Organizational learning in European Solidarity Corps project (ESC)

Imagine your organization as a human being that adopts its own values and behavior, interacts with others, creates its daily routines and develops an organizational brain.

Let's say that the organizational brain is a "breathing mechanism" which creates its own values and behaviors based on its daily routine. The way we handle all processes every single day will define the behavior of our organization. The values of the organization are defined by the most frequently repeated patterns. Therefore, it is really important **to be aware** which values and what kind of behavior each organization is developing in its day to day activities. In this article, we examine how to **increase behavior awareness** of organizations involved in ESC Projects in order to help such organizations increase their learning capabilities and improve their work.

Organizational learning represents a relatively new field of study which has been attracting much attention over the past few decades. Knowledge is now considered as a valuable asset and the way organizations gather, create and manage knowledge is a crucial factor for achieving their goals. Barbara Levitt and James G. March provide three different observations related to organizational learning:

- "Behavior of an organization is based on routines"
- "An organization's actions are history-dependent"
- "Organizations are target-oriented" – their behavior depends on the alignment between their aspirations and actual outcomes.

In this respect, project management and coordination of tens of projects would benefit from certain steps, including:

- Development of an organizational memory policy
- Identification of knowledge-related processes and implementation of evaluation mechanisms
- Enabling people to communicate and share knowledge, ideas and record them
- Leveraging technology to support these processes and finding effective tools
- Taking actions

Organizational memory policy: Most NGOs understand the importance of this and focus on creating, gathering, managing, sharing and using knowledge. Good knowledge management supports growth and fosters innovation.

Organizations that underestimate the importance of this step may face serious difficulties in the future as they will not be able to leverage their full learning potential. For each process within an ESC project and for each project, an organization should have an easy and effective process of keeping and sharing knowledge. This will prove invaluable to preserve knowledge when people leave the organization, to accelerate onboarding of newcomers, as well as to foster continuous learning within the organization.

Each ECS project comprises multiple processes. What really helps is to formally describe all the processes to **identify the current routines, asses** each process and seek potential improvements in collaboration with all NGO members. Here are two common initial processes:

1. Development of an ESC project idea

The new ESC program calls for a greater impact of volunteer projects on communities. Try to brainstorm with local and international partners and NGO staff to see what initiative you could pursue. Our organization reached out to the community to identify issues where we could provide assistance. We held meetings with school directors, youth workers and sport clubs to find opportunities to organize community based projects while supporting volunteer learning outcomes. We **discussed our needs** with the partners who were subsequently

able to join, support an guide us. Obviously, communication with the right people helps a lot in this process and expressing the need helps even more.

2. Finding partners and developing the project

Do you have your own database of contacts with websites and profiles of potential partners? We do. Once we had an idea for the project, it was easy to identify the most suitable partners in our database. We were looking for sports organizations that could help with children sports trainings, since our ESC community project will be focused on supporting volunteers teaching children play rugby, which is a new sport in Kosovo. Without the database that we had built over the time, we would have had to use the ESC database. However, it makes everything easier if you know your partners and they know you. Preparing the application form and developing the project will be much easier once you have defined your objectives and know who and what you can rely on.

There are some other processes to carry out after the project has been approved:

- finding and selecting volunteers;
- finding and selecting mentors;
- finding and booking accommodation;
- definition of tasks and responsibilities among ESC actors;
- defining a method to asses if the desired impact on the society has been achieved;
- providing room and support for the volunteers' own initiative;
- resolving conflicts and difficulties;
- supporting volunteer integration into the local community;
- helping the volunteer with practicalities, such as local medical care;
- mentoring and provision of necessary materials;
- communication with ESC volunteers and stakeholders;
- project promotion;
- evaluation and feedback etc.

Every organization should feel free to add or remove any process based on its specific needs. Nevertheless, it is really helpful to create a list of applicable processes, analyze them and brainstorm over them with your team and stakeholders.

As you can see, everything is about managing processes, **and once you have a process, there is always a possibility to improve and create better routines**. Make sure you have specified and implemented rules for each process as well as evaluation methods that will help you improve the process.

Each process involves interaction among **different people**. That is why it is very important to understand their respective roles in the processes. The organization also needs to make sure that relevant knowledge has been transmitted to other people in the organization, including local volunteers. This will stimulate creation of new knowledge and help everyone to be included in the processes and better understand their role in the project.

In order to facilitate sharing of information and knowledge, it is necessary to create conditions that will support interactions among the stake holders:

There are many different options to facilitate sharing of knowledge, from creating a common coffee space in the office to organizing common lunch breaks and free-time activities with people within and outside the organization to staying actively in touch with partners. Such activities deliver multiple significant benefits.

Learning occurs on different levels and interaction among people in the organization supports sharing of knowledge. Common activities and interactions can help reduce stress, overcome obstacles and understand what is going well and where there are issues that need to be addressed. You will also be able to receive informal feedback from different sides, which will provide valuable insight and improve your awareness of the situation.

Structuring daily activities in an ESC project properly is crucial for its successful implementation. Pay attention to the fundamentals – if all members of the team know their roles and responsibilities and if they attend daily meetings. Think what you can do to bring positive energy throughout the work schedule, how to motivate volunteers and how to enable them to actively contribute. Also, be aware of what may kill their motivation. All aspects matter: how long or short coffee breaks are, how you assign tasks and responsibilities, how you respond when someone reports a problem or concern, how you determine the needs of volunteers and your organization in ESC projects, how you translate them into specific activities etc. Basically, the structure of the activities should be aligned with the needs of both the volunteer and the organization. If the volunteers wish to learn how to promote the activities on social media and this is in line with the needs of the hosting organization, then a common plan should be developed. A good plan will specify tasks, responsibilities, expected outcomes, learning objectives, reporting including timing and structure, etc.

Defining organizational values and setting the priorities facilitate the development of a great organizational behavior. In our organization, we observe several fundamental values, such as: "family comes first", "people matter more than anything else", "do at least one good deed every day", "if you are stuck, there is always someone who will help you proceed", "there are no problems, only issues to resolve".

It is your approach and daily routines that will define your organizational behavior at the end of the day. Knowing your volunteers and staff better and increasing their awareness of the routine will boost your organization's learning capabilities.

However, nothing will improve by itself. **You need to take action** and make your way forward step by step. No feedback or lesson learned can be beneficial unless appropriate action is taken. Your ability to apply available knowledge in day-to-day operations will determine the pace of your progress and the success of your projects.

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