

Challenging Development Practice through Innovative Approaches to Leadership

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Problem Statement

*Ultimately, we have to acknowledge that it is not our methods, strategies, tools or techniques which define the core and quality of our development practice, but ourselves – our past, our present and our future, and the will we can find to face these. Isn't this the process that we are so often called upon to facilitate in others?
(Reeler 2001 – CDRA)¹*

Lasting social change depends upon the ability of people to help shape the policies that affect their lives. Yet for many, barriers to meaningful participation in civic and political life persist. Sustainable development requires that we breakthrough these barriers. Unfortunately, development practitioners, despite the best of intentions, often inadvertently worsen the situation by replicating traditional power relationships in their work rather than creating more enabling and participative development relationships.

The underlying issue is that the values, attitudes and beliefs that shape how Cambodian development facilitators approach their work, act as significant and foundational barriers to forming empowering relationships that would enable communities to develop their capacities to have greater control over their lives. What are needed are innovative approaches to capacity building that would enable development facilitators to become more conscious of their practice and to challenge conventional development wisdom.

VBNK's innovative approaches to leadership development seek to work with development practitioners to promote their personal growth by uncovering the values, assumptions and power dynamics implicit in their development practice. Impact studies have shown that such personal change supports organisational change and ultimately leads to new approaches to social development work that allow the power dynamics, cultural barriers and issues of past trauma to be challenged and redressed to better facilitate sustainable and empowerment-based development.

An assumption central to VBNK's approach to leadership development is that development facilitators will be more effective in bringing about positive and lasting change within the communities they serve if their work is not constrained by the demands of a 'blueprint project cycle' but is focused on building enabling and participative relationships and analysing and responding to the socio-cultural contexts in which they work. This requires that:

- They work through a process of self development, values clarification, team building and trust building and explore how to apply their learning to their work.
- They are given tools, skills and confidence (space, safety and permission) to challenge the hierarchical leadership models that constrain participatory development and to respond to issues of importance to the communities where they work.

¹ "Unlearning – facing up to the real challenge of learning" by Doug Reeler, Community Development Resource Association (CDRA), 2001.

The Development Context

During the last decade, the Royal Government of Cambodia's economic policy agenda has been guided by the Rectangular Strategy. The core of the Strategy is good governance focused at four reform areas: anti-corruption; legal and judicial reform; armed forces reform; and public administration reform, including decentralisation. The Government's stated aim of decentralisation is to strengthen local, participatory democracy and reduce poverty.

Donors and NGOs also see decentralisation as an opportunity for poverty reduction and for leveraging development aid to improve governance. But while the Government and international donors alike have significantly invested in promoting a good governance paradigm, a great number of historical, political, and cultural patterns run counter to its realisation.

Most significantly, the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) systematically shattered social and family structures. The result was the destruction of almost all social bonds outside of the immediate nuclear family, with an extreme distrust of individuals and institutions alike rising in the general population. Since then, neo-patrimonial bureaucracies have embedded themselves in the governance culture, and the civil service is intent on the accumulation of authority, social status, wealth and other personal resources.

These, and other historical influences, have significantly shaped Cambodia's development environment. They have left Cambodians feeling generally suspicious of change. Not surprisingly, Cambodians have come to exhibit extreme cautiousness in public activities, and a general fear of speaking up or stepping out of the bounds of accepted practice. This fear, coupled with traditional conformist and 'face saving' behaviours, has resulted in a tendency for self-monitoring activities and risk avoidance.

Unfortunately, some of the traditional expectations of Cambodia's patron-client hierarchy and authoritarian systems of leadership are replicated within development work. A main area of concern is that interventions into situations of injustice and poverty are not empowering communities to break out of patterns of the past. Nor are they enabling communities to develop their capacities to have greater control over their lives. Rather they encourage gratitude and reinforce an expectation that those who have knowledge, resources and power should give advice, manage and control.

Practitioners tend to see their own development process as separate to the one they are attempting to achieve in the field. But the link between personal change and social change is inseparable, for *if we ignore the need to change ourselves it is unlikely that we will be able to stimulate change in others.*² A practitioner self-confidently acting out of a body of knowledge, and who is consciously taking responsibility for her/his own prejudices and preconceptions, is more likely to be effective in facilitating social change. Conversely, if practitioners are unable to liberate themselves from their own mindsets, they will be unlikely to be able to work in

² Moira O'Leary, Moira and Nee Meas (2001) *Learning for Transformation: A study of the relationship between culture, values, experience and development practice in Cambodia*, Phnom Penh: Krom Akphiwat Phum.

liberating ways with others. There is, thus, a compelling need to locate innovative approaches to leadership development that challenge conventional development wisdom.

Given Cambodia's recent social and political history, these insights should provide a foundation for all leadership development programmes. However (as described in the next section) this foundation is conspicuously absent.

The Cambodian social development sector

Empirical evidence clearly shows that limited human resources and management capacities, chronically deficient systems of accountability to the poor and weak institutions continue to be critical barriers to addressing Cambodia's development challenge of alleviating rural poverty and avoiding inequality.³ In the Cambodian context these failures have several causes:

First, formal training efforts have undoubtedly been important in building practitioners' understanding and confidence. But these trainings have largely focussed on the transmission of technical information. Only rarely have they challenged development practitioners to discern whether or not their values align with the development values of participation, social justice, empowerment and gender equity.

Second, inability (or reluctance) to adapt and change keeps many individuals and organisations trapped in ways of thinking and doing that inhibit their capacity to respond appropriately to the complexities of today's operating environment.

Third, while there continues to be weaknesses in the critical areas of people management, financial management, governance and strategic planning, these skills alone do not strengthen an organisation's analytical capacity – that is, the organisation's ability to step back and critically review its work and the changing environment in which it functions.

Fourth, traditional capacity building approaches do not strengthen adaptive capacity – the ability of an individual or an organisation to change behaviour as a result of learning and reflection.

Fifth, upward accountability (with an emphasis on reporting to the donor on activities, outputs and spend rates) and expectations of short-term results, frequently associated with logical frameworks and results-based management matrices, are often at odds with learning, local ownership and leadership.

Existing ready-made solutions of the past have proven inadequate in addressing these failures. We need to locate fresh approaches to capacity development that encourage shared responsibility, foster local leadership and challenge conventional development wisdom.

³ *Local Capacity Development Investments for MDG Achievements in Cambodia*, draft report written by Katarina Courtinade-Kovačević for UNDP/SNV (Phnom Penh, March 2009).

VBNK's Leadership Development Programmes address core challenges

VBNK's leadership programmes are designed to address the core challenges described above. These challenges were first highlighted in *Learning for Transformation*, an action research project that set out to address the question of why development efforts aimed at capacity building in Cambodia have not been effective in fostering genuine change (transformation). A basic premise, borne out by the research, was that how practitioners 'see' and do their development practice depends on their worldview.

Some key findings of the research were: in general, there is recognition amongst development practitioners that poverty is the result of inequities, unequal distribution of resources and abuses of power. However, development is seen primarily in terms of poverty alleviation (principally equated with improving economic well being rather than empowering people to increase their capacity to control their circumstances). At the same time, there is apprehension about admitting that power dynamics influence how development practitioners interact with communities or impact on what they imagine as participatory and empowering relationships.

The combination of the hierarchical culture, patronage, and a rote learning approach to education has resulted in a widespread reluctance to openly oppose, disagree with or even to question those who have power. Following on, an expectation persists that those people who have knowledge, resources and power (high status) should give advice, manage and control. Such mindsets work against the handing over of control and of decision-making to the less powerful person, thereby constraining their participation in any meaningful way.

As noted above, the link between personal change and social change is inseparable. Development practitioners can only facilitate the development process with others if they first understand how they have developed and are developing (their past, present and future). But personal development requires a disciplined process of self-reflection and contemplation about the values and purposes of our lives, and the desire and willingness to change ourselves.

VBNK's approach to leadership development and who we work with

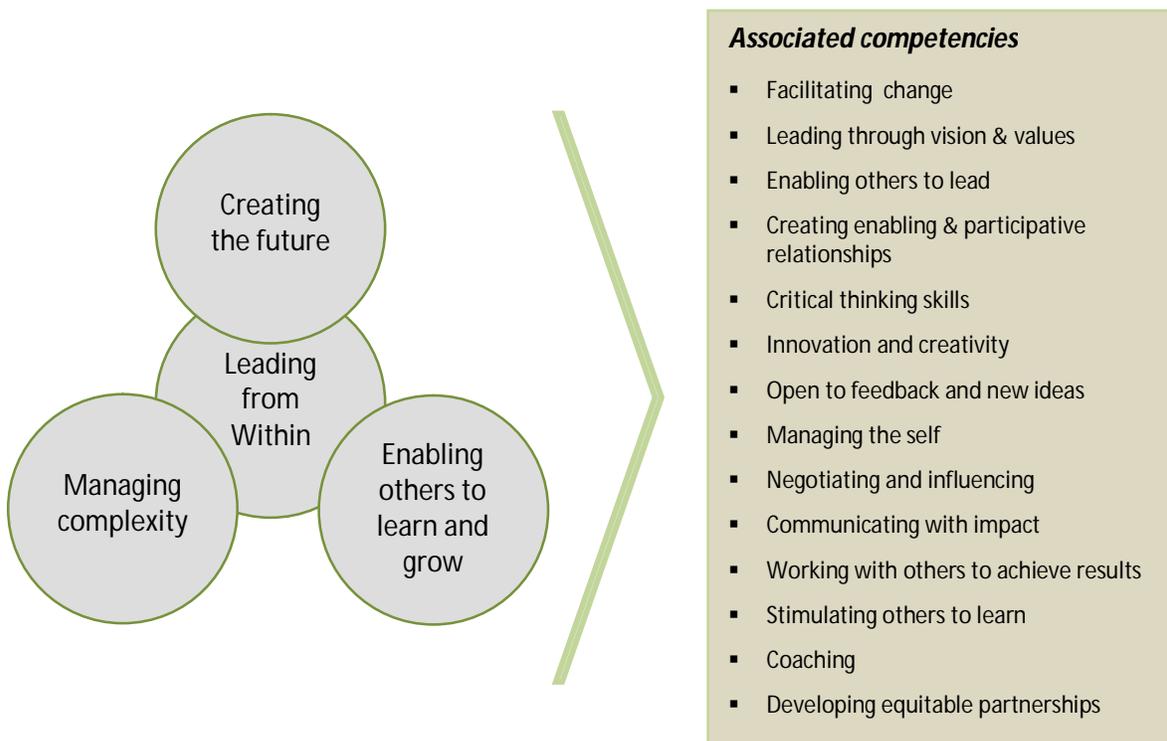
VBNK's seeks to redress the issues described here through its leadership development programmes. Underpinning VBNK's approach to leadership development is the understanding that we need:

- a. To provide participants with collaborative learning experiences that allow them to develop creative and locally relevant responses to development.
- b. To guide them through a process of self awareness, values clarification, team building and trust development.
- c. To provide them with the confidence and skills to challenge the hierarchical leadership models operating within their organisations and communities.

Central to the approach to leadership development are four capabilities shown in the "Leadership capabilities framework" (Fig 1 below).

- Leading from within (which lies at the core of the framework and responds to the need for a more caring and compassionate development practice)
- Creating the future (leading through vision and values)
- Managing complexity (strengthening analytical capacity)
- Enabling others to learn and grow (through participatory and empowering strategies)

Fig. 1 Leadership capabilities framework



Each leadership programme is customised to address specific needs of different populations. These have included:

- CHART – an emergent leadership programme for field practitioners.
- The Leadership Development Program for mid- and senior-level NGO staff.
- The Women’s Leadership Program (first delivered with the Ministry of Women’s Affairs to national and provincial level women government officials).
- Customised leadership courses for senior management teams from individual NGOs.

CHART: an emergent leadership programme for field practitioners

In 2001 VBNK initiated the CHART⁴ project, a field practitioners' action learning course. CHART aims to promote better relationships between field practitioners and communities, thereby to enable the practitioners to become more conscious of their development practice and how they can break the tendency to do development work 'for' rather than 'with' communities.

We wanted to develop a learning course that would enable practitioners to take the pulse of their current practice; to illuminate their values and assumptions; and to uncover the power dynamics behind their approaches. We wanted to see if this would allow them to create and own their own theory of change and develop ...congruent relationship development underpinned by a reflective and creative practice (VBNK staff).

CHART comprises six 5-day modules that extend over nine months. Central to CHART is a multi-stranded methodology that helps participants become more self-aware and reflective about their relationships with others. To this end CHART draws on a variety of action-learning techniques and tools that are visual, creative and interactive, and which explore roles and relationships with power and values.

The intention is to enhance learning response-abilities and to enable participants to question and deepen their own thinking and beliefs about how development can be best supported, so that they can redefine their own practice. In challenging previously held assumptions about development, each participant is able to reconstruct a development approach that holds in balance Khmer culture and traditions with her/his values and development principles. Such an approach contrasts with and is often challenged by cultural expectations and the participant's experience of education as predominantly a process of one-way transmission.

An external impact assessment⁵ has shown that the general flow of learning and impact of the CHART course has been increased self awareness, which leads to increased sense of self-worth and power-within, a key capability for leadership (see Fig 1). This in turn leads to an ability to appreciate people that are different from self (other awareness) and an ability to engage in positive relationships that facilitate/lead others to develop and change (see Fig 1).

Post-course comments from participants

"Now I understand that in development work we are facilitators. We don't tell people what to do or to give them the answers. We try to let people think about their own situation."

"Through relationship building we are able to deal with issues of power. One issue is that the people give us power because we are NGO staff. Through encouragement and relationship we can share this power back with them and they can work from their own ideas and value."

"We learned confidence through developing our vision and our own values. Previously I would follow other people's ideas, so that I would not be wrong. But now I have my own vision and my own values."

"Sometimes I catch myself – when I start to be like a teacher, but then I remember and can change to facilitator again"

⁴ Creative Holistic Action-research for Relationship Transformation

⁵ Betty Langeler – CHART/LDP evaluator 2008

The Leadership Development Program for mid- and senior-level NGO staff

Beginning in 2006, the lessons from CHART were incorporated into VBNK's flagship Leadership Development Program (LDP) for mid- and senior-level NGO staff.

LDP aims to encourage NGO staff to be more responsive to their own development needs as well as to those of their peers, organisations and the communities they serve. Like CHART, LDP incorporates a multi-stranded Whole Person Learning methodology to help participants explore inner and outer blocks to development.

***Whole Person Learning** is an essential precursor to developing an empowering leadership that is so critical in overcoming the legacy of the past and to imbue hope in the future. Whole Person Learning draws on various disciplines, including change theory, creative expression, experiential and action-oriented learning, storytelling, sociometrics and drama techniques.*

A key feature of LDP is that it is learner-centred:

- Each participant is able to choose and direct her/his own learning outcomes through a continuous cycle of action learning and reflective practice.
- The 5 module course is spread over 9 months to give time for shifts in thinking and behaviour to occur.
- The course facilitators act as coaches in between the modules to guide the learners through 'road blocks' they might encounter along the way.
- They are complemented in this role by a mentor, enlisted from within the learner's organization, to ensure consolidation of the learning into the workplace.
- Learning agreements are used to support and monitor the different roles and responsibilities.

Seven core capacity areas are considered fundamental to enabling participants to navigate the challenge of current Cambodian development practice and to become clear about what supports development processes within themselves and others. Self-awareness and developing productive relationships are thus core to the programme (cf. Fig 1), along with creativity, critical thinking, power and development and learning and facilitation. These core impact areas are woven around the programme's five modules.

The five modules aim to:

- Develop a climate of trustful learning and nurture interpersonal skills required to develop constructive relationships and to promote healthy teamwork.
- Explore how different leadership styles help and hinder empowering relationships in the Cambodian context and also the way organisations respond to change.
- Explore what helps and hinders community learning and to examine how organisations can change to support community learning.

Evaluations⁶ have shown that by the end of the program, participants have a deepened awareness of self along with increased confidence (self esteem); have increased confidence in applying different leadership styles to different contexts; have sharpened their critical thinking skills and the ability to analyse and work with different types of power; have an increased ability to recognise and engage with others around issues of conflict and change; and have increased confidence in stepping out and challenging social norms that block learning and development. In addition, longitudinal follow-up studies have indicated that most participants see increased self awareness as a foundational or pivotal aspect, which they are able to include in their work. Moreover, many come to see that their habit of being passive and subservient in their work – albeit subconsciously – is an expression of lack of power within, which discourages their efforts and commitment to promoting change.

Women's Leadership Programme

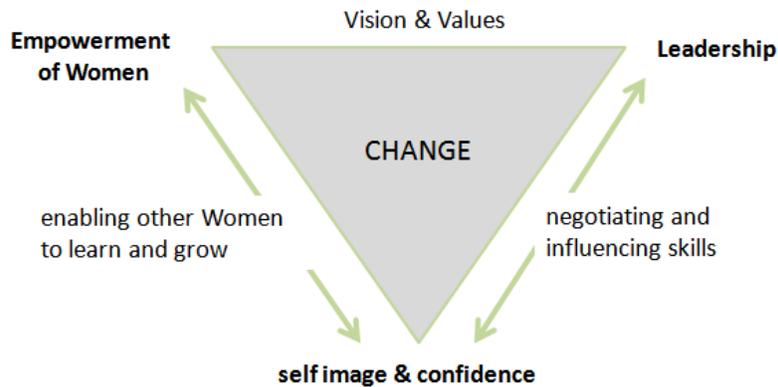
Over the years, VBNK has developed a number of approaches for the empowerment of women in their places of work. One such initiative was a Women's Leadership Programme (WLP), for Cambodian women managers in NGOs. The programme, of three one-week modules over 6 months, was designed to help women managers develop not only core management skills, but also the confidence to use these skills to assert themselves as leaders in organisations and systems dominated by men and the to challenge the prevailing worldview that women cannot contribute anything of value.

The programme designed around three modules – core management skills, institutional management skills and developing professional relationships – worked on the key issues pertinent to women managers in the Cambodian workforce while also building core skills needed to develop their leadership potential. Central to this three-strand framework for women leadership (see Fig 2) are strengthened self-image and self-confidence; skills, tools and strategies that allow women to present themselves in a powerful way and to influence others; and an active consideration of the role women leaders can play in empowering their peers.

To this end, module one – core management skills – aimed to build the women's understanding of their roles and responsibilities as managers and allows them to reflect on different leadership styles and decision-making processes that improve management effectiveness and confidence. Module two – institutional management skills – aimed to increase participants understanding of how organisations function and provides a range of strategies women can use to be more effective and influential within their own organisation. The final module – developing professional relationships – built a range of practical skills and tactics for influencing others positively, for developing constructive work relationships and for building consensus and commitment in others. This module linked to the role women leaders can play in the empowerment of peers.

⁶ Betty Langelier – CHART/LDP evaluator 2008

Fig 2 WLP Conceptual Framework



The WLP ran 5 times during the period 1999-2005.⁷ In 2003, the advisor to the UNDP Partnership for Gender Equity, based in the Ministry of Women's Affairs, contracted VBNK to deliver the WLP for a group of senior women managers in central government ministries. The success of the programme was such that it ran 11 times over the next 4 years with more than 200 women, from different ministries and the Provincial Departments of Women's Affairs, completing the programme.

An evaluation showed that the women invariably met with problems when trying to implement what they had learned in the WLP, but their participation was, nevertheless, deemed to be both successful and influential in enabling the participants to become more effective managers, and also to increase the levels and spheres within which they could exert influence and exercise leadership.

"They now trust themselves and their judgments, which gives them the confidence to advocate for what they believe in. They have strength of purpose and a new commitment to change for themselves, for other women in the civil service and for the community. Whereas in the past they have been frustrated and passive, they now feel empowered and are prepared to organize, to be advocates and to take action."
(Comment made in final evaluation)

⁷ Interestingly, the Women's Leadership Programme did not have a significant take up within the NGO community, which was both surprising and disappointing given how many NGOs purport to have gender policies to empower women. When this was informally explored with a number of different agencies it appeared that gender policies applied only to programme matters, no links were made to the need to support the development of their own female staff.

Customised leadership courses for senior management teams from individual NGOs

VBNK has also customised leadership programmes for senior managers to support succession planning and localisation efforts within individual NGOs. Since 2008, for example, VBNK has been assisting on an Organisational Strengthening Plan which aims at building Cambodian leadership within PSI⁸. This has included providing several leadership workshops for the seven Cambodian Directors of PSI Cambodia and the Expatriate Country Director.

Building on the lessons from LDP, values-based leadership has been central to the approach taken and participants have worked through a process of self development, values clarification, team building and trust development. The starting point was to get the PSI directors to understand the cultural and contextual nature of leadership. The output of this process was an agreed working definition of leadership for PSI Cambodia (see text box).

For PSI Cambodia leadership is having the vision to inspire, and the ability to empower, all staff to succeed and keep the organisation sustainable through a period of major change and beyond. In order to do this PSI's leaders must create a working environment which embodies PSI's values, and support all staff equally to take responsibility for the achievement of the PSI mission and goal through professional development and continuous improvement of their performance.

This work on inner leadership has been augmented with skills development. The Emotional Intelligence leadership model was found to be a useful tool for introducing the concept of, and need for, self-awareness (including values, assumptions, and beliefs) and also management of self. The Situational Leadership model helped the PSI Directors analyse the situations in which they are working and how to align the abilities and commitment of their staff with appropriate inputs in a way that would enable and support staff in taking responsibility for the achievement of PSI's mission and goal.

A sense of safety has grown within the group and allowed them to feel that they can now both ask for and give open and honest feedback without negative consequence (something that is far from being the norm in Cambodian society). Recently, several of the Directors identified clear reasons why they need to change some aspects of their personal management and communication styles; this demonstrates that they have grasped the fact that they need to lead according to vision and values, and that their behaviour should mirror those important aspects of PSI's culture.

A word about ourselves

What distinguishes VBNK from other capacity building organisations in Cambodia are the contributions we make to deepening understandings about the links between learning and organisational development. We have done this through elaborating and disseminating

⁸ Population Services International

innovative approaches that are relevant to capacity development in Cambodia. Some of VBNK's innovations are viewed with special interest for how they are contributing to organisational learning in the Cambodian context and also to making development practice more effective. These innovations are exemplified in the women's empowerment strategies that build workplace skills in ways that also develop the confidence to use these skills and the VBNK leadership development programmes described above. They also include facilitated community conversations that promote engagement in civil society and social cohesion; the dual behaviour change methodology of training and on-the-job coaching; and a holistic approach to capacity development that promotes sustainable and resilient organisations.

The heart of VBNK lies in its own journey of learning and creativity. We hold firmly to the understanding that personal change and social change are inseparable, and that we can only facilitate development processes with others if we first understand how we have developed and are developing. As a learning organisation we therefore dedicate time and resources on different but interconnected approaches to developing our staff and challenging our own development practice. Learning and reflection opportunities include regular development supervision discussions between line managers and staff and structured and sequential activities during bi-monthly Learning Weeks that enable us to be more responsive to changing capacity-building demands in the social development sector. The aim is to promote reflective practice, the development of critical thinking skills, and the creation of an environment where staff can be more honest with themselves about skill levels, attitudes and behaviours.

For example, VBNK organised a series of workshops with VBNK women staff which aimed to strengthen and increase self confidence amongst the women, both in their work and in their personal lives. The women subsequently reported a number of benefits. First, they have expressed increased confidence in the delivery of WLP. Second, they have built trust and become more supportive of each other in the workplace. Third, they report feeling better equipped to put forward their point of view in discussions with male colleagues and are more willing to engage constructively with the men around points of difference.

Walking the talk

"It was clear to me that the female [VBNK] trainers could not facilitate such an experimental and experiential process [WLP] for senior women in government if they had not first experienced it themselves, and it therefore needed to be piloted with them as the participants. I proposed an internal women's empowerment process as a preparation for delivery of the government initiative"
-Jenny Pearson, former VBNK Director

As a follow up, a women and men's empowerment workshop – Fairness, Freedom and Full Potential for all – was organised for VBNK staff in 2009. The women and men met separately for two days to discuss individual concerns and aspirations in the domain of gender and sexuality. The two groups then came together on day three to discuss how to work together to further advance gender equity in our work and workplace. A task force, led by two women and two men, subsequently reviewed and updated VBNK's gender policy and code of conduct.

For further information please contact Graeme Storer, Director VBNK.