

# WORKING WITH BARRIERS TO ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING



If you enter a room full of NGO staff, and ask them, 'hands up, who thinks organisational learning is important?' you are likely to be greeted by a sea of raised hands. But, if you ask for practical examples of organisational learning, the response would be significantly different - you are likely to be met by a sea of blank faces and a sense of jadedness: 'Does it make any difference anyway; is it just a fad?' There is a lot of discussion about the need for organisational learning in the NGO sector, but this has not necessarily led to improved practice. Indeed, there appears to be a growing sense of weariness about it. According to a recent BOND survey, over 50 per cent of NGOs/donors interviewed stated that a 'radically different approach' to organisational learning was needed but, solutions proposed seem to offer few alternatives. [1]

## The Case for Learning

Yet, the case for learning in the NGO sector has never been stronger. The rapidly changing, complex environment in which NGOs work demands an ability to be constantly learning from, and in, practice. The changing nature of development practice has led to different roles and approaches (eg. supporting capacity-building, partnership approach) which in turn demand different qualities and competences from staff, such as relationship-building, 'reading' and responding to complex organisational and social issues, the ability to work with 'messiness' and uncertainty, and to be able to handle difference and diversity. The nature of the learning challenge in development demands an ability to work reflectively, as a 'reflective practitioner' [2], in the here and now of practice. It also demands supportive environments within organisations to enable this quality of learning to take place individually, and collectively.

## Barriers to Learning within NGOs

BOND has commissioned this paper to focus on the barriers that seem to limit this quality of learning within Northern NGOs, drawing on observations and reflections from current practice.

These barriers are worthy of attention, as their existence may explain some of the 'stuckness' around organisational learning. A deeper appreciation of these barriers and defences and some initial pointers for how to work with them, may free up energy for the 'radically different approach' that is called for. Rather than trying to offer a comprehensive view of organisational learning, or models, tools and recommendations, this paper seeks to open-up a conversation and facilitate further inquiry.

## CONTENTS

• What is Organisational Learning (OL)?	p2
• Recognising and working with Barriers to Organisational learning:	
1) Bias for Action	p3/4
2) The Undiscussables	p5
3) Commitment to 'the Cause'	p5
4) A Cultural Bias	p6/7
5) Advocacy at the Expense of Inquiry	p7
6) The Role of Leadership	p8
7) Learning to Unlearn	p8/9
8) Practicing What We Preach	p9
9) The Funding Environment	p9
10) Thinking Strategically About Learning	p10
• Conclusion	p11

# What is 'Organisational Learning'?

Our approach to organisational learning will be informed by our understanding of the term 'learning' and the term 'organisation'. In this paper, we outline and distinguish between different types of learning.

## Transferring Knowledge and Skills

Firstly, there is the transfer of knowledge and skills and immediate problem solving that can generate improvements to existing practice and procedures, often referred to as **first-order, ordinary** or **single-loop learning**.

## Changing our Way of Thinking

Secondly, learning involves inquiring into existing mind-sets and ways of thinking, which may challenge the underlying assumptions and principles upon which practice and procedures are based, 'thinking outside the box'. Creativity and diversity play an important part here, as does self-reflection, with an emphasis on learning in, and through, practice. This is often referred to as **second-order, higher order** or **double-loop learning**.

### Conditions for 'Second-Order' Learning

- Individuals are supported to be more reflective in their practice.
- Learning, including mistakes, is shared openly amongst peers, line reports and other organisations and is self initiated and self organised.
- Experimentation and creativity is encouraged and learning is fun.
- Diversity and difference is encouraged.
- Leaders model learning behaviour, foster inquiry and seek feedback.
- Attention is paid to the quality of relationships and skillful conversation.
- Linkages with other stakeholders are made consciously and actively.
- Basic assumptions and mental models are questioned, rather than limiting inquiry to the existing paradigm. This may include the organisation's values and norms.
- Collective spaces are available and 'loose' enough to allow for new insights and meanings to emerge which are collectively acknowledged; which may lead to greater awareness, improved practice or shifts in behaviour.

If you focus on 'first-order' learning, your emphasis will be on increasing knowledge, sharing information and attending traditional training courses. However, if you focus on 'second-order' learning, greater emphasis will be put on work-based, peer learning.

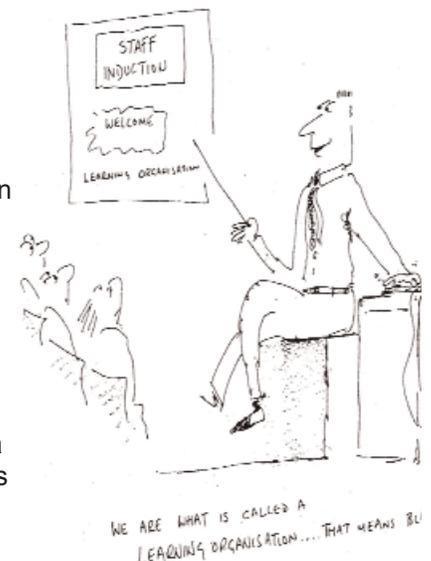
Although 'first-order' learning certainly has its place, for example, when wanting to learn a skill or gain technical knowledge to do a job, the dilemmas, 'messiness' and challenges faced by those in development practice demand more of a 'second-order' approach. But this type of learning seems to be limited or inhibited in NGOs.

## Learning is Relational

There is also a growing view that **learning and change are predominantly 'relational'** rather than purely individual processes. This implies that in order to facilitate learning and change we should pay more attention to the quality of relationships, conversations and interactions taking place between people in everyday organisational life, as well as in more structured meetings within and outside the organisational 'boundaries'. The relational approach to learning also emphasises the importance of opportunities for peer learning. And it is the collective acknowledgement of new meanings and insights arising from all these interactions that may lead to shifts in organisational practice and behaviour. Drawing on this, organisational learning seems more alive when the opportunities for 'second-order' learning flourish. Organisations cannot become effective simply through strengthening individual capacity, or through an isolated piece of learning. It is the complex interactions between people, and the quality of these relations and the processes that support them, that can help or hinder learning, individually and collectively.

## Learning in an Organisational Context

Our understanding of learning within an organisational context will inevitably be influenced by our assumptions about organisations. Some people see organisations like a machine with inputs and outputs, linear causation and control systems,



which is very different from a systemic or complexity view of organisations or change. The approach to organisational learning will differ accordingly.

Within this thinking, knowledge and learning is not simply located in individual minds. Learning is dynamic, it cannot be 'captured' in a static form; rather it emerges and develops in the ongoing interactions between people. For example, a complexity view sees

organisations as being made up of human beings constantly relating and interacting with each other. This raises a big challenge to both some of the mainstream approaches to Knowledge Management where there is an assumption that tacit knowledge can be made explicit, 'stored' and systematised, and to the demands from some donors or managers to 'capture lessons learnt'. [3]

## Recognising and Working with Barriers to Organisational Learning

The words 'barrier' or 'defence' can imply something that needs to be overcome or attacked. Alternatively, they can be seen as an energy to work with or territory to be explored. Freeing up this energy rather than trying to suppress or ignore it, can release a sense of 'stuckness' that limits learning.

So, what are the barriers that seem to hinder the quality of learning both individually and collectively within NGOs? The following pages outline 10 barriers and defences that often appear within NGOs, that need to be recognised, and worked with if organisational learning is to be 'freed-up' and widely practiced in a meaningful way.

### 1) Bias for Action

Those with an activist tendency can be attracted to the NGO sector by its very nature, because the wider policy and cultural environment in NGOs seems to give more value to action and results than to reflection and inquiry. This activist tendency can lead to quick

fixes which, in the long-term, may exacerbate the problems faced if deeper causes are not addressed.

The 'pressures that reinforce this 'Bias for Action' include:

#### Time Spent in Inconclusive Deliberations

When asked why organisational learning is not happening, many would state that there just isn't enough time. NGO staff are too heavily loaded with urgent tasks to engage with reflective, 'second-order' learning.

However, many people also feel frustrated by the amount of time spent in endless, unproductive or unsatisfactory meetings, where decisions are not reached or the same issues persistently reoccur.

#### Urgency of Task

The amount of time spent in meetings increases the sense of urgency, and it is this sense of urgency that reduces the willingness to be more reflective. We see this pattern played out in the NGO sector time and time again. For example, through the need to summarise a complex issue with a 'one-sider' of bullet points or power point presentation, through the reductionist

emphasis on log-frame planning, and through meetings with such tight agendas that there is no room left for an exploration of the issues.

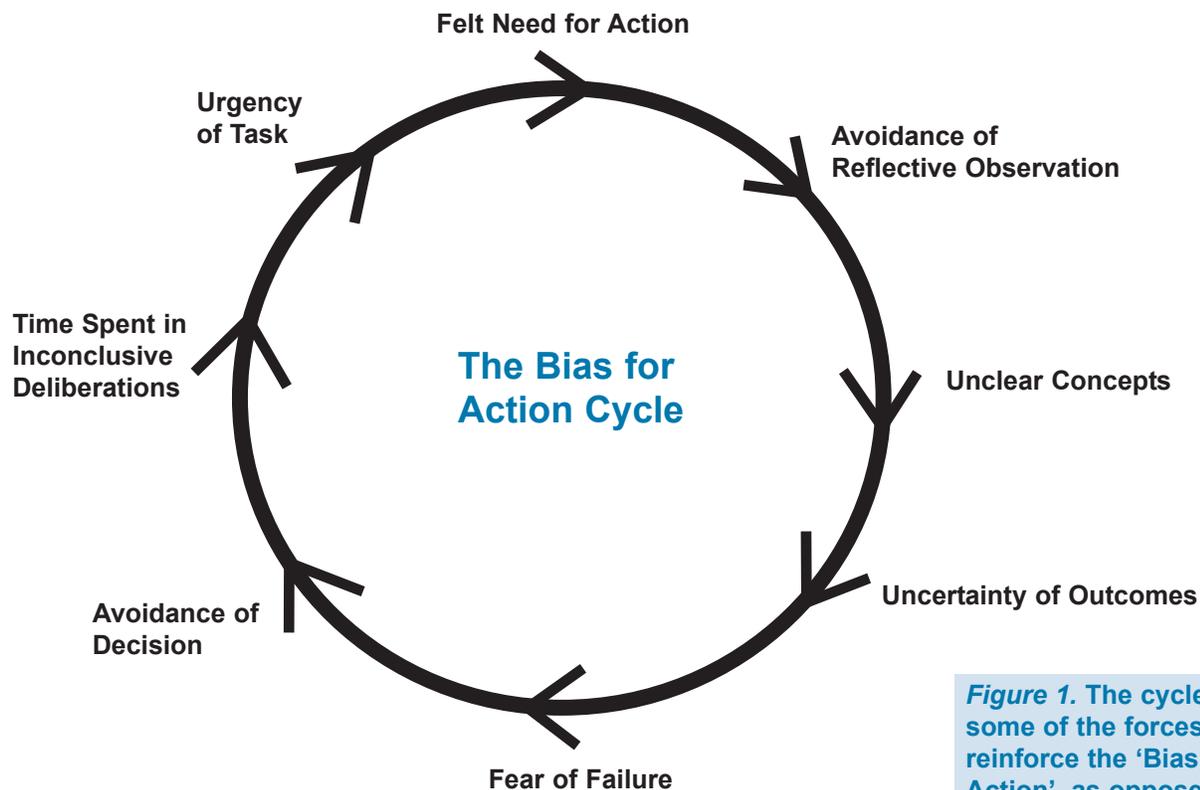
## Avoidance of Reflective Observation, Unclear Concepts and Uncertainty of Outcomes

Deep reflection may be further avoided because it could mean experiencing the situation as more complex than originally envisaged, thus increasing people's frustration and anxiety. It is not possible to fit the complexities and unpredictability of development practice and organisational life into an idealised rational model as they are, by their nature, messy. This can be disturbing, particularly for those who need to feel in control. Attempts are made to minimise this discomfort by reducing complexity through tighter controls and outcomes. However, this then misses opportunities for deeper learning that can actually create greater clarity about choices available. [4] It can also lead to misunderstandings, as there is insufficient space to inquire into our underlying concepts and assumptions.

## Fear of Failure leading to Avoidance of Decisions

Uncertainty, anxiety and fear of failure also contribute to large amounts of time being spent in inconclusive meetings and unproductive 'busyness'. If a decision feels risky and there is not an environment that supports innovation and learning from mistakes, the result may be risk-averse behaviour and avoidance of decisions. For example:

- "Well we might do that, except no-one in this group has the authority" or "what would 'X' think?"
- The 'Waver Game' where a group cycles back and forth between two or more alternative decisions without ever quite coming to a final decision. When they almost get there, they switch to a different track. [5]



*Figure 1. The cycle illustrates some of the forces that reinforce the 'Bias for Action', as opposed to reflection. [6]*

## Working With the Bias for Action

Roger Harrison highlights the need for courage and a strong will to break the 'Bias for Action' Cycle, by taking the time to explore situations in greater depth and complexity [7]. We should feel less guilty about the 'messiness' of organisational life, as it is an integral part! We do not have to appear competent and confident all the time, but can share our vulnerabilities, frustrations and uncertainties with each other. Leaders in our sector need to be brave enough to practice this and to encourage the kind of organisational culture that supports it.

In addition, an over-focus on task can reduce our contact with each other and with other organisations, eg. partners, which impacts on the quality of relationships and the possibilities for deeper learning. Little energy is left for less urgent but more important philosophical and strategic issues concerning the identity and longer-term relationship of the organisation to its environment. Rather than 'task first and process if there is time', task and process need to be seen as interdependent, as is reflection and action.

## 2) The Undiscussables - Handling Anxiety and Fear

Behind some of the pressures that reinforce the 'Bias for Action', is an inability to handle anxiety and fear and the defence strategies that are built up accordingly.

Defensive strategies work on the assumption that whenever human beings are faced with significant embarrassment or threat, they act in ways to avoid it, and then cover up their avoidance. We learn this strategy from early childhood. In particular, we fear exposing the thinking behind our views as people may find errors in it. It is reinforced in school through the fear of not having the 'right' answer, and later reinforced in the work place.

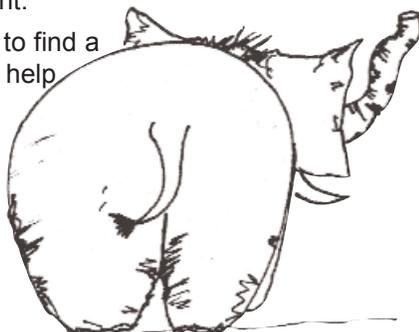
In organisations, defensive strategies can be repeated and become part of the norms of organisational life. Argyris calls these Organisational Defensive Routines (ODRs). [8] He sees them as becoming 'anti-learning', 'overprotective' and 'self-sealing' as the issues that have caused the embarrassment or threat are unlikely to surface because the fundamental rules are to:

- Avoid the issue.
- Make the avoidance un-discussable.
- Make its un-discussability un-discussable.

This makes it difficult to engage with or interrupt the defensive routines. Indeed, the very attempt of doing so can activate and reinforce them. Individuals then feel helpless as they are in a 'double-bind'. Unchallenged, these defensive routines can reduce performance and commitment, but if they are confronted there is a risk of opening up a can of worms that people feel ill-equipped to handle. It feels 'too risky to go there'. So, it all goes underground into the 'shadow' of the organisation.

It is difficult to share examples of working with the 'undiscussables' because by their very nature they are sensitive and 'undiscussable'! However, it is useful to help those involved to recognise and address the pattern of avoidance when it is happening. For example, in group sessions offering to 'press' the 'pause button' on a repeated pattern, (eg. always blaming others) allows for some awareness and reflection in the moment.

Sometimes it is useful to find a term or name that can help describe the 'undiscussable', or at least its presence in the room. These may include: 'The elephant in the middle of the room' (everyone is



talking around it but not about it); 'Ghosts' (those figures who may be mentioned, often 'monster figures', but are not represented in the room); 'Hot-spots' (those issues that trigger high emotion or hold a 'charge' that may be quickly suppressed or are apparently forbidden to talk about); [9] 'Trolls' (from Scandinavian folklor) are sometimes used. Trolls live in the dark forest and people are scared of them, but when they come into the sunshine they dissolve. They can represent the deep, dark secrets, the 'undiscussables' in organisational life which, when actually talked about, lose their power.



### Working With the Undiscussables

People avoid undiscussables because they assume this reduces the likelihood of situations escalating even further. A lot of energy is therefore wasted in avoiding the 'uncomfortable' issues. However, it is often not the potential conflict but the avoidance of the conflict that causes problems. One way of handling this is to invite speculation: 'what's the worst thing that might happen?' 'what would happen if?' The best way to stay scared is to keep yourself from finding out exactly what you're scared of. [10] Such processes must be handled with care, with sensitivity around timing and the extent to which there is the will, and capacity, to explore these areas more deeply. Invariably, the presence of a skilled facilitator is needed.

In some organisations there has been a need for staff to face aspects of the past that continue to drain energy. By paying attention to difficult feelings and to the healing that may be needed, the pasts' grip on the present can be lessened and in turn frees up energy and space for new learning and options to emerge.

When anxiety and fear lead to defensive patterns, they can become significant barriers to learning. Fear may have a specific object like fear of authority or peer rejection, whilst anxiety feels more pervasive and harder to define or articulate and as a result can be debilitating. At the same time, anxiety can bring in an energy and difference that may stimulate learning and change. As one person put it, you can re-frame anxiety as another form of excitement!

Being able to contain anxiety, rather than be driven or paralysed by it, is important at the individual level, particularly for leaders seeking to support 'second-order' learning. It is also important to create supported

spaces where anxiety can be contained but not suppressed (for example, using a facilitator or having some simple guidelines).

### Example: Working With the Undiscussables

Last year, an NGO went through a conflict around leadership, involving the leader, staff and the Board. It resulted in the leader leaving under a dark cloud. A new leader joined and there was desire for an Organisation Development process to explore questions of identity and future role. It was clear that there were 'ghosts from the past' that had not been healed or confronted. As someone said 'you can feel it in the wallpaper'. This finally surfaced during a feedback meeting with Board and staff, where, 'the troll' was named. There was a tension in the room between those who were uncomfortable and wanted to move on, and those who needed to talk about the way they handled the situation or were handled.

Feelings of disquiet, guilt and anger were shared and the whole incident was re-visited and talked through. This was later followed by a healing ritual (it was a Christian organisation) about letting go of the past.

Following this period, a new phase in the organisations life emerged, and staff commented on the sense of lightness and a new energy for shaping its future role and, relations seemed to be restored with the previous leader. It is unlikely this forward thinking could have happened without the expression of difficult feelings that had been avoided or repressed over many years.

Informal 'shadow conversations', in corridors or over coffee, where some of the 'undiscussables' may well be talked about, also have a role in containing anxiety. They can allow for new insights to emerge that can be shared in more formal settings. Rather than these informal conversations being disapproved of as 'unproductive' time or 'negative', they could be legitimised. However, it is important not to institutionalise such conversations as this will invariably kill them.

## 3) Commitment to 'the Cause'

Linked to the 'Bias for Action', many of those who are drawn to working in the NGO sector acknowledge a basic commitment to 'the cause' (in broad terms, working against poverty and injustice). Whilst not dismissing the virtue of this, by its very nature, it may draw those who are more altruistic and action-driven, those who gain a sense of self by 'doing' and having a



### Planning and Anxiety

There is a view that the various control systems and strategic planning processes that NGOs and donors engage in, are another form of defence against anxiety [11] - it can be extremely troubling not to know who is in control or what direction to go in. So, we develop procedures and systems and drawn-out strategic planning processes, at least in part, as a defence against anxiety. Perhaps we should look differently at strategic planning processes and funding procedures and ask ourselves:

- What is the anxiety here?
- Are there other ways that together we can deal with the anxiety that are more useful?

sense of purpose. But at a deeper level, this commitment may lead to a driven-ness because the ultimate need is never-ending. If we were to stop and reflect, it may reveal a sense of failure that we will never achieve the ultimate goal, or may lead us to question what we are really doing but, this is uncomfortable to face and is avoided. So, we keep on

'doing', which can lead to exhaustion, cynicism or burnout. We may also allow an element of self-righteousness to creep in, where the 'cause' becomes untouchable and takes priority whenever there is a choice between reflection and doing. Indeed, our self-identity may even become closely attached to 'the cause'. Taking time to reflect may make us face a deeper need for personal meaning and identity which goes beyond 'the cause', bringing us face-to-face with a sense of meaninglessness.

### Working With 'the Cause'

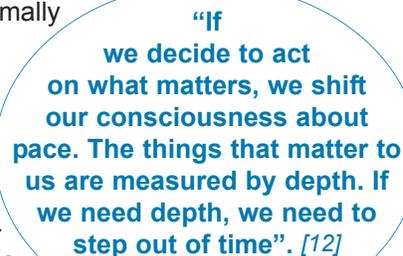
At a recent BOND workshop on organisational learning, the issues of purpose and meaning were tentatively opened up. For some, there was a real acknowledgement of this at a personal level and a curiosity to explore. For others, it was foreign and new, and some admitted that they 'didn't want to go there' because by starting to question this they 'might as well pack up and go home'.

Hard work, high energy and dedication to the cause are not in themselves negative or unhealthy at the

organisational or individual level. It is the meaning and purpose of these patterns and our attachment to them that needs to be questioned, not the fact they exist.

Adopting a stance of 'compassionate non-attachment' is one that is increasingly appealing. In a number of recent fora with NGO staff, there has been an increasing desire by several people to go on, or create a retreat for, NGO workers.

Although it is not formally acknowledged, a recognition of the spiritual dimension appears to be growing. A retreat would offer a supportive space for reflection on some of these deeper questions, in the company of other 'comrades in adversity'. BOND is looking to create such a space in the UK.



**"If we decide to act on what matters, we shift our consciousness about pace. The things that matter to us are measured by depth. If we need depth, we need to step out of time". [12]**

## 4) A Cultural Bias?

When approaching the 'Bias for Action', it is important to recognise the influence of dominant North/West cultural assumptions, a factor that often gets ignored in organisational learning debates. Crudely speaking, these North/West assumptions tend to value outcome and action over process. Whereas, in Japanese cultures for example, there would be more emphasis on talking together about the issue at hand and all those present will 'know' by the end what is needed, without feeling locked into a specific outcome or decision.

### Exploring Other Ways

Given the global context that NGOs operate in, there is a responsibility to explore other ways of approaching learning, particularly from the South. Giving more value

to the power of story-telling and parables could be one important way to counter the more rational Western model.

To assist in this, we can draw on the long tradition of transformative learning in the development field, for example, the work of Paolo Freire, (1970) [13] and the approaches that have grown out of this tradition.

These include:

- The DELTA (Development Education Leadership Training for Action) programme [14] that has been used in many parts of Africa, using drama, pictures, adult learning and participatory processes to raise critical awareness to support empowerment and collective action.
- The community theatre movement. [15]
- The development of participatory action and learning approaches. [16]

## 5) Advocacy at the Expense of Inquiry

In many NGOs/donors, more value appears to be given to advocating a position than inquiring about the view of the other. It could be argued that this is reinforced by the growing interest in advocacy training. This leads to positioning and attack/defend behaviour giving little opportunity for new meanings or insights to

emerge. Many of the 'rules' of dialogue and inquiry can help here, for example, the ability to suspend assumptions, to keenly listen to each other, to give voice to what one really thinks and, to respect difference. [17]

## Talking and Thinking Differently Together

It is interesting to note how easily the word 'dialogue' is used in NGO circles, with no real appreciation of the practices and behaviours it involves. This 'art of thinking together' and the role of skilful conversation in organisational life [18] needs to be further explored, if we want to improve the quality of our everyday conversations and the use of collective spaces for learning. Some of the large group processes like 'future search' [19] and 'open space' [20] also allow for greater learning to take place at a collective level.

Within the UK NGO sector, there is a growing interest in supporting structured spaces for peer learning such as, Action Learning Sets, [21] Communities of Practice [14] and peer reviews. Some NGOs are seeking to build collective learning opportunities into the everyday rhythm of their organisations, for example at the end of meetings, after action reviews, monthly learning days, or by building learning into planning cycles or annual reviews.

However, the very spaces we set aside for learning may become empty rituals if we do not attend to the quality of learning that takes place within them. One organisation set aside a week every quarter for

**"The chief instrument for cultural change is a talent for speaking differently, rather than arguing well". [22]**

collective learning. However, gradually, this space began to be used for other issues, leading to a packed agenda and in turn, the quality of learning was reduced. Over time, people began to question the usefulness of the space, and for some it became merely a tiresome obligation. What happens in these collective spaces, as well as in everyday interactions, will be influenced by the quality of conversation and inquiry that takes place in them.

There are a few isolated examples, where NGOs guard a regular collective space for deeper reflection and learning. One example is CDRA (Community Development Resource Association) in South Africa who hold a Learning Week once a month. All staff are expected to attend. Each person writes up to two sides of A4 on reflections from their practice. These reflections are shared, common issues discussed and feedback is given. There is also space for team development, one-to-one peer reviews and strategic thinking together. Leadership has played an important role in ensuring this space is protected and used well, and CDRA see this time as core to the development of their identity and practice. Although one week each month may feel impractical for some, the principle of guarding a regular collective space to reflect on practice remains the same. [23]

## 6) The Role of Leadership and Power

Leaders have a powerful role in amplifying or challenging patterns and norms that limit learning. The expression of negative feelings may be 'un-discussable' with some leaders because they may feel ill-equipped to deal with uncomfortable feelings or their own personal vulnerability. They may subtly or overtly discourage negative feelings, and instead put energy into improvement initiatives or communication training programmes to build a 'team-culture' or a positive thinking culture. This is known as 'flight to health'. It is important to work with, and build on, what is working and where the energy is (for example, through an Appreciative Inquiry Approach). [24] But if this becomes another form of defence, it also needs to be explored.

It is striking, how the initial reaction of leaders to the raising of difficult feelings or issues is amplified by the position they carry. If their response is one of brush-off, dismissal or attack, then staff may not have the courage to raise the issues again. Instead they may get submerged or ooze out in other ways. In addition, if a leader is constantly checking on staff or undermining their decisions, this reduces innovation and risk-taking. In one organisation, staff were encouraged to take on pieces of work, only to have

their team leader cutting across them and questioning their decisions and judgement. The response of staff was then to ask, "What's the point? We close down and feel no longer responsible". It is important that leaders seek out feedback on the impact of the gestures they make and to be aware that 'second-order' learning, by its very nature, may challenge existing power relations.

### Working With Leaders

For example, if groups of peers are meeting regularly to reflect on their practice, such as in an Action Learning Set, they may well raise organisational issues. This can be seen as a challenge to existing power relations, just by the very fact that such conversations are taking place amongst peers without line management present. This can be quite threatening to managers and senior leadership if they are not engaged with such a process and its implications, and demands openness and a willingness to let go of control. Leaders themselves can also demonstrate 'leaderly learning' by being willing to engage in their own learning, for example taking part in their own Action Learning Set or working with a coach/mentor.

In running initiatives such as Action Learning Sets within organisations, it is important to have face-to-face conversations with senior management at the beginning of a programme. In one organisation, a senior manager expressed concern that running Action Learning Sets should not be a substitute for supervision meetings, but then discovered that these very meetings became far more stimulating and

focused as staff had an opportunity to think through their issue with the support of peers beforehand. In turn, the qualities and skills learnt in Action Learning Sets, like skilful questioning and active listening, were noticed by other managers, as well as their donor, and enhanced the quality of the input of his department into the strategic planning process.

## 7) Learning to Unlearn

Learning can be a painful process. It may involve 'unlearning' habits and assumptions we have carried for many years. Unlearning involves letting go of what is known, in order to create fresh space for new learning to take root. It demands a high degree of self-reflection, in order to notice the habits in the first place. It involves risk, and being able to cope with not having all the answers, being in-between ideas and acting in the face of the unknown. Given the challenging nature of 'unlearning' and some of the systemic defences at play, it is not surprising that we stay with what we know. [25]

Moreover, some of the personal qualities needed when taking a second-order approach to learning (such as, openness, good judgement, intuition, creativity and integrity) will involve some unlearning, particularly if we

carry defences and prejudices with us from our own personal experience.

### Working With the Personal

Reflective practice means, amongst other things, reflection on the personal, and action on the personal front, as this is integral to learning. This can start with the simple practice of keeping a learning journal. The role of a mentor or coach can help us to notice our blind-spots and habits, as well as offering support in any unlearning that may be needed. But, taking the step of working with a coach demands some awareness and resources in the first place. Given the importance of reflective practice, how might mentoring and coaching be made more widely available and accessible to NGO staff?

## 8) Practicing What We Preach

We can also pay attention to learning from our development practice. Somehow, some of the values and processes we promote to others do not always get practiced internally in our own organisations. This is curious given the rich tradition of radical approaches to learning that influence development practice (see *Barrier 4 for examples*). It raises questions of integrity, as one South African organisation put it, 'we may teach others to fish, but do we know how to fish

ourselves?' In turn, if we began to reflect more on how difficult learning and change is for ourselves and our own organisations, we may become more sensitive when promoting learning and change with partners. This could affect how we approach and learn from our capacity building work with partners. A more integrated approach would allow for greater learning between what is promoted with others and how this is practiced internally. [26]

## 9) The Funding Environment

Whilst the focus of this Briefing is more on the internal barriers to learning, it is not possible to talk about organisational learning without looking at the wider funding environment. Funding tied to particular projects or programmes does not lend itself to innovative learning initiatives outside the project box or facilitation of organisation-wide or inter-organisational learning processes.

NGOs tend to get stuck in 'first-order' learning because planning and evaluation tools focus on the operational level. There is a sense of increasing pressure in the sector, from some donors and some NGOs themselves, to produce results/outcomes in the name of accountability, whilst at the same time, an interest in generating 'lessons learnt'. The tension between wearing the different 'hats' of accountability and learning is a real one and is felt at every level.

Some donor procedures cut across space for learning and effective relationships, limiting the potential for organisational change for Northern NGOs and their partners alike. This tension may need to be more consciously 'held' and named rather than polarised and avoided.

Likewise, there needs to be recognition of the power dynamic of a funder, being in control of the key resources of a partner, and how this may impact on their willingness and openness to take risks, be innovative and share mistakes. This underlines the relational aspect of learning. If learning is seen as one-way, and the NGO is not also including itself and the nature of relationships between itself and its partner (and in turn, NGO and donor), then this does not create an environment for open learning or authentic 'partnership'. [27]

### **A Proactive Approach**

It can be difficult to get funding for learning initiatives, but, that being said, NGOs maybe use this as a defence mechanism in order to not engage in 'second-order' learning. If NGOs could really see learning as central to their identity and good development practice, maybe this could influence the type of funding or donors they seek? Some donors may also like to receive more innovative learning approaches from NGOs, but can only respond to what they get. Donors

may need to be more proactive about wanting to fund and support more innovative forms of learning without tying them down to pre-specified outcomes or indicators or 'capturing lessons learnt'.

In turn, donors are faced with their own learning challenges and accountabilities to supporters and tax payers. Some are beginning to look at this more. For example, the Evaluation department of one donor agency has been running a year long learning programme, looking at some of the qualities and approaches needed for a greater learning approach in their work. If more donors explored this way of working, it could have a significant impact on the NGO sector.

### **The Challenge of Decentralisation**

Many UK NGOs are decentralising, partly in response to the increase in direct funding by official donors. This can pose a challenge for organisational learning. If relationships or communication between the 'centre and periphery' are weak or strained, then this may limit opportunities to engage in 'second-order' learning at a collective level. The question of decentralisation opens up a complex area, which goes beyond the parameters of this paper. However, in further reading, it may be useful to consider the experience of distributed Communities of Practice [28] as a way of approaching this challenge.

## **10) Thinking Strategically About Learning**

How NGOs strategise and structure learning reveals a lot about existing mind-sets and assumptions. For example:

- A staff and development officer struggles to make strategic linkages with international programme staff, as they think his work is to do with 'internal' learning, not programme work.
- A capacity-building officer is seeking to respond to some of the learning challenges that capacity-building with partners raises for staff, but feels the human resources director has little understanding of what she is talking about.
- The evaluation officer of a donor is trying to develop a learning approach within her department, but is challenged by her colleagues, who see evaluation as more about accountability.
- A monitoring and evaluation officers job title suddenly changes to become an evaluation and learning officer without any discussion of what this means in practice.

- Innovative learning initiatives take place around particular issues (eg. HIV/AIDS), but there is a 'silomentality' and fragmentation, where individual departments have to prove their worth and do not share their learning.

On the whole, organisational learning tends to be held by an individual post-holder at middle management level. Although this gives learning a profile, there is a danger that it is seen as the responsibility of one individual rather than as core to practice, and central to the organisations identity and strategy.

Those who hold a specific 'organisational learning' brief in their organisation, often carry a certain amount of anxiety about conveying a clear OL statement to others (including senior managers) who may be sceptical about its benefits. This concern, although valid due to the above reasons, may also relate to individual practitioners' fear of exposure about their own thinking and understanding of OL in practice, particularly when they are expected to be the 'expert' in it.

## Tending the 'Organic Garden'

There is often pressure on those with an OL brief to come up with some kind of strategy for OL or to make the organisation a 'Learning Organisation'. Although it is important to have learning at the core of an NGOs culture and strategy, there is also a danger of legislating for learning too much, and thereby killing it. The anxiety to be seen to be doing something organisationally, can actually be counter-productive, as it restricts the self-organising potential of learning. It may be more useful to think of the image of an 'organic garden' [29]: tending existing relationships, creating spaces for experimentation and for conversations between people to grow across departmental boundaries, supporting informal linkages between and across organisations, offering opportunities and support for peer learning, and 'going where the energy is' for as long as its needed.

Certainly, where any strategic framework for learning is required, it needs to be 'loose' rather than 'tight' with specific outcomes, given the unpredictable nature of learning and change. It needs to begin with an inquiry into the existing practice of staff, their learning challenges and the barriers they face in context, as well as their underlying assumptions about learning and practice. Out of this, appropriate responses and support may be explored, experimented with and learnt from on an iterative basis. This in turn, will shape any

next steps in strategy. This emergent approach to strategy is very different to a more traditional Training Programme that is 'rolled out' within a fixed time frame.

Increasingly, some NGOs are also beginning to explore the development of an internal capacity to support learning and change, for example, developing a team of learning facilitators, rather than leaving it to the sole responsibility of one person. This kind of capacity in itself demands a development of skill and qualities that need ongoing support and mentoring.

There is also an increasing recognition of the importance of crossing organisational boundaries and being able to inquire into practice with peers from other organisations that goes beyond just exchanging information.

The Bond Organisational Learning Programme [30] is one example of an NGO co-ordination body seeking to encourage more of a reflective practice between NGOs through the promotion of Action Learning Sets, themed conversations and larger self-organising spaces (Open Space), where synergies and different perspectives have led to greater openness and new insights and connections, as well as solidarity and support. Engaging in learning together goes a long way to reducing a sense of competition in the sector, which potentially limits learning at inter-organisational level.

## Conclusion

This paper has focused on some of the defences and barriers to organisational learning that face many NGOs. It has offered some initial pointers and examples of how these can be worked with. The intention has been to open up a conversation and further inquiry into this key area of organisational life, out of which new meanings and actions may emerge.

The approach to learning conveyed in this paper inevitably challenges the dominant world view that outcomes need to be predicted and, we are judged solely by our ability to achieve these predetermined outcomes. This is not a conducive environment for learning. Whereas, if we inhabit a world view, where things are not in our control, where we do the best we can, at that moment, but even when we bring all our

collective intelligence to bear, things may still not turn out the way we thought, where we operate from a position of humility and compassion for human frailty (including our own) then it offers a very different environment for learning.

We need to recognise and work with the barriers to organisational learning, in order to release the vital benefits that it brings. Indeed being able to work with some of the 'stuckness' is one part of what organisational learning is about. It takes a strong belief in learning to make a case for funding support/procedures and an organisational culture to support it, for both NGOs and their partners. We hope this paper encourages this.

## Acknowledgements

This Briefing Paper has been written and prepared by Liz Goold. Liz has spent the last 20 years working with Organisation Development, learning and change issues in the not-for-profit sector. She has extensive international experience, working with international NGOs, donors and community/church groups in Africa, Asia and Europe. She is presently working as an independent consultant, based in Oxford and is in the process of finishing her Masters in Organisational Consulting at Ashridge Management School.

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- [www.bond.org.uk/lte/ol](http://www.bond.org.uk/lte/ol)
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