

17. Continuous Improvement

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Introduction

The animal protection environment is a fast-changing one, where we are faced with an ever-complex range of problems and opportunities. Our opponents are better resourced in so many ways. Our 'competitors' are always trying to steal advantage from us. This makes it vital that we continue to make the most of our scarce resources, and our most valuable asset – our staff. Continuous improvement (or 'learning') and Kaizen are ways of achieving this, without a damaging 'revolution'.

What is a 'Learning Organisation'?

A 'Learning Organisation' is an organisation that learns and encourages learning among its people. It promotes exchange of information between employees hence creating a more knowledgeable workforce. This produces a very flexible organisation where people will accept and adapt to new ideas and changes through a shared vision.

"A Learning Organisation is one in which people at all levels, individuals and collectively, are continually increasing their capacity to produce results they really care about." (Senge)

Key aspects of a 'Learning Organisation' are that it established procedures to: -

- Apply techniques to measure the organisation's strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures
- Identify areas for improvement within the organisation
- Set organisational policies and approaches to all aspects of management
- Implement techniques to improve organisational effectiveness.

The Importance of Learning

The importance of learning was first put forward by the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551 - 479 BC). He believed that everyone should benefit from learning: -

"Without learning, the wise become foolish; by learning, the foolish become wise."

"Learn as if you could never have enough of learning, as if you might miss something."

Reason for the growing emphasis on organisational learning is because of the increased pace of change. Classically, work has been thought of as being conservative and difficult to change. Now, there is such a fast-changing environment that 'business as usual' is no longer an option.

As various management writers put it: -

"Organisations must develop a capacity for fast-paced innovation... learn to love change" (Peters)

"As the competitive environment becomes more complex and variegated, the need for greater genetic variety - a broader range of managerial beliefs, and a greater repertoire of managerial actions - grows apace" (Hamel and Prahalad).

"Top companies seem to organise around people - honouring these needs - feeling of control, something to believe in, challenge, lifelong learning, recognition" (Waterman)

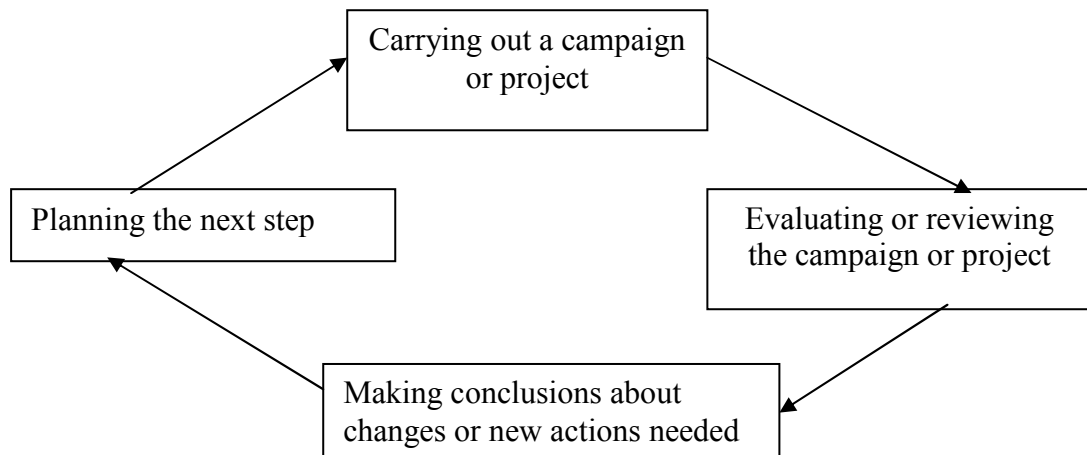
With the pace of change ever quickening, the need to develop mechanisms for continuous learning and innovation is greater than ever.

The Steady Process

If the changeover to a 'Learning Organisation' happened overnight, the environment around the workers would be complex and dynamic. This would cause fear, uncertainty and confusion, which would hamper learning and openness to change. So it can only be introduced into a company that is prepared to reach a balance between change and stability, i.e. a balance between the old and the new. Thus, part of the senior management's job involves innovation, but more is process review and some is maintenance. For middle managers, jobs consist largely of process review and maintenance, and for workers, mainly maintenance, with some process review. The core stability is maintained through a steady review and introduction process, supported by staff and management development.

The Learning Cycle

Evaluation is necessary for an organisation to learn from its mistakes and also to appreciate its successes. Discussion and contribution in a team framework is vital, followed by assessment and planning. Each team member should be encouraged to assess his/her own performance. This requires continuous feedback and assessment, which is commonly depicted using the 'Learning Cycle' model below: -



Animal protection organisations can be very poor at evaluation, instead dashing from campaign to campaign, or project to project. This may give the feeling of constant activity, but it completely misses the important chance to learn and improve upon experiences.

The Process

An organisation that learns and wants its people to learn, should try to follow certain concepts in learning techniques and mould itself to accommodate for a number of specific attributes. These include: -

- Thrive on Change
- Encourage Experimentation
- Communicate Success and Failure
- Facilitate Learning from the Surrounding Environment
- Facilitate Learning from Employees
- Reward Learning
- A Sense of Caring and Mutual Support

What Type of Learning?

A 'Learning Organisation' is not simply about 'more training'. While training does help develop certain types of skill, a 'Learning Organisation' involves the development of higher levels of knowledge and skill. This includes four levels of learning: -

- Learning facts, knowledge, processes and procedures. Applies to known situations where changes are minor.
- Learning new job skills that are transferable to other situations. Applies to new situations where existing responses need to be changed. Bringing in outside expertise is a useful tool here.
- Learning to adapt. Applies to more dynamic situations where the solutions need developing. Experimentation and deriving lessons from success and failure is important here.
- Learning to learn. Is about innovation and creativity; designing the future rather than merely adapting to it. This is where assumptions are challenged and knowledge is reframed.

Furthermore this model (or adaptation of it) can be applied at three levels - to the learning of individuals, of teams and of organisations.

Characteristics of a 'Learning Organisation'

Some of the key characteristics of 'Learning Organisation' are given below: -

A Learning Culture

An organisational climate that nurtures learning.

- Future, external orientation - these organisations develop understanding of their environment; senior teams take time out to think about the future. Widespread use of external sources and advisors e.g. consultants
- Free exchange and flow of information - systems are in place to ensure that expertise is available where it is needed; individuals network extensively, crossing organisational boundaries to develop their knowledge and expertise.

- Commitment to learning, personal development - support from top management; people at all levels encouraged to learn and learning is rewarded.
- Valuing people – ideas and creativity are stimulated, made use of and developed. Diversity is recognised as a strength. Views can be challenged.
- Climate of openness and trust - individuals are encouraged to develop ideas, to speak out, to challenge actions.
- Learning from experience - learning from mistakes is often more powerful than learning from success. Failure is tolerated, provided lessons are learnt

Key Management Processes

Management processes that encourage interaction across boundaries. These are infrastructure, development and management processes, for example: -

- Strategic and Scenario Planning - approaches to planning that go beyond the numbers, encourage challenging assumptions, thinking 'outside of the box'. They also allocate a proportion of resources for new challenges.
- Competitor Analysis - as part of a process of continuous monitoring and analysis of all key factors in the external environment, including political factors.
- Information and Knowledge Management - using techniques to identify, audit, value (cost/benefit), develop and exploit information as a resource.
- Capability Planning - profiling both qualitatively and quantitatively the competencies of the organisation.
- Team and Organisation development - the use of facilitators to help groups with work, job and organisation design and team development - reinforcing values, developing vision, cohesiveness and a climate of stretching goals, sharing and support
- Performance Measurement - finding appropriate measures and indicators of performance; ones that encourage investment in learning.
- Reward and Recognition Systems - processes and systems that recognise acquisition of new skills, team-work as well as individual effort, celebrate successes and accomplishments, and encourage continuous personal development.

Kaizen

Another very similar concept to a 'Learning Organisation' is Kaizen. This is a key Japanese management philosophy that means 'improvement'. Kaizen strategy calls for never-ending efforts for improvement involving everyone in the organisation - managers and workers alike.

In practice, Kaizen can be implemented in organisations by improving every aspect of the work process in a step-by-step approach, while gradually developing employee skills through training education and increased involvement. The principles in Kaizen implementation are: -

- Human resources are the most important company asset
- Processes must evolve by gradual improvement rather than radical changes
- Improvement must be based on statistical/quantitative evaluation of performance (quite difficult to apply in the animal protection environment)

Support throughout the entire structure is necessary to become successful at developing a strong Kaizen approach. Management as well as workers need to believe in the Kaizen idea and strive toward obtaining the small goals in order to reach overall success.

Therefore, all members of an organisation need to be trained in a manner to support this. Resources, measurements, rewards and incentives all need to be aligned to and working with the Kaizen structure of ideas.

The Kaizen Mindset

- Not a day should go by without some kind of improvement being made somewhere in the company
- Mission-driven strategy for improvement - any management activity should eventually lead to increased mission achievement
- Quality first: professionalism and quality as goals
- Recognition that any organisation has problems and establishing culture where everyone can freely admit these problems and suggest improvement
- Problem solving is seen as cross-functional systemic and collaborative approach
- Emphasis on process - establishing a way of thinking orientated at improving processes, and a management system that supports and acknowledges people's process-orientated efforts for improvement
- A positive, win-win attitude, not a blame culture

Further Resources

🔗 Web Sites

Peter Senge and the Learning Organisation

<http://www.infed.org/thinkers/senge.htm>

The Learning Organisation

<http://www.skyrme.com/insights/3lrnorg.htm>

Continuous Improvement

http://www.managementhelp.org/quality/cont_imp/cont_imp.htm

Kaizen Institute

<http://www.kaizen-institute.com>

Kaizen

http://www.1000ventures.com/business_guide/mgmt_kaizen_main.html

Books

The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation

By: Peter M. Senge

Publisher: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group

ISBN: 0385260954

Ten Steps to a Learning Organisation

By: Peter Kline, Bernhard Saunders

Publisher: Great Ocean Publishers

ISBN: 0915556324

50 Ways Towards a Learning Organisation

By: Andrew Forrest
Publisher: Spiro Press
ISBN: 1858355990

Office Kaizen: Transforming Office Operations into a Strategic Competitive Advantage

By: William Lareau
Publisher: American Society for Quality
ISBN: 0873895568

The Goal: A Process of Ongoing Improvement

By: Eliyahu M. Goldratt, Jeff Cox
Publisher: North River Press
ISBN: 0884271781

The Kaizen Blitz

By: Anthony C. Laraia
Publisher: Jon Wiley
ISBN: 0471246484

Kick Down the Door of Complacency: Seize the Power of Continuous Improvement

By: Charles C. Harwood
Publisher: St Lucie Press
ISBN: 157444168X

Creating a Learning Organisation (50-minute Series)

By: Barbara J. Braham
Publisher: Crisp Publications Inc
ISBN: 1560523514