

Small interventions can have big effects

Organisational learning

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PSO is an association of 45 Dutch development NGOs that are working to strengthen the capacities of civil society organisations in developing countries. In this article two learning facilitators of PSO Knowledge and Learning Centre discuss their experiences with organisational learning.

When I worked as a project officer, many times when I proposed ideas, nothing happened. People seemed to be indifferent, and the management didn't appear to care. I became really frustrated! Later, when I took up a management position, I looked back and thought about what I needed to do differently to avoid my team members becoming as frustrated as I sometimes was. So I talked to the director and we decided to promote a 'yes-culture' in our organisation, to ensure that good, new ideas have a chance to come up. Thus, the first reaction to any new idea is always 'yes!' Now, we openly look at new ideas and explore them. We have experienced a real change in atmosphere!

This story gives an illustration of one way to put organisational learning into practice. It was told by a participant at a meeting organised by PSO (Personnel Services Overseas) in The Hague on 25 April 2006, when around 50 people from 15 Dutch development organisations answered questions and explored their experiences with organisational learning. The meeting was to kick-off a new PSO initiative to support organisational learning in development NGOs.

Why all this attention to organisational learning? We see that the environment in which development organisations work is complex and continuously changing. The development process itself is nonlinear, unpredictable, and not always easy to understand. In such a dynamic context, NGOs such as PSO need to be dynamic if we want to ensure continuous improvements in our performance and development impact. We need people who are able to reflect on their work and its impact, and who are capable of changing the way they work in order to become more effective. We need leaders and managers who will give priority to learning as integral aspect of practice.

An organisation's ability to improve its impact is largely dependent on the capacity of its staff to reflect collaboratively and to envisage change. Strategies for personal and collaborative reflection are necessary in order to achieve the kinds of insight that will result in learning and profound change. We believe that this type of learning has less to do with systems and databases, and

more with tools for dialogue, attitudes and skills for working collaboratively, and the competency for peer review and reflection. There are also implications for the organisational culture, as well as structures, incentives and procedures.

From this it might sound like organisational learning is something 'big', 'abstract' or 'difficult'. But we believe that all organisations are already learning. It is impossible not to learn. Learning starts by making existing learning situations more explicit, and being more aware of them. Being aware of where you already learn helps to see where there are opportunities for learning, what conditions enable learning and how you can build on them.

Storytelling can be a very helpful method of identifying examples of learning in your organisation. As an example, one participant at the kick-off meeting told the following story:

'As a manager, I was not happy with the way team meetings were going. I felt I wasn't hearing enough about what was on people's minds. Therefore, I decided to ask two questions at the end of each team meeting: 'What worked well this week?' and 'What didn't work well this week?' I got all kinds of reactions to my proposal. One person said: 'I'm not interested in doing this'. Another was very enthusiastic. Two people were a little fearful, saying that they had not prepared these questions, that they did not know the answer. But then, people slowly decided to try it out. Now I get so much more insight into what occupies the minds of my team members, things I otherwise would never have known about! These included small things, such as 'our computers don't work?', but also bigger issues. It works!'

This story shows how small interventions can have big effects. This is a very powerful principle if we strive to learn more from our own practice!

Learning starts with asking questions

Another powerful principle is the idea of 'learning starts with asking questions'.

[Nancy Dixon](#), a leading expert on organisational learning in the United States, is a strong advocate of this principle. Understanding what you want to learn helps you to shape your own and your organisation's learning processes. Nancy Dixon joined us in the kick-off meeting, and challenged us to explore our own questions around organisational learning. Due to this exploration, there are six central questions to explore further in the future:

- How do we create a space and culture where we can learn with each other?
- How do we organise reflection within our organisation?
- How can managers support learning for themselves and for their teams?
- How do we create space for feedback?
- How do we bring our learning into practice?
- How do we get from individual learning to organisational learning?

These are some of the important challenges faced by development organisations that which to improve their organisational learning capacity.

This exploration of questions about organisational learning, and the stories collected from practice, is already one of the main principles of this learning trajectory. We will support learning from our own practice. The learning trajectory is based on a very exciting and challenging design, with learning cycles taking place in the work situation of participating organisations, collective reflection together with 'critical friends', and concrete outputs at the end of each cycle. The design is based on principles like 'the workplace is a powerful place for learning?', 'learning from successes and strengths?', and 'learning is about experimenting and trying out new ideas?.'

Curious to know more about the learning process? For more information, visit the [organisational learning section of the PSO website](#).