

**VBNK'S JOURNEY TO BECOMING A LEARNING ORGANISATION:
DEVELOPING A PRACTICE THAT SUPPORTS STAFF LEARNING**

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At VBNK, we keep learning as a way of life. We believe that learning and change – at an individual, organisational, community and society level – are inextricably linked. When we learn, things need to change, and when things change we need to learn. We strive to increase our effectiveness by identifying underlying blocks to learning and growth. However, like other Cambodians, we face “traditional” blocks to learning.

The research study, *Learning for Transformation*,¹ identified a number of traditional blocks to learning prevalent in Cambodia. These included learner dependency (learning to follow what the teacher teaches); power and hierarchy in relationships (whereby people who have knowledge, resources and power – high status – tend to give advice, manage and control); discouragement of challenging, questioning or of holding dissenting views and avoidance of conflict (especially with those who have power); fear of losing face; and self defensive and blaming others. Furthermore, successive regime changes – which have been experienced as disappointing and mostly negative (from a better regime to a bad one or from bad to worse) – have had significant impact on Cambodians’ consciousness.² This has been a crucial lesson that has resulted in widespread suspicion of and resistance to change.

Recognising the importance of addressing these challenges in our work in the Cambodian social development sector, VBNK has created opportunities for facing up to these challenges by fostering staff learning. In this paper, we share some of our experiences and draw out what has had the most influence on our individual and organisational learning. We hope this will serve as a foundation for other Cambodian development practitioners who want to create similar learning conditions in their organisations.

What are VBNK’s practices that foster staff learning?

VBNK has a working definition for learning: *“learning is the process of acquiring knowledge from a variety of sources and experiences and using that knowledge in a way that results in positive change, i.e. behaviour or improved performance.”*

¹ 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.

² *Working in Cambodia*, Leng Chhay and Jenny Pearson, VBNK (May 2006)

This definition is integral to our human resource development strategy. In particular, we focus on applying holistic approaches to support staff learning. The human resource development strategy is based on our belief that:

- People and the quality of our relationships are our most important resource.
- It is important to give attention to the whole person (mind, body and spirit) in order to help each person achieve his/her potential.
- Everyone in the organisation can take more responsibility for their own learning and for contributing to the learning of others.
- We will achieve excellence through practice.

Through the application of our HRD strategy we have identified practices that directly influence learning and growth amongst our staff. These practices relate to staff at all levels and have an effect on both individual and organisational learning.

Top managers are accountable for enabling others to learn and grow

The internal organisational practice toward learning is shaped by leadership and commitment of our top level management (that is, the director and management team). We challenge ourselves by aiming to build on what each of us know (our inner strength and resilience) to improve our actions. We start by promoting equal relationships at all levels and the courage to trust our own experience and learning. Our common voice and confidence to admit mistakes and learn from these mistakes guides us to find ways to reduce fear and defensiveness. We also strive to promote openness and constructive feedback in the workplace. And we build on our relationships to lessen blame by listening to staff and learning from their experiences. We share our own learning with staff in a way that models openness, while also challenging them to unlock and learn. We avoid giving them answers or telling them what to do differently.

Support staff learning through the performance of their work

As line managers we serve as mentors/coaches and are responsible for development supervision, planned and regular (monthly) meetings between each staff member and his/her line manager. In these sessions, we discuss routine matters arising from the past and upcoming months' work, and identify and process learning arising from the work.

In VBNK, development supervision and staff appraisals are vehicles for learning and strengthening staff capacity. During development supervision and appraisal meetings each staff member has an opportunity to reflect on and learn from her/his past performance. We listen carefully to staff and show our appreciation for any new learning or good practice staff may have discovered. We challenge staff by asking critical questions – rather than giving answers and ready-made solutions – to unlock their thinking. The result is that staff engage in deeper reflection and learn. For instance, non-judgmental support from a line manager encourages staff to address an actual weakness or mistake and also feel safe. In

most situations, we find that staff can learn from doing when they are honest and true to themselves.

Involve staff in organisational level activities

Within Cambodian culture, and within organisations, staff are accustomed to seniors taking responsibility for all important matters. In VBNK, we decided that our HRD strategy should encourage all staff members to learn through participating and contributing to organisational level activities, for example, strategic planning or the annual impact assessment, and deciding on their representative in management team meetings. These opportunities better enable staff to develop sufficient insight into and ownership for matters outside of their main areas of responsibility. The benefit from this kind of expanded participation has been increased staff confidence. We are finding, for example, that staff will offer opinions and suggestions to their supervisors during development supervision and team meetings. This change of practice has helped us to work against hierarchy in VBNK.

Change patterns of learning

Acknowledging the impact that our physical work environment has on our relationships, our practice and our learning, we made a collective decision with staff to break down the walls between the different offices to form an open space. This arrangement allows staff to more easily interact with each other. Moreover, the Programme Managers and Team Leaders don't have separate office space but sit amongst the staff. This encourages more direct communication, especially from bottom to top. Separate meeting rooms allow teams to meet in privacy as needed.

There was a pattern of staff not mixing with other staff during the work days. They tended to interact only with the staff closest to their desks and only in their work unit. We decided to schedule a common mid-morning break time in the designated coffee area to encourage staff to sit and talk with one and other. Some staff use this time to build relationships, some use this to talk about a work matter, and others talk about family and personal issues. This experience showed us that learning is not always about increasing knowledge and skills. It is also important to learn about self and others.

Allocate time for ongoing reflection and learning

Learning Week has become a feature of VBNK's organisational life. There are five 5-day learning weeks each year, once every two months. We decide on the schedule and themes during our annual planning. The objectives and themes are aligned with our strategic plan, and there is a connection between each of the five Learning Weeks. A pattern of Learning Week is (a) unit/team reflection, (b) coaching conversation on certain issues, (c) cross unit/team sharing, and (d) training or coaching (provided by internal expertise or external consultants) on important topics, such as, self awareness and facilitation, authentic communication and coaching skills.

Due to workload and busyness, individuals and teams can all too easily become so engrossed in their own work that they forget to communicate and exchange experiences with each other. The learning weeks offer occasions to share experiences with colleagues and for colleagues to learn from one another. It gives opportunity for all staff to take part in a more systematic approach to cross unit/team learning, which encourages them to take greater responsibility for their own and each other's learning. Learning weeks also provide ongoing opportunities to develop more creative practice in the design, research and presentation of our work and projects, and enable staff to draw on a broad range of learning resources both internally and externally.

The learning week is one of our major investments in learning and provides opportunities for all staff to step away from doing their routine work. During learning week staff devote time to reviewing past performance and drawing lessons learned by practicing the Action - Reflection - Learning - Planning (ARLP)³ cycle. We also allocate time for practising our coaching skills and on discussions about how to improve effectiveness.

What has had the most influence on individual learning?

We asked VBNK staff about their experiences, in particular what influences them to learn. Staff expressed that they value experience-based learning, which is practical and action based, and which encourages learning by doing and learning from mistakes.

Staff perceive that being honest and true to self, having self discipline and commitment to learning (keeping learning as a way of life) are most influential on how they learn. They see, for instance, that development supervision will not be helpful if staff are not honest to self, and that the learning weeks will become routine if they do not commit to doing quality reflection.

Each person's personality and interests influence his/her way of learning. Some have a sense of curiosity, some commit to unlearn from experience, some aim at sharing and others connect learning to personal goals. Peer sharing within the team, honest feedback and trustful environment help individual staff let go of fear and encourage each person to concentrate on learning and growth.

However staff point out that there are factors that hinder their learning. Their ongoing struggle is influenced by external practice. For example, staff feel confident to challenge their superior during the internal discussion, but they remain reluctant to show the same confidence when working with other professionals outside the organisation.

³ Action-Reflection-Learning-Planning (ARLP) approach advocated by the Community Development Resource Association in South Africa: James Taylor, Dirk Marais and Allen Kaplan (1997) *Action Learning for Development: use your experience to improve your effectiveness*, Juta and Co. Ltd.

What have we learned?

The culture of learner dependency remains very strong in Cambodia. Learners are accustomed to passive and rote learning. This can often hold back staff from truly valuing experiential learning.

The tendency to equate challenging each other's ideas with blame and avoidance of conflict can hinder open feedback and criticism. Constant support and encouragement and, sometimes, pushing forward are needed to secure a pathway for staff to let go of these old habits and to move forward. When managers regularly ask questions, give feedback and accept mistakes, staff behaviours can and do change – they shift away from blame and defensiveness.

Deciding to become a learning organisation is simple; making it happen is a different thing altogether. It requires an ongoing process and a joint effort between all managers and staff. We have paid attention to our actions and experiences. Our successes move us forward, while our challenges help us to focus on how to continue moving forward. We recognise that the following conditions are important, in the Cambodian context, to foster learning:

- Create opportunities for ongoing experiential learning.
- Encourage management practices that allow staff express themselves and find their own solutions.
- Recognise that all staff have their own personality and interests and find ways to help staff locate and reach their own potential.