Adopting Organizational Learning Systems at the Field Level of International NGOs

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ADOPTING ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING SYSTEMS AT THE FIELD LEVEL OF INTERNATIONAL NGOS

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A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in Intercultural Service, Leadership and Management at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA

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# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... 1

Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 2

Review of Literature ............................................................................................................ 3
  Definitions and Approaches ............................................................................................. 4
  Purpose and Advantages ................................................................................................. 6
  The Individual .................................................................................................................. 8
  Organizational Culture ..................................................................................................... 10
  The Role of Technology ................................................................................................... 13
  Criticisms and Challenges .............................................................................................. 14

Research Methods ............................................................................................................. 18

Findings ............................................................................................................................... 20
  Structural ......................................................................................................................... 20
  Relational/behavioral ....................................................................................................... 22
  Cognitive .......................................................................................................................... 23
  Cultural – Organizations and People ............................................................................... 24
  Challenges and Solutions ............................................................................................... 26

Discussion ........................................................................................................................... 28
  Exploring Organizational Learning .................................................................................. 28
  Considering National Culture ........................................................................................... 32
  Permeation of Learning Systems in Field Offices ........................................................... 34

Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 38

References ........................................................................................................................... 39

Appendix A: Organizational Learning Uptake Model ............................................................ 42

Appendix B: Sample Starter Questions from Practitioner Interviews ...................................... 43
ABSTRACT

An increased push for accountability in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has led to the imperative for what was previously an internal management practice widely-utilized in the private sector: organizational learning. Learning initiatives support organizations to utilize resources more effectively and to reach their objectives with adaptive strategies.

In this paper, I explore the many components belonging to the organizational learning umbrella term from multiple disciplines, grounding my inquiry in the context of international NGOs. The findings from my qualitative research highlight aspects of learning and knowledge management in addition to organizational change and culture; to provide a comprehensive understanding of organizational learning and how it is optimally implemented. Notable attention is given to the apparent contrast of national culture and learning culture. I examined my research through a framework adapted from social capital theory, which categorizes learning into structural, relational and cognitive aspects. Analyzing learning initiatives through these three aspects provides a comprehensive understanding of how organizational learning systems are successfully implemented throughout a multinational organization, particularly at the field level of international NGOs.

I conducted qualitative interviews with experts and field managers to complement the literature review and draw recommendations. These insights are valuable for senior management, field managers and field staff to utilize in advocating for and carrying out organizational learning systems.

Keywords: organizational learning, knowledge management, knowledge sharing, engagement, culture
Introduction

As part of the demand for improved non-governmental organization (NGO) management of resources and proof of positive impact, there has been increasing emphasis in the past 15 years surrounding adaptive management and organizational learning. The two fields of study are seen as a means to improved NGO performance, better management of resources, responsiveness to beneficiary inputs and creating optimal opportunities for staff engagement. In the past, and likely still now, NGOs worked hard to gain and maintain the approval of donors, so much so that it could be inferred they are more accountable to them, than the beneficiaries they are serving. This approach often results in covering up failures, glossing over mistakes and beefing up outcomes. Now, many donors and NGO leadership are pushing a learning agenda and shifting mindsets towards adaptive, dynamic implementation. This shift is slow yet steady, as is any organizational or institutional change (Balzac, 2014). NGOs are encouraged to adopt adaptive management tactics, including collaboration and continuous learning activities, thus encouraging programs to learn from failure, adapt practices based on lessons learned and base their results on dynamic measurement systems (Balzac, 2014; Edwards, 1997; Dexis, 2017).

As I worked in multiple country settings with international NGOs, I became increasingly interested in three aspects regarding the implementation of these evolving learning approaches. First, exploring the complexities of organizational learning as a technical area- what is organizational learning? Second, observing national culture and how culture may affect proposed learning activities- how do learning initiatives succeed in cultures whose values differ from those conducive to learning? Finally, noting how learning systems are often initiated by headquarters (HQ) and uptake by field offices is varied- how can the culture and activities of learning permeate through to field offices?
Therefore, my primary inquiry is to understand what organizational learning (OL) encompasses and what factors enable, inhibit or require adaptation for optimal OL practices at the field level of international NGOs. I will utilize insights garnered from qualitative interviews with experts and field managers to supplement an extensive literature review.

Three aspects of social capital theory are utilized as a theoretical approach for framing the varied insights and research elements as structural, relational or cognitive. I have adapted their definitions from Jannesari and colleagues’ knowledge sharing research, to fit the broader technical realm of OL (Jannesari, Wang, Brown, & McCall, 2016). Structural refers to the ‘hard mechanisms’ or structures that allow learning to take place, which I note to include physical practices, as well as software systems. Relational refers to interactions between people and the ‘soft mechanisms’ that dictate those relations, which include trust, power dynamics and accountability, among others. The final aspect, cognitive, concerns the ‘linking mechanisms’ or individual values, beliefs and attitudes that affect OL transactions.

**Review of Literature**

OL encompasses a broad spectrum of practices with grounds in multi-disciplinary research including psychology, neuroscience, culture, management, development studies. This review included inputs from those disciplines for a well-rounded understanding of the umbrella term. Much of the research on OL originates from the private sector as a method of optimal management practice, thus giving insight for internal NGO management. There is lesser, though recent research and interest pertaining to the external effectiveness on NGOs to reach their aims, often related to reducing poverty or increasing power of vulnerable groups.
Definitions and Approaches

The two terms in focus are ‘knowledge’ and ‘learning’. While knowledge management is likely the most widely known practice, it often refers to structural mechanisms such as software and internal process flows that instruct where and how to store digital information; therefore, it is regarded as one component of broader organizational learning (Zhu, 2004; Dxis, 2017). Edwards adds clarity to these key terms by differentiating information, or raw inputs, from knowledge (systematically organized information) and wisdom, defined as the ability to use knowledge in action (Edwards, 1997). Organizational learning encompasses those three differentiated terms, with wisdom, often known as action learning or reflective practice as the most valuable.

There are two distinct, yet similar bodies of literature differentiated by researchers. The ‘learning organization’ studies are a pragmatic approach to utilizing knowledge for action, while literature on ‘organizational learning’ is comprehensive to include management science (knowledge management software systems), social organizational systems, process improvement procedures and psychological/behavioral aspects (Roper & Pettit, 2002). Management visionary Peter Senge developed the former idea, defining a learning organization as:

…organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.

(Smith, 2001, p. 3)

Taylor simplifies Senge’s definition, "The organization which builds and improves its own practice consciously and continually devising and developing the means to draw learning from its own (and others’) experience” (2002, p.347). Both are based on systems thinking and
emphasize conscious, or intentional actions. Senge was an initial proponent of learning organizations in the private sector over 35 years ago, emphasizing the need to decrease hierarchical authority and harness true commitment from staff by engaging leaders at all levels of an organization (1996). While management studies lend distinction between Senge’s learning organization and OL practice, for the purposes of this paper, both are regarded as equally contributory to foundation of OL in international NGOs.

Lewis sums up the idea of OL in the NGO environment as learning to be effective, learning to be efficient and learning to expand (Lewis, 2001). Milway and Saxton define it as, “The intentional practice of collecting information, reflecting on it, and sharing the findings, to improve the performance of an organization” (2011, p.44).

I compiled an overarching definition of OL compiled from this review is as follows: intentional opportunities to create, share, transfer and/or manage knowledge within an organization and with its environment. This includes components of knowledge management, knowledge sharing, communities of practice, continuous learning activities and adaptive management; understanding these components may be formally part of organizational strategy or informally implemented at the will of interested staff. (Dexis, 2017; Roper & Pettit, 2002; GPSA, 2015; Boateng & Agyemang, 2015).

More definitions at depth include a business focus on knowledge transfer between expatriate and national staff identified as a ‘process in which employees within an organization learn from each other, [having] two dimensions: explicit knowledge (formal and codified) and tacit knowledge (informal, often culturally-based understandings)’ (Jannesari, et al., 2016, p. 370). A specific form of OL, ‘adaptive management’ is defined as ‘an approach that combines appropriate analysis, structured flexibility, and iterative improvements in response to contextual
complexity’ (Dexis, 2017, p. 20). Adaptive management is treated as a ‘deliberate experiment for the purpose of learning’ (GPSA, 2016, p. 5). The term knowledge management (KM), though historically known as codified information made available to staff in a top-down approach, has shifted as that method proved unfitting to the desired purpose (Alavi, Kayworth & Leidner, 2005). Now it includes not only the storage and transfer of knowledge, but considers the ‘source, channel, and recipient of knowledge and how these influence the ways in which individuals learn and behave in organizations (Alavi, et al., 2005). A literature review from USAID’s Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) initiative emphasizes the evolved definition of KM, noting that knowledge is not only an object but something created during an interaction between people (Dexis, 2017).

The crux of these approaches at the relational level is the creation, transfer, sharing and integration of knowledge through social interactions for various learning purposes (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005). At the cognitive level, it is learning to think deeply about the why of what we do, or practicing double and triple loop learning where we consider not only which actions led to our results, but what assumptions led to those actions and the context that led to those assumptions (GPSA, 2016; Roper & Pettit, 2002). The idea is to make these thought patterns reflexive, or automatic, rather than actions which are separate, static and forced (Balzac, 2014). Essentially, we are reminding ourselves that learning is inherent in everyone and every organization. While we all learn, learning consciously and intentionally provides much greater benefits (Taylor, 2002).

**Purpose and Advantages**

Research supports the implementation of OL systems for a variety of improved effectiveness measures, including increased creativity, innovation and team performance (Dexis,
2017); competitive advantage (Imran, Ilyas, Aslam, & Ubaid-Ur-Rahman, 2016); problem solving and efficient practices, enhanced communication and connections between staff (Alavi, et al., 2005); as well as sparking critical awareness and consciousness (Roper & Pettit, 2002). The last point is directed towards the benefit of utilizing OL in a broader environmental context to improve development outcomes, eluding to yet another distinction in OL systems. I noticed a convoluted divide between utilizing OL systems as an improved management science and utilizing OL systems for the purpose of adaptive development work to improve program outcomes. Taylor (2002) goes as far as to say that private and public sectors control formal learning but have no set way to address ‘vast imbalances’ in society and therefore NGOs should focus on maximizing learning for this cause.

Fowler (2002) clarifies this division by acknowledging that learning is always taking place, its differentiation depends on who and what we are referring to. He refers to two types of learning relevant to development outcomes, including participatory learning for understanding what works for who and why; and project-based learning to understand how to improve development interventions. He defines organizational learning as improving internal NGO functions while offering three additional learning areas beyond the organization: civic, policy and advocacy. While current NGO research focuses on learning for development outcomes, it seems imperative to include concomitant internal OL practices, if not due to the benefits I present in this review, but also as it may inadvertently contribute to the external development outcomes that NGOs aim for.

Donors and NGOs are increasingly turning towards OL systems as a means to improve development outcomes, however the research on the positive link between these two is not strong, likely due to lack of empirical evidence (Dexis, 2017). The roots of participatory learning
and knowledge exchange however, date as far back as the 1960’s, when Julius Nyerere and Paulo Freire were proponents of non-formal learning as a way out of poverty (Roper & Pettit, 2002). For the likes of this paper, OL systems will be largely limited to NGO management practice and not be explored specifically in development programming, though the two are inextricably linked.

While there may not be enough research supporting OL as a means to improve development outcomes, insights from the private sector reveal the extensive ways in which OL benefits teams and organizations, namely in performance and efficiency measures (Dexis, 2017). It is also noted to ‘save time and increase productivity’ as well as build capacity and increase satisfaction through intrinsic rewards (Milway & Saxton, 2011; Alavi, et al., 2005).

The Individual

The overarching theories of OL begin with the individual and how they learn, then secondly how they can interact with others to share and create more learning together (Senge, 2003; Zhu, 2004). Senge describes the precursor to an individual’s willingness to learn as getting to a place where ‘they see that their established ways of coping with their problems are clearly not going to suffice’ and they are prepared to learn and change themselves (2003, p. 50). There are two types of individuals tasked with taking forward OL systems in the literature: one is leaders, for whom it is absolutely necessary for their buy-in (Imran, et al., 2016) and those with a ‘growth-mindset’, who are curious, inquisitive by nature and ask questions, are flexible in their behavior and skillsets in addition to being comfortable with ‘not knowing all the answers’ and have a strong sense of teamwork (Dexis, 2017, p. 22). Staff who understand the value of utilizing evidence and have an ‘intrinsic learning motivation’ have a higher ability to learn and adapt (Dexis, 2017, p. 21).
Roper & Pettit stress the key for successful OL is to ‘structure learning processes in such a way as to enhance individuals’ agency and learning capabilities’ while noting that learning begins with self-knowledge (2002, p. 267). They also ascertain that the extent at which someone is able to learn is embedded in how much one has insights into ‘underlying issues of values, power, and culture’ (2002, p.268).

Senge describes an ‘internal networker’, a staff who has no authority except ‘their convictions and the clarity of their ideas’ who can galvanize inquisitiveness and change in interested people whom they influence. Repeatedly in literature and particularly from Senge, the mindset of an individual is indicative of how much a person is willing to learn. Believing in learning and being committed to the principles can be the most powerful source of deep change within an organization, as opposed to people acting out of compliance to top-leadership orders (1996).

A leader is one enabler of individuals’ ability to learn as they promote or inhibit organizational norms and culture that are conducive to OL (Dexis, 2017). Milway and Saxton assert that leaders are the first and foremost necessity for intentional OL and that they must champion its practices and ‘foster the culture of continuous improvement that values organizational learning’ (2011, p. 46). The most commonly repeated traits for leaders or individuals in the literature reviewed were openness, empowerment, creativity and curiosity. Roper & Pettit also add that working collectively in a manner that supports staff to realize their full potential and breaks down traditional barriers will release creative potential, a trait noted to contribute to better performance (2002). Other leadership qualities which inspire adaptive programming include the following from a 2016 BEAM report:
Insistence on substantive engagement by all staff; an open embrace of failure; an ability to create incentives for internal reciprocity and integration; celebration of staff who are willing to be honest about results when speaking with leadership; and an overriding curiosity and enthusiasm for the task of adaptive programming that demonstrates desired behaviors in way that instructions cannot (Dexis, 2017, p. 26).

Aligning with ‘textbook’ leadership lessons, OL practices require senior management buy-in, support and modeling behavior, with Imran et al. going as far as to say that the responsibility of OL lies with the leadership (2016). Leadership buy-in should be considered in balance with Senge’s view on staff commitment. He asserts that buy-in from staff is as important, noting that genuine commitment from staff is more effective than compliance to orders (1996, p. 2).

**Organizational Culture**

The culture of an organization is central to fostering or inhibiting OL practices (Sanz-Valle, Naranjo-Valencia, Jiménez-Jiménez, and Perez-Caballero, 2011). Research supports that knowledge management practices are ‘largely influenced by the social context’ in which they emerge (Alavi, et al., 2005). Balzac describes organizational culture as the accumulated lessons that staff have learned and the values and beliefs they attach to those lessons, which they then pass on to others (2014). While people tend to simplify culture, in reality there are multiple layers of culture that any one person may identify with, such as geographical, national, specific interest, familial, workplace, and so on (Balzac, 2014; Boateng & Agyemang, 2015; Alavi et al., 2005). This is key to understand, particularly when working in international contexts and contemplating cultures conducive for OL systems. For the sake of discussion, the two main types of culture examined will be national and organizational.
Utilizing Geert Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, or systematic differences in national culture, the general cultural inclinations of each country may be mapped, with results applied across disciplines, including to organizational learning research. The four dimensions Hofstede originally introduced as important to organizations include individualism versus collectivism, large or small power distance, strong or weak uncertainty avoidance and masculinity versus femininity (Boateng & Agyemang, 2015). Researchers in OL systems single out individualism and power distance as two dimensions that strongly affect how people share knowledge and how people coming from opposite sides of these spectrums will likely struggle in knowledge exchange (Jannesari, et al., 2016).

People from individualistic cultures, often attributed to Western nations, prefer explicit, linear information which is managed and see themselves as independent from groups, tending to hoard information or not see the importance of sharing (Imran, et al., 2016; Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston, & Triandis, 2002). On the opposite end of the spectrum, collectivist cultures see themselves as part of the whole and often assume information should be shared with that whole (Jannesari, et al., 2016); however, the ‘whole’ or group that they consider may be a very small sub-group, therefore possibly excluding some from receiving information (Bhagat, et al., 2002). Jannesari et al.’s research exhibited how these opposing preferences may clash in an international NGO setting, where disconnect is found between expatriate and national staff, with the latter viewing the former as an outsider and a possible threat, and therefore not sharing information (2016).

When adding layers of cultural dimensions onto the individualism-collectivism spectrum, the analysis becomes increasingly complex. Large power distance societies, which all developing nations identify as, are very hierarchical and people tend to accept and even preserve power
differences. This characteristic is a hindrance to organizational learning activities. Repeatedly the literature recommended that organizations maintain small power distance and non-hierarchical culture to encourage openness, sharing and trust (Jannesari, et al., 2016; Boateng & Agyemang, 2015). This recommendation eludes to the ability for organizations, no matter which country they reside, to take on their own culture.

Similar traits that were identified for the individual understandably carry through to organizational culture. A learning-oriented culture, also known as collaborative culture, should have a ‘long-term vision and continuous change and improvement orientation’ as well as open communication, trust and empowerment from leaders exemplifying these traits, all which enable an OL-supportive culture (Sanz-Valle, et al., 2011; Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005). Additional traits for an OL environment are non-hierarchical structures, decentralized decision-making, availability of slack resources, communities of practice and a risk-taking culture (Dexis, 2017).

Numerous studies support that a risk-taking culture is conducive for OL, however this is an example of how sometimes OL systems are not complementary to development aid, as donors and NGOs are often risk-adverse due to their strict accountability for funds (Dexis, 2017).

Cabrera and Cabrera use the dimensions of social capital theory to determine if an organization has enabled staff to share their knowledge with others, citing the structural dimension of time, space and tools provided and the cognitive dimension of a shared language. The two aspects together allow knowledge to flow easily (2005). They add that when the climate feels safe, non-judgmental and strong social norms support knowledge sharing, staff are more willing to share.

Imran and fellow researchers use Hauschild, et al.’s term, ‘knowledge-intensive culture’, defined as ‘shared norms, values, and beliefs that knowledge sharing is beneficial for employees
and organization’ (2015). Alavi et al. (2005) emphasize that organizational culture is the most significant factor for successful OL systems and that shaping an organization’s culture towards that of collaboration, trust and learning are ‘key for a firm’s ability to manage knowledge’. Trust is a term repeated frequently in nearly every article, with Jannesari, et al. stating that the level of trust between a giver and receiver determines the level of knowledge transfer (2016). Kahneman’s neuroscience research found a remedy for distrust within teams, stating that reflecting as a group (on anything work-related) builds mutual understanding and shared trust (Dexis, 2017).

**The Role of Technology**

Alavi, et al. (2005) refer to ‘information repositories, data warehouses, intranets, search engines, data filters and collaboration agents’ which all facilitate the ‘creation, storage, transfer, and sharing’ of knowledge within and outside of an organization (2005, p. 193). With ample existing software to support the OL process, particularly in capturing and managing explicit knowledge, research has shown that use of such technologies increases performance, efficiency and shortens problem-solving time, among other benefits (Zhu, 2004). A challenge is that technology is often seen as the solution to OL, with the belief that no further support is required beyond the IT department. The literature affirms that technologies should be utilized to provide the enabling environment for OL to take place, not to be the only system (Zhu, 2004; Alavi, et al., 2005; Milway & Saxton, 2011).

Cabrera and Cabrera explain that new technologies often fail because ‘inadequate attention was paid to the non-technical or human factors which are critical determinants of the effectiveness of the new systems’ (2005, p. 731). Selected technology should be in alignment with the organizational culture, enhance existing social networks, be user-friendly and be
implemented alongside trainings for how and why to use them (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005). Technology can be seen as a ‘true multiplier of organizational learning when put in service of deeper person-to-person connections and exchanges’ (Milway & Saxton, 2011, p.49).

Imran, et al. point out that much of OL takes place through technologies, such as e-learning and webinars, as well as ‘social learning through electronic media’ (2015, p. 234). The social environment heavily affects if and how technologies are utilized, alluding to the importance of the entwined three learning aspects. In fact, the most innovative technology has strong collaborative aspects, promoting the values of OL discussed earlier. Some companies, particularly large multinationals, are creating adaptations of online communities of practice within their organization. A community platform may allow document sharing, posting of questions for subject experts in different countries, online meetings with screen sharing, and so on. One participant of such a system stated, “If we have a common global problem, we will startup a subset of the community and ask them to get together and solve the problem.” (Alavi, et al., 2005, p. 204).

**Criticisms and Challenges**

Across the disciplines, I found that evidence from neuroscience to social field research overwhelmingly supports organizational learning and its many components, however some question how important it is as a management and development practice (Dexis, 2017; GPSA, 2016). Dexis explains that as the approach is still new, there is lack of evidence in the development sector, unlike the supple private sector research. Roper and Pettit echo that the majority of positive research regarding OL is from the private sector and as such, there is no consideration or evidence extended to OL’s effect on development outcomes (2002). GPSA
notes the historic perception of OL systems as ‘good’ but also as a ‘luxury’, with more pressing development needs taking precedence, though they observe this discourse is changing (2016).

The second criticism largely placed on Western KM practices is the high individualism focus where people believe controlling information and working independently is an essential skill (Jannesari, et al., 2016) in addition to the belief that OL systems are mainly explicit knowledge that should be handled by one or few people (Zhu, 2004). For learning to take place, a space needs to be created, where interactions are emphasized and rewarded for their collaborative nature (Dexis, 2017). Instead, often KM systems are about storing and managing existing information, reducing the complexities of multilevel learning into explicit tasks rather than ‘internalizing processes that support knowledge exchange’ (GPSA, 2016; Zhu, 2004).

Tacit and explicit processes are both required and this balance is partially what makes implementing OL systems such a challenge. There is not a fix-all, 10-step solution or definite explanation of what and how to implement to support the learning of staff and stakeholders.

The institution of development aid in itself is limiting for adequate learning of organizations. Donor focus on accountability to ensure the best use of their funds translates into minimized learning opportunities confined by project proposals or scarce resources and therefore static results that are not flexible for adjustment (Dexis, 2017).

Changing deep beliefs concerning knowledge sharing, transfer, creation and capacity building and therefore changing culture, is another immense challenge. Rooted both in historical colonial mindsets and large power distance cultures, the belief that knowledge transfer is one-way, from the more powerful, knowing person to the lesser, is pervasive throughout management in NGOs (Dexis, 2017; Zeelen & van der Linden, 2009). In fact, researchers note that often OL systems do not dig deep enough to address power dynamics, sometimes due to senior
management realizing that such systems challenge their authority, which may lead to knowledge hoarding behavior from the leader and therefore throughout the organization (Roper & Pettit, 2002). In cultures of large power distance and those that favor competition, knowledge hoarding behavior prevails as low trust levels drive staff for fear of losing power, their status or job (Alavi, et al., 2005; Zeelen & van der Linden, 2009; Boateng & Agyemang, 2015; Jannesari, et al., 2016).

Nearly all the reviewed literature pointed towards how humans fall trap to simplicity – focusing on explicit and therefore easily defined tasks, single loop learning and explaining away failures rather than double and triple loop learning (Roper & Pettit, 2002; GPSA, 2016). A final point brought up by nearly every reviewed paper was trust, and how the lack thereof inhibits all types of OL activities (Jannesari, et al., 2016; Dexis, 2017; Alavi, et al., 2005; Sanz-Valle, et al., 2011; Boateng & Agyemang, 2015; Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005; Balzac, 2014).

**Key Insights and Lessons**

The basic concept of OL from the literature follows the process of raw data being collected and managed (structural) through engaging processes that cultivate participation and reception from staff (relational) with the aim of mindset shifts towards evidentiary traits of learning (cognitive). If these concepts can be married and implemented, organizations will see vast improvements across systems, teams and development outcomes (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005; Jannesari, et al., 2016; Dexis, 2017; GPSA, 2015).

While the components and approaches of organizational learning are vast, the idea is not to know it all, but to know what is right for the particular organization, in a particular context. Zhu emphasizes the process of constructing and sharing contexts is where mutual learning takes place, not by imposing a single ‘best solution’ (2004). A recommended method for deciding
which systems to utilize is for leadership to link their values and culture with a set array of systems and allow each team to decide which components are useful for them to use (Alavi, et al., 2005).

Relational and cognitive aspects need more emphasis in the learning process, even in the realm of technology. Various technologies enhance and enable learning when it is people-centered and in alignment with organizational culture (Dexis, 2017). Training which explores the what, why and how must be provided with the technology utilizing interactive methods to ensure uptake. The best software represented in the literature are intranets and communities of practice, or online arenas where people are active to provide and receive information to do their jobs more effectively. However, even the most basic documentation system could be highly beneficial with leadership emphasizing its importance and usage.

Another key OL activity, which may use technology or not, is feedback loops. Numerous researchers highlight the importance of utilizing double and triple feedback loops, which means not only solving immediate problems or alleviating symptoms, but paying attention to the processes, assumptions and context that drive actions (GPSA, 2015; Dexis, 2017).

The outstanding challenge I see after completing the literature review, is how to get leadership and middle managers to care enough about learning and to hold staff accountable to engage and share knowledge. While the evidence is abundant, the majority of skills and qualities required are ambiguous relational or cognitive aspects, which do not fit easily into explicit training sessions or operational policies. This highlights the need to hire the right people, those who have high emotional intelligence and an interest in metaprocesses, or ‘thinking about thinking’- which allows for double and triple loop learning. Another tactic could be to create or enroll managers in external training that cultivates such tacit qualities.
In regard to culture, large power distance environments are not conducive to learning and should be countered with participatory decision-making and less hierarchical structures. This presents a potential problem as Hofstede asserted that all developing nations exhibit this dimension of national culture. Boateng and Agyemang (2015) hint at organizations taking on their own culture due to the mixing of many layers of culture residing in people.

**Research Methods**

In my exploratory research, I utilized a qualitative approach which included qualitative interviews to add practical voice to the reviewed research. This approach supports the aim of my paper to be a useful insight for management within NGOs. Interviews were conducted with 13 practitioners, four in the category of expert, or those who work in learning and KM capacities; and nine managers in the field offices of international NGOs, with one in an international social enterprise. Interview practitioners were selected as per convenience and purposive sampling according to basic criteria. Expert practitioners were working (or consulting) with NGOs or non-profit organizations in a learning capacity, such as Directors of Learning departments or learning/KM specialists. Field practitioners were managers, coordinators or country directors. Demographic details were not collected as my interest was to focus on their experiences, knowledge and opinions concerning the technical and practical areas of OL. Experts provided insights on organizational learning and related culture and change processes while the field managers had varied experience implementing learning initiatives and insights on the culture of their field offices. In total, six women and seven men originating from eight countries and currently working in nine countries were interviewed. The data from research and interviews was organized into emergent themes and analyzed utilizing an inductive approach; focusing on experiences and insights generated rather than on specific country or cultural contexts.
For interviews, I formed questions mainly in interpretive and ideal styles – trying to understand people’s knowledge, experiences and opinions and clarifying their meaning. I began by asking about the structures in place that support learning and branched into relational and cognitive aspects by referring to actions, behaviors and attitudes. In many cases, I preempted questions with basic explanations, as the concepts of OL are vast and I realized the need to ensure myself and the practitioner were ‘on the same page’.

As a field practitioner myself, my decisions for what and how to include information were based on providing field managers a comprehensive understanding of organizational learning and what aspects to consider as they implement such activities in their workplace. Therefore, while extensive theory is discussed, my purpose is practical. Data from transcribed interviews was divided into themes and emergent patterns from those themes were highlighted throughout this paper.

The limitation of the methodology is that it is not quantitative and cannot be easily generalized to a population. Those seeking to gain insights from this paper should note the interviews are a non-representative sample. This limitation is partly due to the fact that I wanted to soak up information regarding practical experience and also due to time constraints.

It is of note that some interviewed practitioners worked in emergency humanitarian contexts only while others in both humanitarian and development and others still, only development or consulting. This differentiation is not explicit in the findings, and may be seen as a limitation as the varying contexts may have impact on approaches and abilities to implement learning initiatives; a factor that was not thoroughly analyzed in this paper.
Findings

*Ask not what information other departments can provide to you. Ask what information you can provide to other departments.*

*JFK communication exercise*

The 13 semi-structured interviews were transcribed before being divided into themes. The themes were further dissected into the three aspects of learning (Figure 1), although in hindsight it is difficult to understand how discussions about experience can be neatly divided. In actuality, all three aspects could be identified in nearly any given experience shared from the practitioners. Regardless, relational and behavioral aspects of learning were most frequently discussed, especially in respect to existing structures and culture.

The purpose for OL was divided into staff support (skill and capacity building), programmatic support (efficiency or effectiveness) or programmatic design and strategy (improving development outcomes). There was a divide between those focused on learning for internal team improvement and those utilizing learning activities for external development outcomes.

**Structural**

Interviewed practitioners had wide-ranging interest and understanding of a variety of OL systems, the most common being knowledge exchange through emails or at structured meetings, followed by document filing systems. Field managers participated in or led online trainings, webinars, document filing, structured meetings, technical working groups, drives, intranets (e.g. Sharepoint), and creating e-learning modules for staff training. When discussing knowledge
sharing specifically, email and face-to-face was most common. Most stated Sharepoint as a site for documents and not regularly utilized. The comment, “We don’t really do this very well…” was repeated by more than half of the field managers.

One field manager is developing an e-learning system which teaches organizational systems and tools to new staff and budding project managers, an undertaking made after a cost benefit analysis. Interestingly, two practitioners explained that their organizations started this way, supporting staff and building their skills and knowledge, and now include learning for development, venturing into program implementation and outcomes.

Reasons for participation in these activities included organizational practice, donor requirements and belief in their use, as well as for cost and time-saving benefits. One respondent explained that his organization is currently putting a heavy emphasis on feedback mechanisms with beneficiaries as a means of accountability. However, this new emphasis is in direct response to pressure from donors on fraud and corruption, and therefore the focus is to catch such anomalies rather than be a regular, two-way learning exchange in the field.

Those part of self-proclaimed learning organizations (four out of 13) understandably had extensive research and support evident in the strategic direction of their learning activities. They also ascribed strong support from senior leadership, while those initiating learning activities individually stated strong support from someone in the organization, typically a direct supervisor. A field manager from the latter explained that there is no learning component propagated from HQ and no coordination between country offices, eluding to the point, “We are probably reinventing the wheel all over.” A positive side of this was the freedom and independence of field offices to do as they please.
Interestingly, one field manager was employed by a large, self-professed ‘learning organization’ but due to lack of interest from her immediate managers in the field, intense project deadlines and internet/electricity issues, the available systems are not utilized. The participant was also not familiar with OL besides obligatory meetings and infrequent lessons learned workshops.

One advice echoed by six practitioners to improve trainings and meetings was the understanding of adult learning and use of interactive methods. In one instance, a field manager anticipated attending a webinar with field staff about a useful learning resource from HQ. However, the webinar dryly showed how to navigate the manual of this learning resource without interactive elements, nor any connections as to how or why it could be useful to staff. The creation of a webinar is an example of how a structure for learning may be in place, but without regard to how that structure is utilized and received by its intended recipients, it likely will not have its intended effect and in the words of one expert, “Why would they be happy to do a halfwit job of their programs?” The same expert utilizes Kolb’s experiential learning cycle, a reflective cycle of adult learning, as the backbone of his training and learning activities.

**Relational/behavioral**

One expert consultant stated that he is often enlisted because managers want staff to be more engaged and buy into the mission of the organization. Other services offered by the experts ranged from supporting teams and individuals to be more skilled, effective, coordinated and knowledgeable through training; structured learning activities and technical support; performance improvement measures; technical assistance on effective learning for related project components; and finally, supporting feedback loops. The latter is a result of the organization’s evolution of intentional learning practices stretching back more than ten years prior. Supporting
feedback loops entails reviewing results of evaluations and other knowledge sharing processes within programs to ensure that strategies and programmatic design are taking into account feedback from the people they serve.

While research supports that a key relational aspect of OL is the ability for staff to collaborate and build upon another’s work, nearly every participant acknowledged the difficulty of some team members to accept and utilize this concept. Qualities described in field offices as inhibiting learning practices include the refusal to ask for help as it appears weak, the lack of urgency and accountability for getting work done, the desire to make everything from scratch because ‘made here, by us’ is better, deference to supervisors, intense sense of ownership and independence and the desire for formal communication channels. The latter was explained as inhibiting informal discussion and learning in the workplace. Positive enabling factors included a desire of staff to learn and gain skills, informal work environments and those who have naturally open, inquisitive attitudes.

**Cognitive**

One expert mentioned an OL activity that directly relates to the cognitive aspect of learning: a skills and expertise directory that attempts to explicitly track the implicit knowledge of people in an organization on a platform that staff access globally. Another expert confided that he would prefer to spend 60 per cent of his time on cognitive aspects, but instead typically spends 20 per cent, depending on requests from field offices.

Two experts and one field manager identified having informal ‘champions’ in field offices, people in varying roles who ‘get’ the idea of learning activities and are eager to participate and encourage others to do so. This is similar to Senge’s definition of internal networkers from the literature review (1996). The motivation for these champions was described
as either intrinsic to the person’s behavior, or as a result of knowing how engagement with such activities supports their work. An example shared was a teacher training project that included e-learning and interactive teaching components. The learning department of the NGO was utilized to inform best practices for that component of the project. This was not a requirement, but the will of the project manager who knew such consultation would improve its effectiveness. One expert’s advice was to identify these champions and find ways to work with them, no matter their position, as a way to sustain OL activities in field offices.

Intentional rewards and incentives for participation in learning activities was mentioned specifically by three practitioners. One expert explained that rewards ‘cement the adoption’ of learning activities while another explained that incentives can be extrinsic (reward and punishment) or intrinsic (such as autonomy or belonging), with the latter being more effective for sustained change. He added that having a larger meaning or purpose in one’s life contributes to the motivation to engage in the workplace.

A field manager explained that incentives used to promote learning through deliverables as a practice in her organization, though cautioning against ‘perverse incentives’. Her workplace implemented a job grade system, whereby certain requirements should be accomplished by staff before moving upward. One requirement was ‘content creation’, which caused staff to ‘reinvent the wheel’ and create new content instead of building and adapting previous content, just for the sake of moving upward in job grade.

**Cultural – Organizations and People**

One expert noted that while they have an entire department dedicated to learning and senior leadership declare they are a ‘learning organization’, they are weak in building a culture of learning, with basic information provided at new staff induction along with piles of other
information. Another expert, working at an evidently highly developed learning organization, stated that their learning culture was a ‘way of thinking’ that seemed to permeate throughout field offices. The same organization aligns their learning activities with their mission and values, according to the expert.

The culture of field offices was noted to be affected greatly by national culture as well as other factors, including the presence of a donor in-country, which makes the field office more accountable on a micro-level. Two field managers explained frustration in getting staff to collaborate and learn from each other’s work, attributing this challenge to differences in culture. Another manager noted the many cultural differences which may delay or cause issue in the workplace, saying that, “They all seem to be used to the way things function, even if it is not working.” The personality and preferences of a project and team manager sets the culture of that team. If that manager’s style is not conducive to that of learning, neither is his team’s.

To influence organizational culture, particularly in the field offices, one manager said he would begin by modeling the desired behavior and finding a senior staff who was receptive (perhaps a ‘champion’) and work with them. He would also give opportunities to lower level staff in response to any power distance and to encourage their growth.

A learning consultant offered his advice to managers to make it known that learning happens all the time, whether from positive or negative situations. He further provided that, “It is certainly a role for managers and leaders to take away the barriers that create the kind of pressure that people feel they don’t have a chance to work on anything more than daily tasks.” He concluded his advice that intentionality and experiential learning in the workplace are key.

One national field manager explained that when working with people ‘from the West’, time and speed is very important. On the other hand, in Africa and Asia, relationships matter
more than time and speed. “The way you relate is very important, the way you understand people and bring them into your office.” The field manager stated that over time, she adopted the importance for time and speed, learning from her supervisors and also from living abroad. However, she learned to combine the two approaches, stating, “I would combine time and speed with the human face- you don’t report human relations in donor reports. My expectations were clear to my team; the human face goes down, we deliver and then we go for coffee.”

Another national field manager explained that most expatriates he had worked with had extensive experience working in different cultures and were therefore more respectful and understanding. An expatriate field manager had a different experience in his organization. He also believes that the culture in his host country is ‘chats over tea’ and that many expatriates are too focused on professionalism, getting ahead and their personal lives to take part in the informal relationship building, to the detriment of team cohesion. Also mentioned in this regard was ‘exposure’, with both national and expatriate staff attributing better relations to staff that have had exposure outside their own culture and country, with one national field manager defining them as ‘globalized staff’. Exposure to different roles and different countries was repeatedly referenced in relation to good working relationships, ease of understanding new systems and team cohesion.

**Challenges and Solutions**

A challenge brought up repeatedly from field managers was the lack of understanding the purpose of software systems. Not only are internet and electricity a regular inhibitor of software systems in the field, but when they are implemented by HQ, there is lack of information about why staff should use it. “You have the tools but without information sessions on how to use them. I received an email saying I can use Yammer, but not why or how it is beneficial.” An
expert whose organization has very long-standing and advanced OL systems in place had a remedy for this. When implementing new systems, they have a gradual roll-out, “First, let the staff know it’s coming, get them excited about new features, then brown bags, larger presentations, then system people would offer to come to your team.” In addition, they have interactive trainings on Moodle for staff to refer to.

Beyond understanding the purpose of systems is the lack of accountability to use the systems. A country director explained that if the in-country office never utilized their organization’s global intranet, someone might follow up on this once or twice a year, particularly as the person who manages the system does so as only one-third of his job.

A method to ensure OL systems were appropriate for the field offices was conducted by one expert’s organization: they started with a global technical working group that engaged with staff, asking “What systems would support your work better?”; so the end products were implemented in direct response to requests from the field. Another way mentioned to ensure uptake of OL activities was to implement a package of activities and let teams choose which elements to utilize according to what helps them, allows them to demonstrate what they know and helps them connect and collaborate with others.

A downside to successful collaboration was noted by three practitioners. In very collaborative teams, it is sometimes hard to move forward as the team wants consensus from everyone and there may be some in disagreement, causing delays. This was also noted in the literature (Dexis, 2017).

A final challenge discussed was what we do with knowledge when it contradicts our thinking or actions. One field manager explained that when recent field data showed very ‘off’ results, rather than investigate why, the team spent time trying to rationalize it. “People say they
want information but when it criticizes past efforts they’ve been involved in, they become more closed.” He also acknowledged that maybe some staff have never experienced this kind of feedback and that these change processes take time.

**Discussion**

*There can be no knowledge without emotion. We may be aware of a truth, yet until we have felt its force, it is not ours. To the cognition of the brain must be added the experience of the soul.*

*Arnold Bennett*

**Exploring Organizational Learning**

It is clear that the methods of OL are complex and vast – it requires leadership to align a clear mission and values to identified learning initiatives, to hold people accountable for learning and to model the culture of learning. Without thoughtful, intentional due process to the three, mutually reinforcing aspects of learning, OL systems are likely to be ineffective or have varied uptake and unpredictable results. See Figure 2 for an example of a successful and unsuccessful implementation of communities of practice (CoP). Providing access to CoPs only addresses the structural aspect and further support is required for the CoP to serve its purpose. The figure shows how providing training on why and how CoPs are useful and encouraging participation affect understanding and acceptance from staff, while holding them accountable to engage and utilize feedback.

**Figure 2.** Communities of practice: successful and unsuccessful learning aspects
The varied activities and approaches implemented by the practitioners were always linked to some evident need; whether that need was impressed upon them by donors, evidenced by reoccurring problems in the workplace or poor development outcomes or whether leadership proactively intended the organization to be a learning one due to its evidentiary base.

The difference of a learning organization and organizational learning activities was apparent. It is certain that every field staff in every NGO practices some form of OL, even on the most structural level, as it is central to project cycles—particularly ‘lessons learned’. However, the difference was clear of those who implement static learning activities as related to required project tasks and those who learn consciously with intention, in whatever they do.

Those who were part of learning organizations described their OL practices as having intention and structure. This begged the question, *is it unarguably better to be a learning organization as opposed to implementing some OL activities?* I presume the answer ties back once again to the mission and values of the organization, with consideration also to size and available resources, as was noted by a participant from a small organization.

Organizations that only have structures in place may be missing the mark as well. The oft described explicit nature of most KM systems cannot address the realm of human behavior, or the tacit underlying values, attitudes and beliefs that drive behavior. These tacit factors are also the highest determinant of successful learning. Due to their ambiguity, these factors are usually given attention only as much as someone is interested in such human elements. As one expert explained, “Behavior is what matters. It drives actions.” A field manager noted the difficulty people have in identifying and sharing these implicit notions, stating, “When I speak to field staff, I can see the learning they experienced, but when I ask them to think about lessons learned and include them in reports, it is not recorded. It is hard for them to convey learning.”
These relational and cognitive aspects are important in project implementation as well. Table 1 lists significant examples across the learning aspects brought up in this study both in the literature review and interviews. The structural components enable the relational/behavioral actions to take place in a more intentional manner, while the cognitive aspects also drive actions. The middle column is where the learning takes place. In NGOs, the focus so often is on technical sectors and ensuring the most updated and optimal technical knowledge is applied in implementation. Yet, much of the work is related to learning and exchanging knowledge, such as trainings and capacity building programs. As one expert concluded, “We often go after the content expert, such as the HIV advisor, and not the learning professional who can say, ‘here’s the best method.’”

Table 1. Aspects of learning: practical examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural</th>
<th>Relational/Behavioral</th>
<th>Cognitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>social intranet</td>
<td>experiential learning practice (reflect, conceptualize, apply, act)</td>
<td>values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shared drives or ‘cloud’</td>
<td>identify ‘champions’ and work with them</td>
<td>beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>email</td>
<td>utilize intranet to provide/search information</td>
<td>motivations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>structured meetings</td>
<td>foster staff capacity through guidance and technical support</td>
<td>perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>webinars</td>
<td>seek out support and collaboration to build upon existing program materials</td>
<td>assumptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>training</td>
<td>informal discussions in the workplace</td>
<td>inquisitive thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e-learning systems</td>
<td>follow up with staff to use established resources</td>
<td>open-mind</td>
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<tr>
<td>best practices</td>
<td>provide constructive feedback</td>
<td>trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>lessons learned</td>
<td>evaluate actions and practices and change actions accordingly</td>
<td>metacognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strategies</td>
<td>systematic document naming and filing</td>
<td>growth mindset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communities of practice</td>
<td></td>
<td>understanding</td>
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</table>
Kolb’s research on experiential learning explains the cognitive aspect of learning which is far more complicated than providing information for consumption. Experiential learning follows a cycle of reflecting, conceptualizing, applying and then acting; similar to what development organizations call ‘action learning’ or ‘adaptive management’. Kolb explains that ‘deliberate experiential learning requires individual conscious metacognitive control of the learning process’ (2014, p. 338). Metacognition is defined as ‘the mind’s ability to reflect on itself and control its own process’ (Kolb, 2014, p. 338). During the literature review, I latched onto the three aspects of learning as a simple way to classify attitudes, behaviors, interactions and activities of OL, however during interviews my approach expanded and I added ‘behavioral’ to the relational aspect (see Figure 3). This addition accounted for all ‘action’, whether in relation to others or the individual. A field manager prompted this shift when he explained that at the start of his new position, colleagues and supervisors were too busy to meet with him, especially since he worked remotely. While he values collaboration and understands the benefit of knowledge exchange (cognitive aspect), the structures were lacking (meetings, interaction and access to more information) and he was unable to meet with colleagues or ignite an easy exchange. Instead, he “researched in every way I knew how- talking to people, initiating meetings with relevant people from other organizations, as well as using internet and online training.” What drove his learning process was his own behavior, as he took action to ensure he received the knowledge he need to do his job. Since behavior is action, just as human interactions are, I find it appropriate that relational and behavioral are one shared aspect. Figure 3 shows the visual connection between the mindset of staff, their actions and the support measures put in place that feed into the defined learning aspects. The key factors that determine mindset, action and support are drawn from the literature and interviews. Note
that support measures in place are an outcome of the marrying of resources with mission and vision.

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![Figure 3: Understanding the 3 aspects of learning](image)

To measure the impact of learning initiatives, it depends on the type of learning taking place. Programmatic learning is (or should be) already encapsulated in the project management cycle and evidenced by existing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, though it is worth noting that many organizations are upgrading their M&E systems to include a more reflexive learning approach. For internal learning, this will depend on the size of the organization and again, be based on the mission and values. Some practitioners noted tracking learning in staff performance evaluations while another in a large organization has specific learning outcomes which are measured by automated results on their intranet. As one researcher put it, the test for whether learning has taken place ‘lies in the extent to which the practice of the organization has actually improved’ (Taylor, 2002).

**Considering National Culture**

Studying Hofstede’s national culture dimensions in conjunction with learning research highlighted that traits related to high power distance, an inclination of all developing countries, inhibit learning. I wondered then, does national culture inhibit OL or adversely, are these
Western traits of a “learning” culture and so then, are we imposing Western values in national cultures? Now I understand that in an international organization dealing with so many staff and stakeholders (e.g. donors), cultures mesh to create a unique workplace culture. Even if the country's cultural dimension is high power distance, and some staff, national or expatriate, may exhibit that, for the most part, most staff behavior will fall somewhere in the middle as their personal cultures meld with those of others around them. I had been thinking in such distinct divisions- ‘this is my culture and that is your culture’, but whenever people come together, no matter where they are from, they have opportunity to learn and adapt, particularly in a sustained setting such as a workplace. Figure 4 shows how everyone has layers of culture and cultural dimensions within them, and as they come from each of their countries into the field office of one NGO, say in ‘Country E’, those many layers and dimensions mix, rather than staying distinctly separate. The degree at which cultures mix as staff interact over time in a workspace is of question and is an area for further research.

Figure 4. Visual of cultural amalgam in I-NGO field office
While the question of national culture, namely high power distance, inhibiting learning in the workplace was answered by the melding of cultures, this dynamic outside the realm of international organizations is an area for further research. Does high power distance, a cultural dimension found in all developing countries, hinder the learning process? This would be relevant to study in primary education as well as in government offices, among other environments. Particularly useful would be case study research conducted in-country by national researchers, for their perspective in this very Western-dominated field.

A mixed methods observational study of what enables OL, conducted over a longer timeframe in an organization, would also be insightful. Such a study would better explain cognitive and behavioral aspects of learning that are more implicit and therefore difficult to identify, discuss and even define.

**Permeation of Learning Systems in Field Offices**

Experts understandably have a greater insight to the cognitive and behavioral requirements for learning activities in the workplace. Whether they have the opportunity or resources to impress that upon staff, particularly field managers who are in their remote locations, is another consideration.

Learning initiatives are often driven from HQ where there is less immediate action (most often) as they support field offices whom are implementing. This distance provides more time to reflect, to see the bigger picture and to push learning agendas. There is a disconnect between HQ staff who can see this ‘bigger picture’ and why learning is so important; and the field staff who are under pressure from all angles as they try to ‘fight fires’ and implement projects with limited resources in challenging environments. For this reason, clarifying the purpose of OL activities is necessary.
Edwards highlights the sometimes contrary reality between HQ and field offices and asserts that learning at the grassroots level should be to ‘promote self-development and social and economic change’ rather than produce insights for HQ (1997, p. 243). A field manager noted that senior leadership often talks about the importance of learning and collaboration in the workplace, however it comes across as only a way to feel better about themselves as an organization and they do not want to dig deep into lessons for fear of hurting people’s feelings. This coincides with what Roper and Pettit say about learning organization theory: “it does not examine ‘deep structures’ and power inequities within organizations, [therefore it] is unlikely to have the transformative impact it aspires to” (2002, p. 262).

While the senior leadership of an organization should carefully consider mission and values alignment with whatever OL systems they decide to implement, so at the level of the field office should management decide which aspects of the OL systems are relevant, or can be made relevant to their context, all done with support and direction from HQ for accountability. Connections between HQ-based learning staff and field offices are vital to encourage regular use and participation in learning activities, with many practitioners stating that HQ learning staff send monthly reminders or utilize monthly bulletins to keep the knowledge exchange active.

Indifference to technology systems that support learning may be a symptom of limited resources. It could also be that whether funds could be made available or not, the culture of NGOs does not prioritize innovative technologies, as they have been noted to be behind the private sector in this regard. A practitioner explained that when he is consulted about technologies by senior managers, “I caution them from looking at technological solutions first and challenge them to look at what and why questions first. What are they trying to accomplish and why is this technology helpful? How will they use it?” That last point was brought up
several times, with field managers noting that there was little accountability to use the software systems in place and also that there were often internet and electricity barriers to using systems regularly anyway. Once again it is apparent that intention is key – investing in technology without first defining needs, considering context and tying it to organizational values can be a waste of structure and resources unless the relational and cognitive aspects of OL are considered.

Depending on the degree to which senior leadership desires to promote a learning organization, learning staff may collaborate with human resources to devise strategy that begins the search for ‘learning’ candidates at the hiring stage, or minimally adding learning culture components at the induction stage. This practice has been publicly noted, namely consulting firms (such as FSG) and those who profess to be a learning organization.

A model created from the analysis of qualitative interviews lays out the key people, documents and actions required for one method of successful implementation of an OL initiative in international NGOs, seen in Appendix A. Note the horizontal structure which ensures adequate input from all stakeholders for adoption to the field level. The responsibility of relational and cognitive contributions lies with senior leadership and management, as they model behaviors and set intention. Leading the charge is a technical working group, which, noted from two experts interviewed, is a highly effective way to spread responsibility, accountability and relevance across stakeholders. Once a package of OL practices is developed, further training and support is required to ensure adoption. An exhaustive list of recommendations garnered from interviews is found below in Table 2.
### Table 2. Recommendations for implementing organizational learning systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Senior Leadership</th>
<th>Field Managers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decide how much of a learning organization to be</td>
<td>Consider context and align OL systems accordingly; allow staff flexibility according to preference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Align OL systems, including technology, to mission, vision of organization and allow flexibility for field managers to align to context</td>
<td>Have program directors/managers pay attention to when learning expertise is required in projects activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider focusing on internal systems first, before perfecting and branching out</td>
<td>Ensure adequate support at HQ level, with specialists according to size and resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure adequate support at HQ level, with specialists according to size and resources</td>
<td>Have a dedicated staff at HQ look at ‘how the wheel is being reinvented’ within the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a dedicated staff at HQ look at ‘how the wheel is being reinvented’ within the organization</td>
<td>Decide how learning will be tracked at personal level (performance reviews), project level (dynamic M&amp;E) and organizational level (automated indicators on intranet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decide how learning will be tracked at personal level (performance reviews), project level (dynamic M&amp;E) and organizational level (automated indicators on intranet)</td>
<td>Build personal connections between staff of different offices whenever possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build personal connections between staff of different offices whenever possible</td>
<td>Utilize a global technical working group for creation and improvement of OL systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize a global technical working group for creation and improvement of OL systems</td>
<td>Ensure use of interactive, adult learning methods for internal staff and external beneficiary learning</td>
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</table>

### Senior Leadership & Field Managers

- Create an HR strategy to recruit people with OL-conducive qualities (open-minded, inquisitive, etc.)
- Ensure appropriate feedback mechanisms for staff and communities served are in place, utilizing double and triple loop learning in their creation and analysis (what kind of feedback is needed; what is the purpose; how will it be utilized; who is driving this activity? Are we doing it for the right reasons?)
- Provide training for any OL initiatives including not only usage, but purpose - *why it is important?*
- Model behavior
  - Explore intrinsic rewards for OL participation (autonomy, belongingness, etc.)
  - Thoughtful intentional conscious
  - Discuss adaptive management with donors to map out receptiveness to dynamic action
  - Cultivate and encourage champions/internal networkers
- Further research is needed to understand how to measure the impact of learning activities – in the workplace for its internal benefits, as well as externally for evidence of how OL improves development outcomes. As resources are increasingly limited and many OL activities take more time and thought to undertake, it is important to evidence whether these OL principles are one management approach of many, or a critical element of a successful organization. There
is also very little qualitative research undertaken with national staff of field offices, who make up the majority of staff in most NGOs, to understand the dynamics of culture and power and how it affects their ability and willingness to learn and share knowledge.

**Conclusion**

The presented insights into organizational learning may be most useful as an introductory guide for field managers and senior leadership in organizations that have yet to consider the intentional switch to a ‘learning organization’ or who struggle with the change required to support organizational learning. While it is not vital for managers to master metacognition, understanding basics of adult learning and interactive learning methods, or being aware to know when expert consultation may be necessary is crucial for ensuring that the aims of learning are met. Another vital understanding for managers is the dynamic of culture in the workplace.

Organizational culture, defined as the collective behavior of staff and their values, beliefs and objectives, is the highest determinant of successful learning in organizations. While national culture is highly influential in the workplace, staff interactions create an amalgam of culture that emerges from their collective layers and dimensions. Leadership and management can influence culture by modeling behavior and upholding accountability.

This study has shown me that intentional, participatory management practice is the backbone of understanding organizational learning and how it may be implemented. Alignment with an organization’s mission and values as well as the relevance and appropriateness of the practices are crucial initial considerations. Once a package of learning is implemented, the ability of senior leadership to model the culture and put accountability measures in place will determine the extent to which the practices permeate throughout their field offices.
References


Appendix A: Organizational Learning Uptake Model
Appendix B: Sample Starter Questions from Practitioner Interviews

1) Tell me about your role and what your work entails

2) How do staff access and/or know about these [learning] services?

3) What type of staff utilize your services?

4) Who holds staff accountable to use these [learning] services?

5) [Discussing structural, relational/behavioral and cognitive aspects of learning] – what do you (or your organization) spend the most time on? Why?

6) Does your current work involve any of the [learning] practices I have just described?
   Explain which learning activities you are involved with, or one in detail?

7) Who is the driving force for these activities to happen?

8) What learning activities do you push for your staff as a manager?

9) What are some challenges you face with getting staff to share knowledge?

10) [speaking of large power distance in their workplace] If you were put in charge, how would you minimize the negative effects of large power distance in the workplace?