

Learning Interventions

Learning interventions help people to experiment with renewal and to learn from that. I will first discuss developing and stimulating new behaviour through setting up learning processes and developing leadership. Then, I will talk about how workshops help people to get experimenting with renewal and to learn with each other from this how things can be different and better. Exchanging knowledge and experience is given shape further in learning communities, twinning and knowledge circles. Exchanging experiences helps others to start experimenting themselves with renewal. That is the case with the last two interventions as well: distributing learning experiences and sharing experiences widely.

Creating Learning Environments

To improve market-oriented innovations, 3M launched a leadership development programme, an intensive 17-day course in which forty employees from different divisions and backgrounds participated each time. The participants were identified and nominated by their managers from among their top performers. Participants in this programme spent the first seven days on leadership skills. The next 10 days were based on action learning, where the participants worked in

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teams on real problems faced by the company. These problems were selected by executives and involved different situations that could range from improving utilization of resources to increasing a particular business unit or breakthrough innovations. The teams were multi-disciplinary and the participants were expected to come up with solutions to these problems and share them with top management at the end of the training. If top management accepted the solutions provided by the participants, the company implemented them. The facilitators and trainers were 3M's own executives as well as some outside experts. One of the 3M trainers in the programme praises this approach: "A commitment of 17 days to development and training on leadership to take the company to the next level is phenomenal. You don't see many other corporations having that kind of ongoing level of commitment for so many young potentials for such a long time. It testifies to 3M's focus on developing a new generation of leaders in the company."¹

Setting up learning processes involves offering a learning space in which the people concerned can exchange experiences, reflect on them and learn from them. Learning environments that are based on action learning are proposed as particularly suitable for management and professionals, as they enable each person to reflect on and review the action they have taken and the learning points that arise. Action learning is an educational process whereby the participant studies their own actions and experience in order to improve performance. Learners acquire knowledge through actual actions and repetitions rather than through traditional instruction. Action learning is done in conjunction with other people in small groups called "action learning sets."²⁻⁴ The arrangement of a learning environment takes into account the cognitive and social relationships that develop during the learning process and offers space to activities that contribute to cultural renewal. Setting up learning processes is a powerful intervention in cultural change if the learning processes go deeper than just behaviour and the learning processes also affect entrenched behavioural patterns and underlying assumptions. If that happens, the learning process can evoke a lot of emotion. Then, the art is in continuing to examine imperturbably what the learning process is doing and where the emotions come from. One disadvantage of this intervention is that it requires a large investment of time from the people concerned.

The following rules of thumb are available for setting up learning processes:⁵

- Find out what the next development step of the company can be that chooses for a learning process. Is this a step in the known world or is it precisely about entering an unknown world?
- Define who the participants are in the learning process and what their role is in that learning process. Estimate how much time they have available to invest in learning.
- Investigate who the relevant partners are for cooperating with and involving in the learning process. Explore and negotiate the specific contributions that the partners want to make to the learning process and share with others.
- Find out what is already happening in the area of renewal and learning and which tensions are occurring and which ambitions play a part.
- Make a conscious choice of the physical spaces in which the learning will occur. Will that be at the business premises of the participating companies or outside of them? Which technology can be used in the learning process to stimulate learning?
- Take time to think about the formation of groups and learning teams. What is the best size, where are the boundaries of diversity and what is the position of smaller groups in the greater whole? How is the communication in and between the groups facilitated?
- Discuss the roles teachers and supervisors will have in the learning process and how these teachers are connected to the important issues in the learning pathway. What is a stimulating balance between theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge and usable methods?
- Determine how new language can be introduced that opens up new perspectives, brings new possibilities of acting within sight and creates different patterns of interaction.
- Consider how new pictures of the future can arise and be envisioned. How can possible futures be made discussable in the company and be brought up for discussion in the relationship with suppliers, buyers, customers and other interested parties?
- Consider how obstacles can be removed and extra space created to discover new roles and try out methods and experiment with new strategies.
- Consider how learning experiences are linked to the daily work practice and the practical acting and how the effects can pass on to others.

Investing in Leadership Development

KPN is losing too many good managers and it is unclear for “high potentials” what KPN intends for them. The Human Resources (HR) department reports this problem and wants to train the best managers within KPN and link them to an optimal job within KPN. The department sets the objective of doubling the leadership quality in four years’ time and making this quality improvement visible in the KPN organization. It starts a “Leadership Pipe Line” to recruit, keep and develop good people for KPN.

Gradually, a leadership programme is introduced for all managers. All managers are assessed: their position with regard to the six core qualities of KPN is examined. There is also 360° feedback on the basis of six people from the professional environment. A trajectory is started for the top 100 managers to support them in leadership development. There are four targeted activities in the trajectory:

Succession planning: Top management asks itself twice yearly: Who would be a good successor for me? This is how a successor is ready for every management position. Job vacancies are filled in a more structured, more transparent way and on the basis of more objective criteria through the input of HR.

People review: Once yearly, the managers of the divisions discuss the complete group of potentials: What has the progress of the potential been, what are his assessments like and what would be a good next position? HR facilitates this process so that decisions are based on facts and not on opinions. This transforms the competition to get the good people into an open dialogue about how they can ensure together that the leadership at KPN improves as a whole.

Academy: Potentials are given support in their development through master classes, assignments, skills training and career counselling. Each potential is assigned an internal mentor. The development of talent runs along two lines: craftsmanship and leadership. The result is that space is created for leaders in professions and that more professionals take up management positions. The specific attention for potentials means a drop in the turnover of highly qualified workers who are needed in the future to occupy leadership positions.

Performance dialogue: What is at stake in discussions between managers and employees is the question: How do I get my people from Good to Great? Managers follow training sessions to hold motivational talks that ensure that their employees take the initiative and take steps. The performance dialogue teaches managers a different style of managing and communicating. This involves a challenging “performance conversation,” from an appreciative attitude that brings out the strong sides of a potential.

After four years, the HR director can observe: “With the help of the ‘Leadership Pipe Line’, we are succeeding increasingly more in holding real conversations with employees. This enables them to develop towards excellence and form excellent teams that keep KPN on its feet. If the discussions successfully target the pursuit of excellent performance, then as far as I am concerned, you are close to the Holy Grail.”

Leaders are the bearers of culture. This means that developing leadership is a long-term intervention for shaping and adjusting a culture. Leadership development can be given shape in many ways, such as setting up learning processes or offering a coherent career programme. The preceding example clearly describes the elements and steps that can make up a programme for leadership development.

Offering Workshops

At Youth Format, the initiators in Exemplary Youth Care are provided support in the shape of a workshop. This workshop runs in parallel with their work on the case and hooks up with the personal ambitions and motives. The concrete details of the workshop depend on the themes and questions that the initiators encounter during their work. They are questions like “How can I get from a desire to real action in practice?” and “How can I inspire colleagues to supply a part to my idea or start an idea themselves?” These overlapping questions and themes form the basis of the design of the workshops. The workshops all have a similar structure. There is always

an introduction concerning the contents of the chosen theme, given by an expert. Participants then get to work on the theme practically in groups. At every workshop, participants are always asked to show, using an example from real life, how they contend with the theme in their ideas. This ensures that there is always a connection with the practice of the participants and participants are given the opportunity to learn from each other's experiences. The five managers at Youth Format are invited to the workshop and one of the members of the Board of Directors concludes the workshop. The presence of managers and board ensures that the ideas also remain linked up on a strategic level.

Workshops are based on action-oriented learning.⁶ Learning takes place at and in the work and is done by people who cooperate and learn from each other through that cooperation. One advantage of workshops is that the learning environment does not compete with time and attention for the work. It helps in performing concrete assignments in the job better. Through solving problems, people learn how those problems arise and are linked and how they can solve problems. This has a motivating effect and is favourable for giving the learning process depth. A possible drawback of workshops is that the knowledge gained is bound to a context, experiences gained often remain implicit and thus difficult to share with people who are not participants. This intervention is only possible if people are highly committed and prepared to learn with and from each other.

Characteristics of workshops are:

- Use concrete issues in the work as a starting point and link them to the knowledge, ideas, concepts, contacts and tools that can be useful.
- Connect to the things that professionals are concerned about and how they do their work and use their experiences.
- Make space for experimenting outside of the existing working methods, procedures and networks and learning from this.
- Ensure that people learn and reflect together and that space is built in to exchange experiences and meanings.
- Consider experiences gained and knowledge developed as context-related and not amenable for generalizing to other situations without further ado.

- Take the time to reflect on entrenched patterns and underlying values that steer the behaviour and give it a direction.
- Invest in transforming implicit knowledge into explicit knowledge and in the dissemination of knowledge to colleagues in your own company and partner companies.

Developing Communities of Practice

Arcadis starts a transnational strategy in which it links local knowledge and entrepreneurship with worldwide knowledge and expertise. This means that sharing knowledge is a strategic spearhead. It is about building international knowledge networks. “Communities of Practice” or knowledge communities are formed with people who have expertise in a certain field. People from different countries meet each other to exchange practical knowledge. The idea behind this is that people will only cooperate if they know each other. Arcadis forms “Centers of Excellence” that bundle knowledge in specific fields of expertise. The “Global Knowledge Network” supports the exchange of knowledge and sharing of practical experiences. “If a colleague asks a question, that is one of the first requests or messages that you answer. Willingness to link with each other and the kick you get from together finding the right person in just a few hours. Willingness to learn, offering help, that is what it is about.”

Knowledge communities, or “communities of practice,” are specific learning environments in which people with the same profession develop their professional expertise, share knowledge and give meaning to and derive it from their work practices. Knowledge communities contribute to cultural development through the exchange and sharing of knowledge.⁷ This intervention supports the exchange of professional knowledge in extensive networks. One disadvantage is that these knowledge communities do not always respect organizational boundaries so that knowledge can easily be leaked. Such networks are also quite casual and often temporary. To overcome these drawbacks, a company can set up the knowledge communities around professional knowledge or specific fields of knowledge.

Communities of practice involve⁷

- A community of people who look for each other because they have and share a common field of expertise that they stand by and go for.
- People who give meaning to being a member of their community of practice and give identity to it and derive identity from it.
- A community of professionals who want to develop further and in which the members themselves undertake activities to organize this.
- People who are aware of the meaning they have and who realize they can realize their commitment better by sharing knowledge.

Activating Learning Circles

InAxis organizes all kinds of learning interventions to increase the chance of success with experiments. These learning interventions come in different shapes and sizes: an expert meeting, a “peer assist,” reflection by a scientist, the efforts of influential directors to create space on a policy level or to smooth a difficult administrative process. Employees of InAxis are always willing to step up and stand up for an experiment if the experiment owner requests that. A special learning intervention is the innovation patent and the corresponding learning circles. An innovation patent is presented to a successful experiment, whereby the Committee believes that the diffusion and adoption of that experiment deserve extra stimulus. The deal is as follows: The innovator is awarded € 1000 for each organization that takes up the innovation. To that aim, the innovator organizes at least one introduction meeting at which the concept is explained. Organizations that want to take over the innovation can then participate in a learning circle, a kind of intervention, during their own implementation. The idea behind the learning circles is that successful innovations that relate to the method of organization cannot be ready-made products for the people who want to adopt them. The contexts differ too strongly for that. InAxis considers them as a kind of semi-finished product and the learning circles enable participants to translate the innovations to their own situations.

The learning circles of InAxis resemble the communities of practice described earlier with the difference that the learning circles cross organizational boundaries and can take widely varying forms. In addition, learning circles use innovative methods such as the innovation patent. They thus stimulate the diffusion of innovations. Learning circles can be regarded as a mix of consultation and intervision between people from different organizations. The aim is for companies to take over innovations from each other by sharing insights and helping each other if there are barriers. It is essential that the adapting party take responsibility for their own innovation process. Without willingness for mutual efforts, learning circles quickly turn into meetings without obligation that do not offer a future. In order to prevent this lack of commitment, it can help to make clear agreements in advance about the number of meetings and the method of support that will be offered.

Activities for getting a learning circle going are:

- Make innovations widely known through as many channels and networks as possible and bring potential adopters together in a small setting.
- Make clear that innovations are only semi-finished products and that it is necessary to apply innovations in one's own situation.
- Besides attention to the actual innovation, also pay attention to the process of innovation and the introduction of the innovation.
- Work on trust between the people in the learning circle and the willingness of the innovator to share knowledge and experience unselfishly.
- Address the adaptive capabilities of the people who are open to the innovation and their willingness to tailor the innovation to their own work practice.
- Emphasize new insights and skills that can lead to different behaviour and that can result in a different view of reality.
- Take risks to bring the innovation into practice and the willingness, with the help of the innovator, to remove obstacles that hold the innovation back.

Initiating Twinning

The Immigration Service starts a collaboration with the Social Security Service to learn from each other. Because the companies are similar, this learning process has the name "Twinning." It is a good term for twin companies that want to win together by learning from

each other. The intention of the twinning is to share knowledge and experience about business operations in an open dialogue. The Social Security Service is similar as far as work processes are concerned. The organization also works with large data files and also grapples with problems that resemble the issues facing the Immigration Service. The solutions found by the Social Security Service can therefore be instructive for its Immigration Service partner. Through cooperation and the possibility of looking around at the twinning partner, the importance of a better service and steering according to timeliness gets through to the employees. One of the ideas that comes out of the communal learning experiment is taking over the quality monitoring system. The Social Security Service developed this system a few years earlier because the service at the bank left a lot to be desired. The project leader of the twinning partner supports the Immigration Service in the introduction. The system quickly results in the adjustment of the advisory sheet that municipalities send along with an application for family reunification. The municipalities often did not fill in the old advisory sheet properly. Now, municipalities are guided step by step through the complicated legislation. This results in significantly fewer problems, fewer errors and faster handling of applications. This experience contributes to the awareness of the customer for people of the Immigration Service.

The aim of twinning is to promote learning between organization through mutual cooperation and exchange of information. Learning back and forth is only possible if the partners have a good view of what can be learned through the cooperation, if they trust each other and are willing to share knowledge. Twinning is only successful if the necessity of cooperation is significant and if parties know what each other's stronger and less well developed sides are. Showing your weaker sides makes you vulnerable, and therefore requires a great deal of trust between the partners in the cooperation. The cooperating organizations must first develop this trust and that needs a lot of contact and the necessary patience. Trust can be damaged if a company runs off with the knowledge and skills of the other company. Friction and conflicts can arise in the learning process that block the process or damage the relationship. If twinning is to be effective, it requires careful alliance management.

Elements of Twinning as a cultural intervention are:

- A temporary cooperation construction that, definitely in the initial phase, will deliver surprising insights and new viewpoints.
- A cooperative arrangement in which both partners acquire ideas outside of their own solution frameworks and with which they can improve their own functioning.
- A platform for people on the operational level for looking in depth into what is important outside of their own organization and thus gaining a perception of their own entrenched patterns and idiosyncrasies.
- Communal use of tools and technological systems through which work patterns and underlying value patterns can change.

Distributing Learning Experiences

Almost all of the initiators at Youth Format achieve success in the case they adopted. Their success stories provide insight into how professionals take the space to work on exemplary youth care. They share their stories on the intranet under a special item, so that colleagues in the rest of the organization can also use them and build further on the knowledge and experience of others. By presenting the successes as jewels, the stories become something that employees at Youth Format can be proud of. Sharing and distributing these success stories contributes to the initiatives for renewal coming to life more and more in the organization. New people feel challenged to take up the quest for renewal. A continual process of strategic renewal comes about that takes place in the entire organization and that also affects professionals and directors of partner organizations.

Distributing learning experiences works in several directions as a cultural intervention.⁸ It gives the initiators strength to hold on to the success won in their case and keep their network on its feet. In sharing success, they remain enthusiastic themselves, and they pass this enthusiasm on to others. They stimulate others in their own organization to do the same and take the initiative. Professionals from partner organizations are also invited to cooperate in new working methods. Gradually, a continuing movement of

professionals comes about who work on breakthrough renewal. A condition of success for this renewal is good teamwork between professionals, managers and directors. The often difficult relationship between these players receives a positive new impulse from the successes in the work practice. Those successes also have an external meaning. In groups in the outside world, more positive pictures of the quality of the service and the social meaning of the company grow. Distributing learning experiences on the basis of successes does not cost much and is an extremely effective intervention for developing new work practices and values.

There are several lines of approach to distributing learning experiences as a cultural intervention:

- Making learning experiences explicit means that increasingly more knowledge develops within the organization about the way innovative initiatives can result in success.
- Stories about positive experiences and results contribute to professional pride and to the activation of professional values that guide acting.
- The learning experiences contribute to shared giving of meaning to what is important in the company and what deserves attention.
- Successful learning experiences inspire others to also take meaningful initiatives that result in renewal of service and the underlying values.
- Discussing learning experiences gets a discussion going between professionals, managers and directors about what important values are in the organization and when those values obstruct the professional execution of the work.

Sharing Successes

Modern employment practices and a dynamic vitality are attributed to the Consultancy Group. The advisors spread their perceptions and working methods because they work for more than one service. When they go to work for a different service after four years, they take along with them new perspectives and they share their experiences. The Municipality of Amsterdam commissions a study into the success of the group. The municipality wants to spread the positive experiences of the group further through this study. The study results in a booklet

with nine inspiring lessons. The lessons give answers to the questions of how authorities find people and talents and which culture is required to give people the space to realize their ambitions and work on an innovative government. Other authorities use the booklet as a source of inspiration. Besides the booklet with lessons, the Consultancy Group also organizes congresses about its learning experiences and customs.

Sharing successes as an intervention contributes to pride and self-confidence. Successes are positive experiences that nurture learning communities and they produce stories and enthusiasm that in turn can spread through networks. These networks are not static but are in movement themselves as well. New relationships are always being started and people get relocated. People take the positive experience they gained with them when they move to different locations. That means that renewal partly comes from one's own networks in an organization, definitely if that organization is larger and has all kinds of subcultures. Experiences and underlying values find their own way if they are linked to successes, positive experiences and inspiring stories.⁹

The effectiveness of this intervention can be increased if the following matters are given some attention:

- It is good to tell success stories in different ways, to have different people tell them, at different locations and using different means, such as booklets, videos, conferences, lectures and the like.
- Getting people and networks together requires initiative and effort on the part of network leaders and people who play an intermediary role in more than one network.
- It is essential to make the value of the experiences clear and to fit in with the perceptions of others for this aim.
- Success stories spread more easily than methods, techniques, protocols or successful practices. Stories about successes offer inspiration and evoke curiosity.

Cultural renewal can be risky. If you are considering taking up a role in it, you want to weigh up the experiences of others. Presenting the cultural interventions in this part is one way of sharing successes to inspire others and encourage them to take the initiative.

Notes and References

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