

Robust concepts and dedicated willpower

Learning for organisational development

Author: Sue Soal, Community Development Resource Association (CDRA), Cape Town, South Africa < sue@cdra.org.za >

The Community Development Resource Association is a South African NGO that serves social development and civil society initiatives around the world. Sue Soal describes CDRA's approach to organisational learning.

Organisational learning should be an integral and continuing aspect of development work. At the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) we are trying, through our work in the field and internal learning and evaluation, to contribute to the development of our own practice and assisting others, both clients and colleagues, to do the same. We do this through regular 'homeweeks', when we perform all of our organisational strategising, maintenance and integrating activities. At the heart of the homeweek is space for practitioners to share with each



Homeweek activities can vary. Sometimes we carry out a complete review of practices, which are written up in reports that are tabled and processed collectively. At other times, we focus and report on an issue in the broader

environment, in the field, or in our strategy. Our planning and evaluation cycles very often begin with these reports. At other times, one or two practitioners will present a case from the field for the whole team to work on. Programmes can also be reviewed and designed during homeweeks or the time used to provide individual supervision. We may invite visitors to share their perspectives with us, and in our book club, we share useful articles and books. These sessions are extremely valuable and are not run as staff perks, or as a holiday from 'real' work in the field.

During the homeweeks we also take care of business. We discuss requests and initiatives and assign responsibility to individuals. These meetings are also useful for picking up new trends and

collectively considering our commitments. The debates about what work we do, what requests we pursue or decline serve as a vital, constantly renewing connection to the values and mission of the organisation.

In homeweeks, a melting pot is created, where individuals share their experiences, which are then actively forged into something else, something organisational.

Five elements of learning

Five elements characterise our approach to organisational learning.

The first element is space and the determination to make space, hold it and use it. Not all organisations and practices need one week each month. Many meet for a few days every quarter or perhaps just one day a month. The point is that learning only happens with dedicated space. It is a distinct activity in its own right.

Second is rhythm. Learning is best done when there is experience to learn from. Just as experience is constantly changing and accumulating, so learning should be continuous too – a steady presence that keeps pace conceptually with the ongoing emergence of practice.

Creating any new culture and discipline requires practice, persistence and adaptation. To get through the early stages, especially, a champion is needed. Responsibility for ensuring that learning happens cannot be delegated to people who do not have the authority to make it happen. These processes demand huge investments, with important strategic and operational implications. If the leader is not behind them, they are unlikely to work.

The fourth element is approach. For us, the primary value is on learning from experience, collectively. This means rendering that experience transparent. The ‘inputs’ that this requires are also the ‘outputs’ – trust, confidentiality, warmth, respect, and listening without judgement. Working meaningfully with these qualities requires a rigorous method, which is sometimes belied by the ease and informality of our meetings.

In our internal processes we use multiple methods which in turn have multiple purposes. In CDRA, peer supervision, strategising, accountability, information generation and team building all happen through our learning processes. The trust and mutual understanding built up during these learning processes generates a robustness that carries over to other meetings, where more direction, discrimination and judgement are required. It seems that doing business is far easier when the relationships and the values between people are clear.

Finally, there is the shared sense of collegiality that the homeweeks create. Our sense of accomplishment or failure comes from the extent to which what we do is in keeping with the requirements of the practice we are building. Our colleagues mediate our relationship to that practice, but they do not control it. When we are learning together in our homeweeks, we are building that practice.

Further reading

[Community Development Resource Association](#) (CDRA).

This article is adapted from Sue Soal (2007)

Towards 'better evaluation': An account of one internal practice. Keynote address to the Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) Conference, Melbourne, September 2007.