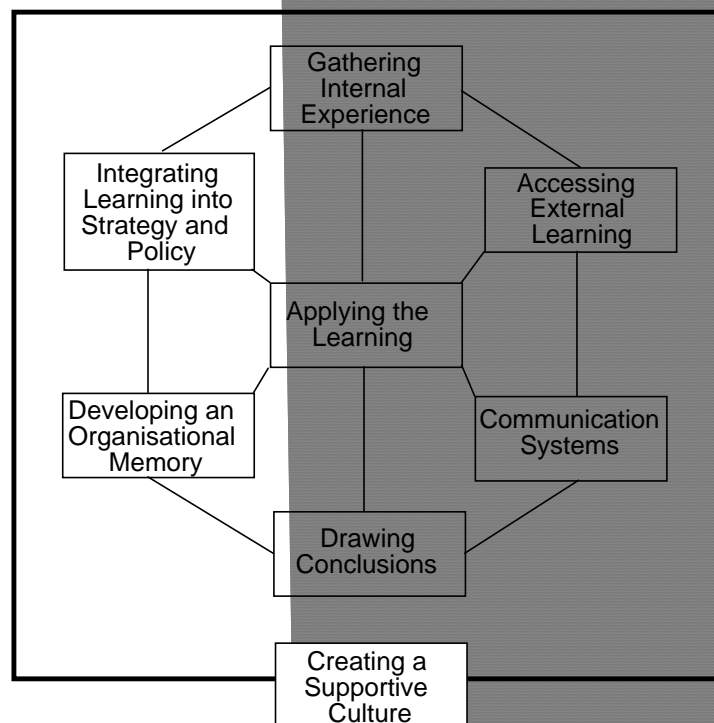


Extract from paper: 'The Learning NGO' Bruce Britton March 1998

The 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 for organisations 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 below.

Figure 3: Eight Key Functions of a Learning NGO



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

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

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.

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 lessons 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 open-ness 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 more 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 the UK 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 what 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 actively learn 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 the way in which NGOs in the Northern hemisphere go about strengthening the organisational capacity of their Southern partners. 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 publications and 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 to constantly 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 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 - you have to be a dedicated seeker of *specific* lessons to read them) and training courses (which can be a useful way of distilling lessons learned as one sure way of ensuring that you understand 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 email 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 where before they would not have considered writing a note or going to talk to a colleague. 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 Web² 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 in their book 'Becoming a Learning Organisation'.

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. There are encouraging examples of good practice in the NGO community more widely.

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.

² The People Centered Development Forum can be contacted at <http://iisd1.iisd.ca/pcdf>

- 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. Linking individual learning to

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 de-briefing 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

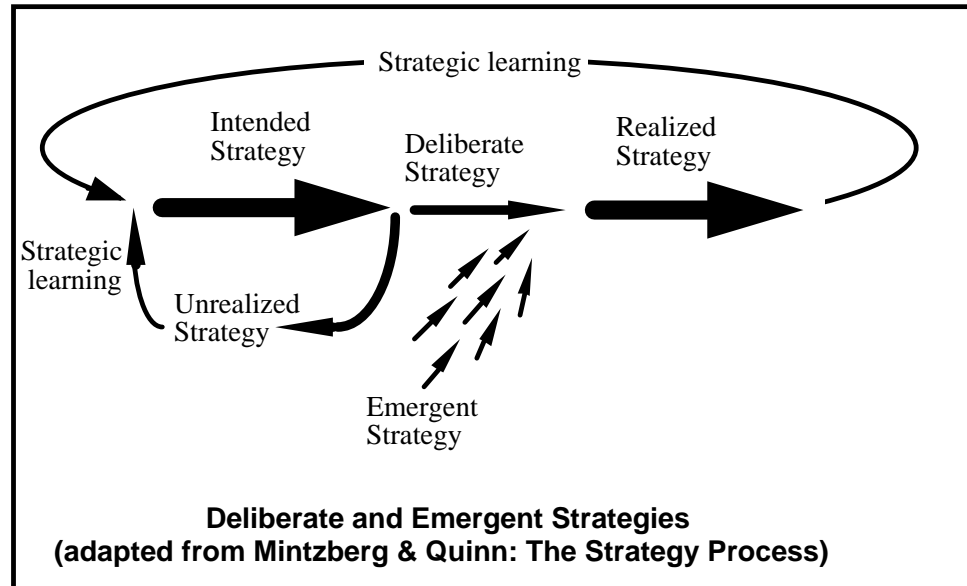
One way of building lessons learned into the fabric of an NGO is to develop policy and procedures which reflect organisational learning. This provides the NGO with a framework for decision-making and resource allocation which is grounded in the organisation's own experience and that of other agencies.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

The development by The Commonwealth Foundation (Ball & Dunn, undated) 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 organisational 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.

Figure 4: Deliberate and Emergent Strategy



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 other strategic goals over others which are allowed to 'fade away'.

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.

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.