

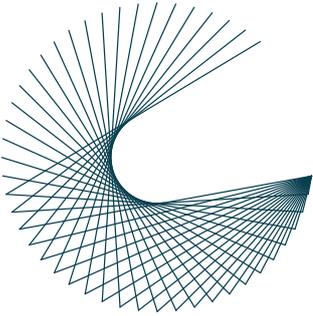
THE CURVE

HOW TO BUILD A LEARNING CULTURE

A guide for leaders of every level



Contributing organizations



THE CURVE

The Curve consortium was formed by M&C Saatchi World Services and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, and supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. We convene global and Nigeria based communities of practice, where we share best practice advice and practice-based evidence on responsive feedback. Please see the-curve.org for more information.



Adaptive Change Advisors (ACA) is the preeminent organization for mission-driven Adaptive Leadership development.

ACA seek to “democratize leadership” – making it possible for anyone, anywhere to improve their livelihood by more effectively mobilizing people in their organizations, communities and in their own lives. Combining an ethos for social change with innovative leadership approaches developed through work at Google, Facebook, Acumen and elsewhere, ACA has put the powerful framework, tools and techniques of Adaptive Leadership into the hands of hundreds of thousands of people worldwide. Please see <https://www.adaptivechangeadvisors.com> for more information. A particular thanks to our ACA colleagues, Eric Martin, Nqobizitha Ndlovu, Trevor Rees and Kazi Mghendi.

Thank you

This publication would not have been possible without the hard work of so many. We want to express our gratitude to our Nigerian Community of Practice for identifying this topic as an area for exploration. To all the individuals named below who joined our working group as co-authors and co-collaborators on this publication, we thank you for your commitment, enthusiasm, and dedication.

Our co-authors share what they have learned throughout this process.



Amina Aminu Dorayi
Country Director, Nigeria
Pathfinder International

"Learning should be a critical component of every organization, especially because both the vision and the people are dynamic. There is always an opportunity to scale up impact but only if we make learning a priority"



Babafunke Fagbemi
Executive Director Centre for Communication and Social Impact (CCSI)

"It is helpful to embrace some mindset boosters that facilitate learning: a humble disposition, a teachable heart and a tolerant spirit"



Emeka Emmaunel Okafor
Project Director, IntegratE, Society for Family Health

"Learning and adaptation is what keeps organization and individuals alive and relevant"



Ezinne Peters
Director - Technical, Health Systems Consult (HSCL)

"Learning culture, as the bedrock of programming, results in improved project designs, generates dynamic approaches to implementation, and boosts impact for stakeholders and beneficiaries"



Kehinde Osinowo
Director of Programs, Association for Reproductive & Family Health

"Cultivating a culture of learning, creation of leadership at all levels and use of responsive feedback mechanism are important ladders for organization's growth and development"



Lekan Ajijola
Deputy Director, Technical Operations John Hopkins Center for Communication Programs (CCP) The Challenge Initiative (TCI) Nigeria Hub

"Building an organizational learning culture through adaptive approaches and continuous learning is critical to achieving sustained impact in complex and fast-changing environments"



Modupe Oladunni Taiwo
Project Director, Save the Children, International

"Learning is a living organism which when adequately nurtured becomes beneficial in transforming lives and the world around us"



Toyin Olamide Akomolafe
Research M&E Advisor, Population Council, Nigeria

"Building a culture of organizational learning is in the process, it is iterative in nature and not an end in itself"



Victoria Agbara
TA Hub Incubation Manager, DAI Nigeria

"There's a quote by Einstein that goes, 'Once you stop learning, you start dying.' I think this also applies to organizations. A culture of learning is crucial if an organization plans to grow and thrive"

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“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.”

Alvin Toffler



Learning has never been more important. From responding to a global pandemic, to tackling climate change and addressing the deeper inequities, the challenges we currently face call for an ability to learn and adapt as never before.

Organizations working to bring about change are expected to reach their goals and meet challenges while also obtaining and analyzing huge amounts of information and data.

There are no easy recommendations for building a culture of learning so that organizations adapt and respond effectively. However, this guide sets out practices that can cultivate an organizational environment where adaptive learning can flourish.

Key acronyms

RFM - Responsive Feedback Mechanism

TOC - Theory of change

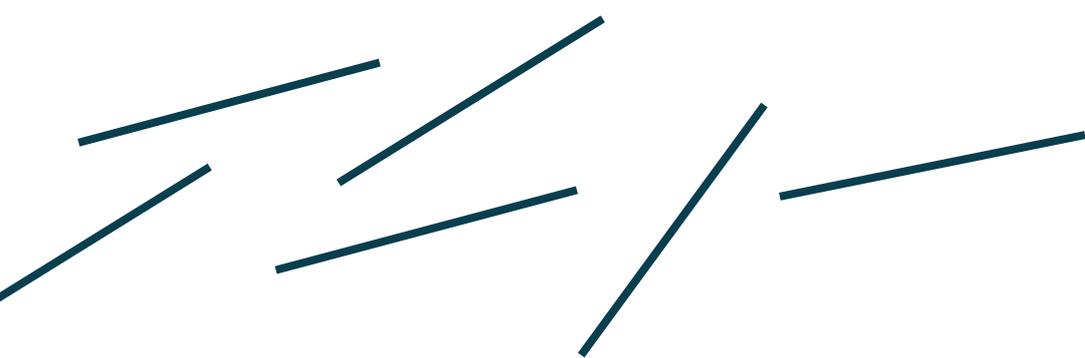
TA - Technical Assistance

OD - Organizational Development

M&E - Monitoring and Evaluation

MEL - Monitoring Evaluation & Learning

PDIA - Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation



Purpose and limitations of this guide

This guide provides practical information and suggestions for strengthening or creating a learning culture for responsive feedback.

The concept of organizational learning is far from new. It is deeply embedded in a broad, diverse, and dynamic body of work concerning learning, organizational change, and leadership development. Where appropriate, conceptual background is provided so that a reader who is just getting started has a direct route to the most meaningful and practical of these theories and practices. With this in mind, the guide offers a selection of models, tools, and practical advice for the reader to apply in their own work.

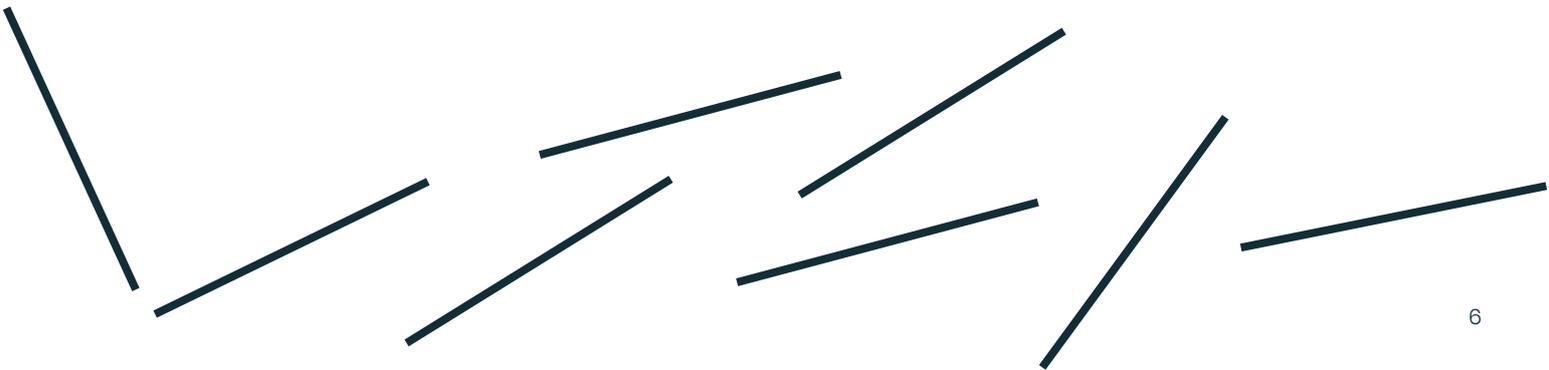
Reflected in this guide are deep experiences of practitioners working in what has been referred to as 'developing countries'. It is important to note that the challenge of strengthening a culture of learning is experienced in similar ways, whether an organization happens to be based in Lagos or London. Learning should be viewed through the prism of decolonization – acknowledging entrenched biases and established systems that can perpetuate rather than reduce inequity.

Who this guide is for

This guide will be useful for anybody interested in strengthening a learning culture as an individual, in programs, in a consortium or within their organization.

Most of the challenges and practical suggestions identified should also be easily recognizable to people working in the private sector, government, or civil society organizations.

The practitioners who have developed this resource happen to work primarily in sub-Saharan Africa, but the approaches and recommendations included should be relevant anywhere in the world.



How to use this guide

It is impossible to design a step-by-step guide that is guaranteed to deliver a learning culture. Every organization faces its own unique challenges of which learning is only one component.

Organizations and individuals approach learning in their own way depending on a multitude of factors, such as resource constraints, excessive hierarchy or paternalism, and the risk of making mistakes, which necessarily accompanies learning.

Adults often struggle with learning, sometimes due to the well-intentioned but misguided attempts to codify and standardize learning they experienced at school or in higher education. 'Unlearning' old ways of learning is one part of strengthening a culture of learning, and this guide includes some practical suggestions for approaching this.

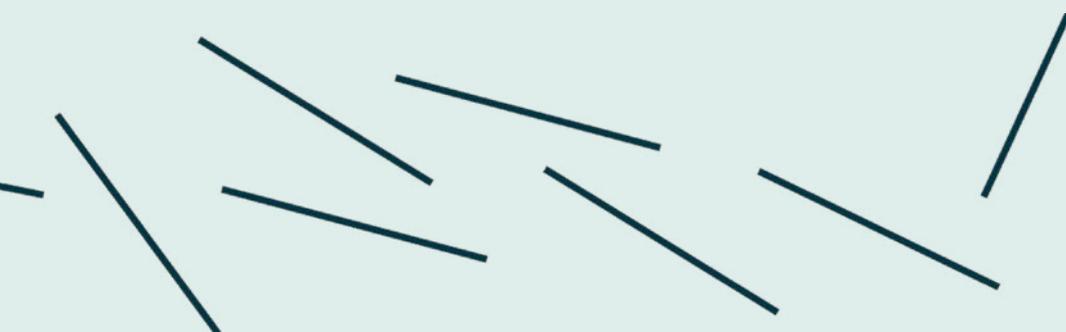
This guide offers a range of tools and resources which can be used during different stages of your learning journey. Some parts will be most useful at the start of a project, other parts will become relevant when you find yourself stuck with a learning challenge that people seem unwilling to address, and other parts will be more useful toward the end of a project.

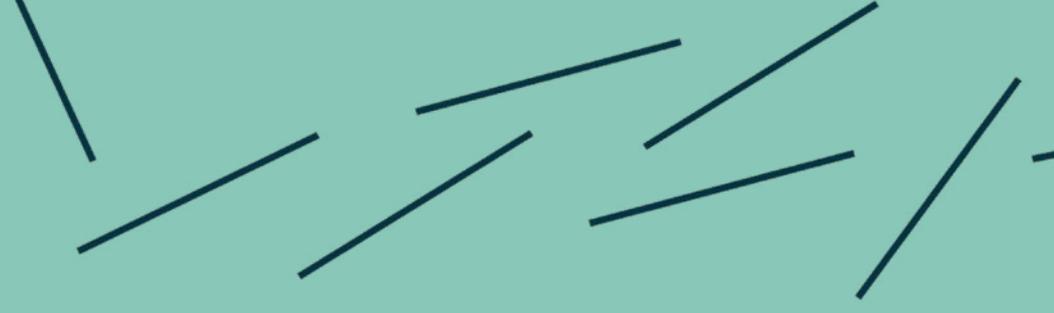
Learning and adaptation are complex and lengthy processes that this resource only begins to consider. If you wish to deepen your understanding, resources and further reading are identified in the appendix.

'Culture eats strategy for breakfast,' according to the world-renowned management consultant Peter Drucker. This is a recognition of the profound influence culture has on how any organization works to achieve its goals. When applied to the issue of learning, it is useful to remember Drucker's remarks. Even the best organizational learning strategies, tools, and systems are of limited value without a culture that supports and values learning, and all of the leadership challenges it brings.

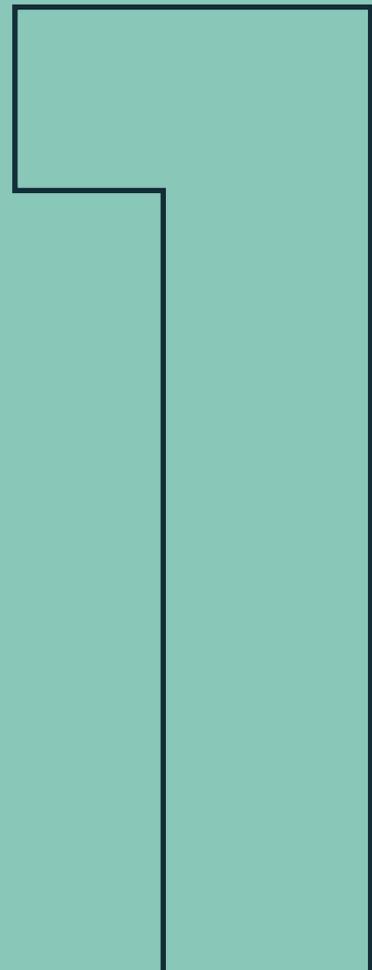
SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- There is no easy way to create an organizational culture of learning. But there are proven approaches that will help you progress towards this goal.
- While learning is a good thing, it can mean unwelcome change and disruption. Different stakeholders will view learning differently, meaning it is essential to understand and take account of these various perspectives.
- This guide builds upon the many parallels between learning and leadership. Creating a culture where people feel safe to ask difficult questions means the responsibility for learning is shared.
- Learning cannot be enforced, but you can create the conditions where people want to learn, because it connects with individuals' values and sense of purpose. As such, technical solutions have limited value in this context.
- Donors play an important role in shaping attitudes and behaviors - especially when change and adaptation is required - so don't wait for a fixed reporting deadline to share important learning, involve them early and make sure project aims are aligned.
- Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) activities won't automatically deliver learning. M&E is critically important in its own right, but often serves a function more focused on accountability and reporting, so be sure to build a learning function in early.
- Try to make learning second nature. This is more easily said than done and incorporates any number of practices to support this - from learning incentives and performance reviews to senior staff demonstrating what it means to embrace failure.





SECTION 1: **INTRODUCTION**



What is a culture of learning?

A learning culture is much more than merely an important business driver of performance, it is a key indicator of organizational health.

In the development sector, organizations working to design and implement complex projects, operating in environments with high uncertainty, need to continually learn and adapt.

Learning can happen at an individual, team or organizational level, formally or informally, or it may be directly related to a specific project.

Aims of creating a learning culture might include improving operations, strategic adjustment, strengthening capacity, deepening understanding, building trust, and advocacy.

While a learning culture is important in virtually every organization, it is particularly critical in those that seek to implement responsive feedback.

Over the last 30 years, a culture of learning has come to be seen as critical in the field of development. For some organizations, it is routinely supported by robust systems, structures, and processes to embed and institutionalize learning. For other organizations, learning matters most at the individual level, primarily concerning human development, growth, and job satisfaction.

Research consistently shows that learning opportunities have become the second most important factor in workplace happiness after the nature of the work itself.

How is a culture of learning important to responsive feedback?

Responsive feedback is the practice of ongoing learning through feedback, and evolving and adapting in response to those learnings. This is easier if a 'learning culture' is in place; information provided by responsive feedback only translates into meaningful action if the organizational culture is supportive and enabling.

Tangible practices by learning organizations include: regular pause & reflect sessions, an openness to asking hard questions, forums for honest discussion, an openness to ideas and innovation, a willingness to question received wisdom, an openness to ideas from outside the discipline, sharing examples of failure as well as success – all of which are conducive to successful iteration and responsive feedback.

Chief Executive Officers have even been known to refer to themselves as Chief Learning Officers. Jack Welch, the CEO of the multinational conglomerate GE, famously did this in the 1990s, and so too does Boris Buyalev, the CEO of Educate!, one of the most successful social enterprises in Africa today.



“Establishing and incubating an organization that curates and deploys technical assistance (TA) to match state TA demands, while at the same time curating and deploying technical assistance to states is a classic example of the expression ‘building the ship while sailing it.’ By incorporating Responsive Feedback Mechanisms (RFM) into the design from the outset, we have learnt as we built and have applied these learnings to improve our systems and processes. We intend to continue to use RFM to iterate and improve as the organization grows and evolves.”

– Victoria Agbara



The link between a culture of learning and responsive feedback: an example from the RASuDiN project in Nigeria

By Kehinde Osinowo

The Resilient and Accelerated Scale-Up of DMPA-SC and Self-injection in Nigeria (RASuDiN) project is being implemented by the Association for Reproductive and Family Health (ARFH) and Centre for Communication and Social Impact (CCSI) in ten Nigerian states. It is working towards changing the low modern contraceptive prevalence in Nigeria.

The project applies Responsive Feedback (RF) as a means of refining and iterating program activities as well as exploring assumptions created during proposal writing. The ultimate goal of this is to improve the quality and scale-up of self-injectable contraceptives as a means of effective family planning, in order to drive higher contraceptive rates across the country.

To achieve responsive feedback, the RASuDiN project makes use of learning in the following ways:

1. Use of participatory learning through stakeholder engagement including health care providers and local government supervisors. Together with these stakeholders, the program actively explores problems – such as bottlenecks in implementation – and co-create problem solving strategies.
2. Adapting tools for learning to be shared with government stakeholders and policy makers to invite them into the learning culture
3. Debriefing with policymakers on the key learnings from the stakeholders’ engagement to encourage reflection and learning policymakers for an adaptive change.

When problems are identified, the RASuDiN team proactively engage the policymakers, share their report findings and review the problems together. This helps empower policymakers and the program team to work together to identify an approach solution. It also encourages local stakeholders, such as state leaders and government representatives, to be part of the learning and ensure that the basics of adaptive responsive feedback mechanisms are included in this process.

Learning as leadership

The practice of learning and the practice of leadership are closely related. Although many models and definitions of leadership exist, learning is recognized as an essential ability for anybody who wants to exercise leadership.

This guide draws on a model of leadership known as adaptive leadership. It is well suited to the complex challenges of international development, the demands of responsive feedback, and the intricacies of power dynamics inherent in a learning environment.

Adaptive leadership is a framework and set of tools and techniques to work with others to tackle challenges that have no known or easy answers. In other words, challenges that require adaptation and learning, or adaptive learning.

The adaptive leadership framework has origins from Harvard University and has been developed and refined through practical application over many years by organizations such as [Adaptive Change Advisors](#). Its application ranges in fields from public health to social entrepreneurship, sustainability, business, and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

By viewing learning and leadership as two sides of the same coin, it is possible to make use of the practical tools and approaches of adaptive leadership to mobilize people to 'learn their way through problems'.

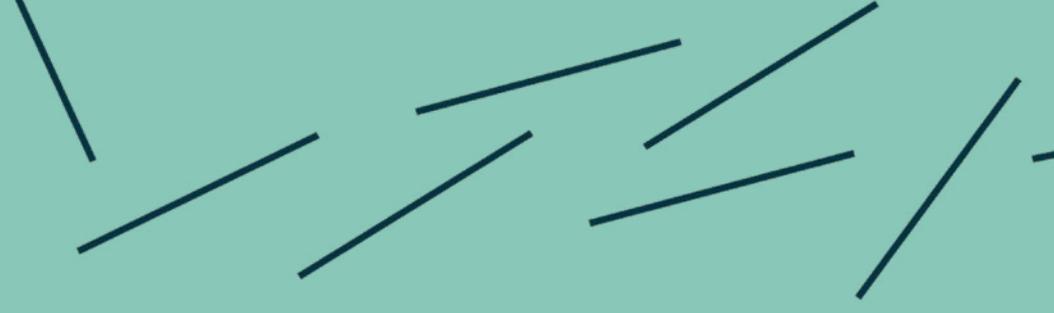
Practitioners of adaptive learning effectively integrate data from responsive feedback, finding solutions together with other stakeholders. In this framework, authoritative expertise or traditional hub-and-spoke ways of operating, while still relevant, are relegated to a more proper and realistic role in strengthening a learning culture.

In **Section Two** of this guide, we provide an introduction to one helpful aspect of adaptive leadership, drawing a distinction between adaptive learning and technical learning.

Section Three outlines three common challenges often encountered when adopting a learning culture and suggests ways that these might be addressed.

In **Section Four**, we provide a practical approach from the adaptive leadership framework that can be applied to strengthen a culture of organizational learning.

This document is not a handbook for adaptive leadership, but you will find useful resources and further reading in the Annex. What often goes by the name of adaptive learning or adaptive management in the development sector, in fact, bears no resemblance to adaptive leadership. In many cases, it actually runs afoul of the key principles of adaptive leadership.



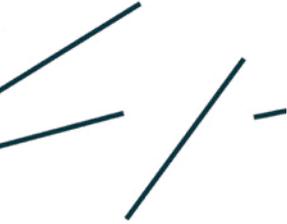
SECTION 2:

WHAT DOES A 'CULTURE OF LEARNING' LOOK LIKE?



SECTION TWO: WHAT DOES A 'CULTURE OF LEARNING' LOOK LIKE?

There are several ways to identify a culture of learning within an organization. This section outlines the qualities and practices of learning organizations, which can be applied to your team.



“[Learning is] the social process by which we develop knowledge, skills, insights, beliefs, values, attitudes, habits, feelings, wisdom, shared understanding and self-awareness.”

—Britton, 2005.

Learning encompasses pretty much every aspect of human life. But we need a more specific understanding of what learning is for responsive feedback. It is extraordinarily helpful—necessary even—to distinguish between adaptive learning and technical learning.

Adaptive learning versus technical learning

Learning is key to the way that we solve problems. But different types of problems require different approaches to learning. Adaptive problems are difficult to solve and may be difficult to even identify, and therefore require learning. In short, if you can Google the answer, it probably involves technical learning. If not, there are likely to be adaptive aspects to the problem.

Technical learning

Technical learning is required in situations where the problem is clear and the solution, too, is well known, generally accepted and available. It often takes the form of bringing authoritative expertise, best practices, or protocols into an organization.

The knowledge and resources needed to apply technical learning often reside with experts or people in authority. Since the problem and solution can be anticipated well in advance, technical learning can be planned for, and implementation prepared in advance.

Technical approach to strengthening learning culture

By Modupe Taiwo

Incentivizing learning is central to fostering and sustaining the culture of learning within the organization.

This could include integrating the learning goals in the performance framework for staff and management, with effective accountability and reward mechanisms.

Certificates, badges and other forms of workplace recognition can be adopted to promote motivation and healthy competition among staff. Employees might accumulate points for participating in learning and claim an award at the end of the year.

Learning should be part of the fundamental culture of the organization, encouraging feedback from staff to inspire ownership and participation in the improvement of the organization and approaches.

Learning opportunities should be inclusive and participation should be encouraged from every part of the organization. Leadership support for learning needs to be consistent to sustain the learning momentum.



SECTION TWO: WHAT DOES A 'CULTURE OF LEARNING' LOOK LIKE?

Adaptive learning

Adaptive learning goes hand-in-hand with technical learning, but it is a different kind of learning.

Adaptive learning is required in situations where there are no known or easy answers. Adaptive problems are difficult to solve and sometimes, difficult to even identify.

Learning strategies and models that are best suited to support responsive feedback are those which develop adaptive learning.

Adaptive learning refers to the ability to harvest deep lessons that are born from experience and then use them constructively, especially when the learning and outcomes cannot be fully defined in advance.

An adaptive learning culture enables, encourages, values and rewards learning.

It also leverages the learning of all key stakeholders, both individual employees and the wider ecosystem of development partners and donors, to drive consequential change, often in the face of the status quo.

Being able to successfully engage in both adaptive and technical learning is key to setting your organization up for success in implementing responsive feedback.

If you have attempted to create a culture of learning and it is still not working, this is often the first sign that adaptive learning is needed or has been avoided (see Section Four, work avoidance).



Using an adaptive approach to strengthen learning culture

By Lekan Ajjola

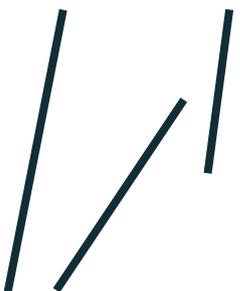
While there is often a focus on the technical aspect of a project, it is just as important to work a learning component into plans and to include a Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL) framework from the outset.

Make it clear how specific interventions and learning approaches can aid the culture of learning in the organization.

Beyond having an MEL framework, interventions that can improve organization learning culture include:

1. A learning agenda based on the organization's theory of change and emerging themes from program implementation
2. Capacity strengthening or coaching on knowledge management, including capturing and documentation of learnings during implementation
3. Introduction of a learning section into routine program reports
4. Regular team pause and reflect exercises (monthly or quarterly) exploring relevant program areas or topics of interest to articulate key learnings and recommendations for program improvement.

SECTION TWO: WHAT DOES A 'CULTURE OF LEARNING' LOOK LIKE?



People often associate learning with a form of teaching or training. But while learning can be structured, it can also be thought of as what happens when we try something new: make a mistake and, as a result, do it better the next time; or learn to never do it again. A learning culture is the sum of these many learning moments, sometimes over decades or even centuries.

Five qualities of adaptive learning organizations

What makes some organizations better equipped for adaptive learning than others? While every organization is different, there are five key characteristics.

1. Responsibility for learning is shared

People have a wider sense of responsibility beyond their own individual roles and will comment on issues outside their own portfolio, working across boundaries.

2. Elephants in the room are named

In highly adaptive, learning organizations, no issue is off-limits. Challenge is expected and people in authority create a safe 'holding environment' for discussion.

3. Independent judgement is expected

Individuals within an organization do not only rely on the director or senior authorities to always have the answers.

4. Leadership capacity is developed

People within the organization are valued and supported to learn where they can make their greatest contribution and what must happen to maximize their potential.

5. Reflection and continuous learning are institutionalized

Continuous learning comprises many factors including experimentation, debriefing failure for lessons, frequent pause and reflect sessions or retreats, and open communication.

[Adapted from The Practice of Adaptive Leadership]

SECTION TWO: WHAT DOES A 'CULTURE OF LEARNING' LOOK LIKE?

[Adapted from The Practice of Adaptive Leadership]

TAKE THE QUIZ...HOW ADAPTIVE IS YOUR ORGANIZATION?		
Adaptive learning criteria	Description	Rating 1=low and 10=high
Responsibility is shared	To what extent do people across divisions or individual groups place a top priority on learning?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Elephants in the room are named	How long does it take for conversations to get from inside peoples' heads to the 'water cooler conversations' and then to meeting rooms?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	How quickly are crises identified and bad news discussed?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	Are there structures, incentives, and support for speaking the unspeakable?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Independent judgement is valued	To what extent are people valued for their own judgment rather than their capacity to guess the boss' preferences?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	When someone takes a reasonable risk in service of learning and it doesn't work out, to what extent is that seen as a learning opportunity rather than a personal failure?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Leadership capacity is developed	To what extent do people have clarity about their potential for growth and advancement?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	Do they have an agreed-upon plan for how they are going to reach their potential?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	To what extent are senior managers expected to identify and mentor their successors?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Reflection and continuous learning are institutionalized	Is there dedicated time for individual and collective reflection and learning from experience?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
	To what extent is time, space, and other resources allocated to get diverse perspectives on how work could be done better?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

SECTION TWO: WHAT DOES A 'CULTURE OF LEARNING' LOOK LIKE?

The average rating for each of the above criteria varies across teams and organizations. Generally, if you rate yourself less than a six on any of them, there is significant room for improvement.

The criteria identified above are intended to be illustrative rather than definitive. Every organization will have its own context for 'naming the elephants in the room,' but they will share underlying characteristics, sometimes identified as 'psychological safety', in other words the conditions where people feel able to speak up without fear of being punished or humiliated. Links to resources on strengthening psychological safety are available in the Annex.

Based on our research and experience, as well as conversations with members of the working group, the first—and often biggest—challenge faced by people who seek to strengthen a culture of learning is developing shared responsibility for learning.

In Section Four of this document, we provide practical step-by-step guidance for doing this. While it is beyond the scope of this document to cover all five criteria above, you can check out the resources in the Annex for further guidance on ways to improve your ability to engage in adaptive learning and adaptive change.

What does it mean to “strengthen” a culture of learning?

A learning culture recognizes the true gifts that are the skills, talents and time of each and every human being.

As people, we long for growth and learning in most aspects of our lives. The lack of real opportunities to continually grow as a person at work, and to apply talents and gifts in ways that are meaningful, sits at the core of much organizational dysfunction.

This is one reason that a central challenge of leadership is to strengthen a culture of learning. Without it, organizations fail to adapt, become irrelevant and die.

Learning happens in many places and at different levels within and even outside of an organization.

These different levels might mean an individual, a team or entire organization, or a system, such as a community, or field as a whole.

SECTION TWO: WHAT DOES A 'CULTURE OF LEARNING' LOOK LIKE?

Learning is often situated within an organizational context, but that is not a prerequisite.

As learning accumulates it tends to become embedded in organizational folklore, which is one element of culture. Consider, for example, the stories told about the “last person” who took a risk and got fired.

It can also become embedded in values statements and norms, particularly around experimentation and risk-taking, as well as systems and processes for project design and decision-making, resource allocations, and organizational hierarchy and structure.

All of these things tend to get lumped together and labelled with one word: culture.

Viewed in this way it is possible to see that what we call ‘culture’ is actually an outcome, the result of many experiences and learning moments—including those by people who may no longer even be involved with the organization.

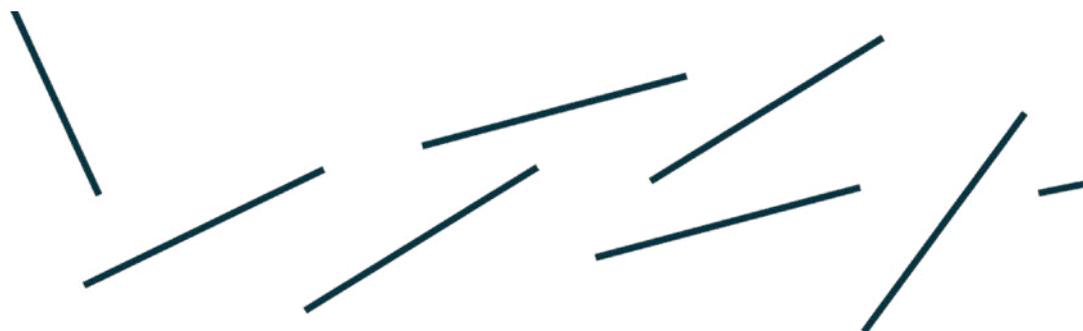
Culture can be easily (although unhelpfully) summed up as, “This is how things are done around here.”

Changing a culture to make it more about learning, for example, requires the ability to diagnose the conditions, factors and forces at work within a system or an organization.

More specifically, you need to determine more clearly the kind of learning that might be needed, and any underlying features that make learning difficult to achieve. It then requires the ability to mobilize the organization or system.

Strengthening a culture of learning, therefore, nearly always requires two kinds of activities:

1. Creating change at the practical and almost mundane level of everyday decision-making
2. Challenging the status quo, particularly old systems of authoritative expertise



SECTION TWO: WHAT DOES A 'CULTURE OF LEARNING' LOOK LIKE?

No individual can lead change or develop a culture of learning alone. Mobilizing others requires an ability to recognize well-intended but misguided tactics for learning, to reframe these default perspectives, and to offer the possibility for real learning and change.

At an organizational level this means thinking and acting politically, working with opponents as well as allies, and managing conflict in a way that maintains focus on the work, while deftly navigating organizational structures, business models, and behavioral norms.

Learning as leadership: two sides of the same coin

Change of any kind is hard, and changing an organizational culture is no exception.

It is often said that culture starts at the top, and while this isn't always true, we do look to people in authority to create culture, protect culture and enforce change when culture is no longer fit for purpose.

We may then blame people in authority when they do not, or cannot, meet these expectations. As a result, we all need to better understand our relationship to people in authority and power, and how leadership gets exercised to create culture and change.

Adaptive leadership draws a distinction between leadership and authority. In short, leadership involves mobilizing people to engage in adaptive learning (often under conditions of uncertainty and conflict), while authority involves facilitating technical learning.

Leadership and learning share many qualities; both are difficult to define, subjective and context specific. They are generally seen to be positive, important and desirable aspirations, but both should be viewed as a behavior or process, not as a role or an outcome.

Leadership and learning both require shared responsibility at all levels of an organization, not just within positions of seniority.

Developing a culture of learning means creating an environment where people recognize and engage with the opportunities for learning as they happen.

Section Four of this document, which provides a practical approach to developing shared responsibility for learning, can also be applied to creating shared leadership.

'Learning leads to organizational improvement when everyone is involved and people at all levels own the learning culture. It is easier to incorporate best practices across organizational units when learning is embedded through a collective process. Learning questions should also speak to the organizational example, as organizations develop regular strategic plans to serve a period of time, all employees should be given an opportunity to contribute to identifying learning points and share their ideas of best practices. This way, they will be motivated to be part of the improvement process.'

— Amina Dorayi



SECTION TWO: WHAT DOES A 'CULTURE OF LEARNING' LOOK LIKE?

The learning organization: embracing failure

Those who seek to strengthen a learning culture can be inaccurately labelled as troublemakers, overly negative, or “bringing problems instead of solutions”.

Being seen to challenge authority might damage an individual's career prospects. Organizations may have a 'shoot the messenger' culture, especially where speaking about failure is discouraged.

But developing a culture where failure is embraced is key to establishing real and lasting change.

Implementing responsive feedback requires a more 'democratized' form of leadership that listens to all members of the team, however junior, knows how to facilitate new cultural practices of learning and is able to identify and let go of old practices.

The term 'learning organization' first popularized by Peter Senge can be used to describe an organization that continuously adapts and develops through experience to enhance organizational capability.

Organizational learning happens when small groups of people come together to share, discuss and analyze information—potentially around specific projects or activities—and recast their work to be more aligned with recent learning and future learning goals.

Organizational learning is more than the cumulative result of individual learning. It involves developing systems and procedures that enable you to test approaches, and to capture, share and respond to joint experiences.

Boost - Learning and adaptation for immunization

A program of the Sabin Vaccine Institute, Boost is a global community that enables immunization professionals to connect with peers and experts, learn skills that strengthen capacity, advance careers and lead programs in challenging contexts.

A learning culture is central to the approach taken by Boost and this can be seen in a number of ways:

Be intentional about listening and learning

Immunization professionals are at the center of Boost's work and therefore finding ways to engage and listen to the perspectives of this community is critical to program design and approach. Boost intentionally gives community members opportunities to contribute their views, and acts upon these perspectives.

Differentiate between technical and adaptive challenges

Boost recognizes the challenge of supporting professionals to improve immunization program performance is both technical and adaptive, in that it is complex, with no clearly identifiable solution. This means the Boost team is constantly looking for ways to learn more about and understand problems, rather than just designing and deploying 'solutions'.

Build capacity wherever it is needed

Adaptive capacity is a core foundation for Boost, with online courses and other opportunities offered to the community of immunization professionals. At the same time, strengthening adaptive leadership and learning at all levels within the Boost team and wider organization, has been vitally important to create a strong holding environment for learning.

Work systemically

The work of Boost to support immunization professionals exists within a wider system that includes partners, governments and donors. Working to address adaptive challenges means taking account of the systemic nature of the work. In response to this, Boost plays a role as convenor and connector, creating opportunities for shared learning with partners and other stakeholders.



Embracing Failure as a form of learning

By Babafunke Fagbemi

1. Set realistic expectations by identifying the tolerance for failure

Creating a culture of organizational learning depends on how stakeholders feel about the tasks they are given. Leaders may have an ambitious vision, but unrealistic targets. Handing over intimidating targets provides undue pressure to perform and gives the impression there is no room for mistakes. Set realistic expectations remembering that the best vision is a shared vision. Tasks should be jointly agreed upon with room to express concerns. Stakeholders should know that management understands that everything might not go according to plan and failure or making mistakes is an important part of a learning journey.

2. Provide tools and guidelines to do the job well - and paint scenarios of what could go wrong

Make adequate preparations for tools that might be needed for successful task execution. The most important tool could also be the mindset of staff. Provide adequate information to set the right context. Do not make assumptions but rather provide platforms for seeking clarification. Have well documented case studies of what has gone wrong before and how the situation was addressed (if it was). Be intentional about developing a compendium/catalogue of challenging scenarios and what the response was. The main message should be it is okay if things go wrong.

3. Recognize that new hires will be less comfortable with failure, and try to build their confidence

Staff should be hired with organizational learning principles in mind. Set up a system of mentorship focused on improving technical delivery, but also touches on staff perception and mindset. Mentors should share examples of mistakes they have made, explaining the task, what went wrong, how it made them feel, what they learned and the value of this experience.

4. Embrace failure rather than stigmatize it

Let everyone know why it is important to embrace failure. A popular adage says "experience is the best teacher". It is important to communicate that nobody is above mistakes and there is no shame in taking a wrong turn. The organization should state clearly that shaming in the event of failure is not tolerated. When someone is bold enough to share their failure journey, recognize it as an act of courage and humility and a real asset for leadership. Process the information so that others can identify opportunities for learning.

5. Provide opportunities to share and document failures

Set up informal sessions to provide the opportunity for failure information exchange, perhaps during regular feedback mechanisms or conferences. It might be helpful to set some ground rules, such as individuals speaking within allotted times and opportunities for reflection exchange and discussions after each shared experience.

6. Keep it real, so that failure and learning result in action

While fully discouraging blaming or shaming, it is important to develop clear next steps after a failure. Sometimes urgent intervention will be needed. During this intervention process, it will be important to the culture of organizational learning to continue to document and share personal reflections. It will be necessary to strike the delicate balance of failure and action so that the situation is stripped of unnecessary sensationalism and the goal of learning is actually achieved.

SECTION TWO: WHAT DOES A 'CULTURE OF LEARNING' LOOK LIKE?

The importance of diversity: involving stakeholders in learning

As Babafunke suggests (above), strengthening an organizational culture of learning requires engaging a diverse set of stakeholders and factions to make progress. Diversity is vitally important to any organization's ability to learn and adapt.

It goes without saying that restricting learning to a small number senior management would be extremely bad practice resulting in negative impacts. Organizations must consider both 'who' is learning, and 'how' that learning is being generated.

Engaging a diverse set of stakeholders greatly enriches learning. However, it often complicates the learning process. Setting the pace and content of the learning agenda therefore, requires careful consideration and planning.

Power dynamics and complicated relationships between partners, stakeholders or community members must be properly taken into account. The Curve has a dedicated resource that advises on how best to engage stakeholders here:

<https://the-curve.org/resources>

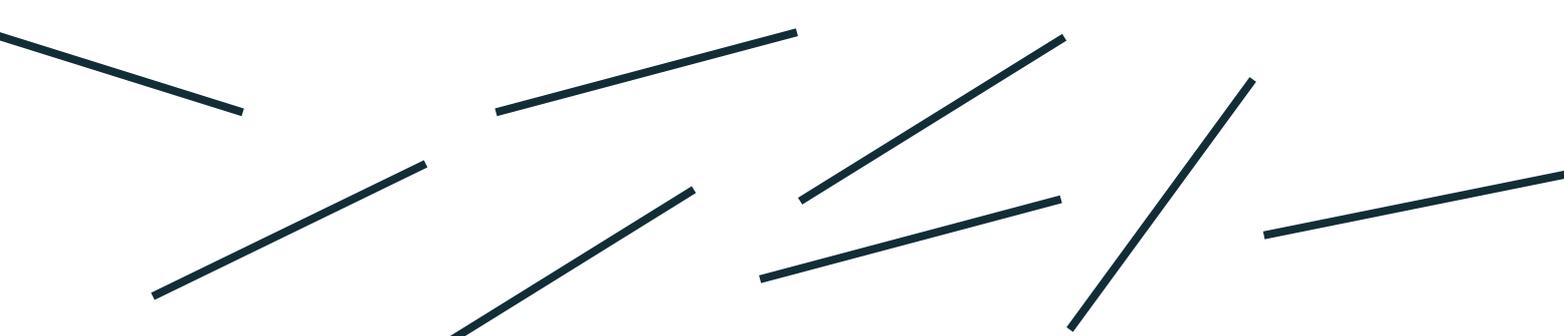
Identifying key stakeholders

Think about a particular learning project you want to pursue, brainstorm and list the key stakeholders who are involved in these projects. These include people or groups who:

- have a point of view on or a stake in the learning challenge
- may or may not have a point of view but share strong ties to the people involved
- possess formal or informal power in the system
- are affected by the change
- have something to lose if they are to truly learn and act on those learnings

Make of note of the stakeholders you've identified. We'll do a deeper dive on them in Section Four.

Develop an engagement strategy with each of these stakeholders using the 'actions' suggested by the learning continuum below.



SECTION TWO: WHAT DOES A 'CULTURE OF LEARNING' LOOK LIKE?

Stakeholder learning engagement continuum

Strengthening a culture of learning requires engaging stakeholders in both adaptive learning and technical learning. Both types of learning require different approaches to engaging stakeholders. The chart below outlines the types of engagement approaches and the types of learning required for each. Think of it as a spectrum of engagement. On one end of the continuum is simply informing or “educating” people on known technical solutions. At the other end is mutual accountability for action and learning.

To determine what stakeholder engagement approach you should use, ask yourself honestly how confident you are in your understanding of both the problem and the solution(s) for a particular challenge you're facing. If you have full confidence in your understanding, then an Inform or Consult engagement approach is likely sufficient. This may be the case, for example, for the challenge of creating vaccine infrastructure or distributing bednets. The learning in this case simply involves “educating” people on the technical aspects of the solution, e.g. proper use of bednets. On the other hand, if you are unsure about the solution or the problem – for example, the challenge of addressing vaccine inequity – then a Collaborative or Empower engagement approach will provide richer learning. It'll also deepen stakeholder commitment and ownership, including your own, to sustain the solutions over time.

While adaptive learning produces the most robust and sustainable learning outcomes, it need not always be desirable or feasible. Take care, however... even seemingly technical solutions, such as bed-nets, reveal upon careful inspection missed opportunities for adaptive learning. Anyone who has seen firsthand fishing equipment tailored from unused bed-nets knows what we're talking about.

SECTION TWO: WHAT DOES A ‘CULTURE OF LEARNING’ LOOK LIKE?

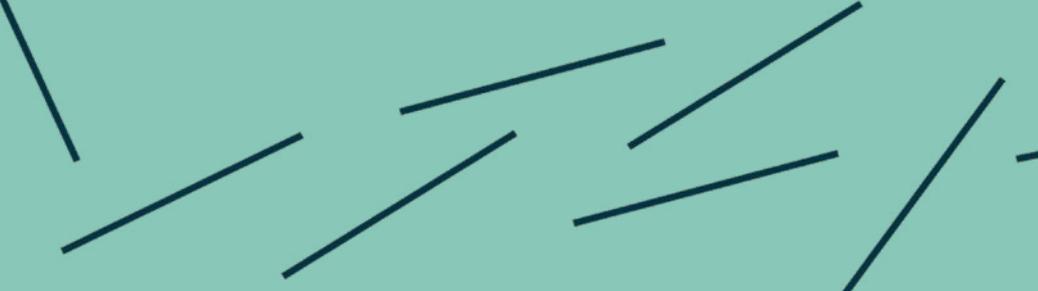
Technical Learning

Adaptive Learning



Engagement Approach	Confidence in solution(s)		Confidence in understanding of the problem or context		Mutual Accountability
	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Learning Required	Learning is limited; resides primarily with stakeholders to understand solutions pre-determined by you	Learning is limited; resides primarily with you as you acquire feedback on possible solutions, alternatives, analyses or decisions	Learning is significant; resides with both you and stakeholders to ensure that their goals, concerns and alternatives are considered at the outset	Learning is significant; resides with both you and stakeholders as you figure out how to make key decisions together, including resource allocation	Learning is significant; resides with both you and stakeholders as develop mechanisms to hold each other accountable for action and learning
Your promise to stakeholders	<i>“We will keep you informed of our work”</i>	<i>“We will listen to your input as we make decisions”</i>	<i>“Your priorities will be reflected in our work and we will let your input influenced our decisions and resource allocation”</i>	<i>“Together, we will partner in implementing decisions and include your ideas and considerations throughout the process”</i>	<i>“The decisions that you make will drive the direction of our work”</i>
Sample Learning Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publishing findings and reports • Holding information meetings with others • Sending out a newsletter • Incorporating into regular reporting templates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soliciting anonymous feedback • Focus groups • Peer review • Making timely course corrections based on data and information provided by responsive feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening tours • Hosting a community forum or meeting • Engaging others strategically based on stakeholder mapping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making strategic investments based on stakeholder feedback • Joint funding mechanisms • Aligning “business” drivers of performance • Incentivizing learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking others to set expectations • Creating an advisory committee with “teeth” to hold people accountable • Providing unrestricted, multi-year funding • Aligning organizational health indicators • Truly celebrate and embrace failure • Center learning on human development, growth, and job satisfaction, and workplace happiness

Adapted from the International Association for Public Participation



SECTION 3:
CHALLENGES IN
ACHIEVING A
LEARNING CULTURE



3

SECTION THREE: CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING A LEARNING CULTURE

Many organizations face similar challenges and obstacles in strengthening a culture of learning. Here we describe three commonly encountered challenges and suggest ways these might be addressed drawing on the practice of adaptive leadership.

Challenge 1 – Learning not seen as a shared priority: work avoidance

Learning is generally seen as valuable and important, but it is rarely treated as a priority. It is important to recognize that learning can be deprioritized for legitimate reasons, including the usual constraints on time and attention.

Learning can be disruptive, both in terms of organizational activity and also challenging established mindsets and mental models, so capturing and keeping people's attention can be a challenge.

'Work avoidance' is a term from adaptive leadership used to describe behaviors and activities that seem legitimate, and may even be "the way things are done around here," but actually impedes learning.

'Work avoidance' either distracts attention from the learning process, or displaces responsibility for learning onto the wrong people.

Watch for work avoidance as you work to mobilize others in learning, recognize the potential for disruption and pace your efforts accordingly.

Examples of work avoidance

1. Displaced responsibility

- **Shoot the messenger:** Marginalizing the person who raises the need for learning
- **Delegate the adaptive work:** To consultants, committees, task forces, or a learning officer
- **Attack authority:** Compelling them to provide solutions that they cannot reasonably enforce
- **Scapegoat:** Blaming others who aren't in the room.

2. Divert Attention

- Launching only technical fixes, thereby wasting time and resources
- Defining the problem to fit your own competence, thereby precluding any need to learn
- Creating a proxy fight, such as a personal or personality conflict, thereby avoiding the real issue or learning from failure
- Denying the need for learning, thereby leaving it unaddressed and under-resourced

Understanding work avoidance and being able to point out when people engage in these behaviors is important when managing the level of disruption an organization experiences as a learning culture grows.

Challenge 2 – Understanding donors and learning culture

The wider operating environment, political, economic, and social factors all impact on organizational culture. Among these are the pressure and expectations that come from donors.

Donors shape attitudes and practices around learning within the organizations that they fund, consciously or unconsciously.

Organizations may feel a tension between accountability and learning, with the latter seen as an optional and potentially risky undertaking, especially if it begins to surface instances of failure or unintended consequences.

If organizations feel reluctant to discuss and examine what isn't working because of concerns about loss of funding, then this inhibits the all-important ability to 'embrace failure', as described above.

Donor attitudes towards learning vary widely and are determined by many different factors, including increased recognition of the need for adaptive approaches and the value of responsive feedback.

Donor perspective

“As funders, we play a critical role in setting the tone and are responsible for creating an operating environment that supports or stifles learning. It's not just about the grantees as they operate in a wider system and we have to recognize the power dynamics at play,”

– Head of Learning at UK-based Charitable Foundation

Tips for creating a learning culture that involves donors

1. All funders are different and will have diverse approaches and preferred ways of working. The way that a foundation operates is likely to be completely different to that of an institutional donor so take time to learn about your donors' particular preferences. Be prepared to acknowledge that maybe a certain donor is not for you
2. When communicating learning, be proactive, not reactive. Initiate dialogue early and share what is emerging, don't wait until you have a report due to provide important information. The earlier you have these conversations the better, so you can develop a trust-based relationship together
3. Share information in a propositional manner. Grantees have the best understanding of context and they are also best placed to identify interesting learning questions. If you are suggesting reallocating budget lines, shifting focus or making other adaptations be clear about what you're proposing. Timeliness and honesty are key
4. Own the narrative of what you are trying to achieve. Don't over promise and do manage expectations appropriately. There can be a temptation to withhold information from donors, but this can contribute to and reinforce a lack of understanding
5. Frame opportunities for learning. Donors can help implementing partners understand what they are looking for and provide clear information about the learning opportunities they will be supportive of exploring further

Challenge 3 – Learning in consortia

Donor-funded programs delivered through a consortium-based approach have increased in recent years and this trend seems set to continue.

Consortia models often bring together partners with different organizational cultures, including with regard to attitudes to learning. This can bring its own challenges, for example:

- Consortia often include partners who have not worked together before, coming from a range of different disciplines, cultures, geographies, and institutional mandates, making collaboration tricky unless there is a specific investment in building trust
- Relationship-building is often overlooked and taken for granted, as the focus is often placed exclusively on deliverables and achieving project goals and objectives, invest time in developing an approach based upon reciprocal respect and civility.
- Unresolved conflict within teams can lead to the undermining of trust, weakened relationships, and poor collaboration, ultimately resulting in less effective outcomes and lower impact.

From the perspective of adaptive leadership, tension provides an opportunity to engage more deeply and to watch out for work avoidance. The stakeholder mapping tool in Section Two provides a useful starting point to begin the work of learning with partners.

Developing a shared commitment to organizational learning in a consortium is usually very challenging as each partner brings different views and mindsets formed from their respective organizational cultures. Common challenges include:

- Hierarchy and chain of command in communication which varies from one organization to another
- Decision making process which differs from one organization to the other
- Organizational differences in adaptation.

The practical guidance in Section Four can be used to identify each stakeholder's needs and to develop a tailored strategy for engaging a consortium in developing shared responsibility for learning.

“Working in the complex context of climate change adaptation and resilience, individuals and organizations are often required to work together in consortia across disciplinary, institutional, geographical, and cultural boundaries. Working in large consortia offers great opportunities for addressing complex problems. It enables those with a wide variety of technical skills and other capacities to come together and devise more integrated responses. However, diversity of backgrounds and approaches to issues means that joint identification of challenges and solutions can be complex. Without explicit attention to roles, responsibilities, and relations, a variety of obstacles may undermine or obstruct effective collaboration and achievement of intended goals,”—

– **BRACED, a consortium working on climate change**



How learning can improve communication between donor and organizations in a consortium

By Emeka Emmanuel Okafor

In every project the implementing organization and the donor share the same objective: to achieve a successful implementation.

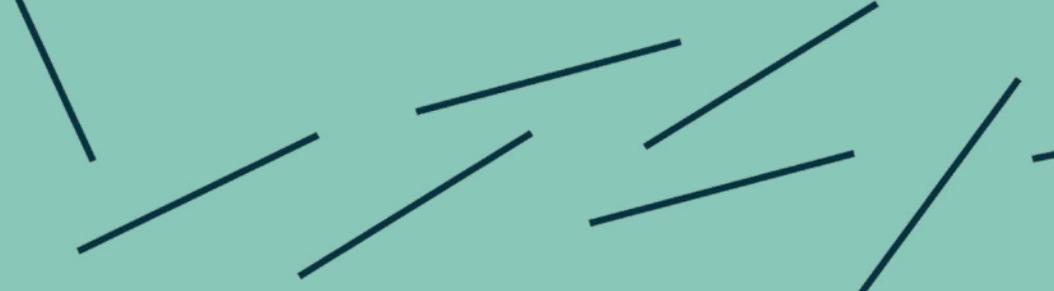
At the design phase of the project, provision must be made for constant communication and feedback between the implementers and the donors. As the project evolves, feedback and communication should be open and continuous to allow for necessary and timely approvals for course correction, especially where there are major deviations.

At Society for Family Health in Nigeria, for the IntegratE project, the organization maintains monthly program update meetings with donors in addition to the regular project quarterly reports. These monthly meetings provide a platform to discuss changes and adaptations that need to be made due to feedback from implementation.

Data collection is also crucially important for decision-making. The team find that it is easier to discuss and convince the donors of a necessary change when they have compelling evidence from data.

Steps to improve organizational learning within a consortium

- 1. Develop unified operational guidelines.** Due to the short duration of most projects, it is often difficult to change or address some of the issues hindering organizational learning within a consortium. Changing mindsets that are deeply rooted in organizational practices and cultures often take time so the best place to start is to agree on a unified operational guideline that clearly highlights the decision making process, command structure, communication etc.
- 2. Get every member of the consortium to sign up.** Every member of the consortium must agree to sign up to and own the operational guidelines which will inform most of the processes and decisions to be taken.
- 3. Build in a feedback mechanism.** Ensure a responsive feedback mechanism is built into the project that allows constant feedback to be generated, shared with stakeholders, discussed with the donors and government in such a way that allows timely course correction without delays and bottlenecks.
- 4. Documentation.** Ensure changes are properly documented as they occur and all necessary approvals for course corrections either from government, donors or regulators filed appropriately for easy reference



SECTION 4: **GUIDE TO DEVELOPING SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEARNING**



SECTION FOUR: GUIDE TO DEVELOPING SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEARNING

Of the five qualities of learning organizations (described in Section Two), the most important is developing shared responsibility for learning.

You're not alone if you came up with a low rating on this quality in the quiz on page 17. Even if you scored high in the quiz in shared responsibility, these steps are essential for sustaining a commitment to learning over a long duration.

Learning requires ongoing commitment by each stakeholder, not just a one-time decision or designation of a representative to a committee. This becomes particularly evident when the learning gets tough, or when it brings into stark relief decisions or choices that are unexpected or have been avoided.

Starting a genuine shared learning process is not as difficult as it seems, however, and nor is addressing the three challenges (described in Section Three) to strengthen a learning culture. You simply have to break it down into steps.

Drawing again on tools and insights from adaptive leadership, this section provides a clear set of practical steps to develop shared responsibility for learning and thereby strengthening a culture of learning.

You will know you're making genuine progress when people begin to demonstrate a wider sense of responsibility for the entire group's learning, beyond their own individual roles or objectives.



How to create a shared responsibility for learning

By Ezinne Peters

Just as it's possible to establish a culture of learning in an organization where there wasn't one previously, it is also possible to widen responsibility for learning from one small, centralized team of individuals, and broaden it out so that stakeholders involved at all levels have responsibility for learning together. Here are some ideas for how senior leadership within organizations can promote and create a shared responsibility for learning:

- 1. Establish key definitions.** Senior leadership should provide clear definitions of what a 'learning culture' means and looks like in their organization. Establishing a shared definition of learning at the organizational level makes it easy for team members to identify when learning has gone 'off-track' and take responsibility for reprioritizing it within workstreams.
- 2. Encourage and articulate the value of learning at all levels.** Through roundtable discussions, senior leadership teams should engage with all staff in discussions about the "shared value/meaning" of learning. Senior leadership should be clear about sources of learning, and where if at all, teams should draw on external sources to facilitate their learning. A lack of clarity around required learning risks there being gaps in skillsets during project implementation.
- 3. Dedicate human resources to help drive organizational learning.** Including human resources at the center of organizational learning - for example through a Head of Learning - ensures it becomes an organization-wide conversation. Appointing such a person also means that learning can be included as part of the annual Key Performance Indicator (KPI) evaluation.
- 4. Hold staff accountable in organizational learning.** Senior leadership should make clear that every staff member is a stakeholder in learning. This promotes the idea that learning is the responsibility of everyone, and not just assigned MEL teams.

Set the stage for a shared learning process

A culture of learning involves deep conversations about more than policies, rules or structure. It requires the people with the problem to become part of the solution, not simply to implement one.

Values and loyalties shift in small but profound ways as part of a process of growth and learning. These shifts are an unavoidable part of creating deep cultural change, and nobody goes untouched or untransformed during this process.

The steps below demonstrate what it will take to create shared responsibility for learning. Specifically, use these steps to:

- Decide which projects are ripe for learning and which aren't
- Identify which people or stakeholder groups to involve and the sequence or order for doing so
- Develop insight into how to frame the learning opportunity from their point of view, which is needed to help them generate sustained commitment
- Most importantly, understand your own purpose and commitment to learning—and any competing commitments that will help you avoid your own work avoidance.

Step 1 - Clarify our shared purpose for engaging in learning

Strengthening a learning culture is not something that you can do as an added extra. Your motivation for learning must closely connect to your broader purpose or mission.

Try writing down a list of your personal and professional priorities, and how they connect to your broader purpose. Examine where learning comes on this list, and why. Share your results with friends and colleagues, and discover how they value and prioritize learning.

If learning isn't a priority for you right now, that's ok. Come back to this document at a time when you and your organization are ready.





How to make organizational learning a second nature

By Toyin Akomolafe

Making organizational learning second nature begins with leadership. A strong commitment from leadership will influence an organizational response to learning, processes and how learning is managed.

The first step to making learning second nature is to get buy-in from leadership. Bring leaders on board by:

1. Identify and share potential outcomes and impact of organizational learning on the project with the top managers
2. Explain how organizational learning supports and contributes to the strategic goal of the project
3. Identify key champions, and change agents among the senior leadership, and market the learning process to them. They will create positive energy about the process and are likely to influence others
4. Create a learning process that fits into the busy schedule of senior leadership for ease of integration
5. Negotiate with senior leadership on key issues of the learning process
6. Communicate, communicate and communicate – processes, outcomes, feedback and every other information that will help leaders to make informed decisions.

Systems and processes should be put in place to support and manage learning activities. A step-by-step guide should be developed to incorporate organizational learning into regular project/program implementation.

Some of the processes required for this include; inclusion of learning responsibilities into staff job descriptions, capacity building sessions, learning-oriented work processes, and documentation.

Organizational learning is not a one shoe fits all process. It is flexible and adaptable. Create a strategy to get everyone on board with the new ideas, and ensure the steps are documented. Modifications to the process should be documented, and key actions from the previous learnings that can improve ongoing and future projects incorporated.

Organizational learning should be promoted from the onset of a project or program. A learning plan should be included at the planning stage of the project and not later. Late introduction of a learning plan may result in resistance to change.

The capacity of stakeholders, both internal and external, should be built on organizational learning. The development of a learning culture as a second nature can be influenced by pressures/ expectations from the external environment.

Documentation of learning for institutional memory is key. This is important as it helps for the future and continuity of the project and it helps the upcoming managers to learn from the already implemented projects within the organization. If there is a change of leadership, whomever takes over can pick up from where they left off



Incorporating organizational learning into existing programs

Organizational learning can be incorporated into existing programs piece by piece, or it can be introduced program-wide.

In a program-wide introduction, a portion of regular activity can be substituted with a learning component. Learning activities should be introduced as a compulsory requirement. In situations where learning activities are optional, staff may choose to opt out.

Staff should be made to understand how organizational learning fits into, contributes and enriches existing programs. Strategies with low marginal costs should be identified for incorporating learning into existing activities.

Rather than create new activities for organizational learning within a program, existing activities should be modified to include learning components.

Organization learning process is participatory and should engage partners. In addition to training, their involvement in the process will reinforce the relevance.

A clear distinction needs to be made between monitoring, evaluation, and learning. In my experience, there is a tendency for program monitoring to be confused for learning especially among beginners.

The first step to including learning in monitoring and evaluation is to clearly define each of these terms. A learning plan should be included as an extension of a monitoring and evaluation plan.

Efforts should be made to learn from the learning process, and the process should be examined for key features of learning and whether learning was included as expected.

Step 2 - Identify the learning challenge

A learning culture is built brick by brick. Scope out your specific learning opportunities by doing the following:

1- Of all of your projects, initiatives, programs, which demand learning? Make a list of which aspects of them require learning and you'll identify where to start your learning activities.

2- Choose the projects that have high ripeness and high readiness (see chart). A project is ripe for learning when it has people's attention and is considered important. It is ready when there is a willingness and capacity of the various stakeholders involved to engage in adaptive learning. If none of your projects fall into this category, you will need to spend time ripening one for action, or in preparing people to engage in learning.

		READINESS	
		HIGH	LOW
READINESS	HIGH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis acknowledgement • Take on the issue directly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group to authority • Build allies and partners before ripening
	LOW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group learning for technical solution • Ripen adaptive element 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group in denial • Build allies and partners before ripening

Step 3 – Diagnose stakeholder values, loyalties, and losses at risk

Learning doesn't mean changing people, it means changing alongside them. It begins when you are prepared to accompany people on their developmental and learning journey, maintaining relationships amidst competing and sometimes irreconcilable motivations.

To prepare yourself for this, spend time diagnosing stakeholder's distinct values, loyalties, and losses at risk, stemming from their mission, vision, funding sources, constituents, and partners, that guide how willing and able they are for learning. If possible, you can also ask them to take the *How Adaptive Are You?* survey above and then share and discuss your results with each other.

Think back to the qualities of adaptive learning organizations; the approach described here can help to share responsibility for learning as well as providing valuable insight into opportunities for developing leadership capacity. You can find a dedicated resource by The Curve to help you think about how to understand and engage stakeholders here: <https://the-curve.org/resources>

Maintaining relationships with a broad set of stakeholders requires insight into each other's deeper motivations, so you can pace the learning. If you're not up for doing this kind of work, go back to Step 1 and reconsider whether or not your purpose is up to the task.

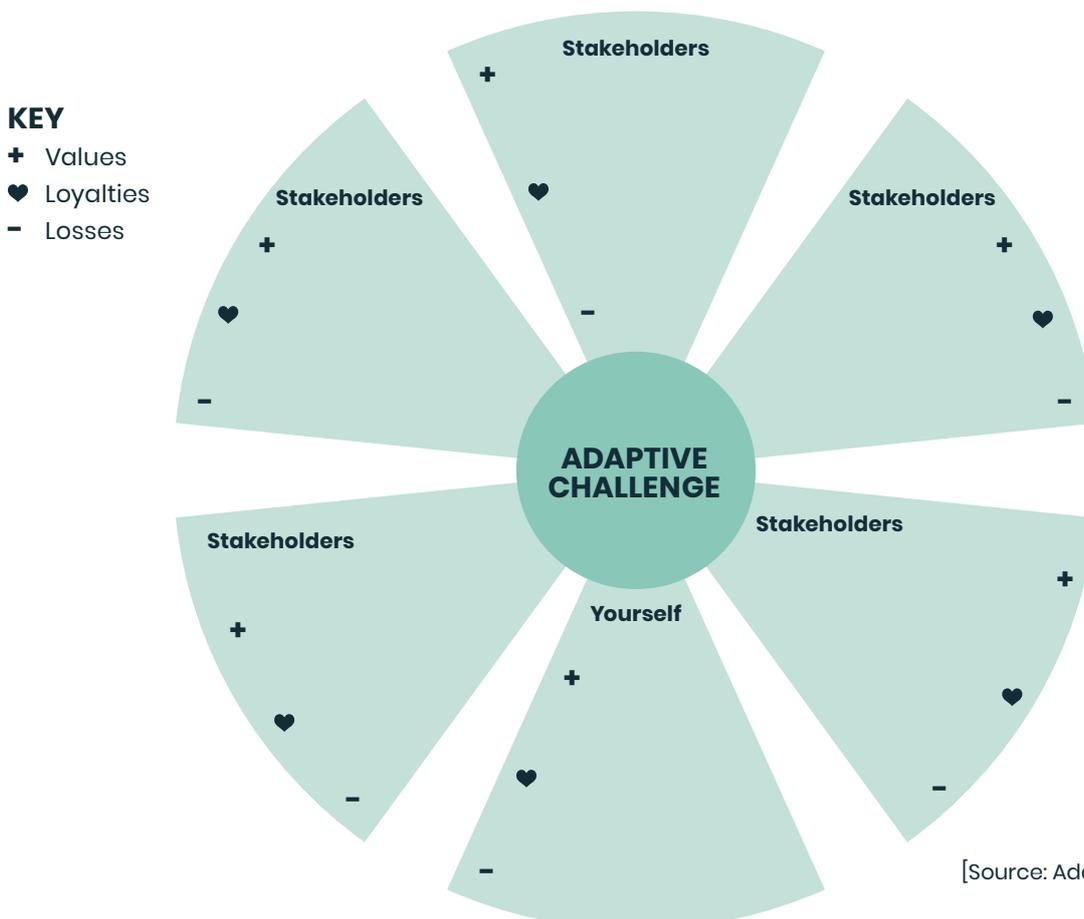
Likewise, a restricted view of what constitutes 'accepted' sources of learning requires proper consideration, with underlying assumptions, values, loyalties, and potential losses at risk identified and challenged. The tool from adaptive leadership that we describe here is called "Thinking Politically", a more advanced version of traditional stakeholder mapping, encourages deep reflection on what is getting in the way of colleagues, partners or others, moving from verbal agreement to collective action and learning.

The tool included on the following page can be used to help you develop a more strategic way to engage stakeholders. It highlights where there may be overlap across factions in terms of what people care about and what they might be fearful of losing if change happens.

Thinking Politically

How to use this worksheet

1. In the middle of the worksheet, state the learning objective that you are trying to address, described in terms of the gap between your current reality and your aspiration.
2. In the sections of the worksheet, list five to seven stakeholders who need to be engaged to make progress on your learning objective. You can use the stakeholders you identified using the instructions in Section Two of this document. You are also listed on the worksheet below, because people often forget to include themselves as one of the stakeholders.
3. Consider each stakeholder's relationship to the learning objective. Use the symbols on the worksheet to list the following:
 - a. Values – What are the commitments and beliefs guiding behavior and decision-making with regard to the learning challenge?
 - b. Loyalties – What obligations with regard to the learning challenge does the person have to people outside his or her immediate group?
 - c. Losses – What does the person fear losing (status, resources, influence) with regard to the learning challenge?
4. Any overlaps amongst groups are opportunities to create learning alliances or partnerships. Also notice where there are gaps in your understanding of a stakeholder's values, loyalties, and potential losses. These highlight opportunities for deeper engagement with stakeholders before engaging in the learning process.



[Source: Adaptive Change Advisors]



Stakeholders & learning with partners

By Ezinne Peters

Federal and state ministries of health have a role to play in institutionalizing learning culture:

- 1. Ministries, Departments and Agencies & Ownership of Organizational Learning:** Considering the sensitivity of work done in the development sector, engaging government and policymakers should aim to have them own the learning concept and drive the idea across all ministries departments and agencies. With initial funding support to back the take-off, subsequent engagement, and outcomes on learning as a concept should rest solely on the government. It would also be important to highlight how this can improve the expected impact the country can get during engagement with partners in the development sector. Showing how these local attempts can ultimately build into some global relevance for them individually and also as a country would be ideal.
- 2. 360-Degree Approach to Organizational Learning:** To make learning participatory and create ownership, there needs to be a 360-degree component to it. Learning cells can be created with each including a senior, mid-level, and junior member of staff or in line with the organizational structure of the MDAs; ensuring inclusion at all levels would make it more participatory within the MDAs. Each cell would, on a rotatory basis, share their new knowledge and field Q&A sessions from the rest of the staff.
- 3. Incentivization:** Understanding that at the point of employment, some of these new concepts may not have been included in their defined job description, selling the idea of organizational learning would need to be accompanied by incentives, such as rewards schemes.

Step 4 – Assess your own personal “immunity to learning”

You might find yourself having second thoughts as you prepare to commence work on building a learning culture.

You might ask yourself questions, such as: Do I understand the learning challenge sufficiently? Do I care enough to even make the time? Can I afford to take a risk? More importantly, can I afford not to?

Much like the exercise of leadership, engaging in a learning process is risky. Readying yourself requires understanding of what holds you back from taking the first step, and what modulating the risk looks like once you've begun.

Refer back to the quiz in Section Two. How did you score on the criteria of naming elephants in the room? A low score might indicate that there is some immunity to learning and change. But the good news is it is possible to achieve real progress once the underlying issue has been recognized.

Here are common things that can hold you back from summoning your own courage for engaging in learning:

- Loyalties to people who may not believe you are doing the right thing. The people you depend on and who depend on you can feel disappointed or exposed when you act or start making different decisions based on your learning.
- Fear of incompetence. Not having an answer can make you feel like a fraud or intellectually vulnerable.
- Uncertainty about taking the right path.
- Feeling some loss of a sense of comfort, security, routine or identity.
- Not having the stomach, relentless persistence or patience for the time and effort required.

SECTION FOUR: GUIDE TO DEVELOPING SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEARNING

Spend time with your learning team reflecting on these questions alongside the question of the team's shared purpose.

People sometimes try to change their and others' behavior through individual, technical skill development. When that happens the learning becomes unsustainable. For example, when a doctor tells a heart patient they'll die if they don't learn new habits, only one in seven will follow through successfully. This is because systems—organizations, communities and even families—have a built-in “immunity to change”, according to Bob Kegan and Lisa Lahey, considered by many to be the foremost experts in adult learning.

Desire and motivation alone aren't sufficient to change the status quo. Identifying blind spots and competing commitments that get in the way of learning allows us to more effectively address limiting assumptions. Like an immune system, we tend to want to return to the status quo, back to “the way things are done around here.”

Learning while doing - Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

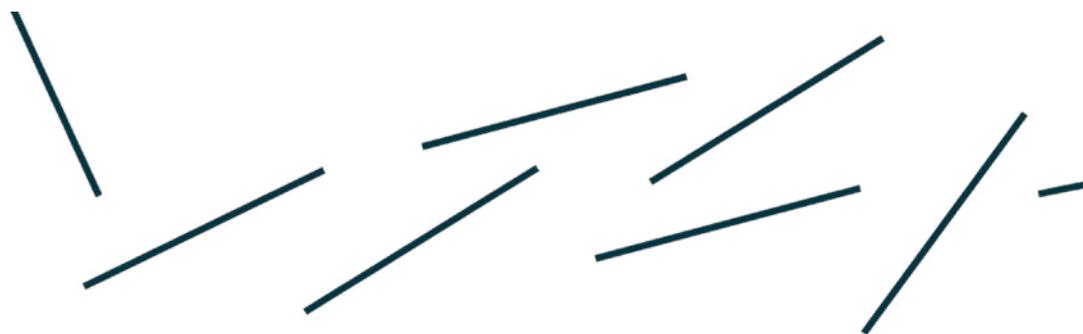
Any organization that has been funded to deliver projects, programs or other activities will be familiar with the requirements of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E).

Individual M&E approaches and requirements vary enormously. They can generally be described as aiming to provide accountability as well as ensuring the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of activities delivered towards achieving specified outcomes.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) describes a broader function that extends beyond accountability and effectiveness. It explicitly seeks to generate knowledge and lessons drawn directly from experience.

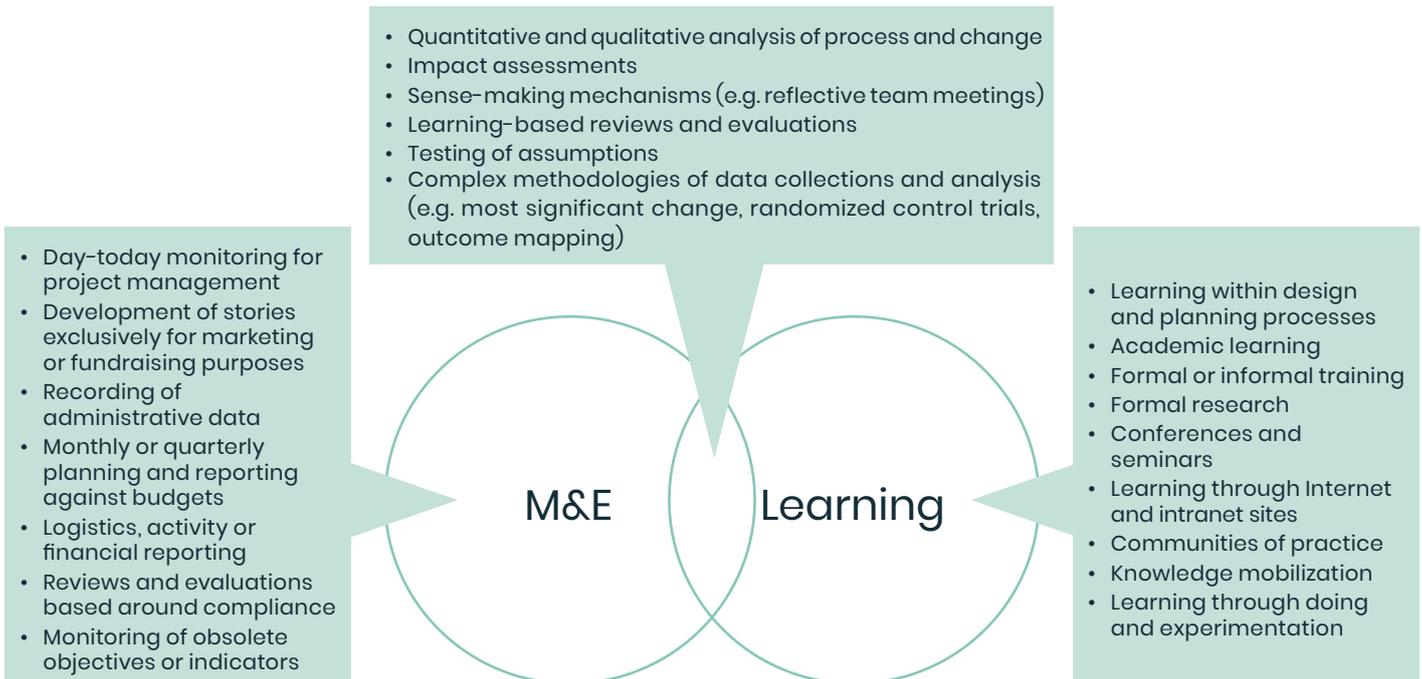
Many organizations attempt to integrate and operate MEL systems. However, M&E and learning are not the same things. Most M&E has very little to do with learning, and much learning happens independently of M&E, as illustrated in the diagram below.

Developing effective MEL systems and processes will institutionalize reflection and continuous learning – one of the five qualities of an adaptive learning organization, as described in Section Two.



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More information about learning-based M&E systems is available in the Annex.



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Learning can be included in many ways within an M&E system. This includes:

- placing learning questions into a results framework
- incorporating them into regular reporting templates
- including them as agenda items during regular meetings, workshops and feedback sessions
- including them as evaluation questions during formal reviews, evaluations or impact assessments and addressing them through one-off M&E or research studies.

While monitoring and evaluation are mandatory, learning is not always seen as essential due to both internal and external factors.

Even for small organizations, a certain amount of M&E will be fundamental, and certain donors may provide tailored support to strengthen M&E capabilities. However, because learning capacity is seen as optional rather than essential, it is often lacking.

Responsibility for M&E may be assigned to specific individuals or departments in larger organizations, particularly if there is a portfolio of projects to manage and report on. This approach can contribute to a culture of centralization, where responsibility for learning and improvement resides with a small group. When this happens, an organization is likely to see low scores on qualities of shared responsibility and expectations of independent judgment, as described in the quiz in Section Two.

Another form of centralization can occur when project review and learning become seen as the responsibility of senior staff who fail to seek the views of other, less experienced colleagues. Junior staff can be overlooked or excluded from learning and development opportunities, especially if this is seen as a perk that is only available to longer serving personnel. The example below provides some practical suggestions of how to overcome decentralized learning and increase a sense of shared responsibility for learning.

For resources on developing approaches that integrate Monitoring Evaluation and Learning refer to the Annex.



CONCLUSION:
THOUGHTS ON
LEARNING OVER
A LIFETIME



CONCLUSION: THOUGHTS ON LEARNING OVER A LIFETIME

Learning is an imperfect process with imperfect people, working individually and collectively. Understanding this imperfection offers hope to anybody interested in learning. It is an invitation into the messiness, not a step away from it.

The goal of learning isn't to provide easy answers, but is to build healthier and life-affirming ways of delivering impact to people and communities that we care about.

As you begin to see the many learning moments that arise every day, you might experience a strong inclination to do something. To act. Long submerged questions might bubble to the surface. If you're lucky, you might even see solutions on the horizon.

At the very least—and this is significant—you will have the awareness and courage to take the next step when it presents itself. Don't force learning. This isn't some big new thing that now you need to do. That feeling, which often comes from fear, anger, frustration, or panic, might just be coming from the same old technical, authority-driven mindset about how learning happens.

Learning is not a substitute for other kinds of action. Rather, it's a set of questions, a curiosity of spirit, even, that underlies action. It's a kind of not knowing, individually or collectively in relationship with others.

Give yourself permission to act from a deeper sense of purpose and relationship to the complexity of the situation and the people involved. Allow yourself to act from a spirit of experimentation, however illogical, irrational, naive or impractical it seems.

Whatever that next step is, it will come with a little bit of uncertainty. It will also require courage. Yet, from this place emerges collective action, a genuine commitment to learning that, over time, reveals answers that were not visible from where you started.



ANNEXES:



Annex 1: Selected Tools and Resources

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Annex 2: Recommended Reading

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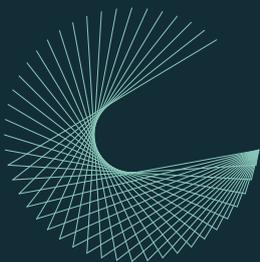
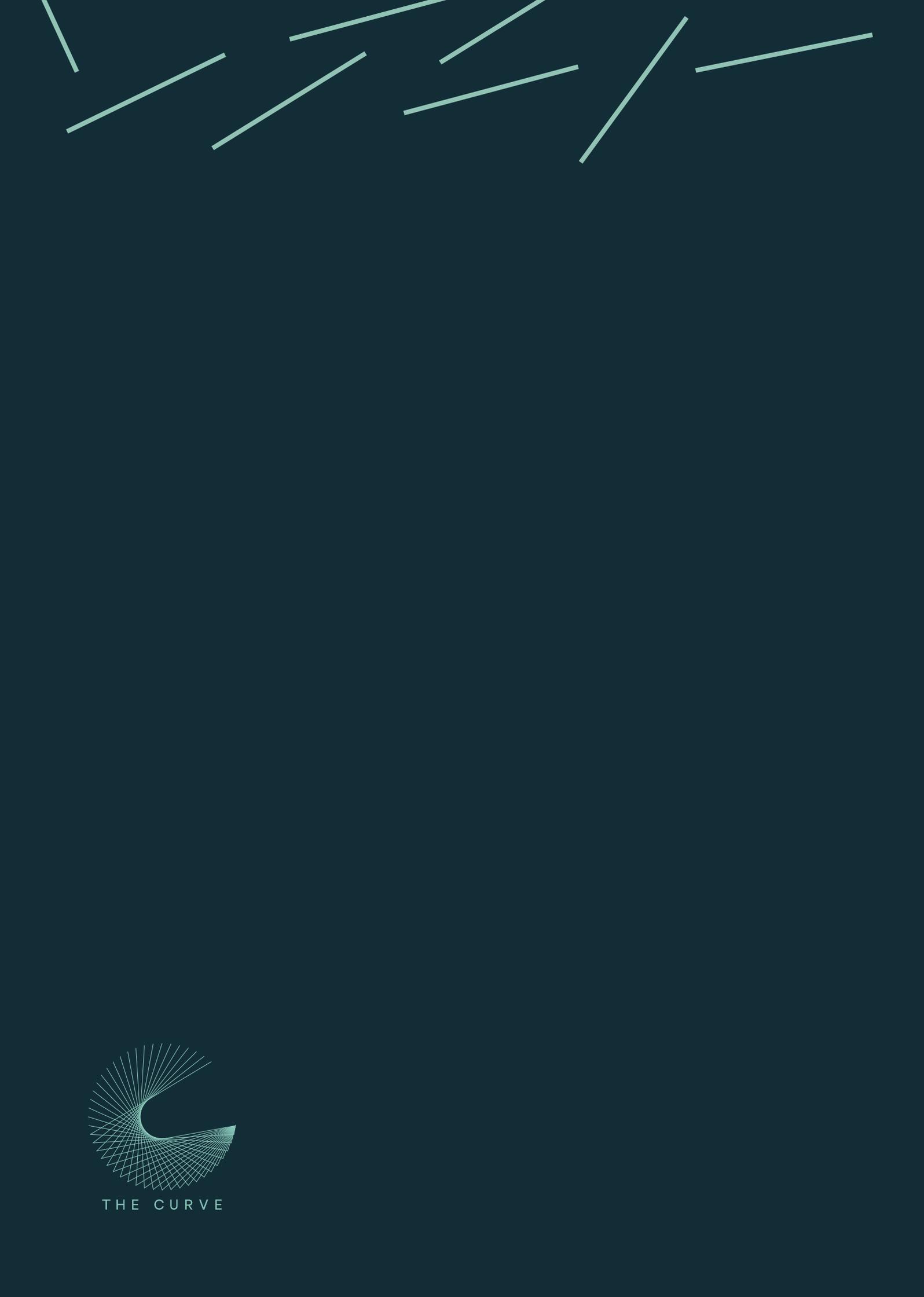
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