Chapter 50
Changing Learning Paradigms in a Global Health Agency

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ABSTRACT

This case history describes a learning culture intervention initiative with an international rescue organization focused on expanding conceptions of learning from a traditional training approach to one focused on integrating informal and incidental learning approaches to create a learning culture. It reflects on the intervention process and outcomes and offers insights for evidenced-based practice.

INTRODUCTION

The site for this reflective case history was the Global Health Group (GHG) within an international rescue organization (IRO). The work of the IRO is both humanitarian and developmental, and health is a major area of work for the IRO. Challenges faced by the GHG include globalization, urbanization, diseases, lack of access to healthcare, and an increasingly aging population.

Learning Beyond Training

The IRO's budget included funding for nearly 400,000 hours of training. In fact, the work plan of every subject matter expert in the GHG includes the delivery of face-to-face training and developing training materials in the form of printed manuals or, more recently, online courses.

In 2012, the GHG contracted a consultant to develop training guidelines as part of its strategic plan. These guidelines provided detailed instructions on how to assess training needs and recommended using a rigorous methodology based on best-practice evidence of how people are trained. Last but not least, the consultant recommended that training activities be evaluated not only regarding improved knowledge and skills, but also improved performance for both the individual and the organization. The key insight for the GHG was to recognize the significance of informal and incidental forms of learning to achieve its strategic goal of improved teamwork in which every member manages knowledge to improve the quality of health interventions.

Hence, in 2013, the IRO's GHG recognized the need for a strategic approach to learning beyond training. In 2014, the GHG developed a learning strategy to enhance its individual and collective capacity to learn and change as it faced the stark reality of having to do more with less.

Organizational Characteristics

The IRO and its GHG present characteristics that highlight the relevance of learning, knowledge, and capacity building. First, it is a non-profit organization with a globally dispersed workforce that includes several million volunteers, many located beyond the reach of modern technology with few funds to support travel to attend training.

Second, work is accomplished at the local level. Hence building capacity at the local level is a priority. The idea of a global team has been promoted but the exact number of health staff that may be considered members of this group, as well as the numbers reached through collaboration, fluctuate and could not be determined. Such a context makes collaboration to deliver training at the local level difficult.

Third, the IRO's workforce is both volunteer- and community-based. Though the organization is known for its work in major crises, the majority of its daily work at the local level is delivering health services. The training needed to maintain the quality of that workforce is substantial.

Increasingly, the organization's role is in brokering knowledge in an increasingly-networked global public health system that has undergone a fundamental shift where 'experts' who provided answers must reinvent themselves as facilitators who, through critical thinking, develop the questions that stimulate others to develop themselves. At the same time, most of the training budget is currently used for in-service training and learning is still a short-term tactical approach rather than part of the organization's long-term strategy.

These role shifts to knowledge broker and facilitators of learning and inquiry refer to knowledge processes that are more likely to be achieved through informal and incidental forms of learning, rather than through formal training. The question explored by this organizational change initiative was how the GHG could leverage its existing practices and create new ones to foster and create a learning culture that was rich in informal and incidental learning.

EVIDENCE-BASED ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE INITIATIVE

The Learning Organization Model

A learning organization is defined by Watkins and Marsick (1993) as an organization that has an enhanced capacity to learn and change. They proposed seven action imperatives to promote learning in

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