

Learning in teams

Overcoming barriers to learning

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Moussiliou Adiloy, an independent consultant based in Benin, has many years' experience in capacity development with various organisations. Here he identifies the barriers to team learning, and ways to overcome them.

Development organisations are increasingly recognising the benefits of 'on the job' team learning. Individuals who attend workshops and training courses rarely apply or share their newly acquired knowledge. Learning in teams, or 'action learning?', can generate solutions that are more likely to be applied in practice, but which pose their own challenges.

Most organisational learning occurs haphazardly. I previously worked with a project team in Benin. We used a logical framework to plan and report our activities, but our learning needs were not directly linked to the project goals. We organised learning sessions, but did not specify where the improved skills should lead, and so we were unable to measure their effects. Team learning processes must be set up in a systematic way, starting with well defined individual or team goals. Outcome mapping frameworks can be helpful in the design, structuring and monitoring of the learning process.

The advantage of learning in teams is that members can help each other, especially in solving problems. They can take a detached view, and help put a problem in perspective. Team members can also act as coaches, a role that is not always well understood. As an example, a development advisor confided in her colleagues that she had a problem with a client and had decided to end the relationship. They explained that the relationship was important, and advised her to continue. Thus they offered a quick solution rather than helping her establish the cause of the problem, and an opportunity to learn was wasted. Colleagues should help each other to reflect on their experiences, find appropriate solutions, and so learn as a team.

In many organisations, another barrier to learning is lack of time, which is related to a lack of incentives to learn. Staff will not engage in learning unless they are assured that the effort will be valued just as much as other activities. Management should make it clear that staff are expected to learn and to reflect on their performance. It is essential that this is supported by appropriate incentives, and that time is made available for writing.

Organisations often try to introduce reflection and learning as part of regular staff meetings, but this simply doesn't work. During meetings, people are in action mode rather than learning mode. Short meetings are more suitable for planning day-to-day activities, while reflection and learning require longer sessions where issues can be discussed in depth. Merging the two is not satisfactory.

Cultural barriers to team learning

There are a number of cultural factors that inhibit team learning. In some societies, like Benin, people do not like to share knowledge and experiences with others because they want to keep it to themselves. In other cultures seniority goes hand in hand with an attitude of distance to junior staff, thereby avoiding opportunities for mentoring and helping younger colleagues to learn and grow.

Giving feedback is interpreted differently in different cultures. In Mali, for example, it is assumed that giving positive feedback encourages the receiver to become arrogant, or to act like a chief. Also, asking for support or feedback may be regarded as a sign of weakness.



Another cultural barrier to learning, related to the oral tradition, is the aversion to, or even fear of writing. The importance of documenting experiences for collective learning is recognised, but individuals with good writing skills are rare. During several missions in West Africa I asked people to write down their experiences, but they would reply: 'you've listened to me, so you can help to write it?'. Thus, many good practices remain undocumented, and newcomers are destined to repeat the same mistakes. Yet those who do make an effort to write and ask colleagues for feedback are often frustrated by the lack of response.

Organisations can take various steps to overcome such barriers to learning. They can reward staff who do document their experiences. They can organise internal workshops to help to demystify writing, and to teach staff how to write case studies or reports describing their experiences.

Within larger organisations there are opportunities for teams to learn from other teams. For those with access to the internet, it is also easy to learn from other organisations. Unfortunately, a 'we-know-best' attitude often stands in the way of benefiting from knowledge that is within reach. Practitioners have to learn that, 'as fire, knowledge is borrowed from neighbours'.

Further reading

International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

[Outcome Mapping](#)

E. de Haan (2005)

Learning with Colleagues: An Action Guide to Peer Consultation. Palgrave Macmillan.

M. Landsberg (2003)

The Tao of Coaching: Boosting your Effectiveness at Work by Inspiring and Developing Those around You. Profile.

G.F. Shea (1992)

Mentoring: A Guide to the Basics. Kogan Page.