a custodian of people's trust and resources, we constantly monitor and evaluate our activities to ensure that we are financially sound and scrupulous, efficient and effective.
- We work in partnership with other organisations who share our vision and values, particularly the members of the International Save the Children alliance, to achieve common goals and increase our impact.
- In all we do we seek to demonstrate and promote our values - particularly the Rights of the Child - and to share a pride in our heritage, our achievements, and in working for Save the Children.

Source: Save the Children 1997

- **Learning to be efficient.** The organisation must then learn to use its resources efficiently so that it can achieve its goals at an acceptable cost. Ideally this will require the organisation to reduce its costs to the point where local communities can sustain the work indefinitely.
- **Learning to expand.** Finally, organisations must learn to expand or 'scale-up' their work so that the maximum number of people can benefit from the programmes which have been piloted. This involves generalising from particular experiences in order to apply successful approaches to development in new settings offering different challenges.

Each of these stages involves learning as an essential component of the development process. This third stage is what we often call 'scaling-up'.

The concept of 'scaling-up' involves increasing the developmental impact of the organisation through the use of deliberate strategies: these can be categorised as additive, multiplicative or diffusive.

Additive strategies imply an increase in the size of the programme or organisation; *multiplicative* strategies achieve impact through deliberate influence, networking, policy change, legal reform or training and consultancy; and *diffusive* strategies are those where the spread of ideas is informal and spontaneous. Learning is an essential element of any scaling-up strategy since it must underpin an understanding of ‘what works’ and, therefore, what is worth ‘scaling-up’.

A failure to learn from experience can be a critical weakness when it comes to planning at any level, but particularly at a strategic level where it is necessary to make sensible long-term choices about goal-setting and resource allocation.

The stewardship of resources is a particularly important reason for NGOs to be proficient at organisational learning. Indeed, given that learning is going on all the time throughout any organisation, it could be argued that it is a negligent misuse of resources NOT to create a framework which both encourages that learning and makes lessons freely accessible. This does not necessarily mean formalising the process of learning since informal learning can be just as powerful as that which is more planned. Rather, it means creating both a culture and a structure which enable the organisation to make the best use of its experience and, hence, its resources.

NGOs, therefore, need to address a number of different types of learning. Edwards (1996) has identified five different focuses for learning in NGOs and these are summarised in Table 1.

A critical issue which influences learning at all of these levels is the need for organisational support from the highest level to give learning a recognised priority in the organisation. This means that senior managers need to be convinced of the value of learning and be able to demonstrate this in their own behaviour and practice and in turn, encourages an open and supportive organisational culture which takes learning seriously. (see 4.1).

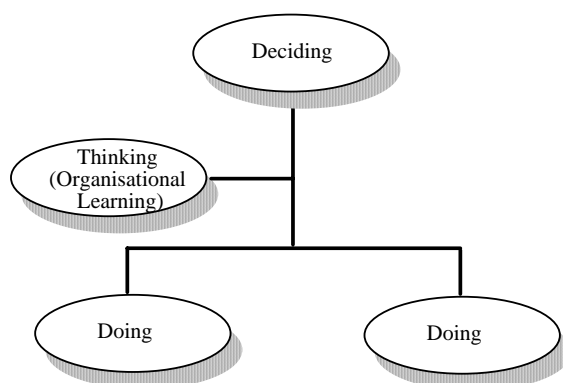
Table 1: Types of learning in NGOs		
Focus	Characteristics	Issues
Field-focused learning	Powerful and of immediate benefit. Foundation for sustainable benefit. Basis for genuine empowerment based on self-development. Basis for all other learning including advocacy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to encourage learning among those who do not see themselves as having a contribution to make to the wider organisation. • Converting information and knowledge into explicit wisdom in a multi-cultural environment. • Excessive dependence in NGOs on the written word which may alienate grass-roots practitioners. • Ensuring accountability for how knowledge is used. • Ensuring that learning is legitimised and rewarded. • Building communication between grass-roots and other parts of the NGO.
Project-focused learning	Learning which is focused on improving the effectiveness and efficiency of specific projects. Well-documented processes exist for this through the mechanisms of monitoring and evaluation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Danger of overemphasis because donors require project-based evaluation and accountability and therefore resources for project-focused learning are more likely to be made available. • Must take into account organisational issues as well as simply project-focused ones.
Policy-related learning	Lessons learned in different settings are used to establish policies and procedures which influence wider organisational priorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem of generalising experience in a meaningful way whilst avoiding the 'lowest common denominator' problem.
Advocacy-related learning	Lessons learned by one organisation are used to influence the policy and practice of other organisations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lessons need to be based on evidence which is transparent and stands up to external scrutiny.
Possibility-creating learning	Learning focused on creating new visions or possibilities which are outside the scope of the NGO's normal operations. Can lead to exciting new possibilities (e.g. alternative trading).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Important for the evolution of thinking about development as a whole. • Likely to challenge orthodox thinking and therefore may be difficult to justify and prioritise to resource providers.
<u>Source:</u> Edwards 1996.		

3.3 Responsibility for Learning in NGOs

Given the range of types of learning in NGOs, deciding on who should take responsibility for what can be a difficult process. In larger NGOs, the solution is often to use a bureaucratic 'division-of-labour' approach to learning and assign different functions from the learning cycle to different groups (see Figure 1). Hence, in larger NGOs, the responsibility for learning often belongs to the 'policy unit' or 'research and information section' or similar whilst senior managers focus on decision-making and the rest of the NGO generates the information and implements the plans.

The problem faced by this type of organisation is combining the thinking, deciding and doing necessary for effective all-round learning, since the groups responsible for each function are likely to operate in different cultures, have different priorities and often harbour suspicions of the other groups.

Figure 1: A 'division-of-labour' approach to learning in organisations



Source: Swieringa and Wierdsma 1992.

A significant challenge facing larger NGOs is, therefore, how to avoid the compartmentalisation of learning within the organisation whilst also avoiding the overburdening of individuals. Alan Fowler (1997) attempts to address this dilemma by dividing responsibility for different types of learning (rather than different functional activities) among the main groups in the NGO (see Table 2, overleaf).

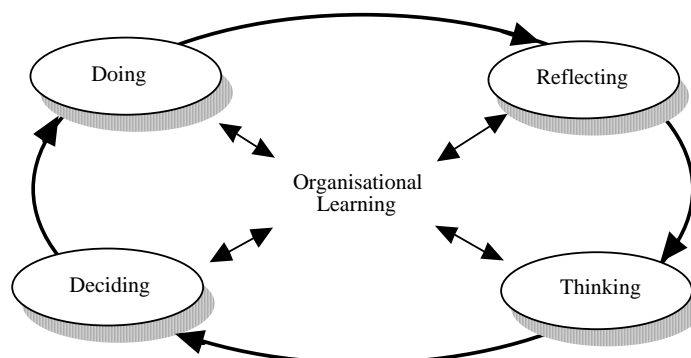
Even Fowler's approach promotes an unnecessarily compartmentalised view of what different staff groups may contribute to the process of learning in an NGO. An alternative approach is to try to ensure that everyone is responsible for all the learning functions as described by Swieringa and Wierdsma (1992) and summarised in Figure 2 (overleaf). This is more difficult to organise but is more consistent with the spirit of what a learning organisation culture should be.

For example, field staff when given the opportunity, may be able to make crucial contributions to the development of policy as was the case with a UK-based INGO which used, with great success, a working group drawn from all levels in the organisation to develop its Equal Opportunity policies. Staff were selected on the basis of what they could contribute to policy development as a result of their knowledge, skills and experience, rather than their functional position in the organisation or their place in the organisation's hierarchy. As a result, the working group comprised a departmental Director, specialist advisers, the leaders of projects with a specific focus on equality issues and project staff with a particular interest in the issues.

Table 2: Learning within NGOs

Who should be learning?	What should they be learning?
Field staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participation in practice; • effective empowerment; • local-level collaboration with government and other NGOs; • gender dimensions of local development.
Technical specialists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • best practice in their area of expertise; • ways of integrating with other disciplines; • how to improve cost-effectiveness; • how existing internal and external policies affect performance.
Operational managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what factors make interventions/projects work well or badly, for example funding conditions; • how to be more cost-effective; • how to co-ordinate internally and externally.
Fund-raisers/development educationalists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • principles and insights to be used in negotiation with professional donors; • new messages to get across to private contributors; • examples of impact and what made things work or fail.
Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how policy choices and strategies work out in practice; • how to make external relationships more effective; • how best to exert influence; • what environmental factors have had unforeseen effects and must be taken into account; • the quality and costs of donors.
Governors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the degree of stakeholder satisfaction; • consistency between mission, strategy and impact; • improving social standing and credibility of the organisation.

Source: Fowler 1997.

Figure 2: An ‘integrated’ approach to learning in organisations

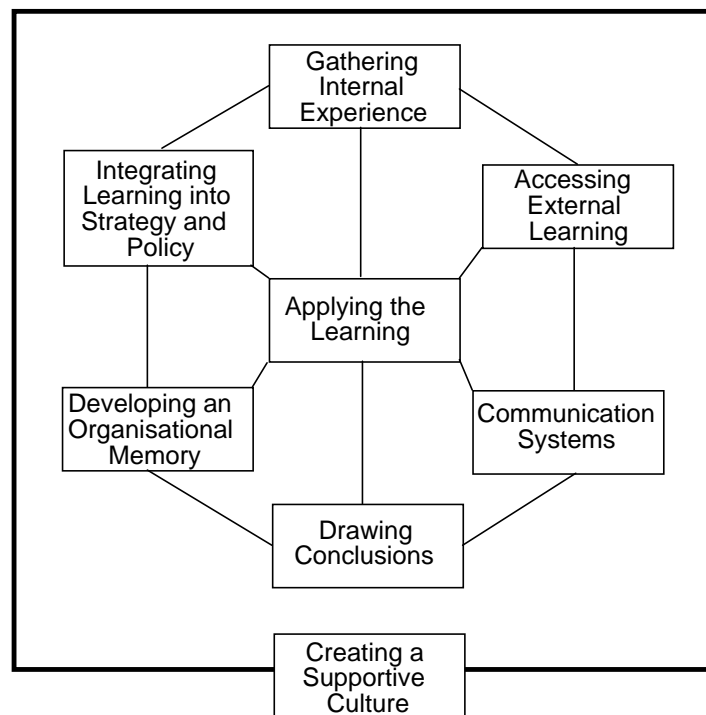
Source: Swieringa and Wierdsma 1992.

4. Key functions of a Learning Organisation

What does an organisation need to do in order to learn? The literature on learning organisations and effective NGOs suggests that there are a number of key functions which must be undertaken to learn effectively. Eight key functions for organisational learning are

summarised in Figure 3 and described with indicators¹ and illustrative examples from the development sector.

Figure 3: Eight key functions of a learning NGO



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

4.1 *Creating a Supportive Culture*

If organisational learning is to be a genuinely organisation-wide endeavour it must become part of the organisation's culture - the set of basic values, ideologies and assumptions which guide and fashion the norms of desirable individual and group behaviour of its members. This requires both a positive attitude to learning, a commitment by everyone to contribute to the process and a willingness to legitimise learning by providing adequate resources.

Given the nature of the challenges they face it is not surprising that most NGOs tend to be very 'action-oriented'. However, this implicitly tends to downgrade the value of the three other stages in the experiential **learning cycle** (see Glossary) - reviewing experience, concluding from the experience and planning future action - (all of which are essential for effective learning). In such a culture, learning tends not to be rewarded either overtly or implicitly and it therefore becomes something which individuals are expected to do in their own time or at quiet periods when the 'legitimate' work permits.

This has to change if NGOs are to take learning seriously. The force for change may arise from the grass roots but it must be legitimised at the most senior levels.

¹ The indicators are taken from the Learning NGO Questionnaire which is described in detail later in this paper.

Indications:

- Staff are rewarded for the contribution they make to the organisation's learning.
- Organisational politics and power relations are not allowed to get in the way of sharing experience and knowledge in the organisation.
- Senior managers create a climate which encourages experimentation and acknowledges that mistakes are an inevitable part of this.
- Resources and facilities for individual development are made available to all members of the organisation.
- People feel free to enquire about and challenge each others' (and their own) assumptions and biases. There are few (if any) undiscussable subjects.

4.2 *Gathering Internal Experience*

The process of gathering experience needs to be one based on sharing and exchange. This requires an awareness inside the organisation of what it does and the impact of what it does - a clear role for monitoring, review and evaluation.

There are particular 'paper' mechanisms which can be used for this which may include: evaluation studies, annual reports, documentary information systems, policy documents strategic plans and research reports. Other, 'non-paper' mechanisms include meetings, workshops, debriefing and other forms of informal contact.

Many NGOs are not rigorous enough in evaluating and documenting their work. Few offer sufficient opportunities for staff to meet, share and learn from each other's experience.

Indications:

- The organisation uses systematic procedures for the regular monitoring, review and evaluation of all of its project, programme and advocacy activity.
- The organisation has enough built-in 'spare capacity' to allow staff to take time out to reflect on their work experience and learn from it.
- The organisation continually enables individuals to voice important lessons that they have learned in order to constantly expand the organisation's base of explicit wisdom.
- Individuals, groups and sections view each other as working partners and constantly strive to find out and meet each others' expectations and needs.
- People at all levels of the organisation are encouraged to learn regularly and rigorously from their work and feed such learning to other parts of the organisation.

Water Aid has sought to address this problem by producing a 'Working Methods Directory' which describes the technologies and planning approaches used in each of the organisation's overseas programmes. The Directory enables staff to see what experience exists in other programmes and provides opportunities for them to seek advice directly on a specific area from those with the most experience rather than having to go through head office.

This example usefully illustrates how the production of a written document can change communication routes in an organisation, reducing dependency on a head office and encouraging internal networking.

4.3 *Accessing External Learning*

Organisational learning in NGOs has two major sources: what the organisation does and what others do. It is not enough to be clear about what the organisation itself is achieving; it must actively seek out learning from elsewhere. This requires a genuine openness and willingness to share its own learning (which means being willing to share the learning from failure as well as success).

The concept of **benchmarking** (see Glossary) is useful here with its recognition that NGOs may learn a lot from looking at 'best practice' in a wide range of organisations in the corporate, public and even the multilateral and bilateral agency sectors as well as the NGO world.

Some Northern NGOs have been somewhat introverted until fairly recently, but they are increasingly recognising that they gain a multiplier effect from their resources by working in partnership with Southern NGOs.

This creates more exposure to new ideas in a setting where learning can be immediate and influential. Partnership work with other agencies is becoming more common within and Europe, though setting up their own projects is still the favoured approach to implementation of many NGOs working in the UK.

Indications:

- All organisation members who have dealings with the 'outside world' are expected to gather and share relevant information. Their managers take an active interest in 'debriefing' them about the information they have gathered.
- The organisation enters into open co-operation with other organisations in order to share and encourage mutual learning from each other's experience.
- The organisation encourages its staff to develop a wide range of contacts with other agencies and to learn actively from their experience.
- Staff are encouraged to visit other organisations and are expected to write up and share in other ways what they learned from their visit.
- The organisation is linked to a wide range of networks and uses its contacts with other agencies to gather useful knowledge and skills.

In a major piece of research, **INTRAC** has been examining approaches to organisation development consultancy, as a strategy for strengthening Southern NGOs, focusing on the experience of nine NGOs. Key success factors have been identified as well as questions/dilemmas these raise for Northern NGOs. This is a rare example of an NGO support organisation setting out explicitly to benchmark good practice and make this information widely available throughout the sector by producing newsletters during the research and publications², as well as offering training and consultancy services based on its findings.

4.4 *Communication Systems*

If learning is the lifeblood of the organisation then it requires a circulatory system to enable it constantly to stimulate and refresh all its component parts. Communication systems - both formal and informal are the circulatory system for learning. Systems must be designed in such

² The main findings can be found in James (1998). Back copies of the newsletter produced during the research, *ODC News*, are also available from INTRAC.

a way that they are not so 'heavy' that information and learning sink without trace or so 'light' that they evaporate.

The communication style in many larger NGOs has tended towards both the heavy and light ends of the spectrum. At the heavy end we have reports (which are often so focused that they do not encourage a lateral transfer of knowledge - one has to be a dedicated seeker of *specific* lessons to read them) and training courses (which can be a useful way of distilling lessons learnt as one way of ensuring that one understands something is to try to explain it to someone else). At the light end we have informal conversations which may have little lasting effect unless they are shared more widely or documented in some way.

Internal networks in larger NGOs are beginning to play a useful role in filling the gap between heavy and light communication systems - individuals will pass on ideas and contacts by email whereas in the past writing a note or personally talking to a colleague might not have been considered. Team meetings, presentations, in-house workshops, briefing sessions and even in-house newsletters can all play a part in sharing information and learning between individuals, teams and sections.

Indications:

- Information flows freely throughout the organisation, crossing departmental, sectional and locational boundaries without hindrance.
- The organisation has a wide range of mechanisms for sharing experience between staff in different teams, sections, departments and locations.
- It is easy to access information on the lessons learned from other parts of the organisation.
- Staff have access to email and are encouraged to share information using electronic media such as the Internet and bulletin boards.
- The organisation's staff are skilled at making their personal knowledge and wisdom available to others.

The **People Centered Development Forum** have set up a simple but very comprehensive site on the World Wide Web³ which contains full-text copies of all their discussion papers and individual profiles. This use of the Internet makes available an enormous amount of information to a wide NGO audience which might otherwise be almost completely inaccessible - the problem, of course, is to sift the useful from the useless.

4.5 Mechanisms for Drawing Conclusions

The process of drawing conclusions and identifying lessons learned is the main characteristic which differentiates organisational learning from simple information exchange. Drawing conclusions converts information to knowledge and then knowledge to useable wisdom.

Drawing conclusions is a process which needs to be seen as the responsibility of the whole organisation and should, ideally, happen as near to the experience as possible. In many NGOs at present, it tends to be concentrated in those specialist parts of the organisation, which are associated with research and information. This reflects a division of labour which, as mentioned earlier, is commonly (but unhelpfully) associated with organisational learning and which is usefully analysed by Swieringa and Wierdsma (1992).

One simple mechanism for sharing out the responsibility for drawing conclusions is to insist that no experience should be documented and shared without considering its learning points and its implications for policy, strategy and practice.

³ The People Centered Development Forum can be contacted at <http://iisd1.iisd.ca/pcdf>

Indications:

- Learning from experience is seen as ‘everyone’s business’ and not left to specialist units or senior managers.
- Monitoring and evaluation reports and field visit reports are routinely analysed to identify what has been learned from the work and what lessons could be applied in the future.
- The organisation is skilled at converting raw information from evaluations into useable wisdom.
- The organisation regularly identifies a theme of work and draws conclusions based on an analysis of all of its practice experience and an understanding of the current ‘state of the art’.
- The organisation uses a continuous improvement approach when analysing the knowledge and experience gained from its practice. Staff are encouraged to constantly ask themselves ‘How could we do this better?’

The British Red Cross provides a good example of a voluntary organisation which attempted to evaluate and draw conclusions from a major piece of work. The organisation undertook an evaluation of its response to the crisis in Rwanda which focused on management and decision-making processes. A number of recommendations based on a rigorous analysis of the information were made and these have subsequently been acted upon. The Red Cross also identified areas of ‘best practice’ which have been written up for wider distribution. This kind of evaluation requires ready access to the necessary information and an openness about discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation’s practice.

4.6 *Developing an Organisational Memory*

Remembering is a crucial element of organisational learning. Although it is true to say that organisations cannot learn, it is reasonable to say that organisations can forget. If learning is locked inside the heads of individuals, the organisation becomes very vulnerable if those individuals leave or forget! The old African proverb that ‘when an old person dies, a library is lost’ should no longer apply within organisations in these days of information technology. A learning organisation needs mechanisms which enable an individual’s memory to be ‘down-loaded’ into an information system so that everyone can continue to access that person’s experience and their analysis of that experience long after the individual has moved on to other organisations.

Simple documentation of experience is rarely adequate but is better than nothing. Many organisations now require all departing staff to go through an exit process which parallels the induction required at the beginning of contracts. Some organisations link departing staff with trainers to develop training materials (sometimes based on case studies) which can be used either in-house or with other organisations. At the very least, staff should be encouraged to ‘tell their story’ of their time in the organisation in whatever way they feel comfortable.

Through the use of documentation, databases, resource centres, policy papers, guidelines, training and discussion of experience, an organisation can enhance its members’ collective memory in ways which unlock each individual’s knowledge and place it in the organisational domain. Informal sharing related to problem-solving is also an effective way of ensuring that the organisational memory is expanded and refreshed.

Many NGOs have recognised the importance of unlocking each individual’s memory but few have, as yet, developed systematic ways of ensuring that their knowledge and understanding are made widely accessible to colleagues both in their own organisation and beyond.

Indications:

- The organisation has mechanisms for ‘remembering’ the experience of its current and previous work through the development of highly accessible databases, resource / information centres and data retrieval systems.
- All written reports and key documents are cross-referenced and made easily accessible to all staff.
- The organisation is not vulnerable to losing its experience when individuals leave. For example, staff who leave the organisation go through a systematically recorded debriefing to ensure that the organisation retains their knowledge.
- The organisation has a systematic database of all its project and programme work which can enable staff and ‘outsiders’ to identify where expertise resides.
- The information function is given sufficient prominence and is resourced adequately to enable the organisation to keep its records up to date.

4.7 *Integrating Learning into Strategy and Policy*

One way of building lessons learned into the fabric of an NGO is to develop policy and procedures which reflect organisational learning. This provides the NGO with a framework for decision-making and resource allocation which is grounded in the organisation’s own experience and that of other agencies. If policy development is seen as a participative learning process in itself, this strengthens the process of integration and builds commitment for implementation.

The development by The Commonwealth Foundation (Ball and Dunn, n. d.) of their ‘Non-Government Organisations: Guidelines for Good Policy and Practice’ is an example of an organisation (in this case inter-governmental) which has drawn together its experience of supporting NGOs into a series of good practice guidelines which can be used by NGOs to benchmark their own practice.

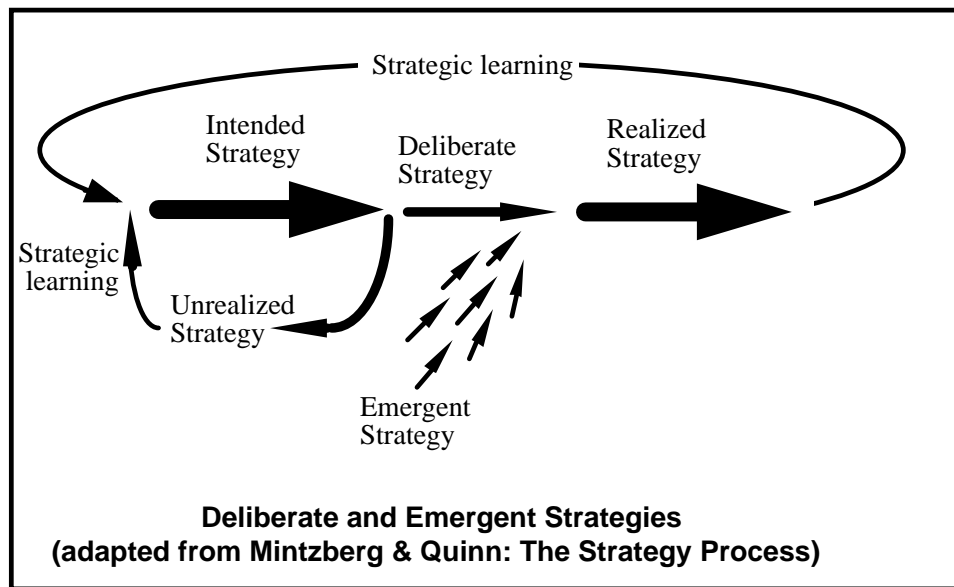
People in Aid, a group of UK-based development organisations, have also pooled their experience to develop ‘The People in Aid Code of Best Practice’ (1997) which benchmarks exemplary practice in the management and support of aid personnel.

Integrating learning into strategy is more complex but, potentially, more fruitful. Strategy development in NGOs is often a more flexible process than the strategic planning processes used by large-scale private and public-sector organisations. Mintzberg and Quinn (1992) provide a useful model for strategy development which acknowledges the importance of ‘strategic learning’. This is illustrated in Figure 4.

Without going into detail about the terms used, Mintzberg and Quinn’s argument is that the strategy which is actually used and realised by an organisation is rarely exactly what was originally intended.

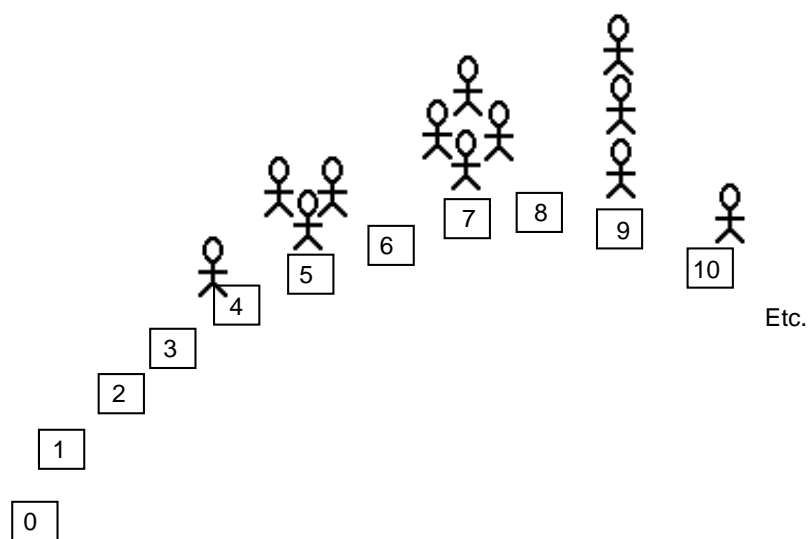
Some aspects of strategy emerge from opportunities and threats which the organisation faces as it carries out its work. Some of the organisation’s strategic intentions may never be realised for whatever reason - maybe the window of opportunity passes before the organisation can respond; maybe the organisation prioritises certain strategic goals over others which are allowed to ‘fade away’.

Figure 4: Deliberate and emergent strategy



The important thing about Mintzberg's model is that it recognises that organisations work in a dynamic environment. What is crucial to the success of the organisation is that it reflects on the various elements of emergent and unrealised strategy and learns from them in such a way that it can better respond to new opportunities and new threats as they emerge in the future - hence the 'strategic learning' arrows in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Using the 'Human Continuum' to examine different scores for one of the eight functions of a learning organisation



Indications:

- The development of strategy is deliberately organised as a learning process. Feedback loops are incorporated to enable continuous improvement in the light of experience.
- Policy-making involves people at most levels in the organisation, according to what they can contribute not their status.
- The system of planning, accounting, budgeting, financial reporting and other management processes are organised to assist learning.
- Learning is built into the organisation through the development of systems, operational procedures and other ways of sharing the lessons gained from individuals' experience.
- The learning gained by one part of the organisation is quickly made available to others even if at first it appears of little immediate relevance.

4.8 *Applying the Learning*

The ultimate test of learning is the ability to apply what has been learned. Only when learning is applied in the work setting can we say that a continuous learning cycle has been created. For many NGOs, the application of learning is not limited only to their own organisation but also to the practice and policy of others through the processes of capacity-building, scaling-up and advocacy.

At present, many NGOs' scaling-up and advocacy strategies are based on what is probably a relatively small portion of the total knowledge and wisdom that they have at their disposal. In short, NGOs are regularly under-functioning.

Indications:

- The organisation systematically uses its learning to improve its own practice and influence the policy and practice of other organisations or agencies.
- The organisation writes up and publishes its experience for a wider readership without using unnecessary technical jargon.
- The organisation has a strategy for scaling-up its impact which reflects the learning it has developed on 'what works'.
- The organisation changes its practice and priorities to reflect new knowledge and insights in its efforts to constantly improve its effectiveness.
- The organisation is constantly building its capacity and innovating based on what it has learned.

5. **Barriers to Learning in NGOs**

If we are correct to assume that there are considerable benefits to be gained by NGOs which commit themselves to developing their capacity to learn at all levels, why is it that so many NGOs readily admit that their practice does not always match up to their aspirations? One major reason is that NGOs, like other organisations, have to overcome barriers to learning. Barriers to learning can be categorised as external or internal. Although this paper focuses on the *internal* barriers over which NGOs will have some control, it is important to acknowledge that some of the most significant barriers to learning in NGOs may be largely or completely outside their sphere of influence.

5.1 *External Barriers*

External barriers to learning are those which arise from the organisation's external environment and over which the NGO may have little or no influence, let alone control. A

useful starting point for identifying external barriers to learning is to look at the NGO's key stakeholders such as its funders, other NGOs, the general public and even its supporters.

- The nature of **donor priorities** often enforces on NGOs a fragmented project framework which can inhibit learning or even make it almost impossible.
- The pressure to demonstrate **low overheads** to donors may make NGOs reluctant to invest the time and other resources necessary for effective organisational learning.
- **Competition for funding** with other organisations may create a perceived pressure to generate uncomplicated success stories for the public and even some of the organisation's supporters. As Edwards (1997) points out, this 'detracts from the depth of self-criticism and analysis required if NGOs are to be serious about learning; rising competition for public funds leads NGOs to prioritise public relations over genuine learning (i.e. highlighting the good and burying the bad).'

5.2 *Internal Barriers*

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

As Edwards (1996) has pointed out 'We all know that, in practice, learning in NGOs is very difficult. Often the characteristics and behaviour of NGOs are not favourable to the requirements of learning...In addressing barriers to learning the first step is to identify what they are.' His summary of some of the main internal barriers to organisational learning in NGOs is shown in Box 5.

Box 5: Internal Barriers to Learning in NGOs

- An **activist culture** may see learning as a luxury, separate from and secondary to the 'real work'; time and space for learning may be difficult to find and protect; differences in learning styles and languages are an inevitable feature of a large, dispersed, multi-cultural staff.
- **Hierarchical, centralised, control-oriented structures** are inimical to learning; the 'tunnel vision of the project system' (Smillie 1995) restricts learning as timescales are compressed and experimentation discouraged; different parts of the organisation (and different individuals within them) may guard information jealously rather than exchange it freely.
- **Incentives and rewards for learning are weak** and diffuse; failures are disguised or punished; inertia, defensiveness, complacency and territoriality may override NGO values of openness; 'risk aversion' is commonplace; and job insecurity and short term contracts make staff less amenable to learning.
- **Systems for accessing, storing, transferring and disseminating learning are underdeveloped, under-resourced and inefficient.** Information overload is common - there is a huge amount of information around, but too little of a structure to ensure that the right people get what they need at the right time. Indeed, there is too much information generally, and not enough learning i.e. information that is systematised into knowledge-in-action.
- NGOs are not very good at **dealing with 'discordant information'**, i.e. learning which challenges the organisational consensus or threatens short-term institutional interests, particularly about roles and responsibilities, and especially if (as an NGO based in the North) it is wedded to an operational role in the South...NGOs are never immune to the learning disabilities that plague all bureaucracies.

Source: Edwards, 1996 (emphasis added).

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

As Alan Fowler (1997) reminds us, 'Learning has much to do with the attitudes of leaders/managers, their degree of personal security and an understanding of how they can be most effective'. For this reason, one of the most significant internal barriers to learning can be what Argyris and Schon (1996) call **defensive routines** (see Glossary). Defensive routines are the entrenched habits that we use to protect ourselves from the embarrassment and threat that come from exposing our thinking to others.

Organisations as well as individuals can evolve defensive routines through the development of unwritten and unspoken rules which not only make certain subjects undiscussable but also make their undiscussability itself undiscussable! These unmentionable rules become deep-seated parts of the organisation's culture which are more obvious to newcomers and outsiders but may be quite 'invisible' to those who have been in the organisation for longer periods. Indeed, it is their invisibility which makes defensive routines so difficult to identify and address.

Since learning almost invariably leads us at least to consider the need for change, and since change may require us to rethink our currently unquestioned way of doing things, learning may trigger powerful defensive routines which we use to avoid placing our current thinking under scrutiny. Although individuals who have been socialised into the organisation's culture may appear to be unaware of the existence of their defensive routines, the psychological energy which is required to maintain these can take a considerable unconscious toll.

6. Assessing Learning Capacity

6.1 *Introduction*

In order to strengthen their capacity for effective learning, NGOs should first systematically and honestly assess their current learning capacity. Using an assessment tool can be helpful in this process, particularly if it can be adapted to reflect the specific circumstances of the organisation and its working environment.

6.2 *The 'Learning NGO Questionnaire'*

A good starting point for developing a customised assessment tool is the 'Learning NGO Questionnaire' which uses the eight functions of a learning organisation described above as a basis for assessing the NGOs strengths and weaknesses. The 'Learning NGO 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.

6.3 *How to Use the Questionnaire*

This section gives suggestions about how to use the 'Learning NGO Questionnaire' which is included as Appendix 1 in this paper. The questionnaire was originally written for larger NGOs, but it can and has, with suitable adaptations, been used by a number of smaller organisations.

Although it can be used by individuals interested in assessing their NGO, the most powerful use of the questionnaire is as a trigger for a process of reflection and analysis by the NGO as a whole. If used in this way, it forms part of a structured organisation development (OD) intervention.

An examination of the NGO's capacity for organisational learning has the potential for triggering an organisation-wide change process. Alternatively, the questionnaire and its subsequent discussion could be built in to an existing process of change. There is the distinct possibility that different interpretations of the organisation's learning capacity could lead to disagreements and, perhaps, conflict between organisation members. For this reason, it may be useful for the NGO to consider engaging an external facilitator to help them through the process and ensure that the focus remains on the organisation and not on the personalities involved.

6.3.1 Gaining commitment to use the questionnaire

The first step in the process is gaining commitment to use the questionnaire as a tool to examine the strengths and the weaknesses of the organisation. It is worth emphasising that, as with any OD intervention, there should be a commitment from senior managers to consider and address the issues which arise from completing and analysing the questionnaire. The lead for examining the NGO's learning capacity should, therefore, be seen to come from senior managers (and preferably the chief executive of the NGO) since one of the main requirements for organisational learning is a willingness to be open to change, and this ultimately requires senior management encouragement.

Equally important is the involvement of the NGO staff. Without the commitment of participants to complete the questionnaire and discuss the analysis it is unlikely that the NGO will gain much in the way of useful information or recommendations for action.

Commitment to the outcomes of such a process is far more likely if those affected by such decisions have been involved. Nevertheless, it would still be possible to use the questionnaire as a catalyst or spring-board for discussion with a limited number, if it was part of a wider change process.

The use of an external facilitator can help avoid senior managers having to take a dual role in the process. It can also enable managers to take part as full and equal members in the ensuing discussions, as well as encourage other staff members to open up where they may otherwise feel inhibited to do so.

6.3.2 Customising the questionnaire⁴

Before distributing the questionnaire a small group should review the questions (with the facilitator, if one is involved) and to ensure that the wording used makes sense in the organisation. The wording should be changed to suit the size or the structure of the NGO but should remain consistent with the organisational learning function which the question examines.

⁴ A customisable disk copy of the questionnaire is available from the author.
bruce.britton@edinburgh.almac.co.uk

For example, if you want to change the wording of question 2 because your NGO does not carry out any advocacy activity, the reworded question should remain consistent with the function of ‘gathering internal experience’.

6.3.3 Completing the questionnaire

Before asking participants to complete the questionnaire, it should be made clear to everyone precisely what ‘organisation’ they are examining in order to enable sensible comparisons between responses to be made.

For example, in a large NGO, it may be necessary to ask people to think about the NGO as a whole rather than the section, project or department for which they have responsibility or in which they work. There is space on the first page of the questionnaire for individuals to note the name of the ‘organisation’ under consideration.

It is best if each individual is allowed to complete the questionnaire in their own time and well in advance of any discussion. This encourages everyone to take the exercise seriously and prepare well. Completing the questionnaire normally takes between half an hour and an hour, depending on how much time is spent on reflection and how many comments are noted about the issues raised by the questions

6.3.4 Completing the analysis sheet

The analysis sheet (see Appendix 2) enables the responses to each of the questions to be allocated under one of the eight headings which represent the eight functions of learning organisations. When the individual question scores have been entered, the totals for each column should be calculated. The minimum score for any one column is zero and the maximum score is 20.

6.3.5 Completing the profile plotting sheet

The profile plotting sheet (see Appendix 3) provides a series of eight axes (one for each of the eight functions) which can be used to plot the total scores from the scoring sheet. When each person has plotted their score on their own ‘spider diagram’, they should join the dots to create the profile of the NGO as they see it. The advantage of plotting scores in this diagrammatic way is that it provides a graphic representation of what ‘shape’ the NGO is in. Comparison between scores is very much easier and more immediate using the spider diagrams than it would be by simply comparing numerical scores.

6.3.6 Interpreting individual scores

Participants should be given a description of each of the eight functions which form the spider diagram (see Section 4 above). They should be asked to reflect on their organisational profile in the light of these descriptions and to refer back to the original questions to identify the explanation for particularly high or low scores.

6.3.7 Comparing profiles

The method used for comparing responses between participants depends, to some extent, on the size of the group.

In order to make the comparisons in **small groups** easy to share, each individual can be given a profile plotting sheet in the form of an overhead projector transparency rather than a piece of paper. The transparencies can be completed then superimposed and, if each individual uses a different colour of pen, the different profiles may be very easily compared.

In **larger groups** (say, six and upwards) using transparency overlays may prove to be complicated to interpret. An alternative method which has proved to be very enlightening, requires plenty of space and involves creating a continuum from 0 to 20 using separate numbered cards. The numbered cards are placed on the floor to represent an axis of the spider diagram (placing them in an arc rather than a straight line makes it easier for everyone to see each other). The group then examines the range of responses to each of the eight 'functions' in turn. Individuals are asked to stand beside the card which represents their score for the 'function' under discussion. The method is illustrated in Figure 5 (see p. 19).

A discussion can then be encouraged to share views, seek clarification, identify specific examples and identify action points. If a facilitator is not involved, responsibility should be agreed for recording the discussion. It can be particularly useful to discuss and note:

- the range and distribution of scores (these should be logged on a flip-chart);
- whether the group is surprised about their overall distribution;
- whether individuals are surprised about where they stand in relation to their colleagues;
- comments from the person with the highest / lowest score;
- comments from anyone for whom this represented their *personal* highest / lowest score;
- specific examples which illustrate good / bad practice concerning the learning function under discussion;
- if individuals have moved significantly in comparison with the rest of the group;
- links with other issues raised;
- specific points for further consideration / action;

The process is repeated eight times until each of the learning functions has been examined and discussed. Discussion of each of the eight learning functions should be allocated a minimum of 10 minutes, though groups may spend considerably longer on the process.

6.4 *Interpreting the Responses*

Interpreting the responses will require the organisation to examine not only the overall scores for each of the functions but also each individual's assessment of specific questions. The following questions may help to clarify the significance of the responses:

- What functions can the NGO acknowledge as its strengths?
- What functions require most attention? What needs to be done to strengthen the organisation's capacity in those areas?
- Is there a wide disagreement between individuals' scores for a particular function? What is the significance of this?
- What are the main barriers to strengthening the learning capacity of the organisation? How can these barriers be overcome?

Using a customised 'Learning NGO Questionnaire' enabled **Christian Outreach** to evolve an agreed agenda for action aimed at developing their capacity as an effective learning organisation (see Box 6).

Box 6: Assessing Capability for Learning at Christian Outreach

Christian Outreach is an international development NGO based in England. Its director, Martin Lee, describes how it went about assessing its organisational learning capability.

The organisation decided to use a global meeting, at which all senior managers would be present, to examine its capability for organisational learning.

Using a customised version of the Learning NGO Assessment Tool, each of our senior managers made their own assessment of our NGO's strengths and weaknesses. Using the Profiling Tool we grouped together profiles which had a similar shape. We also grouped together the profiles of the UK-based head office staff and the field-based staff from the countries in which Christian Outreach works. We then compared their answers to specific questions on the questionnaire and this opened a wider discussion on the nature of the organisation.

What emerged was very enlightening. Our managers found that Christian Outreach head office was very poor at holding and retrieving data from the field programmes which made it difficult to encourage the transfer of lessons learned between the field programmes. We also found that whilst our field programmes were very good at networking, this was not the case of the organisation in the UK. As a result, the organisation was not readily learning from the experience of other agencies doing similar work, except at a local level.

As a result, Christian Outreach decided to:

- produce a handbook for field practitioners which synthesises the organisation's field experience;
- publish information much more widely to enable other NGOs to learn from the Christian Outreach experience;
- change the structure of our information and communication functions at head office to improve data handling;
- engage in more networking at head office level and contributing to and learning from wider debates, particularly in the field of work with refugees.

Two years later, this process was reviewed at the Director's Conference. As a result, Christian Outreach decided the following:

- that the handbooks needed to be updated on a regular basis as new learning came on board;
- that we needed to keep up to date with technology to enable them to continue to improve data handling. This has led to computerising of the resource library and updating this every three months;
- to set aside more funding to give Desk Officers, in particular; time to network with other agencies;
- introduction of a regular bulletin going to all field offices to which all could contribute. This has been expanded to contain sections on training available, lessons to pass on, resources and field reports that have been published.

Source: Martin Lee, Director of Christian Outreach, personal communication, 1996.

6.5 *Postscript*

Exposing their organisation to the scrutiny of the 'Learning NGO Questionnaire' may seem to some a risky activity. To others it may seem completely unthreatening. Experience suggests that examining one area of the organisation's practice will almost inevitably lead to discussions about how the organisation operates in general and how individuals, teams and sections work together for the good of the organisation's beneficiaries and other stakeholders.

Leaders and managers should be aware of these wider implications before embarking on an examination of learning capacity in their NGO. However, the process need not be a threatening one even in NGOs where there are internal tensions. Indeed, examining an apparently 'neutral' topic such as organisational learning can act as a relatively unthreatening way for an organisation to begin to identify underlying organisational problems which may require attention. In such circumstances two things may help to create a safe climate for discussion. The first is to agree some simple ground rules for the conduct of the exercise. The second is to consider involving as a facilitator an interested and sympathetic outsider who is familiar with the issues but does not have a particular 'agenda'.

7. Strengthening Learning Capability in NGOs

7.1 *Strategies for Building Learning Capability*

There are many different approaches to developing learning capacity in organisations. The approaches can be thought of as a continuum with two extremes: the Individual Competencies approach at one end and the Organisational Development approach at the other.

7.1.1 The individual competencies approach

The individual competences approach is based on the assumption that, unless the individuals in the organisation are effective learners, the organisation itself will be unable to develop the ability to learn at other levels. The focus of this approach is to strengthen the competence of individuals as learners so that they can better contribute to and use the body of wisdom held by the organisation as a whole. The competences approach seeks to initiate change at a behavioural level and use this as a lever for wider change in the organisation.

Are there specific competences which are required of individuals in a learning NGO? If so, what are they? A review of the literature on organisational learning suggests that an organisation's staff and managers need to develop specific competences. Many of the necessary skills are generic and transferable from other areas of fieldwork and management activity. They include:

- objective setting
- change management
- leadership and motivation
- decision-making
- performance management
- training and development
- communication
- self-awareness
- building external relationships

Other competences, particularly for those responsible for managing learning organisations, may be less well-developed and may require specific attention. Peter Senge (1990) argues that the leaders of learning organisations, far from being charismatic 'heroes', must be 'designers, teachers and stewards [whose] roles require new skills: the ability to build shared vision, to bring to the surface and challenge prevailing mental models, and to foster more systemic patterns of thinking'. In a very influential book on learning organisations he identified five essential management skills which he calls 'disciplines' (see Box 7).

How staff can develop these five 'disciplines' or competences have been the subject of two books by Peter Senge and those with an interest in the subject are recommended to read *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) and *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (Senge et al. 1994). Many of the ideas are directly transferable to the NGO sector.

Box 7: Senge's Five Disciplines for Organisational Learning

Peter Senge identifies five basic 'disciplines' which are, in his view, fundamental requirements for the staff of learning organisations. They are:

- Personal Mastery - learning to expand our personal capacity to create the results we most desire, and creating an organisational environment which encourages all its members to develop themselves toward the goals and purposes they choose.
- Mental Models - reflecting upon, continually clarifying, and improving our internal pictures of the world, and seeing how they shape our actions and decisions.
- Shared Vision - building a sense of commitment in a group, by developing shared images of the future we seek to create, and the principles and guiding practises by which we hope to get there.
- Team Learning - transforming conversational and collective thinking skills, so that groups of people can reliably develop intelligence and ability greater than the sum of the individual members' talents.
- Systems Thinking - a way of thinking about, and a language for describing and understanding, the forces and interrelationships that shape the behaviour of systems. The discipline helps us to see how to change systems more effectively, and to act more in tune with the larger processes of the natural and economic world.

Source: Summarised in Senge et al. 1994.

7.1.2 The Organisational Development (OD) approach

Organisation Development takes a holistic approach to organisations which focuses on their structures, systems, strategies and policies, culture and resources as well as the skills and abilities of their people. OD approaches focus on organisations as complex systems in which the elements of the system are interconnected and inter-dependent. OD recognises that attempts to change one part of a system are likely to have an effect on (or meet resistance from) other parts of the system. For example, attempts to build the learning capacity of an NGO by focusing only on the management style adopted by senior managers are unlikely to succeed if the NGO maintains a centralised, hierarchical structure. An OD approach would, therefore, focus on all the key elements of the NGO and encourage those involved to take action which acknowledges the nature of the organisation as a complex system.

There are usually four main stages to an OD intervention, usually in the form of an OD consultancy:

- assessment of the whole picture - feedback and joint diagnosis;
- assessment of options available and agreement on ways forward;
- action planning;
- implementation and management of the change process;
- evaluation, consolidation and ongoing review.

Any OD intervention should enhance the organisations own capacity to manage change and learn from it own practice.⁵

An OD approach to building organisational learning capability informs the 'Learning NGO Questionnaire' which may be used as a tool for the diagnosis and feedback stage of the OD process.

⁵ For further reading on the theory and practice of OD, see R. Harrison, *The Collected Papers of Roger Harrison*, (1996) and James (1998).

7.2 Competences Approach or OD Approach?

These two broad approaches to strengthening learning capacity each have their strengths and weaknesses, some of which are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Strengths and weaknesses of the two main approaches to building organisational learning capacity		
	Strengths	Weaknesses
Individual Competences Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recognises that learning organisations require learning individuals;• Focuses on short-term empowerment of individuals;• Develops knowledge and transferable skills;• Can be done without external help;• Can bring about fairly rapid changes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May address the symptoms rather than the causes;• Does not address the context within which learning takes place: organisational structure, systems and culture;• May be interpreted as blaming individuals for the faults of the organisation.
OD Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Holistic and comprehensive - views every aspect of the organisation as important;• Addresses all the barriers identified;• Can be a very effective way of modelling a learning approach.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Time-consuming;• Lack of instant results may be demoralising;• Requires a high level of commitment from managers and staff;• (Usually) requires an external facilitator;• Can identify issues which the NGO is reluctant to face.

In reality, the two approaches are by no means as polarised or mutually exclusive as the characterisation above would suggest. Indeed, experience suggests that a comprehensive strategy for building learning capacity would normally include elements of each approach since neither on its own is likely to be sufficient to ensure an increase in organisational learning capability.

7.3 Encouraging Learning

In practice, most organisations which try to build their capacity for organisational learning use a combination of both the individual competences and the OD approaches. Examples of what NGOs can do to develop their capability for learning might include:

- Arrange an awareness-raising event focusing on the learning organisation. Use examples from your own or other NGOs to illustrate what can be achieved by taking a systematic approach to learning.
- Establish the areas in which your NGO would like to build a reputation for excellence and use these as a focus for building a strategy.
- Identify some specific problems or issues which would be amenable to organisational learning or where there is already good practice. Set up a group to examine best practice within and outside your NGO - start an action learning set.

- Identify the specific benefits to your beneficiaries of your NGO becoming a learning organisation.
- Identify the NGO's organisational learning strengths and weaknesses and where the potential for change is (involve as many of the organisation's people as possible in this process - the more perspectives to compare, the better).
- Identify the forces for and against learning in your NGO and devise action points for strengthening the forces for and minimising the forces against.
- Decide on whether the conditions are supportive of an OD approach to building capacity. Is there senior management commitment? a broad base of support? agreement on the need for change? If so, you may want to seek the support of an experienced external facilitator. If not, you may want to cultivate these conditions or start with an individual competences approach and build on individual commitment.
- Model behaviour which is supportive of learning (this is particularly important for those with people-management responsibilities at whatever level in the organisation).
- Legitimise and encourage learning by building it in to job descriptions, by allocating time and other resources for it, and by talking about it at team meetings, individual supervision and work review meetings and through staff appraisal schemes.
- Invest time on team-building to encourage a team-working approach based on mutual support and encouragement.
- Encourage horizontal linkages between different parts of the NGO and build links with other NGOs.
- Use these links to seek out and learn from (i.e. benchmark) examples of 'best practice' in the activities and functions upon which your NGO wishes to build its reputation.
- Use the organisation's monitoring and evaluation systems as a source of knowledge and not just a means of ensuring accountability. Ensure that all monitoring and evaluation reports address lessons learned and ways in which these can be applied (see, for example, BOND 1997).
- Arrange events to share knowledge and wisdom around specific themes. Develop task - focused teams to gather knowledge and make presentations to 'kick-start' the events.

8. Raising the Profile of Learning in NGOs

For an NGO to demonstrate that it has become genuinely committed to learning at all levels, it must raise the profile of learning by addressing each of the eight key functions examined earlier (Figure 3). Perhaps the most important of these is to create an organisational culture which legitimises the process of learning by resourcing it adequately and rewarding (in all sorts of ways) those who contribute to and actively use the organisation's bank of explicit wisdom. Embarking on a process of organisational development which is focused on organisational learning sends a strong message to everyone associated with the NGO that 'learning is important to our success'.

Leaders and managers have a critical part to play in developing a learning approach to the NGO's work. First, they must legitimise learning in their organisation in whatever ways they can. The aim of all NGO managers should be to exemplify the 'reflective practitioner' approach in all that they do. This means practising what they preach by opening up their own work to scrutiny as well as encouraging others to do so.

Secondly, the leaders/managers must be prepared to address the resource issues which may well arise from assessing learning capacity at both individual and organisational levels.

8.1 *Legitimising Learning*

Although it hardly needs to be repeated, learning is fundamental to the development process itself. Indeed Fowler describes development as a continuous process of investigation through implementation in which learning has a pivotal role to play (1997: 172).

Despite what should be the self-evident importance of learning in NGOs, there is still a great reluctance to treat it as a legitimate activity. The section on barriers to learning provides some explanations for why this is the case. Many NGO managers and board members are still reluctant to be seen to be using resources for what appear to be ‘non-productive’ purposes. Learning, if it appears in a budget explicitly, is often viewed as a drain on organisational resources rather than a means of creating its most precious asset: wisdom.

As Alan Fowler (1997) succinctly puts it: ‘Equating learning with overheads is wrong.’ Keeping overheads down is a common scapegoat for low prioritisation and meagre investment in learning but there is more to it than that.

Ways of legitimising learning will vary from organisation to organisation. Some examples every NGO could consider are given below:

- **exemplify it** - by ensuring that everyone uses a learning approach from the top down;
- **encourage it** - set up working groups with explicit learning functions; commission specific pieces of research aimed at harvesting learning from programmes or across projects;
- **integrate it** - build a learning ‘heading’ into individual, team and organisational work plans; build learning responsibilities into job descriptions; build learning objectives into project proposals; ensure that learning is built in as a strategic goal;
- **reward it** - no matter where it occurs, learning can and should be rewarded through recognition and feedback in supervision and staff appraisal schemes; time out for reflection and writing up; implementing visible changes in work practices, procedures, policies; providing opportunities for ‘learners’ to speak about new developments at conferences, etc.

8.2 *Resources for Learning*

The most important strategy for generating resources for learning is to view learning as a fundamental part of the development process and to include it in budgets accordingly. This means ensuring that the organisation makes certain that all four stages in the learning cycle (not simply the ‘action’ stage) are adequately budgeted.

One of the priorities for the learning NGO must therefore be to educate its donors and supporters about the nature of the development process itself. Only when donors and other supporters have realistic expectations of NGOs will it be possible to enter into an open dialogue about problems experienced and lessons learned - which are fundamental to the culture necessary for a learning organisation. In this sense, learning is both a necessary pre-condition and a desirable outcome of genuine partnerships between NGOs and donors in the development process.

Donors increasingly talk about capacity-building of the NGOs they support, yet it is still difficult to encourage many donor agencies to translate this commitment into tangible resources. NGOs and NGO support organisations need to continue to remind donors through a range of means including funding applications that capacity-building is part of a learning

process that requires adequate resources. A recognition by donors to allow NGOs to build in 'organisational learning' as a budget line in funding applications would go a long way to raise the profile of learning as a core NGO activity.

Building learning into each individual's job design and job description gives added legitimacy to the activity and also provides an important reminder to NGO senior managers about the staffing levels necessary for ensuring a learning approach to development.

Finally, we should not forget that learning can itself be used as a source of income through sales of publications, training and consultancy work. As an organisation becomes more confident about what it has learned, the opportunity to raise its profile may also grow and with it the confidence to contribute to wider discussions about what works in the field of development.

9. Glossary

Articulation

Articulation is the process of converting tacit wisdom into explicit wisdom.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking is the process of comparing an organisation's performance with the best practices of other organisations in key areas of activity. It involves establishing common standards against which individual organisations can assess their achievements as a way of setting targets for improving their performance.

The process of benchmarking is being introduced into the NGO sector in the UK through informal 'clubs' which exchange good practice on a voluntary basis but mainly through government-sponsored 'quality' initiatives such as Total Quality Management, ISO 9000 registration and 'Investors in People' accreditation (Paton and Payne 1997).

Defensive Routines

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

Explicit wisdom

Explicit wisdom is knowledge combined with experience which is made available to everyone in an organisation in order to extend organisational learning.

Learning cycle

David Kolb (1984) developed a four-stage model of how individuals learn which involves action, reflection, abstract conceptualisation and experimentation in a continuous cycle. According to Kolb, all stages of the cycle must receive adequate attention. Honey (1986) and Mumford (1986) developed this model and used it as the basis for their concept of 'learning styles'. This is based on the idea that each individual will have preferences for one or more stages in the cycle. By being aware of their preferences, they can choose to strengthen other stages in order to make them better 'all round' learners.

Learning organisation

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

Tacit wisdom

Personal and often unconscious knowledge, insights and experience used by individuals to guide their own work practice. Tacit wisdom is inaccessible to others until the individual makes it explicit. Tacit wisdom may be very difficult to explain to others but the process can be assisted through the use of figurative language such as metaphor and analogy; and by asking individuals to constantly re-examine what they take for granted.

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11. **Appendices**

11.1 The Learning NGO Questionnaire

11.2 Questionnaire Analysis Sheet

11.3 Profile Plotting

The Learning NGO Questionnaire

This questionnaire can be applied to whole organisations, a single department or section, a project or a work team. It is important to be clear about what level of 'organisation' you are thinking about before answering the questions and to be consistent throughout. When you have completed the questionnaire, please follow the instructions on the 'Analysing Your Scores' sheet.

The 'organisation' under consideration in this questionnaire is:

Read through each of the following statements and place a tick in the box which best describes your organisation.

Characteristic	Not true of my organisation (0)	Rarely true of my organisation (1)	Sometimes true of my organisation (2)	Often true of my organisation (3)	Very true of my organisation (4)
1. Staff are rewarded for the contribution they make to the organisation's learning.					
COMMENTS					
2. The organisation uses systematic procedures for the regular monitoring, review and evaluation of all of its project, programme and advocacy activity.					
COMMENTS					

Learning NGO Questionnaire

Characteristic	Not true of my organisation	Rarely true of my organisation	Sometimes true of my organisation	Often true of my organisation	Very true of my organisation
3. All organisation members who have dealings with the 'outside world' are expected to gather and share relevant information. Their managers take an active interest in 'debriefing' them about what the information they have gathered.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
4. Information flows freely throughout the organisation, crossing departmental, sectional and locational boundaries without hindrance.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
5. Learning from experience is seen as 'everyone's business' and not left to specialist units or senior managers.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
6. The organisation has mechanisms for 'remembering' the experience of its current and previous work through the development of highly accessible databases, resource / information centres and data retrieval systems.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					

Learning NGO Questionnaire

Characteristic	Not true of my organisation	Rarely true of my organisation	Sometimes true of my organisation	Often true of my organisation	Very true of my organisation
7. The development of strategy is deliberately organised as a learning process. Feedback loops are incorporated to enable continuous improvement in the light of experience.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
8. The organisation systematically uses its learning to improve its own practice and influence the policy and practice of other organisations or agencies.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
9. The organisation writes up and publishes its experience for a wider readership without using unnecessary technical jargon.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
10. Policy making involves people at most levels in the organisation, according to what they can contribute to the process and not simply their status.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					

Learning NGO Questionnaire

Characteristic	Not true of my organisation	Rarely true of my organisation	Sometimes true of my organisation	Often true of my organisation	Very true of my organisation
11. All written reports and key documents are cross-referenced and made easily accessible to all staff.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
12. Monitoring and evaluation reports and field visit reports are routinely analysed to identify what has been learned from the work and what lessons could be applied in the future.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
13. The organisation has a wide range of mechanisms for sharing experience between staff in different teams, sections, departments and locations.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
14. The organisation enters into open co-operation with other organisations in order to share and encourage mutual learning from each other's experience.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					

Learning NGO Questionnaire

Characteristic	Not true of my organisation	Rarely true of my organisation	Sometimes true of my organisation	Often true of my organisation	Very true of my organisation
15. The organisation has enough built in 'spare capacity' to allow staff to take time out to reflect on their work experience and learn lessons from it.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
16. Sharing experience and knowledge in the organisation is given a high priority even when time and other resources are limited.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
17. Senior managers create a climate which encourages experimentation and acknowledges that mistakes are an inevitable part of this.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
18. The organisation continually enables individuals to tell others about important lessons they have learned in order to constantly expand the organisations base of explicit wisdom.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					

Learning NGO Questionnaire

Characteristic	Not true of my organisation	Rarely true of my organisation	Sometimes true of my organisation	Often true of my organisation	Very true of my organisation
19. The organisation encourages its staff to develop a wide range of contacts with other agencies and to actively learn from their experience.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
20. It is easy to access information on the lessons learned from other parts of the organisation.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
21. The organisation is skilled at converting raw information from evaluations into useable wisdom.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
22. The organisation is not vulnerable to losing its experience when individuals leave. For example, staff who leave the organisation go through a systematically recorded de-briefing to ensure that the organisation retains their knowledge.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					

Learning NGO Questionnaire

Characteristic	Not true of my organisation	Rarely true of my organisation	Sometimes true of my organisation	Often true of my organisation	Very true of my organisation
23. The system of planning, accounting, budgeting, financial reporting and other management processes are organised to assist learning.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
24. The organisation has a strategy for scaling up its impact which reflects the learning it has developed on 'what works'.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
25. The organisation changes its practice and priorities to reflect new knowledge and insights in its efforts to constantly improve its effectiveness.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
26. Learning is built into the organisation through the development of systems, operational procedures and other ways of sharing the lessons gained from individuals' experience.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					

Learning NGO Questionnaire

Characteristic	Not true of my organisation	Rarely true of my organisation	Sometimes true of my organisation	Often true of my organisation	Very true of my organisation
27. The organisation has a systematic database of all its project and programme work which can enable staff and 'outsiders' to identify where expertise resides.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
28. The organisation regularly identifies a theme of work and draws conclusions based on an analysis of all of its practice experience and an understanding of the current 'state of the art'.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
29. Staff have access to email and are encouraged to share information using electronic media such as the Internet and bulletin boards.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
30. Staff are encouraged to visit other organisations and are expected to write up and share what they learned from their visit.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					

Learning NGO Questionnaire

Characteristic		Not true of my organisation	Rarely true of my organisation	Sometimes true of my organisation	Often true of my organisation	Very true of my organisation
31.	Individuals, groups and sections view each other as working partners and constantly strive to find out and meet each others' expectations and needs.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS						
32.	Resources and facilities for individual development are made available to all members of the organisation.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS						
33.	People feel free to enquire about and challenge each others' (and their own) assumptions and biases.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS						
34.	People at all levels of the organisation are encouraged to learn regularly and rigorously from their work and feed such learning to other parts of the organisation.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS						

Learning NGO Questionnaire

Characteristic	Not true of my organisation	Rarely true of my organisation	Sometimes true of my organisation	Often true of my organisation	Very true of my organisation
35. The organisation is linked to a wide range of networks and uses its contacts with other agencies to gather useful knowledge and skills.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
36. The organisation's staff are skilled at making their personal knowledge and wisdom available to others.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
37. The organisation uses a continuous improvement approach when analysing the knowledge and experience gained from its practice. Staff are encouraged to constantly ask themselves "How could we do this better?"	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
38. The information function is given sufficient prominence and is resourced adequately to enable the organisation to keep its records up to date.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					

Learning NGO Questionnaire

Characteristic	Not true of my organisation	Rarely true of my organisation	Sometimes true of my organisation	Often true of my organisation	Very true of my organisation
39. The learning gained by one part of the organisation is quickly made available to others even if at first it appears of little immediate relevance.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					
40. The organisation is constantly building its capacity and innovating based on what it has learned.	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
COMMENTS					

Notes:

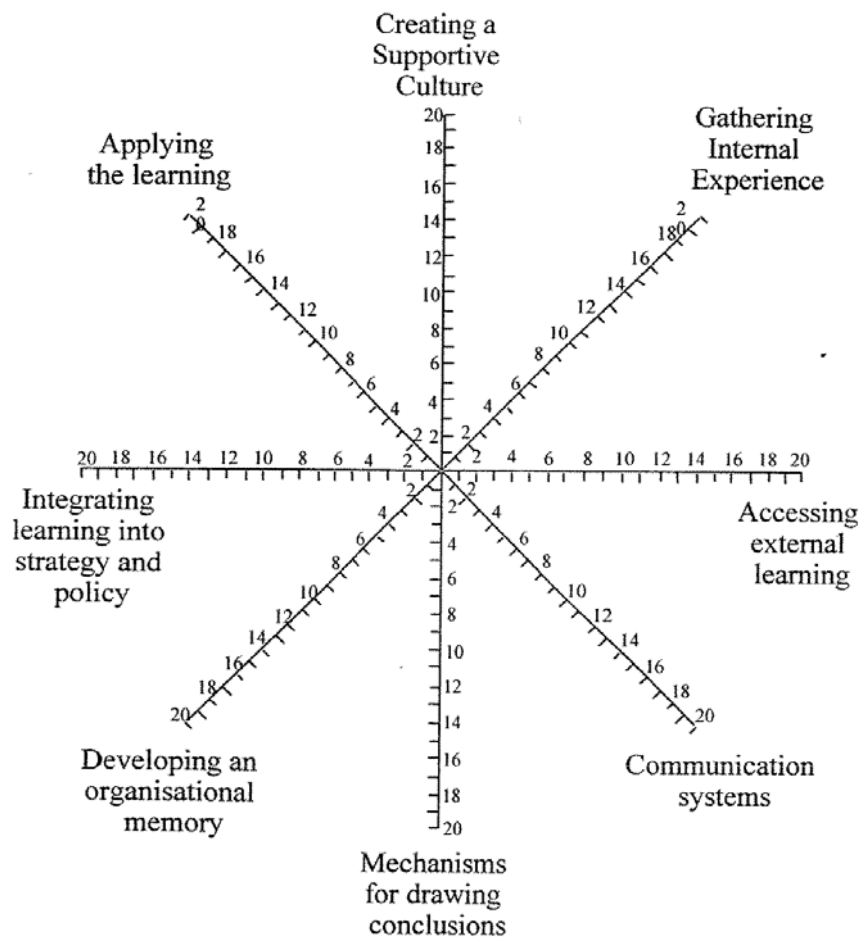
Analysis Sheet

Go through each of the questions in The Learning NGO Questionnaire. Place your score (from 0 to 4) for each question in the appropriate space below. Add up the totals for each column. This will give you an indication of your organisation's broad strengths and weaknesses since the maximum score is 20 for each column. Plot each of the column totals on the axes of the 'Profile Plotting' sheet.

Question numbers	Creating a supportive culture	Gathering Internal Experience	Accessing External Learning	Communication systems	Mechanisms for Drawing Conclusions	Developing an Organisational Memory	Integrating Learning into Strategy and Policy	Applying the Learning
1	—	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
16	—	15	14	13	12	11	10	9
17	—	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
32	—	31	30	29	28	27	26	25
33	—	34	35	36	37	38	39	40
Totals								

The Learning NGO Questionnaire Profile Plotting

Plot your scores on the appropriate axes and draw a line to connect each point. This will give your organisation a 'learning profile'. You can see from the profile where your organisations strengths and weaknesses lie.



Occasional Paper Series No: 17

The Learning NGO

Bruce Britton

The concept of the 'learning organisation' has spawned a number of books within the corporate sector. The ideas underpinning this concept have a generic appeal and as a result, the organisational learning is the subject of increasing interest in the NGO sector and the not-for-profit world more widely.

The author sets out to examine the relevance of the 'learning organisation' concept for NGOs and concludes that the ideas have significant relevance for the sector. The paper aims to provide NGO staff with a conceptual framework for the subject — its purpose is not simply to describe the characteristics of a learning organisation but to encourage NGOs to examine their organisations in the light of these characteristics. For this reason the paper includes a diagnostic tool (the learning NGO questionnaire) which NGOs can use to assess their current capacity for organisational learning.

This paper seeks to stimulate ideas about how NGOs can rise to the challenge of learning from, adapting and continually improving the quality of what they do, if they are to remain relevant as agents of social change into the twenty-first century.

About the Author

Bruce Britton works as an independent trainer, consultant and writer in the field of NGO management and organisation development. He has extensive experience working in the NGO sector in the UK, South and South East Asia, and is a founder member of the Asian Institute of Technology NGDO consortium in Bangkok. In 1995, he received an MBA from the University of Edinburgh, where his research topic was the development of learning organisations in the not-for-profit sector.

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