

Making the learning organisation literal

CDRA's homework

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People are often surprised when they hear about CDRA's monthly "Homeweek" because it is unusual for an NGO to devote that much time to learning. Many NGOs have been inspired to develop their own kind of homeweeks and sought our support in their design. So we often get asked to write up something about this homeweek – its role, what it consists of and how it works. This Nugget attempts to provide this, certainly not as a blueprint but as an example of what we have experienced as effective internal organisational practice.

In essence our "homeweek" is our organisational time-out, an investment in learning. It is a week where we consciously disengage from the field to involve ourselves as colleagues in reflection on our practice and other internal maintenance, strategic and development processes.

Why we do it:

Development of practice and approach

The CDRA is a learning organisation. We see organisational learning as integral to developing and supporting the services that we offer to others. The service, the practice that we offer to clients consists of intervention into human and organisational processes that strives to have tangible, developmental impact. This service requires constant maintenance and development.

For the CDRA then, organisational learning is not a luxury. Rather, it is a part of the work that we undertake. Without organisational learning inside of the CDRA, what we offer to the world, essentially processes of learning themselves – what we put out from the CDRA - would be a very different kind of service.

Maintenance of relationships

The collective learning of the Consultant's Team is the basis for the continuous development of the CDRA's practice and approach. Collective learning, characterised as it is by in-depth peer supervision, requires high levels of trust. This is best built when groups of people work together on a common task over a sustained period of time. The space and form provided by our homeweek allows just this. The same is true for the Administration Team, in their relationships with each other and with the Consultant's Team.

Peer Accountability

In homeweek, work is shared as reflections for mutual learning, but through this sharing it is also indirectly accounted for, and difficulties can be identified and addresses. This operates as a form of quality control and provides CDRA with the basis for an organisational practice, something beyond a collection of individual approaches in the field.

Productivity and quality

Having an identified space in the calendar where issues can be discussed in-depth, difficulties can be brought and resolved, new ideas and approaches devised, consultants are freed to focus with full dedication on their clients when they are in the field. It is our belief, and experience, that dedicated time for reflection and learning increases motivation and productivity. Indeed the quality and quantity in our practice that results from our homeweeks more than makes up for the time and resources invested.

What it consists of:

As a consultancy our field staff are in a constant state of motion, in and out of the office, seldom keeping to ordinary office hours. Very early in CDRA's existence, consultants realised that they would seldom see each other, never build an organisational practice, if they did not commit to certain times in the year when they would all be in the office. Given the nature of consultancy - consultancy periods generally last from one to three working weeks - a monthly rhythm emerged as a sensible organising "structure-in-motion". Recognition was given that all organisational maintenance work – including learning, strategy, business and administration – should take no longer than a week. Thus the term "Homeweek" was coined.

The form for learning that has evolved is contained within our "homeweek" – nine or ten weeks in the year, generally held towards the end of the month, in which all consultants are present in our offices in Cape Town and in which a variety of organisational and maintenance activities take place, including learning.

Homeweeks have several elements, not all of which happen every week, but which, over a year, are generally covered. These include:

Organisational learning from practice

- **Consultant's reflective reports.** Here, each consultant produces a written review of his or her whole practice (including client work, programme work, leadership, networking and writing) in the period since the last report. Sometimes these are written around a theme that is identified prior to writing; sometimes themes emerge out of the reports. When these reports are tabled, a "melting pot" of organisational learning for the month is created. Out of this session, themes are identified for future practice development, as well as for the organisation's strategic direction.
Client review. This is a form of reflective report, a short, essential review of each client. It is done twice a year and provides a comprehensive review of practice with the CDRA's client base as well as a picture of that base. Learning generally focuses on issues related to practice; but also, individual and organisational management of practice.
- **Administrative team's reflective reports.** Increasingly, the administrative team is devising its own approaches to learning, centring on use of the reflective report.
Creative sessions. Because our work requires creativity, it is important to access and develop the creative parts of ourselves. Each month, a session that taps into and challenges this creativity is run with the whole staff, usually facilitated by a local artist. We have worked in colour, with clay, done drumming, movement, story-telling etc.
- **Case study.** Here a consultant, or a pair of consultants, prepares an in-depth case study on a particular client process, to share with the rest of the consultant's team. This might be brought as a problem-solving exercise in which the consultant is seeking help and assistance, or as a retrospective presentation for the learning of all.
- **Product Development.** Sharing/development of new tools and methods – either learnt from others or created and tested by a member of the team.
- **Input/seminar.** Presentation from team members with new concepts or from people from outside of the CDRA. Also, discussion on written pieces of work.

Strategy, strategic review and organisational development processes

- **Strategy meetings** of consultants and whole staff as needed – ongoing strategising is seen as critical rather than a reliance only on annual or three-year strategic planning sessions
- **Annual strategic review and planning**, generally three days towards the end of the year
- Three or four days **OD process** approximately every second year, or as needed with our own external consultant.

Business

- **Allocation meeting.** This is where the whole consultant’s team manages the practice of the organisation. Client requests and general invitations are tabled at this meeting, discussed and responses agreed to. These discussions also contribute to strategic directions.
- **Staff business meeting.** This addresses all general organisational business, including policy and systems development and review of finances, debtors and income.
- **Consultants meeting,** in which the work of the week is reviewed, and other strategic and practical issues and loose-ends that require discussion and final decision-making are addressed.
- **Programme sub-committee meetings** as needed, where consultants responsible for individual programmes meet with the administrative assistants to those programmes to review and co-ordinate logistical and design aspects of the programmes.

Management and development of individual practice

- This includes the following: Supervision/peer mentoring, individual consultation with colleagues as needed, meeting with administrative support, open time in which correspondence can be completed and contracts written.

A typical homeweek might look like this:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Breakfast and personal sharing	Staff business	Reflective Reports – tabling, discussion, pulling together	Case study	Strategy meeting
Staff creative session	Allocation meeting		Product development	Consultants business
Writing of reflective reports	Seminar/input		Individual practice management	Sub-committees

What it requires:

Over the years, "Homeweek" has undergone many changes. There have been times where its strategic functions have been most prominent and others where it has been focused largely on the field practice of the organisation. The "feel" of the space shifts too. There have been times when homeweek has left staff feeling more run down and exhausted than before, and times when it has functioned as a source of calm, fellowship and inspiration.

Finding the right balance between the introspection of homeweek, a safe home to which all staff return, and open-ness, a programme that challenges, stretches and galvanises both staff and visitors, remains a constant challenge. For some time now, the CDRA homeweek in its present form is working well and seems to be managing its multiple roles. This may well change, as it has changed in the past and it will have to be re-

thought and re-formed. Despite these changes, there are qualities that emerge out of our experience of homeweeks, constants over time that might equally be applied to other forms of and approaches to organisational learning.

Vision, patience, commitment

To be a learning organisation, space and time needs to be set aside. To do this takes vision, patience and commitment. Vision is required, to create a clear picture of the kinds of creative learning processes that would most benefit the organisation. Patience, to give it the time needed to get up and running. Commitment, to get through some of the false starts and disappointing experiments that are a necessary part of building such a space. The point is to get through these, and with time, the rhythm that truly supports organisational learning does emerge.

As learning spaces take hold, and initial resistance to them subsides, a further four qualities emerge that are needed for a successful, ongoing approach to organisational learning:

Appropriate rhythm

A strong field practice generates a rhythm appropriate to the core business of the organisation. In the absence of such a practice (or when that practice is not valued), it is often administrative, funding and financial rhythms that determine those of the organisation.

Those wishing to devise learning spaces that best support field practice might ask, "What are the daily, weekly, monthly and annual rhythms of the organisation?" "What are the same rhythms of the field practice?" "How might learning spaces be created that best support the field practice?"

Like jumping on a trampoline, the rightly placed learning opportunities will give "bounce" to the organisation's work in the field. Conversely, the wrong ones will detract from energy and work in the field.

Space and time; Commitment and discipline

It is tempting to move things around, to postpone and to allow other, apparently urgent and important issues to take up the space and time that has been set aside for learning. However, the commitment and discipline to use the spaces (no matter how big, or small) that have been set aside for learning each time they come around, and over time, is an essential part of making learning "real" in an organisation.

Where space and time is made absolutely non-negotiable, and the commitment and discipline to use it is found, eventually, these spaces become filled with learning that is unique to the organisation and compellingly relevant to its mission.

Good relationships; collegial accountability

Creation of these spaces cannot be the little "projects" of isolated individuals. An organisational commitment to come together and learn, to build the practice and so the organisation, must be upheld by all. To achieve this requires good relationships and a sense of mutual accountability, but also strengthens it over time.

Holding

Were all of the above three qualities pursued, the job of holding these spaces becomes a light one, but is probably best pursued by giving the "holding" task to one person as a part responsibility, as it is my responsibility in the CDRA. This essentially involves the planning and design for each coming homeweek,

with the help of others where appropriate and includes the documentation of learning, the maintenance of its memory, building a running account of the organisation's learning and development.

Concluding thoughts

We believe that the very complex nature of a developmental practice requires substantial commitment to learning from practice that is regular, resourced and planned. Each organisation must plan its own learning rhythms to be in tune with its working rhythms, and the content and nature of its learning spaces to suit the unique nature of its work. It may take time to find the appropriate space and time but if done right, it can be an investment in quality that more than compensates for the time spent and can immeasurably enrich the working lives of those involved.

About the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA)

The Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) was established in 1987 as a non-profit, non-governmental organisation (NGO) to build the capacity of organisations and individuals engaged in development and social transformation. We are based in Cape Town, South Africa and work mostly in Southern and East Africa.

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