

BEYOND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT: Key Enablers for the Learning Organisation

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I. Our Practice Shows the Effectiveness of Our Learning.

Twenty-five years ago, Peter Senge published *'The Fifth Discipline. The Art & Practice of The Learning Organisation'*. It remains as inspirational and aspirational today as it was then.

Ostensibly the aid sector has embraced the *responsibility to learn*: There is a proliferation of manuals; 'knowledge management' is a formal function in various organisations, we have intranets and 'communities of practice', and thematically specialised advisers. We invest a lot in training courses. We want to see more 'evidence-based policy' and are struggling with the challenge to 'demonstrate results'. We are also enthralled by the ability of new technologies to generate 'data' much more cost-effectively and to provide us with 'big data'.

Yet when we look closely at the actual practices on the ground, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that more often than not, these do not reflect the collective learning available: practices are not as sophisticated as they could be, key attention areas are neglected, known mistakes are made again, manuals sit unused on office shelves, we wait for formal evaluations to ask the key questions etc. Many lessons may have been 'identified' but are *not* 'learned' and applied. Actual practice is less shaped by the collective learning than by the knowledge, understanding, character, personal preferences, and competencies of key individuals, who may or may not have been good learners. There are two sets of reasons for this: persistent difficulty in being a learning organisation, and sector-wide disincentives.

II. The Challenge.

The learning challenge exists along three key dimensions:

- Experiences need to be documented, brought together and reflected on; then they need to be reshaped in formats that can be communicated; the insights need to be paid attention to, absorbed and then applied in further practice;
- Essential learning has to shift from the level of 'awareness', to 'knowledge', to 'skill';
- Individual learning needs to become team learning, and organisational / network / partners' learning.

Put together this is daunting but not impossible.

III. Five Fundamental Enablers for Organisational Learning.

1. The Curious Manager or Team Leader

Observe what managers ask questions about, and you will see what an organisation finds important. Active managerial interest and support is critical. Without it, all efforts and investment will yield limited and temporary results at best.

Imagine managers or team leaders who regularly – several times a week and sometimes a day- ask: *What are we learning from this? What must we learn from this? Are we documenting and sharing this? Are we using the available learning here, what have we or others already learned about this?* Etc. Not only would this drive the attention to the learning content, it also sends a clear signal that 'learning' and applying learning is an important and valued organisational concern and objective.

2. Make and Value the Time for Learning.

Time is as precious a resource as money. But the word 'resource' has two connotations: something finite that we can exhaust, or something valuable that we can invest. Driven by an atmosphere of 'urgency' and 'the immediate', often self-created and greatly encouraged by modern ICT, we only see the first connotation. But learning takes time: to reflect, to document, to share, to absorb, to apply.

How we choose to allocate our time, is moreover something that is partially under our control: Prior to a renewed escalation of war in Sri Lanka, I had instituted a practice of staff retreats about every 7-8 weeks, to share information and updates and to learn, and plan together. When renewed heavy fighting led to the swift displacement of some 400.000 people, we rapidly scaled up our operational crisis response, tripling the budget and quadrupling the staff within the span of a good 3 months. Notwithstanding the enormous pressures, I maintained the practice of regular retreats. This proved a very good use of precious time: It helped us to integrate new staff and provide them with the fundamental learning needed, to maintain a strategic perspective and regularly assess our positioning within an evolving situation, and ensure our programmatic and organisational coherence. Without it, the external crisis would have become matched by an internal crisis.

Learning organisations do not systematically deprioritise learning over other actions.

3. Hire and Groom People with Strong Learning Abilities.

The not-for-profit sector has largely reproduced the functionalistic organigrams and command-and-control cultures of the public and private sector, yet without the much more dynamic 'management' of human resources that you find in the better private sector companies. In more than 2 decades I've never heard any manager talk about '*attracting and retaining talent*' for example or, in a job interview, inquire about someone's '*learning journey*'. The trend is rather towards specialised jobs, looking for people who have been doing exactly that same type of work for at least 5 or 10 years, and to only call upon them for issues that fit with their job description. When new skills and competencies are needed, current employees are simply replaced with new recruits. If our accounting systems would show the true cost of such practice, we would not manage like this.

Making the working relationship highly transactional creates a false efficiency: On the surface it can give the impression that it attracts the best people. But who is going to be really committed, and give their best, to an organisation that doesn't commit to its staff, and doesn't care about their professional growth? Contrast this with the better private sector companies that go '*talent hunting*', and invest in the systematic grooming of talented people. They make them work successively in different parts of the organisation and/or provide them with well-chosen training to develop skills (including emotional intelligence) they will need in roles of higher responsibility. By doing so, they not only deepen their expertise but also develop a more holistic and strategic perspective.

Mentoring can be a very cost-effective learning enabler. Many years ago, when my better half got her management training, she was told: '*No promotion until you have trained someone to take your place!*'. What an organisational incentive for mentoring - and working together!

We have entered a historical period of rapid and unpredictable change. Organisations will have to be more adaptable and innovative to survive. Old ways of thinking and doing may no longer be appropriate for the new realities. In such contexts, are we not much better off with staff that demonstrate strong learning abilities? Which – for adults- implies the ability to *unlearn* some old knowledge and practices that are no longer so adequate. That also applies to top management – the potential for an organisation to renew itself is closely correlated with the learning abilities of its the top management.

4. Focus on Team Learning.

Learning is individual, yet organisational performance is dependent on team and collective effort. Many organisations over-emphasise the individual: We assess the performance of individuals as if that did not depend on wider team performance and a larger enabling environment; we send individuals on training who then can't apply what they have learned as the rest of us continue with business-as-usual; if we invest in coaching support, it is more for individuals than for teams. Yet there is solid management

literature that confirms the superior performance of learning teams. Learning teams thrive when the team leader is a learning leader and a team coach rather than a 'boss', and where all team members receive credit for what is a collective performance.

Team learning turns into wider organisational learning where learning is encouraged across units and offices. Silos encourage stagnation. Organisations need dedicated resources (people, money and time) to help document the collective learning and pick up and absorb the learning from others. But such 'knowledge managers' or 'learning resource persons' cannot get disconnected from their colleagues fully engaged in practical action. Broader 'communities of practice', within and across organisations, can be very stimulating if they are dynamic. But to have influence on organisational performance, managers need to take part in them, even if they only do so as 'followers'.

5. Pursue Organisational Learning Priorities.

Even if becoming a learning organisation is a strategic organisational priority, the amount of people, money and time that can be invested in it will be limited. So organisations have to set some learning priorities. How do you decide between the learning needs and preferences of individual staff, teams or units, HQ and field-based staff, your own organisation and partners? And between the learning needs of today and for tomorrow? Choices will be inevitable, but making them can be facilitated by exploring three questions:

- What essential competencies do our people need to perform as effective teams?
- What learning will take our teams to the next level of quality?
- What learning does our organisation need to remain a high performer in the face of new challenges from a changing world?

Then pursue your choices with focus, determination and patience. A UK-headquartered peace organisation successfully introduced and mainstreamed a high quality learning-documentation-evaluation practice throughout the organisation. It took five years to get to that next level of quality.

Document the (team- and) organisational learning journey, and the enabling and constraining factors, so that you '*learn to learn*'.

IV. Is there a Business Case for Learning?

The persistent discrepancy between the collective knowledge or learning available and our collective practice, also results from disincentives in the aid-supported sector.

1. Be Busy.

One big disincentive is the pervasive impatience of international actors that drives short-term thinking and sustains the myth of quick fixes to complex problems. Mixed up with an increasingly competitive environment for limited funding, this strongly encourages action over reflection, the import of external solutions rather than the search for contextually appropriate and locally owned ones, and pressures to claim 'success'. Increasing scepticism about the effectiveness of aid among public opinion in donor countries will only reinforce this disincentive.

2. No Serious Penalties for Failing.

A second major disincentive is that, by and large, at the organisational level, we can get away with not learning. Those with the broad cumulative knowledge are rarely the decision-makers, and there is little longitudinal perspective. There is no *evaluation criterion for 'learning effectiveness'* and evaluators are not asked to assess it. When serious programmatic or organisational weaknesses have become visible at some point, teams and organisations argue that they will learn from it. No one ever checks.

In 2016, almost 20 years after 'Do No Harm' was published, we still have experienced organisations that understand '*conflict sensitivity*' as nothing more than '*potential security risks to their staff and assets*'. An organisation can be on the verge of bankruptcy twice in a decade, for spending money that was not

secured, yet be bailed out twice by donors without consequences for its failure to learn. We keep spending a lot on one-off training courses even if we know that their effectiveness in improving practice is very modest at best. We know that sustainable solutions require good fit with the context and broad support from local/national stakeholders, yet continue importing solutions. How come that the *value-for-money* lens does not pick up on the general learning weaknesses?

On the other side, if the aid sector is really about providing effective services and/or creating enabling conditions for purposeful and capable locally- driven action, then, as for the business sector, the customer/beneficiary should be central. But by and large, the intended 'beneficiaries' of our programmes and actions have long been powerless or their views have not been heard. How about, for example, asking refugees who have been receiving aid for more than a year, whether or which aid agency they see as a learning organisation?

That situation may slowly improve with greater access to information, the introduction of formal complaints and response mechanisms, growing citizen activism, and increasing assertiveness of governmental and civil society actors in aid-recipient countries. Will it be enough for aid-supported organisations whose sustainability does not ultimately depend on 'customer satisfaction'?

The aid sector has become an 'aid-business': From that perspective, the question for top management is: *'Does being an effective learning organisation contribute to business success'*, i.e. not only providing real benefits for others but also standing out as a worthwhile organisation, coalition or network, to invest in?

So far, effective learning has not been a requirement for business success. Will that continue to be the case? As aid budgets continue to shrink, and we will eventually be forced to acknowledge that we can't deliver big demonstrable 'results' quickly to the big challenges in many societies and in our world today, I think our learning abilities will start to matter much more.

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