

Learning leaders: the key to learning organisations

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Introduction

Learning and knowledge management are crucial capacities for any NGO expecting to survive and thrive in the uncertain global development environment of the new millennium. Creating the learning organisation is increasingly seen as being synonymous with capacity building, organisational development, and managing change. This recent focus on learning immediately raises a number of questions for NGOs:

- Why is learning seen as so important for NGOs?
- Are NGOs natural learners?
- How do successful NGOs actually learn? What do they do differently from others?
- What drives this quest for learning? What role do key individuals play in this process?

This article attempts to answer these questions by analysing the role of learning and knowledge creation in NGOs, how they are promoted, and what role the leadership plays in this process. It draws heavily on the findings of a major study of nine 'successful' South Asian NGOs including BRAC and PROSHIKA in Bangladesh, BAIF and Sadguru in India, and AKRSP and IUCN in Pakistan (Smillie and Hailey 2001).¹ The research highlighted the importance of organisational learning in local development NGOs, and the role of leaders in promoting a learning culture in such organisations. One of the major conclusions was that the success of these NGOs was in part attributable to their willingness to embrace new learning and invest in developing their capacity as 'learning NGOs'.

The article highlights the many different ways in which these organisations consciously learn, and goes on to explore what is driving

this quest for learning. The research suggests that effective learning is a hard-won goal, which depends as much on formal training, effective information systems, and human resource management strategies as on informal, participatory processes. These findings also question the myth that learning is a distinctive process that is inherent in the values and activities of NGOs. In reality, NGOs are no different from other types of organisation having to work hard at promoting learning.

We shall see that an organisation's ability to learn is dependent on its organisational culture² and in particular the development of an internal culture of learning. The case studies from South Asia reveal that the creation of this 'learning culture' derives primarily from the attitude of the leadership towards learning.³ At the heart of a learning organisation is a 'learning leader'.

What is so important about learning for NGOs?

The importance of learning as a key organisational capacity has become increasingly apparent in the changing and volatile economic and political environment of the 1990s. Learning is considered to be vital if organisations are to be able continuously to adapt to an uncertain future. Reg Revans (1993) pointed out that an organisation's very survival is dependent on its capacity to learn. He argued that in a turbulent environment, an organisation's rate of learning has to be equal to, or greater than, the rate of change in its external environment if it is to remain relevant and effective. If NGOs fail to learn at such a pace, then they will be 'destined for insignificance' (Fowler 1997:64).

The difficult reality for most NGOs is that the economic, social, and political environment in which they operate is increasingly complex and volatile. NGOs have seen their roles and perceived importance shift radically in the last few years. New political thinking on the roles of civil society and the State, inclusive national planning processes, and democratisation has challenged NGOs to take on very different roles and relationships to traditional service provision. Conflict and terrorism can suddenly and very powerfully transform the context in which NGOs operate. On the social side, the devastating 'attrition rate' from HIV/AIDS in many parts of the world, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, places yet further demands on NGOs. In the face of such pervasive change, it is a priority for any NGO to invest in building its capacity to manage knowledge, promote learning, and become a 'learning organisation' (Edwards 1997; Lewis 2001).

The 1990s have been called the decade of the learning organisation and this present decade is likely to reinforce this trend. There is a close link between learning and organisational change. Peter Senge (1990), one of the early advocates of organisational learning, defined a learning organisation as one that is 'continuously expanding its capacity to create its future'; similarly, Pedler *et al.* (1991:2) defined it as 'an organisation which facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself'. The learning organisation can therefore be seen as being synonymous with any ongoing process of individual learning, capacity building, and organisation development. Alan Fowler identifies the challenge for NGOs as how best they can 'bring together facts and personal learning as primary information sources, then collectively make sense of what they mean and then translate the results into a greater capacity to be agile' (Fowler 2000:138). In other words, how can they transform information into organisational change? In both the private and the non-profit sector, the term 'learning organisation' has arguably become a metaphor for managing change.

The effective use of learning and knowledge has been the hallmark of many successful organisations in the 1990s (Dixon 2000). Learning is about linking knowledge with effective and sustainable action. Knowledge is therefore a key resource that all leading organisations, in both the private and the non-profit sectors, must manage and exploit if they are to maintain their position (Handy 1994; Kluge *et al.* 2001; Senge 1990). Similarly, there is more appreciation of the role of knowledge management and learning in the development process (World Bank 1998). Development is essentially a knowledge-based process, and as a result learning and knowledge management are now recognised as key elements in development work. One of the challenges for development NGOs is how they share and disseminate knowledge and learning. As Ian Smillie commented, 'knowing what works and why is essential to the success of NGOs, yet knowing what does not work is equally important. Knowledge involves awareness, memory and familiarity that develops with experience and learning' (Smillie 1995:23). NGOs increasingly appreciate that knowledge, and the dissemination of knowledge and learning, are key to their effectiveness and, as David Korten concluded, their success depends on the suitability of their systems, their ability to embrace error, and their willingness to learn from the local communities with whom they work (Korten 1980).

Are NGOs naturally good learners?

Most NGOs are committed to the learning of their beneficiaries. It is often enshrined or implicit in their mission statements. There is a strong emphasis within most NGO programmes on training and capacity building of their 'clients', rather than just provision of infrastructure. And yet this emphasis on learning is often not emphasised internally. There is sometimes a dissonance between what NGOs promote with their beneficiaries and what they apply to themselves. There are many NGOs who claim to be 'learning organisations', but our understanding of how they promote shared learning and engage their staff is very unclear. Research indicates that many smaller NGOs fail to learn from experience or mistakes and commonly fail to adapt the way they work (Smillie 1995). Fowler even goes as far as to suggest that a universal weakness of development NGOs is actually a 'limited capacity to learn, adapt, and continuously improve the quality of what they do' (Fowler 1997:64). But why should this be so?

The capacity for NGOs to promote learning is limited by a number of external barriers such as the competition for funds and the consequent pressure to show low rates of administrative overheads. There are also structural barriers such as departmental rivalries and the short-termist project culture that militate against shared learning. There is deep-rooted resistance to investing scarce resources in such an intangible concept as learning, in addition to the difficulty of identifying attributable and tangible impact indicators. Other barriers include the unwillingness of individuals to engage in new ideas, new technologies, new ways of working, and the hassle of dealing with the quantity of documentation generated. There is also a reluctance to admit to, or analyse, mistakes because of the fear that this will attract criticism and provoke a backlash from donors and government. The task- or action-oriented culture of many NGOs also does little to encourage the self-assessment or critical reflection that is essential if learning is to take place (Britton 1998; Smillie and Hailey 2001).

These barriers mean that NGOs have to work hard at learning. It does not come naturally or easily. It does not simply arise from their developmental orientation. They have no particular monopoly on being learning organisations. Such learning is not some innate process that is inherent in the culture of development NGOs. Instead, it is commonly the result of conscious investment in a variety of formal and informal learning processes. Those NGOs that exhibit the

characteristics of learning organisations have worked hard and spent considerable time and money in overcoming the inherent barriers to learning and developing new learning processes and systems. It is to some of these ‘success stories’ to which we should turn and from which we should ourselves try to learn.

How do ‘successful’ NGOs learn?

The recent research into what made the largest NGOs in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan successful concluded that their success depends, in part, on their willingness to embrace new learning and invest in developing their capacity as ‘learning NGOs’. This research was concerned with the management practices of NGOs in South Asia, and in particular how such organisations have managed change and handled growth. It was based on detailed case studies of nine NGOs – two in Bangladesh (BRAC and PROSHIKA), three in India (the AKRSPI, BAIF, and Sadguru), and four in Pakistan (AKRSPP, IUCN, SRSC, and Sungi). These organisations represent a cross-section of medium to large NGOs that have expanded their activities and undergone significant change in recent years. They all work with local community organisations, are funded by a range of international donors, and are involved in a variety of activities including primary healthcare, education, microcredit, agro-development, irrigation, and environmental programmes. The case studies were based on extensive research undertaken by local researchers between 1998 and 2000, which drew on both archival materials and interviews with a wide range of staff, beneficiaries, and other key stakeholders (Smillie and Hailey 2001).

In particular, the study analysed how these organisations managed their external relations, handled strategic planning processes, developed their organisational culture, and how they were shaped by the vision, commitment, and character of their ‘founder leader’. These individuals could be characterised as ‘development leaders’, whose leadership style was value driven, knowledge based, and responsive. The study also analysed the process by which such development NGOs promoted learning among their staff, and concluded that they used a range of informal processes to generate new learning, reflect on past experience, and experiment with new approaches. They also invested heavily in more formal learning processes such as training and research. We shall now outline the different methods these successful NGOs employed in order to learn.

Learning from the poor

The importance of the role of personal engagement, listening, and dialogue that lie at the heart of the way many NGOs learn is exemplified by Sadguru (India). When Sadguru started working with tribal communities in Eastern Gujarat in 1974, its founders, Harnath and Sharmistha Jagawat, spent the first two years of the organisation's existence walking up to 30km a day in order to meet with local people. They listened to their concerns and discussed how best to meet their needs. In this way they learnt of the immediate needs of local people, and developed friendships, built trust, and gained the credibility on which their future work could be based.

Virtually all the NGOs in the Hailey and Smillie study relied on similar village-based processes of dialogue to spearhead internal learning about the authentic needs of the communities. These NGOs see the poor as the main source of organisational learning. With AKRSP in Pakistan, most early staff training took place through village dialogues between a team of AKRSP staff and local people. The informal 'training sessions' were held outdoors and were open to everyone, not just village elders and other notables. As these discussions were recorded and analysed, they became the basis of future interventions. Even today, 'staff look back on the village dialogues as the most effective training they received' (Smillie and Hailey 2001:75).

Learning from practice

The primary means of learning for most successful NGOs is the conscious reflection and analysis of their own implementation experiences (particularly where things have gone wrong) in order to learn and improve. Barry Underwood, then Chief Executive of AKRSP (India), identified the 'importance of embracing one's mistakes and learning from them, creating in the process a culture which accepts criticism'. A number of organisations have institutionalised meetings to reflect and learn from experience. PROSHIKA, for example, holds quarterly meetings where 200 staff and group representatives get together to review performance and discuss appropriate changes. Such systems need to be developed if learning from practice is to take place.

The founder and Chief Executive of BRAC, Dr Fazle Hasen Abed, similarly sees mistakes as an inherent part of an iterative learning process, and he recognises that BRAC had many failures from which it was able to learn. He relates:

... you go to a woman's house to find that the loan you have given her is taken away by her husband, or a child comes to school and suddenly has to drop out because the parents have moved away, and the child doesn't learn anymore. These are all failures ... little failures are, of course, inherent in any successful programme. You must accept that for they are part of the learning process.

(Smillie and Hailey 2001:76)

Similarly, in an effort to expand the impact and scope of its health programmes, BRAC staff were 'mobilised with motorbikes'. They became so focused on meeting quantitative project objectives that they had little time to sit and talk with local people. It soon became apparent that 'when we walked or went by bicycle, we did much better'. So BRAC reintroduced slower, more time-consuming ways of working with local communities. The challenge for many NGOs is whether such a decline in performance would actually 'become apparent' as it did with BRAC.

Learning through staff participation

The NGOs in the study responded to the challenge of sharing learning internally so that individual learning became organisational learning. For some, like PROSHIKA, institutional learning is a function of participation. As Faruque Ahmed, the President of PROSHIKA, points out, 'If I as the head of the organisation had to remember everything, then probably there would not be much remembered. But if you use participation in the decision-making process then there is much more chance of institutional memory' (Smillie and Hailey 2001:77).

Most of the NGOs in the study used a mix of regular meetings, retreats, workshops, and seminars to promote shared learning and to disseminate new ideas. Sadguru, for example, holds regular meetings on the last Saturday of the month, allowing staff to share experiences and to give feedback from other meetings or courses they have attended. These meetings are quite structured and characterised by a high degree of mutual respect. This in turn allows for more open dialogue and constructive discussion. BAIF has gone further in its efforts to ensure that staff learn from each other, and systematically moves staff around the organisation or assigns them to new projects as part of its strategy to encourage cross-functional learning. It transfers staff from research posts to field positions and from specialist to management positions in an attempt to disseminate and institutionalise learning.

Learning from external actors

Many of the NGOs in the study have consciously learned from each other's experiences as well as their own. They have been keen to visit specific programmes and have arranged a series of attachments for their staff. All the largest South Asian NGOs have visited BRAC and PROSHIKA and in turn BRAC and PROSHIKA invest in learning from others. According to Dr Abed, BRAC is an 'unashamed replicator' of other people's good work, and he attributes much of its remarkable success to its ability to learn from other agencies.

One of the strengths of many of the NGOs in this study is the way they have actively used external specialists and outside consultants. Despite their cost, there is a recognition that such external actors play a crucial role as a source of new learning because of their ability to challenge the status quo. For example, the major organisational and operational changes at IUCN (Pakistan) in the last five years have been the product of two major external management reviews conducted by consultants. Similarly, the Director of Sadguru, Harnath Jagawat, attributes part of its success as a development agency to 'continuous appraisals by external consultants and academics'.

Learning from formal training

The successful South Asian NGOs have invested in a number of formal processes to capture and disseminate learning. They have spent considerable sums on training, research, and new information-management systems even in the early years of their existence, and they continue to be heavily engaged in training and staff development. This investment in formal training complements informal processes for learning from the poor. As AKRSP, for example, grew and as training needs became more sophisticated and specialised, the organisation gradually became more reliant on formal courses and structured training processes.

Many NGOs have invested in purpose-built training centres and, in the case of BRAC and PROSHIKA, increased their training capacity enough to be able to train nearly a million people a year. BRAC has established 12 Training and Resource Centres that employ 150 trainers and offer management, human resource development, and skills-based training courses, primarily for BRAC employees. Considering its size (over 58,000 full- and part-time staff) BRAC invests a remarkable 7 per cent of its overall salary budget on staff development and has now established its own university in Dhaka.

Learning through research

There is a growing understanding of the benefits that can be gained from sponsoring relevant and applied research, and both BRAC and PROSHIKA in Bangladesh, and AKRSP and BAIF in India have established specialist research departments. According to BAIF, 'development without research is outdated, and research without development is irrelevant' (Smillie and Hailey 2001:82). Since its inception, BAIF has recognised the importance of research, and was one of the first Gandhian organisations to recruit scientists and other research professionals. Its founder, Dr Manibhai Desai, created a climate in which there was an understanding that the organisation needed to invest heavily in an ongoing programme of research. This is reflected not just in the quality of its research, but also in the way BAIF staff are actively encouraged to publish their research findings in academic journals and to present papers at national conferences. The 1996/97 Annual Report provides detailed abstracts of 20 publications produced during that year alone. Even BRAC, which is more recognised for its emphasis on learning by doing, invests heavily in research: by 1997, BRAC employed 52 full-time researchers, ten of whom had PhDs.

Learning from monitoring and evaluation

Closely linked with research work are the formal management processes and systems developed by NGOs to monitor and evaluate their work and learn from their performance. Many of the NGOs in the study have developed sophisticated internal management information and monitoring systems, which are increasingly computerised. For example, PROSHIKA uses an Impact Monitoring and Evaluation Cell (IMEC) to monitor its work. Others, like BAIF, have instituted an integrated review system across the organisation at both district and state levels, incorporating input from its own researchers and outside specialists.

The extent to which donor-led evaluation processes contributed to learning was mixed, with the incentive to cover up mistakes in order to maintain funding undermining the learning process. The older and more established NGOs appeared sufficiently confident to treat the process more positively, and so were better able to take advantage of the outside perspectives of donors and their consultants. But, in general, there appears to be a growing understanding that such evaluation reviews are as much an opportunity to capture and synthesise new learning as they are a mechanism to assess whether goals have been attained or funds have been well spent.

What drives this desire for learning?

We have seen that successful NGOs are intellectually fit enough to handle change, and agile enough to drive change forward. This is a direct result of their preoccupation with learning. Although they all learn in different ways, with some emphasising informal methods and others more formal approaches, what is common to all is their fundamental commitment to learning. Learning is one of their core values and pervades their organisational culture. As a result, their staff demonstrate a willingness to reflect, a curiosity, a capacity to innovate and experiment, as well as to embrace new thinking. Thus, learning is not just a resource or asset to be invested in, it is also a crucial part of the values and culture of the organisation. But where does this culture of learning come from?

Learning leaders

The culture of learning in these NGOs, apparent even in their early years, can be directly attributed to the personal views of their leader. Learning organisations have learning leaders. Senge (1990) points out that leadership is central to organisational learning and that learning organisations have leaders who are facilitators and educators. Organisations, particularly in their founder phase⁴ (though not exclusively), tend to be very much moulded in the image of the leaders. Not only do founders tend to choose the organisation's mission and vision, but they also choose the staff. According to Schein (1992), founder leaders tend to have a high level of self-confidence and determination, and strong assumptions about the world, organisations, and human nature (and learning!). They are usually quite comfortable in imposing (albeit unconsciously) these views on the rest of the organisation. Their strong theories get tested early. If the leader's solutions fail, then the organisation dies quickly. If they succeed, the organisation grows and develops with yet greater belief in its original assumptions and solutions. There is, therefore, particularly in founder-led organisations, a very close connection between the leader's ideas and the way an organisation functions. Even as organisations mature and develop, the importance of leadership in determining how an organisation functions remains paramount. The leader still controls many of the key levers for influencing the organisational culture.

The case studies we have looked at bear this out. It was the drive and insight of key individuals in a leadership position who, with the support of their management team, actively promoted the strategic

role of learning and championed new learning throughout the organisation. BRAC's commitment to learning can be directly traced to the personal commitment to learning of its founder, Dr Abed. It was his views and learning example that laid the foundation for the commitment of BRAC to become a learning NGO. Right from the outset, Dr Abed would go to the field for at least four to seven days, live there, and talk with BRAC staff. 'We would then discuss and analyse strategies and problems, and take vital decisions on the spot. This is how we learnt ... in fact BRAC started learning while doing things, and the excitement was that everybody was learning too. It was like a "little university"' (Smillie and Hailey 2001:75). His commitment to learning, acceptance of error, and active promotion of education, training, and shared learning across the organisation have been there from the outset. Even the research and evaluation department was established after only three years.

With Sadguru, it was the founder leaders' two years' 'walking and talking' with the people that not only proved of immense immediate operational benefit, but also was symbolic of their commitment to learning from local people themselves. This process is the foundation on which Sadguru's relationship with the local community is based, and it created a culture of shared learning which has marked the development of the organisation and the way it works with the local community. But it is not merely founders who influence the culture of learning in an NGO. Barry Underwood, an expatriate appointed as successor to the founder of AKRSP (India), 'personally emphasised learning and research, and because of the pressures for change, he placed great emphasis on training, organisation development and strategic planning' (Smillie and Hailey 2001:155).

The research did not bear out any specific gender dimensions to leadership and learning (possibly because there was only one woman out of the 16 past and present Chief Executives in the case studies considered, and the issue was not a primary focus of the research). There was, however, a sense that women who do get into leadership positions are better equipped to deal with the constantly changing challenges, as they have taken more bruises along the way. Efforts to promote women to senior positions are actively pursued, and a number of special initiatives have been introduced to overcome some of the deep-rooted resistance to women being recruited to senior positions. Many of these NGOs have made women the focal point of their activities, and have learnt over the years that empowerment is a gender issue that relates as

much to men as to women. Consequently, gender programming has been the subject of considerable research and analysis. These organisations have learnt that any efforts to promote women to leadership positions have to be seen as a strategic priority, backed with a considerable investment of time and resources, and actively supported by senior managers. In short, such efforts have to be mainstreamed across the organisation and endorsed at the highest level.

Efforts to promote such new initiatives, encourage innovation, and support new learning are normally seen at an organisational level. However, it should be noted that 'learning leaders' are not just interested in promoting *organisational* learning *per se*, but are also keen to develop their own *personal* learning and initiate individual change. Organisational learning is not an impersonal process. Merely creating a learning culture or developing a knowledge strategy is insufficient. It requires human beings to learn and change. All the evidence suggests that organisational learning is dependent upon individuals being both open to new ideas and willing to engage in new learning (Swieringa and Wierdsma 1992; Cross and Israelit 2000). 'Learning leaders', who can draw on their power and prestige in the organisation to drive this learning process forward, often have a personal commitment to learning, a natural curiosity, and an understanding of the value of research and education generally. The commitment of such leaders to organisational learning is often a consequence of a personal commitment to developing their own learning. The leaders in the case studies we have reviewed had a fascination with knowledge and learning. It was the leaders who went out to learn from the people in the early days, and the same leaders have consciously and systematically created the means by which they can learn from their staff. Thus, it appears you cannot have a learning organisation without a learning leader who is open to personal change. As Hailey concluded, 'what has been striking ... has been the ability of their founder leaders to change and adapt' (Hailey 1999:3).

These findings are reinforced by the academic literature on leadership, learning, and management. It is persuasively argued that the ability to promote learning and instil a learning mindset in an organisation is 'the trademark competency of future leaders' (Conger and Benjamin 1999:242). Senge (1990) concluded that leaders in a learning organisation should have a facilitative role rather than an inspirational or technical one, and as such should be seen as designers, stewards, or teachers. Such managers have specific

learning competencies such as a learning orientation, a proactive stance towards problems, the ability to reflect critically, and a tolerance of critical feedback (McCauley 2001).

Conclusion

There are many different methods by which NGOs can learn, as the cases we have looked at illustrate. These NGOs relied on informal processes to generate new learning, reflect on past experience, and experiment with new approaches. They also invested heavily in more formal learning processes such as training and research.

But what is common to all is that learning organisations are staffed by learning people and are led by learning leaders. Learning is a key characteristic of their organisational culture. Organisations are made up of the people within them. Organisational learning cannot happen without individual learning. Leaders are particularly influential members of organisations. A crucial characteristic of such learning organisations is that their leadership and senior management team are willing to invest in developing the organisation's learning, and recognise its role as a catalyst for change. But more than being committed to organisational learning, they have to be committed to their personal learning.

All the learning leaders reflect different facets of the learning process. Although they place a different emphasis on formal or informal learning processes, their willingness to invest time and money in new learning highlights the importance of their role as founders who inculcated a learning culture in their fledgling organisations. Manibhai Desai, of BAIF, emphasises the importance of learning from new technologies and applied research to help the rural poor. The Jagawatis from Sadguru created an organisational culture that is marked by learning through dialogue, and the need to build trust and relations before genuine learning can take place. Dr Abed of BRAC, while actively encouraging direct investment in formal learning and knowledge-generating activities, also recognises the role of team building and experimentation in promoting organisational learning.

Such leaders have married sound organisational design and effective management with strong personal values. These 'development leaders' have a distinct character and leadership style that can be characterised as being value driven, knowledge based, and responsive. They have ambitious development aspirations and an ability to understand and work within an uncertain and changing

external environment. In practice, this has meant that they have a clear vision, a firm value-set, and a strong sense of commitment to helping the rural poor which they were able to share with, and which could inspire, others. Second, they have had a willingness to learn and experiment, to apply new technologies or organisational forms, and to draw on science or other sources of applied or professional knowledge. Third, they have a curiosity and ability to analyse the external environment, follow trends, and respond to changing circumstances. Fourth, these leaders also possess communication and interpersonal skills that have enabled them to motivate staff and engage with a cross-section of society. Fifth, they have displayed the ability to balance diverse demands and play different roles. They have demonstrated a chameleon-like ability to adapt to different roles, styles, or organisational needs. They have therefore been able to combine ideals and values with analysis, technical expertise, and professionalism, while still being able to communicate a vision and motivate a range of staff, stakeholders, and beneficiaries. Right at their core, they passionately believe in the importance of learning and knowledge in shaping the future of their organisation.

Notes

- 1 For a description of this book, see the Resources section of this Reader.
- 2 We define organisational culture as a pattern of learned assumptions about appropriate behaviour, or more colloquially 'how things get done round here'.
- 3 We use the word 'leader' to refer to the Director or Chief Executive of an organisation, and see leadership as a process through which the senior management and the Board influence group members to attain group or organisational goals and so shape the direction and culture of an organisation.
- 4 The early stage of an organisation's growth where the pioneer provides many of the ideas and much of the energy and direction to an organisation.

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