

Learning in Highly Distributed Organisations

Carl Jackson with Victoire Ngoune (2010)

Summary

Learning in Highly Distributed Organisations is a review paper commissioned by the Institute of Development Studies¹ as part of the scoping phase for a learning hub in the field of low carbon climate resilient development. The purpose of the Learning Hub is to improve knowledge and information flows between practitioners and experts for the UK Department for International Development². The paper is written by Carl Jackson (Westhill Knowledge Group³) with Victoire Ngoune (freelance researcher in ICT and development). IDS commissioned the paper to provide an organisational learning and change perspective on three questions:

- How do organisations with highly distributed staff learn effectively?
- How have comparable learning hubs operated, what has been successful and not so successful?
- What lessons/recommendations should be considered by the IDS learning hub team?

Drawing on seventeen examples from the international development sector, the paper reviews dimensions of organisational learning and change including networking, training, capturing experience, practice communities, different forms of communication, (dis)incentives to learning, functioning of expert/resource groups, capacity support and validation of principles.

The review of experience suggests that highly distributed and networked organisations (HD/NOs) typically adopt a form of bounded pluralism in their selection of organisational learning methods. HD/NOs avoid unduly overloading or restricting learners' access to methods and typically use four contrasting methods. These sets need to change in composition over time in response to changes in demand and in the operating environment for the HD/NO. Drawing on theories and models of learning associated with David Kolb, Paolo Frère, knowledge sharing, organisational learning and capacity development the paper identifies those methods that should have the best fit for HD/NOs. Sharing Own Experience and Communities of Practice show the best fit, followed by Open Innovation, Reflection/Reflexivity and Socialisation. Reading across these methods the paper identifies seven activities that have shown greater success in supporting learning: spontaneous group conversations; face to face interaction; open networks /communities; responsive technical training and practical operational guidelines; bespoke synthesis of publications; critical friends; and stories / neighbourhood visits. Distilling experience from successful components of learning the paper presents lessons for supporting learning in HD/NOs relating to the themes of: complexity; trust and access; learning journeys; co-creation and improvisation; time for learning; existing learning processes; and risks from learning.

In conclusion the paper sets out eight recommendations for further exploration in a design phase of the Learning Hub.

- Explore the complexity of work circumstances and learning demands in a highly distributed / network organisation which will call for a multimodal (bounded pluralism) response in terms of learning methods and approaches with about four options for people in different circumstances.
- Build a very flexible and responsive capacity strengthening window into the hub so that catalysts of existing guerilla and country based learning processes can access support if they wish. Otherwise do no harm and do not compete with or smother what is already working informally.
- Offer professional facilitation and logistics for large face to face events of staff and boundary partners (60-80 people) using simple rules for interaction and allowing people the freedom to co-define, share and socialise whatever content they find valuable
- Open and moderate an email list serve linked to monthly teleconferences for spontaneous conversations where practitioners can share their own questions and

¹ www.ids.ac.uk

² www.dfid.gov.uk

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learning. Start from existing country champions in DFID and building out to an open network/community of practice

- Produce a small number of very high quality co-created knowledge products linked to external process (relevance and timeliness are key). These should synthesize practical experience, research, indigenous knowledge and other evidence with an emphasis on sharing contact information and using reflexive storytelling approaches as well as analytical findings.
- Pre-purchase blocks of individual expert's time to allow them to be co-opted into the hub as critical friends and then engineer collaboration between experts as necessary rather than in a group.
- Staff an open innovation help desk team with an experienced team leader to crowd source knowledge from networks of expertise (including but not limited to individual subject experts) to meet complex policy innovation challenges
- Always use low cost, established commercial and public Web 2.0/social media and mobile tools in preference to bespoke or private ones (email list serve, social bookmarking, teleconference, social networks). Carefully manage subscriptions to modulate trust and access in different spaces for participation.
- Plan and design learning support in ways that will enable qualitative and quantitative monitoring and evaluation of the complex impacts and outcomes of learning, rather than bolting on linear methods after the fact.

Carl Jackson with Victoire Ngoune (2010), Learning in Highly Distributed Organisations, Hastings, Westhill Knowledge Group (prepared for Climate Change and Development Centre at the Institute of Development Studies with support from the UK Department for International Development)

Full paper available and comments welcome at:
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