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Chapter 15

Learning Culture in a Global Context

Gunnar Brückner

In these times of hyper-globalization, many of us work each day with people of other nationalities and from different cultures. Diversity and cross-cultural complexity are not lofty concepts anymore; they have become synonymous with the frequent challenges that run counter to the efficiency of business operations, and they can be quite aggravating. That frustration can make it impossible for us to learn from one another and ultimately to build a truly global organization.

I felt this frustration firsthand during my 12 years at what is arguably the world's largest global development operation, an organization with an almost unrivaled level of complexity and diversity—the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). At UNDP, I also experienced the utter satisfaction of working in an intercultural environment of fine ideas and creative solutions.

The UNDP is the United Nation's global development network advocating change and connecting countries around the world to knowledge, experience, and resources so that their citizens can build better lives. Working with a wide range of partners, the UNDP serves more than 166 countries and territories, striving to help fulfill the goals of the United Nations. Chief among its objectives is the achievement of the UN's Millennium Development Goals, which aim to cut world poverty in half by 2015. Other priorities include achieving universal primary education and environmental sustainability. For the UNDP, "development" means helping people help themselves. This is also known in UNDP circles as "building capacity for sustainable human development," a mantra that extends to the UNDP's own staff.

Today, the UNDP is a results-oriented, knowledge-driven, outward-looking organization, accountable in its relationship with development partners and programme countries and committed to improving staff capacities as a basis for improving overall performance. The organization's mission is credible and sharply defined, and the speed with which the UNDP has responded to post-conflict situations, such as in Afghanistan and East Timor, and to development challenges in Africa and elsewhere, reflects the organization's agility.

The UNDP's position was not always so secure, however. In the past decade, the rapidly declining availability of multilateral grant resources for Third World development was mirrored by a shrinking confidence in UNDP's ability to deliver its projects and programmes efficiently. This further decreased the availability of funds. In order to halt the downward spiral, which threatened UNDP with extinction, the organization had to demonstrate that it was going to deliver better programmes using fewer resources in a shorter time. But consider the magnitude of that challenge: UNDP is dispersed around the world, working in the face of

war and many varieties of governance shortcomings. UNDP staff, by virtue of the organization's design, don't stay in one job for more than a few years. It became indispensable for the UNDP to learn to become a networked, practice-based, results-oriented organization.

Responsibility for catalyzing a learning culture rested on the shoulders of the Learning Resources Centre (LRC), UNDP's formal education and learning department. The Learning Resources Centre operates out of the New York headquarters of UNDP and is responsible for stimulating and guiding the learning of more than 5,000 staff members of various cultural backgrounds who work in and move among offices in about 140 countries. The Learning Resources Centre, during the past decade, was the engine that drove the UNDP's new emphasis on learning as the critical tool to ensure an effective repositioning of the organization within the larger global-development community. Only after aligning human resources and organizational strategies more effectively could the Learning Resources Centre even begin to link the learning agenda directly to UNDP's goals and to the ongoing change process.

Along with the overall sharpening of mission and operational focus came the need for a more rigorously prepared and agile professional staff. As most large organizations have discovered, clarity of mission is the first step; the capacity of the staff is the second. The hallmark of this new, improved staff had to be its ability to respond immediately to an incredible array of local needs, in new ways and on short notice. We found that we could influence staff knowledge (what people know and how quickly and responsibly they put that knowledge to use) and staff interactions (how they communicate, especially when the communication is being modulated by and through a variety of cultural lenses). Taken together, these variables determine the speed and clarity with which every organization can respond to change. Developing and nurturing a learning culture may be the most effective way of influencing these elements in a positive way.

The need to align overall corporate strategy with staff development to produce a fast, flexible, results-oriented organizational culture was first expressed by the corporate pledge of "Learning for All Staff" that became the core message of UNDP's learning framework in 1998. This major shift in the internal development strategy of UNDP was an important signal to the entire UNDP community. It suggested new ways of doing business other than the prescriptive, curriculum-based training programme delivered through a series of centrally planned events, which had been the operational strategy for decades. We needed to make this shift for a very simple reason: previous strategy had produced limited and short-sighted results, served only a small percentage of UNDP staff, promoted a reliance on a small cadre of experts, and did not stimulate innovation or creative thinking. Besides, it was costly. In essence, we knew that a shift was absolutely necessary, but to what—and where to begin?

Entry Points: Where Learning Occurs

Very early on in UNDP's learning culture initiative, the Learning Resources Centre began to distinguish at least three levels we could expect to influence: individual, group, and organizational. There is also a fourth level that comes into play in organizations like UNDP: the society at large.

[Insert Exhibit 1 about here]

Caption: Where does learning occur?

With UNDP's mandate for global capacity building, this fourth level is in fact core to our culture because it motivates the day-to-day work of most staff members. The local focus of UNDP's programmes, whether the goal is poverty alleviation, creating good governance, or protecting the environment, is evidenced by the fact that all programmes are negotiated between each country office and the government of the host country. Local ownership of the object of work and a locally rooted development programme are essential for successful UNDP interventions. The same is true for learning and staff development.

Our approach was to focus as much as possible and as directly as possible on the individual learners who make up UNDP's workforce. This is best done by accommodating a variety of learning styles and affirming a core principle of adult learning: adults learn best when *they* are in control of their learning.

My colleagues and I, previously responsible for formal training, turned our attention to the problem of creating an organizational culture that at its heart values informal learning and personal growth while honoring intercultural complexity.

Individual Learning: Informal and Local

Transforming an organization is hard. Creating a learning culture across two kinds of cultures—that of our organization as a whole and of UNDP's locations around the world—is even harder. We were aware of the difficulties when we set out, and we were mindful of costs, resources, and internal politics. So we decided to focus our attention on individual learning and change, which would then help the entire organization learn and would span both of our culture issues (organizational and local). Our intuitive goal was to promote the concept of individual learning as a prerequisite for stimulating sustainable organizational learning.

For this to happen across the globe, we needed to understand and embrace the complexity of our collective task. We also had to remember that there was no one right learning culture and, thus, no blueprint for creating one. Out of respect for local cultures, for example, we couldn't possibly introduce a one-size-fits-all solution for management development, even at the risk of alienating some well-meaning "friends" of the Learning Resources Centre. A senior Italian manager who submitted pages of sharp thinking on how to bring about management development in UNDP comes to mind as someone who failed to see the limitations of his (incidentally) U.S.-centric approach. He became increasingly frustrated as he realized that his ideas would not be rolled out on a global scale, although in his view he had sufficiently field-tested them in Mexico.

Individual learning and staff development can be the result of informal—but intentional—activities. Consider one of the most culturally sensitive learning activities I know: the Annual Central American United Nations Soccer Tournament, which is hosted by a different country in the region each year. During what appears to be a weekend of sports and parties for busloads of staff and family from all over the region, senior managers talk strategy, meet peers from other UN agencies, and share best practices—as do operational and programme staff with their respective peers.

The same appreciation for personal interaction between office staff is evidenced in El Salvador, where large groups of employees meet up for a daily lunch hour, just to keep in touch and keep information flowing. From a professional perspective, this lunch meeting represents a powerful informal learning activity, which we would have wanted to instigate had it not emerged quite naturally.

In retrospect, I can see why Japanese junior managers assigned to the El Salvador office would complain about the difficulty of integrating with the local and national staff. They were operating with fundamentally different workplace assumptions, such as strict hierarchical boundaries and a need to separate work issues and private life, so that activities (like meeting and chatting over lunch) considered necessary by the locals were almost unthinkable for these expatriates. A better informal activity for them would have been to pair them with a local senior staff member in order to help bridge intercultural differences.

On a global scale, think of it this way: a result of placing such a high premium on social interaction and a low one on hierarchies is that certain interventions work very well in one location and flop in another, or are perceived so differently that they raise confusion rather than promote bonding or attachment. It is conceivable, for example, that a number of outdoor, experiential activities successfully tested in the Costa Rica office might enhance team productivity and motivation in El Salvador, while the same approach might lead to utter confusion in the North Korea office, where any private interaction with and among the local staff is not common and is even discouraged for political reasons.

In practical terms, it was confirmed again and again that the essence of transformative change and learning in our organization (and probably any other) is the degree to which individual behavior is changed. So our question became: How do we create organizational programmes that support individuals' needs, both those they perceive and those the organization perceives on their behalf? In deciding what to do and what not to do, we had to continuously challenge our own assumptions, operate with maximum flexibility, be aware of our own intentions, and remind ourselves that good decisions come out of reflective processes. The global rollout of a 360-degree feedback programme for all managers, with an integral element of coaching support for each participant following the results, is an example of refocusing our resources on changing individual behaviors, one staff member at a time, as a prerequisite for large-scale organizational change. Not surprisingly, even the 360 programme bumped into local obstacles, such as the hesitation of local staff in Asia to provide open and honest feedback to senior managers. On the whole, local managers were able to take actions such as lengthy briefing sessions and sharing of best practices from elsewhere in the UNDP world so that the feedback could have the fullest impact on their individual learning.

The most striking example for supporting individual learning as the starting point for broader learning is the way coaching is modeled for newly appointed learning managers as they are trained to become learning coaches in their respective countries. During an induction workshop, learning managers (the concept will be addressed later in more detail) develop an appreciation for the coaching approach through hands-on experience of one-on-one, group, and team coaching. In my opinion, a coaching approach, which emphasizes listening and respect and focuses on empowering rather than advising, is the best learning tool to stimulate intercultural interaction in a complex organizational environment.

Adult learning theory indicates that adults need to be treated as capable of self-direction and put in a position to be able to take on new challenges.¹ For as much as we wanted to influence, shape, and decide, we learned—sometimes the hard way—that this potential cannot be realized in a control-driven environment. Accordingly, without abdicating our corporate responsibilities, we had to become learning coaches or learning facilitators instead of training providers.

¹ M. Knowles, E. F. Holton, and R. A. Swanson, *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, Gulf Professional Publishing, 1998

Letting Go: The Paradox of Managing Learning

The dilemma between letting go and actively creating change describes the paradox of managing learning. We often talk of learning as a spontaneous process triggered differently in different people. We think of learning as the result of a wide variety of circumstances and settings, some orchestrated and some not. When we reflect on our own deepest learning, we know that it has often been triggered by unexpected situations and facts. So, with this kind of context, the idea of “managing” learning creates some confusion and tension, and raises hard philosophical issues.

Consider this metaphor: creating learning culture in a global organization is a bit like asking musicians from around the world to improvise a fine tune together. Apart from a general confusion as to what constitutes a fine tune, there would be all manner of instruments, the harmonies would range from 5- to 7- to 12-tone, and even the tastes and skill levels of the musicians would vary widely. So how could anyone possibly expect the tunes to sound like the classical works of either Beethoven or Wei Changsheng? We could reasonably expect that the musicians would have fun together, have a powerful sharing experience, learn some things from one another, and create something—perhaps even provocative, musical, and memorable—from their collaboration. But we wouldn’t want to have an overly prescriptive view of what they would accomplish, how they would go about it, or what they would learn in the process.

Stay with the metaphor for a moment longer. Our uncertainties would not mean that we could not try to minimize the chaos or that we could not create a setting and process for their collaboration, or even that we could not suggest a tangible goal toward which they could work collectively. We could do a variety of things to support the musicians — while still challenging them to be musicians. In this sense we could call what we were doing “managing the creation of music.”

Letting go and expecting accountability are not contradictory. In the Learning Resources Centre we found that the trick was to establish a highly conceptual framework for the overall organization but leave the implementation to local and even personal discretion. In other words, we provided the structure and let others fill in the details. By being “just” a framework, the strategy document mentioned earlier was quickly endorsed by top management and within months became the de facto learning policy and road map for implementing learning interventions in UNDP.

For instance, once the framework was erected, a simple letter to all staff from the head of UNDP announced the recommendation to spend 5 percent of staff time on learning. : As with the learning framework itself, implementation of this new concept was deliberately left to the local level—no guidelines were issued.

The immediate reaction to what many perceived as a new policy was an outcry from many offices, demanding that the recommendation be followed by a detailed set of guidelines (which was precisely the way the old UNDP culture worked and how the new one was determined not to). Because we were prepared for this reaction, the Learning Resources Centre resisted the pressure to publish guidelines and instead started collecting and publicly sharing ideas from countries such as Brazil, Cuba, and Peru, which were quickly generating positive responses to the new opportunity. In all those places, the launch of the concept had resulted in creative chaos and the testing of widely different approaches to a new emphasis on learning — from fixed hours for individual learning to whole office learning through

presentations of resident experts to additional time off for participation in professional events to mandatory field visits.

Not surprisingly, the reactions differed region by region and in some cases country by country. For example, several African country offices appeared to have frozen all learning activities for fear of breaking the rules, even though there *were* no rules. Some Asian countries, India and China for example, tried out the concept and then volunteered to write guidelines for the Learning Resources Centre.

Gradually, and with the significant assistance of UNDP's emerging Learning Manager Network, the majority of our offices began to accept the 5 percent as an opportunity rather than a compliance issue, though I admit it helps that the 5 percent has found its way onto the Organizational Scorecard.. I predict that most UNDP staff will eventually devote 5 percent of their time—and perhaps much more—to learning as a matter of principle, and the 5 percent concept will become an institutional memory, a reminder of how modestly parts of the learning agenda started.

Rather than managing budgets alone, the Learning Resources Centre had now begun to influence, but never control, the way people spent their time. Our decentralized, country-office approach, which did not emphasize or demand “control of the learning process,” proved to be an excellent way to generate an increase in local staff knowledge, a precondition for effectiveness in the global setting.

Our conclusion: there simply is no empowerment without some degree of letting go. We needed to trust the processes we created and our people, both individually and as groups of peers. I always found it intriguing that the value of our admittedly hypothetical time-spent-on-learning budget calculated in monetary terms quickly exceeded the annual Learning Resources Centre learning budget of approximately U.S. \$5 million by many millions of dollars. Combined with senior management support, this leverage helped us build more and more trust into the business value of the learning function and, over time, position ourselves solidly within the UNDP's larger change-management strategy, a tactic that gave us a badly needed element of stability in an otherwise complex and volatile situation.

High-Impact Learning Interventions

The UNDP now devotes a great deal of resources to the development of the individual and the support of informal learning. Early on in the process we argued strongly for this, knowing (especially in a global setting) that this is the only way to deliver effectively on the promise to facilitate learning for *all* staff. It was our firm belief that the inclusion of all staff in learning activities is an essential characteristic of an exemplary learning culture. The following interventions were designed to promote this individual engagement of learning—and in turn help us create a learning culture.

The Electronic Platform for Learning

One of the big promises of UNDP's learning initiative was “Learning for All,” and technology made that possible. The Internet and newly available products allowed us to create an easy-to-use and leading-edge online learning and communication environment accessible to all UNDP staff worldwide through their computers. The Electronic Platform for Learning²

² You can see the Electronic Platform for Learning at: <http://learning.undp.org>

was not going to be a learning management system; the credibility gap faced by the corporate learning function was not going to be addressed by more control but by making more learning resources available. The learning platform was launched in June 2000. It puts thousands of free learning resources, including documents, Web pages, online courses, video clips, and materials from CD-ROMs, within reach of every staff member, just a few clicks away. A visually appealing presentation of these resources, rather than an exclusively text-based format, like UNDP's Learning Resources Catalogue, added some badly needed energy and context to the learning journey of each self-motivated and self-directed visitor to the site.

Individual learner awareness is an integral part of the Learning Resources Centre's approach. So, as a critical part of this e-learning environment, all staff members are invited to take a free online learning-style assessment to help them understand as individuals how they prefer to learn, what kinds of resources will facilitate their learning process, and how their learning style may differ from their colleagues'. Taken as a whole, the learning platform resources collection, individualized tools, and contextual interface acknowledge the diversity of learning style preferences embedded within the many cultural communities linked through the site.

Integral to the platform and essential for supporting informal learning is the availability of a UNDP branded online collaborative tool, with which users can create virtual spaces, on the fly, for information sharing and communication. Complementing about ten moderated corporate listserv discussions and with close to 4,000 individually registered subscribers, MyLearningPlace provides a learning environment — outside the corporate firewall and the confines of the UNDP intranet — in which not only staff but also external participants can freely manage their relationships by creating or joining topics for discussion, by storing and exchanging knowledge, by taking online courses, and by chatting.³ The application helps transcend geographical borders as well as the borders between individual, group, and organizational learning.

In essence, the learning platform provides a refreshing view of learning for UNDP managers and staff around the world and particularly in country offices, where learning resources are otherwise difficult to access. This fact is critical, since dedication and motivation are not problems within UNDP! Staff need the right support, at the right time, using the right method. By providing this and so moving from a limited focus on training to the provision of continuous learning and career development, the Learning Resources Centre was able to meet staff energy with real tools and support. And when Learning Resources Centre staff or learning managers — the power users of the learning platform — are able to point to resources that are available to all their colleagues, they enhance their credibility and the desired learning culture starts to take root. This is an in-house example of UNDP's core mission, sustainable human development, which is all about providing choices within a knowledge context that supports smart decisions.

The Learning Manager Network

The UNDP's Learning Manager Network, which was launched in October 1999, is a group of change agents. It comprises volunteers from all hierarchical levels and sectors of the organization who advocate for continuous learning and staff development in their respective offices. The network has more than 140 active members, representing all of the UNDP's regional bureaus and most of the country offices.

³ You can see MyLearningPlace at <http://eltree.undp.org>.

Working locally and independently, with support from the Learning Resources Centre and a global network of peers, a learning manager's responsibilities include encouraging and if possible coaching staff to use the time UNDP allots for intentional learning; promoting learning opportunities and resources; and supporting the learning components of the UNDP's new annual Results and Competency Assessment process. Increasingly, learning managers are asked to intervene at the interface of knowledge management and staff development and learning.

Learning Managers are also championing the use of the learning platform. They connect with one another online, using MyLearningPlace, the learning platform's collaboration software. Although the virtual communities that emerge on the learning platform benefit from worldwide access to peer support as well as a wide array of learning resources, learning managers are an indispensable element in the learning process. They catalyze thinking about learning and help facilitate the development of local solutions to local problems.

Some learning managers have begun to initiate regional meetings with their peers. Organized with little or no support from the central learning function, these meetings create additional opportunities for peer learning, networking, and sharing best practices as they emerge around the globe. Because of this propensity for self-organization and ongoing regeneration, the Learning Manager Network has become an ideal breeding ground for champions of learning—people who can help the UNDP reach a tipping point in creating and mainstreaming a culture of learning.

Virtual Development Academy

The Virtual Development Academy is a curriculum-based, primarily online learning initiative that was established to support the professionalization of potentially 1,400 UNDP staff.⁴

The academy has become a successful and highly visible operation — as well as a signal of the emerging organizational support for learning. It helps create cutting-edge development professionals by providing top-quality content through a combination of face-to-face meetings, an asynchronous delivery mechanism with threaded discussions using Internet technologies, facilitators, and work-related assignments.

In its first year, the academy successfully supported 87 mid-level UNDP staff members from 57 countries as they improved their management skills, consulting-for-development skills, information technology abilities, and knowledge in UNDP's practice areas. The academy is now in its second year, with 129 participants from 79 countries. It is positioned as one of the flagship learning products that each UNDP staff member can access, because it is increasingly democratized, through the provision of self-paced modules that will be available for all staff.

Educational Assistance Programme

Right after the approval of the learning framework, the Learning Resources Centre modified some of its individual learning programmes so that they could offer more impact with the same amount of financial resources. The UNDP's Educational Assistance Programme is an example of such a changed initiative. The programme was originally built around a closely controlled and lengthy administrative process, through which financial support for academic activities could be obtained only if the area of learning fit into a predetermined and narrow set

⁴ You can visit the Virtual Development Academy at: <http://vda.undp.org>

of corporate priorities. The modified programme contributes to the creation of the UNDP learning culture by offering targeted, concrete support to each requesting staff member.

It has been both administratively streamlined and decentralized and now supports staff initiatives, provided they are listed in the employee's individual learning plan, by providing help (50 percent financial assistance) with expenses for virtually all learning activities, such as buying a CD-ROM or book, attending a workshop, taking part in distance learning, or joining a professional organization. Travel, hotel, and cost of living expenses are not eligible for reimbursement.

The underlying idea is that an objective listed in the learning plan invariably leads to a discussion between the staff member and supervisor, which is often a natural place for the local learning manager to engage. As a result, the objective is honed and strengthened. Although 50 percent of costs must be borne by the beneficiary, the Educational Assistance Programme reaches people who had previously not received support for their development. A learning manager or office manager can now approve the application at the local level. Consequently, more employees, especially women in country offices, have been using the benefit. UNDP's learning function has been a major beneficiary of this programme, improving its credibility by reaching out with tangible support to otherwise marginalized groups.

Coaching and Mentoring

Coaching is not an inexpensive way to support individual learning, but it is particularly effective. Giving and receiving coaching are core activities in the action-learning-based induction workshop for newly appointed learning managers. To date, nearly 200 people have trained to be learning coaches within UNDP. Mentoring arrangements have also been made for more than 200 participants in the Virtual Development Academy, for some 40 mid-career staff new to UNDP, for participants in our emerging leaders programme, and for junior professionals joining the UNDP on a one- to two-year contract.

The list above illustrates that coaching and mentoring are gradually making their way into the organization, which I see as a strong indication of positive cultural change. The UNDP is moving from a hierarchical command-and-order culture toward a collaborative environment where respect builds the basis for sharing information and learning from each other. Coaching, with its emphasis on listening and its focus on the needs of the coaching client, is one of the best-suited learning activities in such a culturally complex environment.

Be aware that coaching, while preferable from an organizational standpoint, is often strongly resisted, especially among employees who are used to getting quick answers. But making the client happy is not always the best solution, especially when your goal is to create a learning culture—and not just get the client off your back. Another potential pitfall is that there are so many different approaches to coaching and mentoring that it's often difficult for a large, complex organization to evaluate them all. Insisting on a clearly defined coaching or mentoring standard as a precondition for corporate support may mean that these sorts of learning experiences never gain a foothold. The best practice, as UNDP found, is to support many promising approaches to coaching and mentoring simultaneously.

Intentionality: How Good Decisions Are Made

From a practitioner's perspective, it all boils down to this question: How do we determine which learning intervention is most appropriate at a given time? The answer is *intentionality*. Intentionality implies the act of creating something, deciding where to go next. At some point, and in light of strategy, professional knowledge, and common sense, somebody must make decisions.

I often used the following question to illustrate my personal dilemma as a learning professional in a global setting: If the process of learning were an ailing patient, what kind of a medical professional would you need? A Western-style surgeon? A Vietnamese acupuncturist? A Ugandan healer? A Mexican shaman? The list is potentially very long. In each case, how much time would be needed to diagnose the patient before taking action? What would this action look like and what remedies would be used? If the patient happened to be in the antiseptic environment of a modern hospital, would you allow a traditional healer to use incense?

It is not at all surprising that different people in different environments give different answers. Creating a learning culture in a global context requires organizations to develop an awareness of what R. Roosevelt Thomas described as the “diversity mixtures” in the organizations and cultures where we live and work. Some elements of the diversity mixture are race, gender, geographical origin, color, style of working together, religious background, cultural norms, tenure, work-life balance, and time orientation. Then, only then, can organizations determine the most appropriate course of action.⁵

Deciding what is “most appropriate” must involve a degree of pragmatism. Let me share with you a phrase I have often heard in Latin America, one that helped me make more pragmatic decisions: *Lo perfecto es el enemigo de lo bueno!* This means, “The perfect is the enemy of the good!”

I remember one complex decision we faced about whether UNDP staff worldwide should be given access, free of charge, to a set of 30 online courses for self-paced learning even though the courses were built around biased U.S.-centric content. The question was whether to offer what was available then or wait until the courses were available in all the official UN languages and in culturally adapted versions. Well, the pragmatist in me wrote a general disclaimer, acknowledging the shortfalls and almost apologizing for publishing the courses. I promised that all efforts would be made to improve the offering, and then I went ahead. This decision generated thousands of learning hours at a wonderful price, with virtually no complaints about the cultural limitations of the content.

In other words, when it comes to making decisions, the real question is not how can we be perfect, but how good can we get? We must be intentional about that, too. It would be easy for us to lose sight of the fact that a certain solution may get us farther along on our desired path than waiting until we have the best solution. Many companies that place a premium on solid data and scientific approaches may find this difficult to accept.

Often, I had to challenge my assumptions about what was the “best way” to proceed and what, under local circumstances, was the better or even right way to proceed in a specific situation. Decisions were often influenced, if not biased, by political considerations outside

⁵ R.R. Thomas, Jr., *Redefining Diversity* (New York: American Management Association, 1996).

my area of responsibility. Just before I left UNDP, for example, I don't know how much longer I could have resisted the pressure to create a two-day staff orientation programme to be delivered three times a year, which for whatever reasons seemed to be high on the senior management team's agenda.

My plea to take a little more time in order to work on a blended solution using multiple learning channels based on materials of other UN agencies, which I already had in my possession, was simply not going to win the day. I was confronted by the probability that I would have to deliver a programme, quite different from — and in my mind weaker than — what I wanted and thought possible.

When resources like people, money, and time are scarce, it helps to have a quick way to evaluate the potential of various learning activities or methods and pick the ones destined to have the greatest impact. What helped me was a grid that categorized all learning interventions in four dimensions according to their learning relationships and their expected impact: one provider to one recipient (coaching), one provider to many recipients (classroom), many providers to one recipient (expert panel), and, for highest impact, many providers to many recipients (communities of practice).

[Insert Exhibit 2 about here]

Exhibit 2: Learning Relationships: Providers and Receivers

One-to-one learning, as in giving advice or coaching, is often very gratifying. But if many-to-many learning can generate the highest possible impact without necessarily requiring the highest amount of management, it becomes a much better bet for most organizations.

In Exhibit 3, you can see how selected UNDP activities fit into this grid. Those are the activities to pursue with vigor, mindful that it's still difficult to meet the needs of a globally distributed staff with a wide range of expectations. For example, the merits of an empowerment-based approach with lots of free-flowing ideas and collaboration between staff of different positions, like our whole-office training, are generally an easy sell to a staff member from the United States. But someone from the Philippines, a country with a great respect for hierarchies and age-related positional power, would almost inevitably prefer to receive direct answers to learning challenges, from an experienced staff member or a trainer, for example. Likewise, staffers from Greece or Belgium, places with high levels of uncertainty avoidance, are quite comfortable in structured learning situations and fully expect the learning professional or subject-matter experts to have all the answers. People from countries with low uncertainty avoidance, such as Singapore and Argentina, are more comfortable with unstructured learning situations, open-ended questions, discussions, and coaching.

Some of UNDP's most successful programmes are positioned in the many-to-many category, including the Electronic Platform for Learning, the Learning Manager Network, and the Virtual Development Academy—all of which offer peer-learning experiences and promote self-directed learning.

[Insert Exhibit 3 about here]

Caption: Selected learning activities in UNDP

If learning from many to many can be combined with just a minimum of central control mechanisms and a constant flow of information among all the actors (informally and locally relevant), chances are that organizational learning will be nurtured.

For example, global collaboration would look something like this: The learning team in India talks with the team from China about how to implement the 5 percent recommendation as outlined in our learning framework. The teams from India and China hear about the experience of the learning manager in Vietnam and explore that. This is communicated on the network, giving the learning manager from Brazil a head start as she prepares to explain the new performance-appraisal system to staff in her office. Her presentation in Portuguese stands to benefit staff in Angola and Mozambique right away. The job of the Learning Resources Centre in this scenario is not to micromanage such exchanges but to facilitate discussion by, for example, offering assistance with the use of an online collaboration tool that would enhance the interaction.

In Conclusion

Has learning taken root in the UNDP? Of course, this question cannot be answered conclusively, although the trend is very positive. It is significant that staff development and performance is now one of four corporate goals, right next to the achievement of the UN's Millennium Development Goals. Accordingly, the UNDP's learning function is now focusing entirely on the organization's strategic needs and helping UNDP staff innovate, network, and update and monitor their skills. All non-essential logistical and administrative tasks related to supporting learning are now outsourced to a company that specializes in the transactional aspects of learning such as scheduling and administering training and learning programs.

As evidence that some of our more specific goals have been met, I'm happy to report that by the end of 2002, 53 percent of UNDP staff confirmed that they spent at least 5 percent of their work time on learning. A respectable 81 percent indicated they are developing their knowledge and skill levels (up from 73 percent in 2000). In addition, 62 percent agreed with the statement, "My supervisor encourages me to take advantage of learning opportunities," as compared with 50 percent in 2000.

There are very few shortcuts to creating a learning culture—it doesn't happen overnight and best practices cannot be easily replicated. It takes a lot of cunning, time, and guts to keep pushing ahead. I should reiterate that achieving significant change in the UNDP's learning culture took years. This may serve as a reminder to set realistic goals and manage what you can actually influence—namely, your own expectations—as you create a time frame for change in your organization.

We are now left with the confusing realization that there is no single best learning culture and, therefore, no one correct approach to creating one. But we also know that respect for local culture and the willingness to let go rather than to control all activities are indispensable drivers for the creation of learning culture in a global context. Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether you are dealing with individuals, a community of practice, a peer group, a network, or an entire organization. It is a matter of trusting the people you work with (individually and as groups of peers) and trusting the processes they will inevitably find to create learning. These people and those processes have to be at the heart of your strategy to create a learning culture. Respect for local knowledge can only be expressed through a decentralized management of groups of learners, and respect for learners can only be expressed through the empowerment of the individual and through massive support for informal learning.

A corporate learning function that becomes complacent or succumbs too easily to other organizational dynamics fails to do its job and shortchanges the organization in the process. Failure of the learning function to be assertive and creative (whether the result of low hierarchical position within the organization or the personality of its leader or some other set of circumstances) diminishes the potential for sustained, positive change throughout the organization.

Remembering the early days reminds me just how long this transformation takes and how it is a cultural journey rather than a geographical destination or a state of being. In other words, the goal is not to reach a point where someone can proclaim to have successfully created a learning organization but to foster and nurture individual and organizational learning in an ongoing, ever changing manner.

Creating a Learning Culture : Chapter 15 Exhibits

Exhibit 1: Where does learning occur?

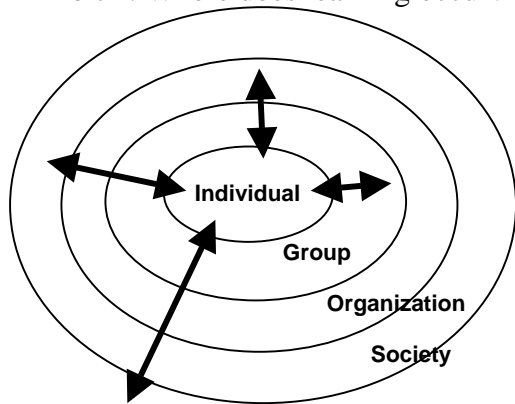


Exhibit 2: Learning Relationships: Providers and Receivers

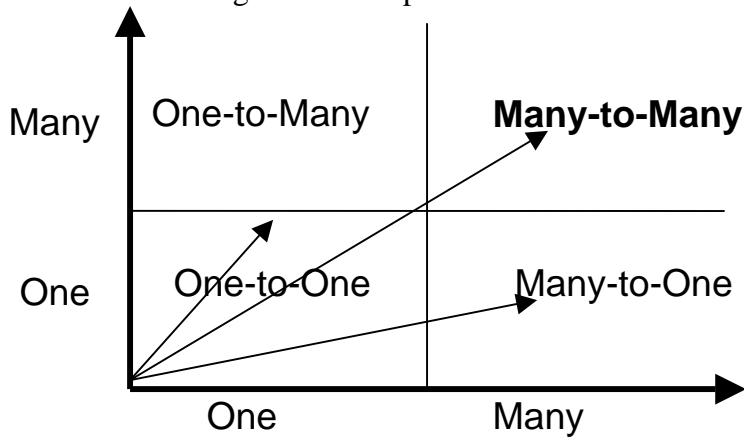
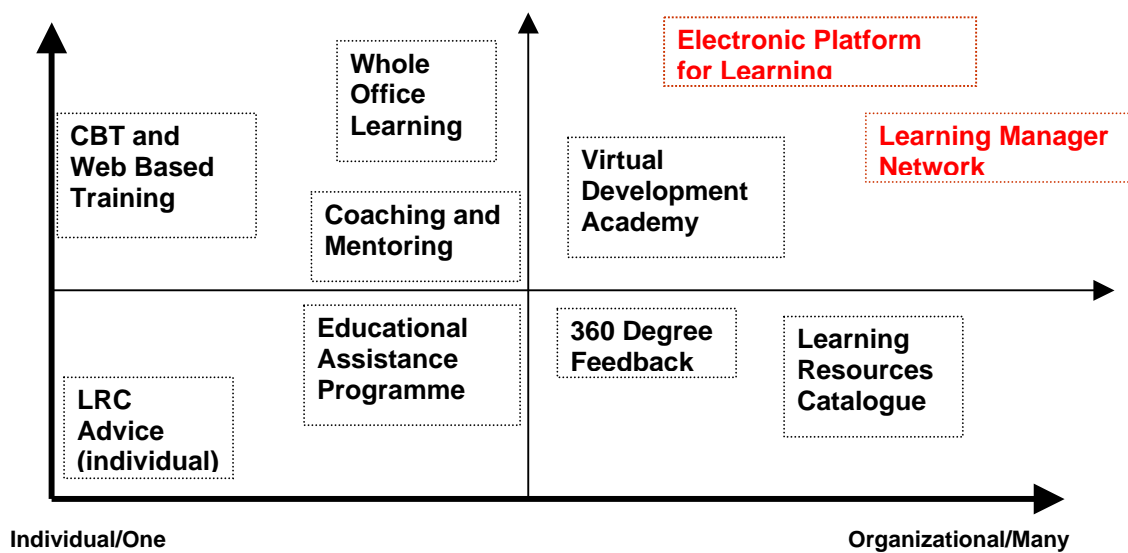


Exhibit 3: Learning in UNDP: selected activities



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