

# Learning how to learn collectively

## Linking learning and informed action

Author: Rebecca Wrigley, Previously with INTRAC, Oxford, UK< rebeccawrigley@hotmail.com>

**CABUNGO, a Malawian NGO providing organisational development services to local NGOs, recently evaluated its own performance using the Most Significant Change approach. Rebecca Wrigley describes how, with the support of stakeholders, CABUNGO learned to improve its services.**

Organisational learning requires both individual and collective learning processes that purposely work towards changed organisational behaviour. In practice, there is often a focus on the information-based dimension of learning, characterised by the increasing adoption of knowledge management strategies among NGOs. This focus can underestimate the significance of the personal, relational, contextual, intellectual, formal and informal dimensions of collective learning processes.

In 2006 I worked with CABUNGO, a Malawian NGO, to design a self-evaluation process with the explicit purpose of 'enhancing CABUNGO's learning in order to improve performance'. This was not a requirement for external donor funding. We decided to use this opportunity to trial the use of the story-based Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology to evaluate the organisational development services provided by CABUNGO.

## Stories of significant change

The MSC process involved four steps:

- Establishing domains of change: these are relatively broad and 'fuzzy' categories that help define important areas of change for stakeholders. Through discussions, CABUNGO staff defined two domains: changes in the organisational capacity of local organisations, and changes to improve the quality of CABUNGO's practice.
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period of two weeks we interviewed 32 stakeholders, including staff, board members, client organisations, donors that fund CABUNGO, and other capacity providers. The interviewees were asked to describe



stories of most significant change relating to each of the two domains.

- Selecting and analysing the stories: The MSC approach involves a hierarchical process of selecting and analysing the most significant stories collected. Within this pilot experience only one level of selection was used. Key stakeholders were invited to a one-day 'evaluation summit', where they were given time to read and think about the stories, discuss their reactions and decide which three stories best represented the most significant changes in organisational capacity. Discussing the stories chosen helped CABUNGO gain a clearer understanding of the 'essence' of changes brought about by its interventions. One story, for example, highlighted the importance of creating a space for people to reflect on, and then potentially shift, the relationships between leaders, staff and board members. Reviewing the stories of change relating to the quality of practice helped CABUNGO to prioritise where improvements could be made.
- Feeding back stories to stakeholders: On completion of the process, an evaluation report was produced and shared with all stakeholders.

Participants felt that the MSC process was an effective way to evaluate capacity development. While time did not allow the process to be applied comprehensively, it was relatively straightforward to implement. Using a story-based approach was useful in helping CABUNGO understand the impact it was having on the organisational capacity of its clients. By reflecting on and prioritising the stories, the participants gained a rich and shared understanding of the systemic, multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of organisational change. This reconceptualisation was then used to develop a more explicit theory of change, which in turn provided insight into how CABUNGO could improve its services. Effective organisational learning can therefore be seen as a collective adaptation of the individual experiential learning cycle.

What is less clear is whether the findings of the evaluation would satisfy the requirements of some donors for specific data. In those cases where data are required, it may be possible to combine the MSC approach with other, more quantitative evaluation methodologies.

## A positive learning culture

The experience gained through using MSC to evaluate capacity development demonstrates that specific evaluation methodologies can enhance organisational learning. However, working with CABUNGO also demonstrated that these methods achieve little on their own. They must be supported by an ongoing organisational commitment to nurture a positive learning culture and healthy internal and external learning relationships. There are no 'quick fixes' to achieve this, but some of the factors that have helped CABUNGO to learn effectively include:

- ensuring a supportive leadership and balanced power relations,
- developing a common understanding of learning and its purpose,
- championing a culture of openness and trust.
- creating formal and informal spaces for learning;
- valuing diverse knowledge and learning styles;
- allowing time and flexibility to observe, reflect and adapt;
- encouraging dynamic learning relationships, both internally and externally;
- accessing, sharing and internalising sources of external learning; and
- establishing effective systems for managing and communicating information.

## Further reading

The author would like to acknowledge the contributions of all CABUNGO staff members during this pilot experience.

R.J. Davies and J. Dart (2005)

[The 'Most Significant Change' \(MSC\) Technique: A Guide to its Use](#). Version 1.0.

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*Rising to the Challenges: Assessing the Impacts of Organisational Capacity Building*. Praxis Paper 2. INTRAC.

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M. Sorgenfrei and R. Wrigley (2005)

*Building Analytical and Adaptive Capacities for Organisational Effectiveness*. Praxis Paper 7. INTRAC.

This article is based on three papers written as part of [INTRAC's Praxis Programme](#):

B. Britton (2005)

*Organisational Learning for NGOs*, Praxis Paper 3.

S. Prince and R. Wrigley (2006)

*Organisational Learning in Civil Society*, Praxis Paper 13.

R. Wrigley (2006)

*Learning from Capacity Building Practice*, Praxis Paper 12.