Organizational Learning and Obstacles to Learning

1. Background: Elevating Awareness

Cooperation systems like development projects, clusters or value chains are cooperation arrangements comprised of highly diverse organisations. The innovative capability of the system as a whole is largely determined by two factors: the willingness of the individual organisations to learn, and the learning-oriented interplay between the organisations.

Learning that is geared to innovation and change tends to elicit an initial response from the participating actors of uncertainty, reserve and resistance. While some see an opportunity in what is new, others reject it. Departing from a well-trodden path really does involve risks. This natural resistance at the level of individuals can be utilised productively by taking up criticism and objections and feeding them into the process.

At the level of the participating organisations and the cooperation system, the structure of these organisations, and their rules and procedures, already constitute obstacles to learning. Learning is constrained and innovative capability is weakened because there is a lack of horizontal communication and opportunity for change, nobody listens to criticism, there is a lack of clarity as to the intended direction of the innovation, or because there is a lack of trust between the organisational units.

Three structural barriers play a key role here:

Fragmented organisational structures
A fragmented division of functions not only leads to high transaction costs, but also constrains learning and fosters territorialism within the organisation. The members of the individual organisational units see themselves first and foremost as representatives of their own little kingdom. There is a lack of awareness of the interdependent, inter-departmental issues that can only be addressed at the level of the organisation or the cooperation system.

Competition instead of cooperation
In many organisations and cooperation systems, open or covert competition for scarce resources, knowledge or profile arises. Though competition can act as an incentive to improve performance, if left unregulated it can constrain cooperation between different partners. Where there are no overarching objectives, and no incentives to cooperation and the horizontal exchange of knowledge, learning processes are constrained.

Reactive basic attitude
Organisations and cooperation systems form among other things a pattern of behaviour that makes them sluggish. They adopt a wait and see approach, and change only when change becomes inevitable. The energy required for fundamental reorientation is consumed in patching up things that then go wrong. The lack of shared vision becomes a structural barrier to learning.

2. Methods

2.1 Checklist of questions for organisational learning

The characteristic features of a learning organisation can be identified both in individual organisations, and in the cooperation systems of projects for development. Applying some ideas from the theory of systems, these are:

Shared vision

The organisations within a cooperation system share values and goals that orient the learning process. The development of a positive vision of the future that is shared by the members of the system as a whole, and of guidelines pointing the way toward realising that vision, harness energy and form the basis for flexible and transparent harmonisation and coordination.

Questions:
• Do we in the cooperation system have a vision of the future with which
all members are familiar?
• Have we agreed on objectives that are sufficiently clear, and at the same
time allow scope for flexible action (corridors of objectives)?
• Do we regularly exchange ideas on the vision and the corridors of objectives?

Learning in operative groups and teams

It is not individuals but groups that form the elementary unit of learning in the cooperation system. Learning activities should therefore be offered above all to operative groups that perform the daily tasks of the cooperation system. This will ensure that learning remains user-oriented and needs-based, and that new forms of learning are utilised.

Questions:
• Do the learning activities offered (courses, workshops, inter-vision groups,
etc.) address the questions that interest operative groups and teams?
• Is there a unit or body at the level of the cooperation system that promotes and evaluates learning in operative groups?

Reflexive skills

The cooperation system is dependent on the ability of its members (organisations and individuals) to reflect critically on their work, learn from experience, and become aware of dissonances between their personal objectives and the objectives of the cooperation system, so that these dissonances can then be addressed. The feedback mechanisms within the cooperation system (monitoring and evaluation, inter-vision, etc.) take into account both explicit and implicit knowledge.

Questions:
• Do the cooperation system's rules and procedures support self-reflection

through horizontal exchange, flat hierarchies, and incentives for innovative thinking and action?
• Are the results from the feedback mechanisms taken seriously and implemented by the coordinating structures?

Culture of voice and questioning of mental models

Mental models are comprised of deep-seated assumptions and beliefs that are biographically acquired and consolidated through social interaction. Consequently, they consist of knowledge that is no longer questioned, along with the cultural orientations and action strategies that are derived from that knowledge. They steer people's thoughts, actions and feelings, and permeate the everyday reality of organisations. This includes for instance people's thinking on leadership and coordination, performance and performance measurement, incentives and rewards, and voice and exit. People's willingness to learn and learning within the cooperation system are promoted when this magnetic field of orientations is addressed in an appropriate and culturally sensitive fashion.
Questions:
• Are we willing and open enough to listen to criticism and take it seriously?
• Do we create opportunities to make mental models explicit and exchange
ideas on them in dialogue between peers?

2.2. Dimensions of organisational learning and path dependency

The economy of cooperation systems and networks tells us that as the number and density of cooperative relationships within a cooperation system increases the members tend to abandon their own personal preferences. This means they tread new paths, become more flexible, and open their minds to the new. The process of differentiation and harmonisation with the other members which then arises helps integrate the cooperation system.

Organisations and cooperation systems develop a certain pattern of organisational learning that in time becomes firmly established. In other words, they develop a certain attitude toward organisational learning. To understand this process of firm establishment it is helpful to apply the concept of path dependency. This means that a certain development is dependent on the path which it has thus far described. We can easily make sense of this by applying it to our own life history. Path dependency arises for instance as a result of where we come from, the profession we have joined, and the partner we have chosen. Compared to continuity, changing path entails an unusually high risk of failure, and involves costs.

By analogy with the above we can ask what it is about our organisation and our cooperation system that makes us path-dependent, and that gives us either a positive or a negative attitude toward learning and innovation. Several dimensions of the organisational learning process are identified

below. To rate our own position along these continua, for instance within the scope of a workshop, it is helpful to raise the following questions:

- Where do we stand on the path toward becoming a learning organisation? (rate from 1 to 4)
- Where do we have deficits and potential? (highest and lowest values)
- What everyday observations support this rating? (give everyday examples)
- What keeps us on this path? (add comments on path dependency).
- Changing track: In a subsequent discussion, strategic options can be formulated for switching to the path toward becoming a learning organisation.

Dimension 1: Division of labour and exclusion					
High degree of specialisation and territorial thinking, little contact between organisational units	1	2	3	4	Focus on core competencies, organisational units well networked both horizontally and vertically
Everyday observation: Path dependency:					

Dimension 2: Architecture of innovation					
Little innovation, only top-down, confused with a large number of workshops	1	2	3	4	Innovations initiated from various sides, clear priorities, all pull in the same direction
Everyday observation: Path dependency:					

Dimension 3: Culture of voice					
Voicing criticism is risky, critics make themselves unpopular, suggestions not taken seriously	1	2	3	4	Criticism is encouraged and rewarded, suggestions are taken up, change is considered positive
Everyday observation: Path dependency:					

Dimension 4: Workload					
High pressure of time and work, no time for informal contacts	1	2	3	4	Scope is provided, informal contacts are nurtured
Everyday observation: Path dependency:					

Dimension 5: Evaluation of experience					
Experiences are usually not evaluated, evaluations stay in the drawer	1	2	3	4	Results, impacts and processes are monitored, experiences are evaluated and scaled up
Everyday observation:					
Path dependency:					

Dimension 6: Mutual support					
Support is usually either not forthcoming or comes late, most of us are loners	1	2	3	4	Support is given readily, on a routine basis, and is the institutional rule
Everyday observation: Path dependency:					

Dimension 7: Transparency and trust					
Information unclear, mutual mistrust, information seen as a power resource	1	2	3	4	Active, open exchange of information, trust built through transparency
Everyday observation: Path dependency:					

2.3. Obstacles to learning

There are various, mutually reinforcing forms of obstacles to organisational learning (Albert O. Hirschman 1992), be it learning in groups, whole organisations, or entire cooperation systems.3 By looking at concrete examples we are able to say what kind of obstacle to learning we are dealing with.

(A) Authoritarian blocking: Don't waste scarce resources!

A learning process is halted or forbidden with reference to a superior or a hierarchically higher body, or on the basis of expert opinions. Learning then only takes place on the basis of top-down directives. Horizontal communication and free scope are frowned upon, and are considered inefficient. Experiential knowledge at the middle and upper levels is seen as dilettantish and unscientific. Control over information and knowledge is a key power resource.

Conclusion: The organisation blocks its own innovative capacity, as autocratic management protects itself by monopolising knowledge.

(B) Ideological blocking: Don't call it into question, articles of faith are sacrosanct!

A learning process is halted and blocked because it calls into question basic attitudes, beliefs and mental models. The voicing of criticism is looked upon as impolite, is ignored, is risky and threatens careers. Opinions that deviate from the norm are considered mistaken and misleading. Preference is given to minor cosmetic improvements, so that articles of faith are not shaken. What is not allowed simply cannot be. This kind of blocking usually goes hand in hand with a shift: the energy that would be needed for the learning process is used to patch up the existing dogmas.

Conclusion: The organisation does not learn from criticism, and yes-men and opportunists dominate the scene. The assumptions made by the organisation about itself become established stereotypes. Anyone daring to call them into question is quickly turned into a marginal figure, a clown. Sooner or later, ideological deviants leave the organisation.

(C) Regressive blocking: No experiments, everything's all right here!

A learning process is halted because the opinion prevails that everything here is all right, that change is unnecessary and dangerous, that everything is quite different here than it is elsewhere.
The will to experiment and try out new things is lacking. The risks of possible change are exaggerated. Experiments with new procedures and instruments are prevented, with reference to the unchangeable nature of the organisational, political, economic or cultural status quo. Energy is mobilised to defend this status quo.

Conclusion: The organisation adopts a rigid defensive position. Although many people secretly feel that something is going wrong, nothing is changed. The organisation buries its head in the sand and becomes oblivious to any other alternatives.

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