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Learning and Accountability: A Monitoring & Evaluation Consultant's Perspective

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Introduction

With so much discussion about learning in the NGO sector, it is increasingly important that as practitioners we have examples of realistic and achievable approaches. This Praxis Note reflects on some of the issues around organisational learning, with a specific focus on how monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes can contribute to and support 'effective' organisational learning. This Note also explores learning and accountability, using the metaphor of a warring couple whose differing mandates make their relationship complex.

The catalyst for writing this paper was a workshop on 'Linking Monitoring and Evaluation to Organisational Learning: Lessons from Experience' held jointly between INTRAC and CDRA in South Africa in February 2006. For myself as a 'development professional' focusing on the area of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, the opportunity to attend the workshop as a participant and not as a trainer or facilitator provided a space to critically reflect on some of the issues around organisational learning which seem to be so difficult to address.

Fifteen participants from seven different NGO capacity building organisations in Southern Africa attended the workshop. It was a fascinating experience to work with and hear from people whose organisations had endeavoured to apply and integrate a strong learning focus

into their ways of working. Coming from the perspective of an M&E specialist, carrying out evaluations and setting up M&E systems for NGOs around the world, it was interesting to hear how people in these organisations undertook to capture and share learning as an integral part of their practice.

Listening to the debates, I found myself considering:

- Why is it difficult for organisations to incorporate learning into their organisations' systems and practice?
- Where had I seen and experienced good practice in the past?
- What could I take (or learn) from this experience and would be valuable to share?

This Praxis Note is an articulation of that journey.

In writing this Note I have benefited from the views of all of the participants at the workshop and especially Nomvula Dlamini, a staff member with CDRA, who provided her insights into the issues of integrating M&E into organisational learning from the perspective of a learning organisation.

Lessons from the Workshop

At the workshop I listened to a group of practitioners who were members of organisations committed to learning. They shared experiences of how

learning as a distinct and core organisational function and activity had been promoted and supported in a sustained way. Through these regular processes, their organisations have increased their capacity by engaging with the challenges confronting their organization and learning from them. For them, learning was not a one-off 'event' but a continual process of action and reflection. These processes enabled them to consciously and continuously reflect on their work, learn from their own experience and feed this learning into their future thinking and practice.

Storytelling formed an important part of the workshop, as a means of sharing the richness and complexity of individual experiences. Each individual narrative was powerful, but, most importantly, they contributed to a collective story about organisational learning journeys. The stories enabled participants to connect the past and potential future of their organisational learning pathways: looking back to identify achievements made and barriers overcome, and looking forward to where the learning journey could lead. Through their stories, they showed how embracing learning had improved their organisations, albeit often in small, incremental ways.

Through sharing experiences of their own journeys, the challenges of engaging in organisational learning were raised. While the group celebrated the achievements, value and benefits of regular organisational learning processes, they also acknowledged the challenges of breaking through the constraints of 'being too busy to learn' and the discipline necessary to sustain such processes.

In the discussions it was evident that these same organisations faced questions about the growing demand

(mainly from donors) for more and 'more effective' M&E. There was frustration with the validity of such requirements – as the prevailing feeling was that more is not necessarily better!

At the end of my four days in South Africa I came away with a lot of new ideas on ways of working and developing thoughts on how to adapt and refine current practice. As well as feeling refreshed by this experience, I also came away asking myself the question: how relevant is this to me and for organisations which do not have such a strong learning focus? Are the approaches to learning that I have just experienced replicable in the mainstream world of relief and development where time is at a premium? Are 'mountain top' experiences, such as this, helpful in a refreshing and invigorating way, but nothing more than that? Are they merely a service station on a motorway, equipping one to keep going but not able to catalyse any fundamental shift in ways of working?

Integrating Learning into M&E: Who Really Learns?

A review of work on the development of M&E systems and processes highlights how learning is listed, alongside accountability, as an essential characteristic of such systems. Yet my experience and that of others engaged in this area is that we struggle to make this a reality in our practice. An alternative perspective of the evaluation process, which questions *who really learns* in the process, can be drawn from my experience as an M&E consultant for numerous NGOs.

A Consultant's Perspective of Evaluation

When organisations invite consultants to carry out evaluations and assessments

of their organisations and their work, they little realise that it is the consultant who gains most from the experience (not only financially). The consultant will have had access to many of the organisations documents, interviewed staff, partners, clients and others who are involved with the organisation. In the short time they are engaged, the consultant will have gained a lot of knowledge and understanding of the organisation and its work.

The consultant then faces a challenge in that this information and knowledge needs to be analysed and articulated in a report – possibly with a brief feedback session for key staff.

The report is the document which brings together all that accumulated information and knowledge and, regardless of whether it is 30 or 100 pages, it will have an all-important executive summary. Despite the effort put into this document very few people will read the full text, with the majority referring only to the executive summary.

The full report, once it has been launched or shared, languishes on various desks for several months where it gets in the way, collects dust and coffee stains, before being archived, never to see the light of day again.

In effect, organisations are paying a lot of money in consultants' fees, costs and organisational time, but are not making the most of the opportunity. It would appear that the prime beneficiary is actually the consultant who uses the opportunity to learn, write articles (like this one!) and gain credibility. They then use that learning to enhance their career, and gain further and higher paid consultancy opportunities. Who says consultants are stupid?



Learning from an M&E Perspective

When the terms of reference for an evaluation are drawn up, it is common to see *accountability* and *learning* expressed as the joint purposes of the exercise. In reality, these two purposes are often incompatible. The challenge for those of us approaching learning from an M&E perspective is to ensure it remains a primary outcome, integrated into both the process and product of an evaluation.

A Focus on Accountability

More often than not, the reason for accountability to be addressed is a response to a demand from a donor. It is also given priority because it is easier to 'be accountable' for tangible products and processes, such as:

- An **input** has been provided – vehicles, people, etc.
- An **activity** has been carried out – a well has been drilled, training courses have been carried out, etc.
- An **output** (which can be measured and quantified) has been achieved – water flows from a well, etc.

While it is important to address these matters, the learning from this is often related to logistics or management of a

programme, such as: materials were not delivered on time, or delays in funding affected the costs. In part, this is due to an ongoing concern to have tangible indicators to 'measure' progress using acronyms such as SMART or QQT¹ to describe them. An over-reliance on tangible indicators appears to limit learning to these lower, more functional levels. We are still struggling with developing indicators to measure/assess more intangible changes in our work.

The work done on developing approaches to assessing **outcomes** and **impact** has done a lot to address this by developing methodologies which stress the use of more holistic approaches to assess qualitative changes in people's lives and situations, the 'Most Significant Change' methodology being a good example.²

Many monitoring reports just capture information on activities carried out and not on the outcomes of those pieces of work. Even where reports are written on the work of regional or country programmes, they are all too often a compilation of activity reports without any analysis or clarity on how value is added when bringing together information from a number of project or programme areas.

A review of an international NGO's M&E systems noted how field reports commonly reported activities at project level. These were subsequently reported

¹ SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-bound. QQT – Quality, Quantity, Time

² See Davies, R and Jess, D (*The Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique: A Guide to Its Use*, 2005). The method described here has since become known as MSC or "Most Significant Change" monitoring.

at programme, country and organisational level moving in status:

From... a report of completed activities...



To...evidence of programmatic achievement...



To...evidence of achievement of objectives and impact

At its worst, this type of reporting acts as a time-consuming exercise of 'Chinese whispers' which adds little value to an organisation's learning.

The second issue is that reports are often boring and written in a style which is not conducive to learning. Reports are often written in a pseudo scientific style:

Methodology > Evidence/Findings >
 Analysis > Conclusions >
 Recommendations

Clearly this style or approach to writing a report may well address the needs of accountability but make it very hard for any real learning to take place. Reports are too long, with the executive summary too short! Often one is left with the uncomfortable feeling that the information which could be most useful to an organisations' learning is trapped in consultants' notebooks and minds and has not made the transition to paper.

It seems that when we are looking at learning, M&E gets in the way!

- How does M&E need to change or what does it need to do to be able to support and encourage learning?
- Are accountability and learning incompatible?
- Or are we driven by the accountability function because of potential sanctions, whereas there are no sanctions for poor learning (or at least they are not so direct!)?

Clarity in Learning

There is often no clarity on learning. We need to ask?

- What are we trying to learn?

Or perhaps more importantly:

- What do we need to learn?

Who needs to be involved in that process?

Learning processes such as workshops and feedback sessions at the end of an evaluation often conclude with a request for a number of 'learning points'. Often these can be a random list of different points ranging from comments on the process of an evaluation through to addressing strategic issues which would need to be directed to a specific group of people.

The result of this 'scatter gun' approach is that potential learning issues are often hidden, sidelined or seen as irrelevant. It would appear that for learning to be appropriate and potentially effective we need to be clear about:

- Who needs to be involved?
- What do the different people involved need to learn? What are the questions that they are asking?
- Is there a need for learning objectives?
- If we had learning objectives, who would develop these? The key stakeholders? The consultants?

Effective Learning – Thinking Outside the Box

It is clear that for learning to be effective, we need to do more than just address the issue of output. The following two examples are taken from work I have been involved in. They show how it is possible to move beyond a report as the main output of a consultancy, and how ownership of the process of an evaluation can enable key stakeholders to engage with the points that are being made in a report as well as identify ones which they perceive as being relevant to their specific needs.

Example from Practice: Exploring Different Ways of Reporting

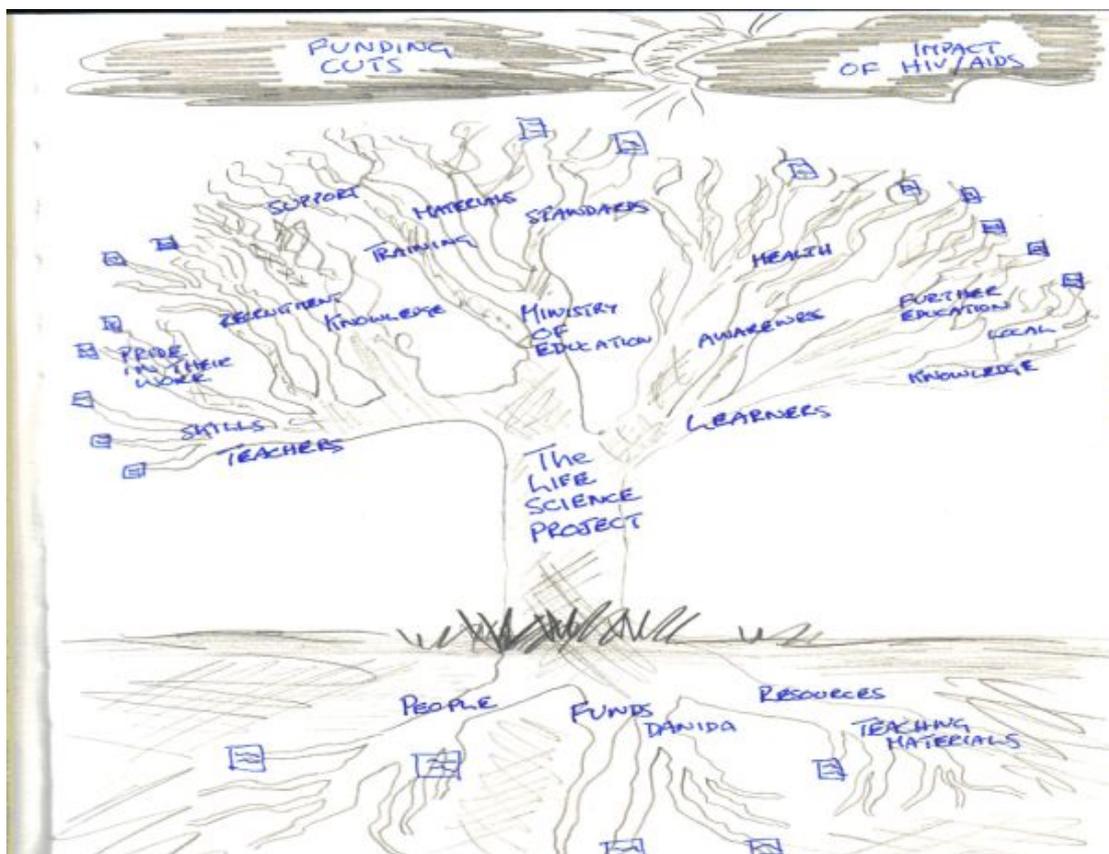
During an impact assessment of an education programme in Southern Africa, there was a need to engage with a number of key stakeholders in the Department of Education; to share early findings and emerging issues with them. A workshop was planned and a draft report of the issues and findings to date was prepared, which would form the basis of discussions over a two-day period.

Two days before the start of the workshop, the team were informed that unfortunately the department officials could only attend for a morning and not the two days as planned. We were faced with a major problem. To just hand out the drafts would probably result in

people scanning them and picking up on a few points or, even worse, focusing on language or structure rather than the real issues. Our dilemma was how to engage with the department officials in a meaningful way that would enable them to contribute on the bigger issues and questions.

We decided to summarise all of the information using the schematic of a

tree where the roots symbolised the major input factors – finance, people, key resources, and the main branches represented the major objectives. We then put Post-it notes onto the tree to illustrate areas where we were seeing evidence of impact and showed a number of potential threats – ongoing funding support and HIV/AIDS as clouds and thunder.



We then introduced the picture to the participants and asked them their views on it. They were encouraged to go up to the picture – which was on four A3 sheets of paper – to look at the Post-its and then to consider a number of questions relating to the impacts, issues for the future etc.

Examples of questions:

- Were the example impacts correct?
- Were they significant examples or possibly just isolated incidents?
- Are the impacts potentially sustainable (embedded into the organisation's work and practice or are they under threat – if so from what/why)?
- Have some early signs of impact disappeared?

This was found to be a very powerful way of engaging the participants quickly and moving into meaningful discussion. It also removed the possibility of focusing down on specific words or phrases which could act (initially at least) as points of disagreement, and enabled everyone to focus on the big questions.

Experience from Practice: Integrating Learning into the Evaluation Process

In a major multi-country evaluation for a bilateral donor, the key stakeholders formed a small steering committee which held regular meetings throughout the evaluation. The purpose of these meetings was to:

- Review the *process* of the evaluation and, together with the consultancy team, to make adjustments where necessary.
- Review the *progress* of the evaluation and the issues and lessons emerging from it.

The meetings involved one representative from each of the key stakeholder groups.

Meeting discussions first centred on the content of the terms of reference and continued throughout the evaluation process right up to the report writing and final stakeholder workshops. So, at each stage, different aspects of the evaluation content and process were discussed:

Preparation – Discussion of terms of reference

Inception – Agree refined methodology; address issues (timing, etc.)

Field Work – Review early findings and issues

Reporting – Emerging issues; points for clarification

It took a lot of time and effort on the part of all involved but the benefits of their continued input and involvement in the evaluation meant that emerging lessons were being captured, reviewed and refined and, most importantly, beginning to be owned by them.

A year later there was still evidence of the benefits of this longer-term process approach. On reflection, it was clear that the benefits of their ownership of the evaluation process had moved the focus of discussion of the results from a potentially 'short window' at the end of the evaluation to being an integral part of the whole process.

Can Learning and Accountability be Linked?

At INTRAC we have discussed these issues and talked about the possible need for an 'amicable divorce', where it would be better for this warring couple – learning and accountability – to separate and have distinct and clearly defined purposes. I can see the attraction of this in the short term: evaluations will be defined as accountability or learning focused; they will be simpler to organise

and manage; it should be easier to support and train staff in these different types of M&E processes.

But beyond the short-term relief, will this really address the problems? I think not. Were such a divorce to happen, we would end up with far fewer 'learning focused' evaluations. In looking at the pressures facing relief and development work we need to ask if we are already beginning to see that.

Would accountability be seen as relating solely to the use of inputs and the achievement of outputs rather than an assessment of the concepts and hypotheses which underpin development initiatives?

Too often evaluations are unpublished and kept out of the public domain. Would such a divorce mean that in future, evaluations which are in the public domain are mainly those focusing on accountability for resources used? How will that affect new ideas and thinking? For evaluation to be in the public domain, how do we address issues of trust, openness and failure? How can we account for what we can't see or measure?

If accountability and learning are to live together, we must ensure that learning is seen as of equal importance. What are the key features of such practice? Do we have any models and experiences now which we can use to show the way?

Looking for a Way Forward

An important question to address is how, if at all, are accountability and learning linked?

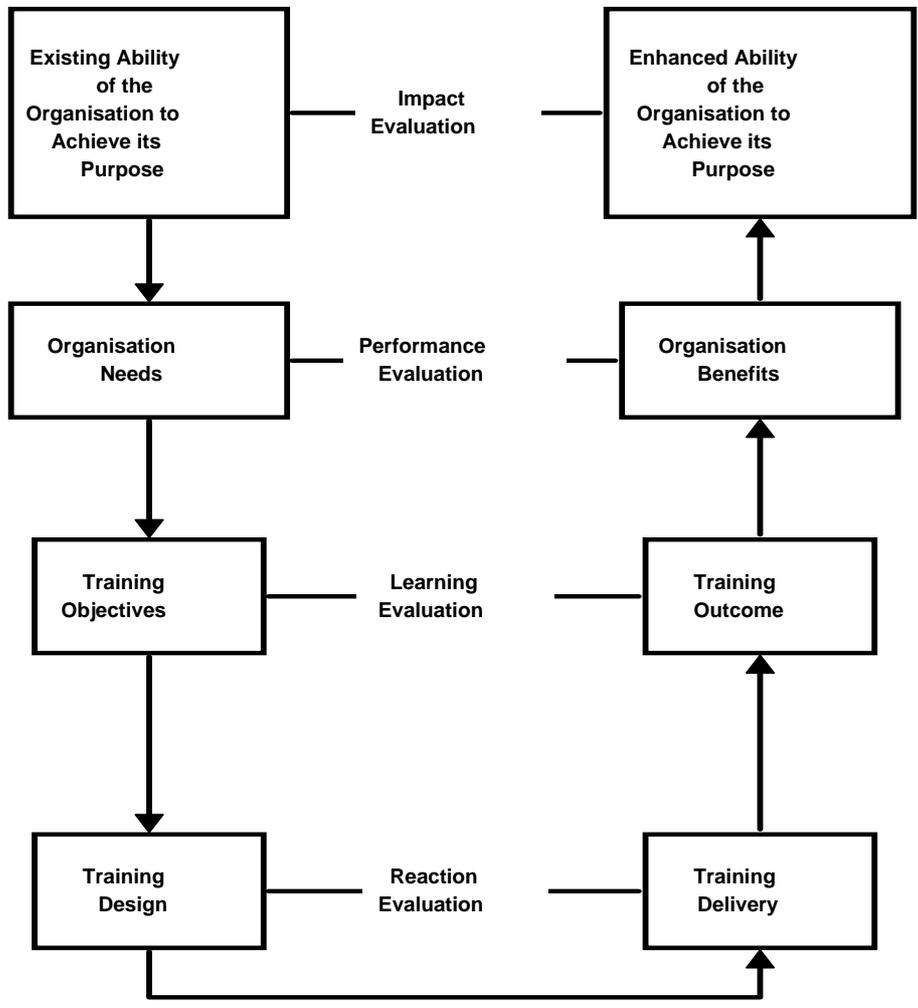
If we look at accountability for:

- the use of inputs
- carrying out of activities
- achievement of results/outputs

it becomes clearer that accountability gives us a set of facts and information which we then need to analyse in order to learn from. Thinking through a development intervention at the conceptual and problem statement levels, it is clear that any development project or programme is based on a set of hypotheses. We are accountable in terms of how we operationalise these.

Learning is clearly an integral part of the process of reviewing the appropriateness of that hypothesis and how it is put into practice. In order to integrate learning and accountability, we need to ask various questions at each level of inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impact. A helpful framework which we developed as part of developing tools for evaluating training programmes in the Former Soviet Union is adapted from Donald Kirkpatrick's model.

Four-Level Model of Evaluation
Kirkpatrick 1998 (adapted)



Using the example of the evaluation of a training programme helps to clarify what the purpose of an evaluation should be, and what sort of questions should be asked at each level.

Reaction evaluation assesses how the participants react to a particular training course. It is often carried out during or at the end of a training event, providing feedback to the trainer about the design of

the training event, the training content and the training delivery.

Learning evaluation assesses the change in participants' skills, knowledge and attitudes. It requires a comparison between the participant's skills, knowledge and attitudes before and after the training. It is sometimes carried out at the end of a training event but is more reliably measured some time after the event, when the participant has had time to reflect on and assimilate the training. Learning evaluation provides feedback to

the trainer about the relevance of the training objectives and the training outcome.

Performance evaluation measures the benefits to the organisation of improvements in the course participant's job performance over a period of time, which can be attributed to the training. Job performance before training is compared with performance after training. Performance evaluation often requires seeking the views of a third party (usually the colleagues or manager of the participant) and can only be done some time after the training event.

Impact evaluation looks at the effectiveness of the training by assessing the ability of the organisation to achieve its purpose. Impact evaluation is the most difficult type of evaluation to carry out. It provides feedback on whether there has been an improvement in the problem or issue that the organisation was set up to address.

Using this framework is helpful as it lays out what we need to reflect on, what we need to learn and what questions we need to ask. We will then be in a position to address supporting questions of who needs to be involved in learning these lessons and how the information can best be presented, shared or discussed with them.

Once we are clear on the linkage between learning and accountability, it is then easier to see learning as an essential element of the process and not an optional extra or benefit which we can usually not afford to undertake. Taking this perspective helps us to understand M&E differently and to see it as an integrated part of the work we are involved in.

Taking an Integrated Learning Perspective

Monitoring has to be informed by a genuine and honest commitment to stand back from the 'doing' with regularity and to establish whether things are going as planned or intended. A commitment to monitoring demands an ongoing process of dialogue through which the organisation seeks clarity about how it is moving towards achieving its goals and objectives. A questioning orientation lies at the heart of M&E and should therefore be integral to the orientation, culture and practice of the organisational whole and all those within it.

Engaging in regular learning demands that monitoring as an orientation to practice should be built into the regular organisational processes in a way that ensures that it becomes integral to the thinking and doing of the organization. This will build the independence, strength and competence of organisations and help to enhance their transformational purpose. When viewed in this way, monitoring as an orientation to practice then becomes the source of questions for ongoing learning and development.

When M&E is integral to the life of the organisation it enables conscious and ongoing deepening of critical assessment, which in turn enlarges the thinking, reflecting and learning capacity of the organisation. It can then become a true source of capacity enhancement.

An essential part of learning is the building of trust. Learning is about being open to questioning and criticism, and must allow for the admission of potential mistakes or incorrect hypotheses. For learning to happen, it is essential that individuals and organisations can operate in a climate of trust and transparency and not of blame.

It is therefore vital that we seek to build trust and transparency into all the relationships within the sector. But building trust is a complex relationship process that requires time and commitment – it requires that we seek opportunities to build relationships and work through complexities. Further, it requires that we move away from cumbersome reporting processes that focus on information instead of relationships. While we acknowledge that reporting is important, the relationship could well be better served by using simpler procedures that enable organisations to account efficiently for inputs and outputs and look together at outcomes and impacts, for example, by using shorter reports and including structured learning events such as feedback workshops.

The use of graphics is one of several more creative methods which can be useful for this.³ Where timelines have been used as one of the tools in an assessment it can be helpful to revisit them and to build on them, in effect developing them into graphical examples of a plan. Photographs and videos are very good examples of feedback mechanisms which enable stakeholders to engage with and ‘hear’ each other’s views.

Build learning into the life of the organisation

From the experiences shared at the South Africa Workshop, it became evident that becoming a learning organisation is not easy – it demands time, space, commitment, discipline and patience. The participants reminded me that it also requires courage and humility.

³ See Crooks, B. *Working without words: exploring the use of cartooning and illustration in Organisational Capacity Building* (2004, PraxisNote 7).

It demands an ability to open oneself and embrace one’s own vulnerability while simultaneously finding strength from within. Becoming a learning organisation is not an easy process; it takes an openness and willingness to admit your own ignorance and knowledge gaps, and to embrace this and use it as a starting point for a journey of learning.

Once embarked on such a journey, an organisation is challenged to find the courage to hold itself accountable, firstly internally, and then to external stakeholders. This requires the courage to embrace its vulnerability and also to nurture a practice of self-evaluation which forces it to face itself (its strengths as well as its weaknesses). Most importantly, the organisation will have to have the courage to act on what it has learned in ways that brings it to a new point in its development. Organisational learning is an inside-out process; it has to start with the individual and extend outwards to the organisation and then to others.

Putting Learning into Practice

Converting learning into improved practice is not an easy task. The organisation has to explore various ways and means for collecting and sharing experiences from which to learn. This requires that particular skills, abilities and practices be developed to contribute to the organisational learning process. The challenge is to develop practices and methods that will enable the organisation to distil learning with practical relevance from experience and to unlock the courage to act on such learning.

One practice is that of documenting learning, usually through documenting of reports and articles that are often written and stored away. However, it is essential as well as a challenge to keep it alive and useful. From the South Africa Workshop, I learnt about the importance of dialogue

and conversation as a means of addressing this, so that learning can continually feed the thinking and ongoing development of the organisation.

Putting in the Time

In the workshop, it became evident that many organisations struggle to fund these processes. Most learning organisations struggle against a mindset that does not see reflective learning processes as essential aspects of the life of an organisation; instead learning is recognized only in terms of productive work that makes a vital contribution towards the thinking and development of the organisation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we need to take learning seriously. My ‘tongue in cheek’ example of consultants ‘running away’ with an organisation’s knowledge is a hidden reality. A starting point for taking learning seriously is clarifying what we need to learn and who needs to be involved in that process. We need to have learning objectives.

Linking learning and accountability will demand time, commitment and resources (particularly skills). Rather than develop ambitious plans to integrate accountability and learning across the whole of an organisation’s work, it would be better to focus initially on a few key areas which can provide useful examples for replication and scaling up.

In this way, learning and accountability will slowly be built into the life of the organisation and together, the ‘warring couple’ will contribute to improved organisational practice.

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