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# Model for change and learning (one example of a member of the UN family creating its own process by using the experience of its own people)

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## Abstract

The United Nations Staff College Project (UNSCP), conceived in 1996 as a project with an initial life-span of five years, has been entrusted by the United Nations to the International Training Centre of the ILO in Turin. The college aims at promoting and developing a series of new and innovative learning and training opportunities in support of a more effective United Nations system and as a contribution and support to the process of change and reform currently under way. This paper is a commentary on the progress made in conceiving, creating, developing and applying a learning and change process in the United Nations Staff College Project. The time span is from January to June 1997.

## Introduction

The ambitions of the United Nations for change and reform create the need for an internal environment that encourages staff to change and reform themselves in line with the UN vision and new goals. Gaining the ownership for and commitment to major cultural and operational shifts is a sensitive and skilled process. The development of a locally owned learning and change process is needed if transformation is to take place. The condition of the environment for transformation to take place must be one of continuous learning by individuals, teams and the whole organisation. This condition is becoming known throughout the world as the learning organisation.

## The learning organisation

Any organisation, large or small, public or private in any sector can become a learning organisation. Probably, the smallest is the family unit and the largest today is a nation aspiring to create a learning society. This paper focuses on the UNSCP and the Turin Centre. The four characteristics of a learning organisation are described in this section. The characteristics answer the question of the definition of a learning organisation. All are vividly illustrated on the front cover of the attached brochure. The learning organisation is one where the quality of output increases and the cost of doing so reduces. The brochure illustrates the learning process as follows:

### Clear vision and goals

A brief statement and what the organisation wants to become. The clarity and ease of interpretation for all people who interact with it is important. It is more akin to a banner headline in a tabloid newspaper than a technical statement that only insiders know about.

What adds substance to the statement is the goals for measuring the progress towards or realisation of the vision. The goals can embrace quality, quantity and costs targets and also be a mixture of inputs and outputs. However, they are vital if the vision of the organisation is to be owned.

### **Aligned dynamic processes**

Aligned dynamic processes are the range of systems or processes on ways of performing work that increases the prospects of realising the vision by achieving the goals. Alignment of everyone directly behind the goals is critical if value is to be added and waste eliminated. Processes are there to improve quality. Alignment is there to eliminate waste and therefore reduce costs.

### **A learning process**

Change and transformation are brought about by the design and application of processes. One of the key processes must be a learning process. If learning on the subject of change is greater in magnitude than the size of the change itself, then successful change will take place. The main section of this paper describes how the change or learning process at the Turin Centre was developed.

### **Line management leadership**

A leader is one who has vision, can inspire others, is willing and able to coach and also bestow recognition. The leadership for the learning environment must be with those who have leader accountability for the results of that environment. It cannot be with specialists who are there to advise, inform and respond to requests.

## **The Turin Centre learning process**

### **Introduction**

At the beginning of 1997, the Centre had already stated its intention to become a Learning Organisation. It needed to create an environment of continuous learning so that change and reform of themselves could take place and at pace. Some people said the Centre should become a role model for change reform and serve as an example for the whole of the United Nations. However, that view was by no means widely shared.

### **Creating an opportunity**

An early question was asked to try and obtain a copy of the UNSCP 92's vision and goals, business processes, learning process and standards of line management leadership. The director of the UNSCP and Turin Centre suggested that we concentrate on the learning process but no articulation of what it was and how it was applied was available.

Therefore, the journey to discover the learning process began by the director identifying seven members of staff from different parts of the organisation and also, as it turned out, from different nationalities. All the staff had a reputation for thinking deeply about the learning process. The opportunity created was to solicit their views on important features of the learning process.

### **Initial interviews**

One-hour interviews took place with each of the seven staff on an individual basis. The question asked was what are the important features of learning that you take into account when designing and implementing training and learning programmes?

All of the seven spoke freely and easily for the one hour – almost without interruption or stimulation. Each point made was noted verbatim and the interview ceased at the one-hour stage. An aggregate of 357 points of importance were noted.

### **Analysis and synthesis of findings**

All of the points made were grouped into like-types of statement and summarised into a single description of each group. A total of 16 groupings were made. Twelve were distinct features of the learning process and four groupings could relate to each of the 12 features.

The summary groupings were charted and checked out with each of the seven contributors again, on an individual basis. Some modifications were made as a result. However, at the end of each discussion – agreement was reached.

### **Group ownership**

The director then agreed to a suggestion that he convene a meeting of the group and gain their support for the process and take further decisions about the future of the process.

The meeting took place and a unanimous decision of agreement was reached. Several other decisions were made including the decision to share the process with all staff in the centre for comments and support and also to gain centre-wide ownership.

Another important decision was to improve the understanding of each stage of the learning process. This was completed by an identification of 50 key questions related to the full process. As a quality assurance check, if learning specialists asked themselves each

question before completing the design of a new learning process, then a significant improvement in quality would accrue if sound answers were available and applied.

### **Preparations for a Learning Communications Event**

A date was fixed for the meeting to share the new change and learning process with all staff. It was the 21 February 1997, about four weeks ahead. The preparations to arouse interest, generate discussion and generally prepare for staff to think about learning included:

- a personal invitation from the director,
- a learning styles questionnaire for each individual to complete,
- a declared set of aims for the event,
- an interim newsletter
- a one-to-one discussion with the animator,
- discussions at team meetings,
- a finger-painting workshop,
- access to the animator at any time who made himself easily available,
- creation of new materials in words, pictures, images and music.

### **New materials**

- The communication of materials to an unenlightened audience from a wide range of levels, departments, specialists and cultures requires a creative and professional approach.
- The pictures and images of stages of the learning process, the characteristics of the learning organisation and the Turin Centre processes needed to be communicated to all.
- It was decided that the main media should be pictures and music supported by hard copy and words. The setting would be up to self-selecting groups in islands in Pavilion P.

### **The communication event**

- Ninety volunteers attended, received the presentations, commented and suggested ideas for further improvement and application. Most important of all, 65 out of the 90 who attended volunteered to stay involved by signing up for further involvement and learning in one of ten subjects to be considered by a group on each.
- The spirit, mood, ideas and output of the event were captured on the walls of

Pavilion P, on photographs and 35mm slides taken at the event and in the staff comments and ideas forms submitted to UNSCP at the end of the event.

### **In ten groups**

The development of the learning environment was considered, envisaged and planned by each of the ten groups on the following subjects:

- (1) organisational learning,
- (2) team learning,
- (3) individual learning,
- (4) programme and financial planning,
- (5) developing new offerings,
- (6) stimulating partners,
- (7) fulfilling expectations,
- (8) building commitment,
- (9) developing staff contribution,
- (10) the learning process.

Their process was to state how it is at the moment; how it should become; and how to deliver it! The process was facilitated by a specialist who was connected to all groups to look at the total scenario together. An input to each of the groups as well as to every member of the Turin Centre was the output from the 21 February event analysis.

### **Leadership**

A meeting with the deputy director-general of the ILO, the director of the UNSCP, the director of the Turin Centre and the deputy director of UNSCP took place on 29 May 1997, took place. The purpose was to brief them on progress and invite their suggestions for involvement. A strategic planning group of the Turin Centre is due to meet from 30 June to 4 July. Progress and an interim report would be delivered and presented to the strategic planning group.

### **Successes ... so far !!!**

The process has now been used effectively to plan major change programmes; capture learning from other agencies; challenge strategic plans; review feasibility studies for effectiveness; promote staff development, design the UNCTAD Management and Teambuilding Workshop: stimulate the environment to consider change; project the UN image outside; represent new thinking at international conferences ... and we have only just begun !!!