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OF WATER AND SANITATION FOR ALL

Strengthening learning and knowledge management: Review of WaterAid's approach to knowledge management

P. Cranston & A. Chandak (UK)

BRIEFING PAPER

WaterAid strives to be accountable for its work in improving poor people's access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene. As part of this, WaterAid undertook a review of learning and knowledge sharing practices across the organisation. This paper presents the findings and recommendations from that review.

Introduction and Background

In this age of information overflow, 'knowledge management (KM)' is a commonly used term for knowledge sharing, organisational learning and effectiveness in the development sector. Indeed the term KM is itself contested: "you can't manage knowledge - nobody can. What you can do is to manage the environment in which knowledge can be created, discovered, captured, shared, distilled, validated, transferred, adopted, adapted and applied" (Collison and Parcell, 2004). There is however consensus on practices and activities that should be included in a definition of KM, including:

- Information management: the collection and management of material from one or more sources and making that material accessible to and usable by one or more audiences;
- Knowledge sharing: a set of practices that enables people to share what they know with others in the application of their work;
- Learning processes: both individual and collective or social, focusing less on the "sending" and more on the "receiving", particularly the processes of sense making, understanding, and being able to act upon the information available;
- Communication: in the sense of a meaningful exchange, as a foundational competence for the interactions that are at the centre of learning, sharing and managing knowledge.

WaterAid is an international non-governmental organisation (NGO), which focuses exclusively on improving poor people's access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). KM is a relatively new term for WaterAid but 'learning' has been at the core of its values and approaches of work. The Programme Support Unit (PSU) within WaterAid has a remit to support and guide country programmes to deliver high quality WASH interventions that can be taken to scale and uses different approaches to capture, disseminate and institutionalise learning on a range of subjects. However, this activity wasn't systematised and there was a growing concern about losing valuable knowledge and learning. Therefore, a review was undertaken of the KM approach and practices within WaterAid.

This paper presents the review findings along with a menu of actionable recommendations drawn to improve learning and knowledge sharing practices within teams, departments and programmes across WaterAid.

Principles of Review

The review was conducted with two aims and in two parts:

- Part One: Identify existing effective practices that effectively promote knowledge sharing and encourage staff to act on relevant learning to improve the way they work.
- Part Two: Identify how processes and repositories support Information Management (IM) within WaterAid and how they could be improved.

The underpinning principles of the review were:

1. Most 'answers' are inside WaterAid, beginning from the premise of assumed competence - that there are smart, experienced, committed, efficient and effective people working in the organisation.
2. Unanticipated outcomes often provide the richest learning. Sustainability of good KM practice depends on identifying ways in which people can do their current work differently, delivering more efficiency and effectiveness.
3. Reflecting on how people behave with each other and how leaders lead in regards to learning and knowledge sharing.
4. Focus on curation and targeting of knowledge products.

Part One: Identifying existing effective practice for knowledge sharing

The review used the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodology. AI involved moving away from the deficit model and, it is the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). Figure 1, summarises the appreciative inquiry in detail. As part of the review the team:

1. Investigated two country programmes well regarded for learning and knowledge sharing. They also examined two areas of work that demonstrate good KM.
2. Worked with respondents and managers to develop a *Vision for a Future State*, drawing on respondents' reflections about the successful initiatives and their recommendations for how WaterAid could improve learning and knowledge sharing practice, and develop the most supportive culture for KM. Emerging themes were integrated with examples of good practice gathered in the case studies and compiled as a series of good practice indicators.
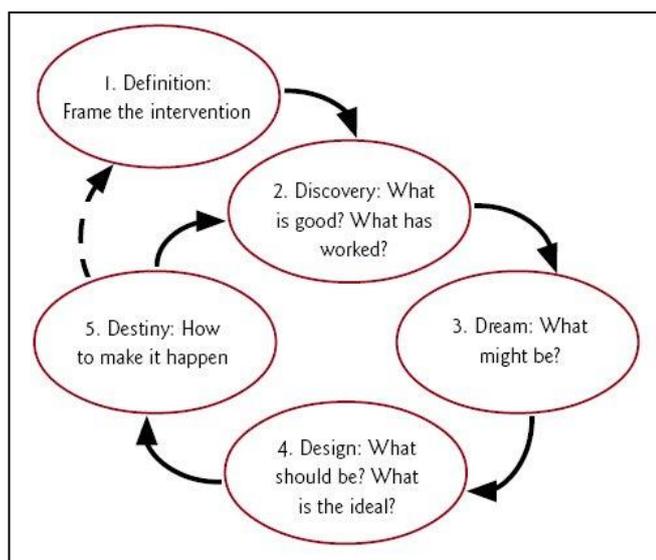
Figure 1- The appreciative inquiry- Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005

The review also entailed a desk review of relevant internal documentation, including evaluation and other review material as well as training and promotional material used in earlier KM activities.

The review also examined examples from other WASH and Development sector KM initiatives, that attempt to address many of the same issues WaterAid is grappling with. WaterAid is also one of the partners in the Gates Foundation Building Demand for Sanitation portfolio whose own KM initiative was reviewed in September 2015. This resulted in a series of practical commitments by the leadership to change the way that the Gates Foundation Water, Sanitation and Hygiene team operates and many echo WaterAid review recommendations.

One of WaterAid's senior managers during the review said that "if an organisation really wants to do something then it happens". Learning and learning systems are pinpointed as the weakness in WaterAid.

The word *learning* appears dismayingly rarely throughout current documentation as well as existing and proposed business processes and systems. Only when WaterAid prioritises identifying, sharing and acting on its learning will it improve.

Part Two: Information Management

Information Management (IM) is much more about behaviours than technical tools. Processes and procedures embody desired behaviours that are supported, in turn, by digital tools - software operating in digital devices. Part two of the KM review focused on how processes and repositories support learning and knowledge sharing within WaterAid and how they could be improved.

Part two followed a qualitative methodology, comprising desk research and interviews with selected stakeholders in International Programmes and Information Systems. A survey was also conducted investigating information seeking and sharing habits and the use of current digital tools and software systems.

Suggestions for improved IM that naturally emerged during part one were extrapolated and reviewed. A simple three question[i] model was developed encapsulating how desired behaviours could be supported by improved information management. Along with this a WASH project life cycle was developed to understand how knowledge is curated, stored and shared during a project cycle. Part two also reviewed various IT tools and systems used for communication, learning and knowledge sharing.

Recommendations and way forward

Practical proposals on how country programmes and teams can improve learning and knowledge were developed from the review and used to produce a menu of actionable recommendations. These actionable recommendations target the building of a supportive and enabling culture through small changes to organisational procedures and structures as well as leadership behaviours that can inspire staff to work differently. These recommendations were:

1. **Knowledge management should be embedded in the organisational structure**: The strategic importance of learning and knowledge sharing is recognised at all levels in WaterAid. Resources should be explicitly allocated to knowledge management. These resources could be allocated to capacity and skill development of staff and partners that improve learning and knowledge sharing. Individual and team learning processes and initiatives should be facilitated. The job descriptions should be consistent across WaterAid and include learning as a key part of the roles. Teams and Country Programmes should encourage embedding of learning into normal rhythm of business by all staff, supported by specialists where necessary.

2. **Identifying, sharing and acting on learning is prioritised**: Country programme strategies and programme plans should detail how learning and continuous improvement is implemented and monitored through programme lifecycles and across teams. Learning objectives should be embedded in personal development plans. Learning objectives and outputs should be included in programme designs. Operational processes for programme delivery support learning across the project cycle.

3. **Leadership drives the process and provides an enabling culture for learning and knowledge sharing:** WaterAid staff and the literature on KM are unanimous: senior leadership drive, modeling and support are essential to improve KM.

4. **Standard WaterAid processes embed good practice in learning and knowledge sharing**: Learning and knowledge sharing are consistently addressed in regular meetings, supported by audience specific written and audio-visual material. Time is allocated for reflection and learning - individually and in teams – to capture of learning from informal sharing.

5. **Individual knowledge management**: A regularly recurring theme in literature about KM is that the basis for effective organisational KM is **individual behaviour**. Individuals who are effective in their KM are competent in a range of skills that support more collective processes such as social learning,

collaboration and networking, capturing emerging lessons from current experience, enabling others to follow and understand insights coming from new learning. The people team includes a KM competency framework for managers. WaterAid already has a awards for exceptional projects and the review recommended that there should be more competitions and awards to incentivise good practice. Further, to maximize learning across the organization these should be crowd-judged.

6. **Knowledge flows within and between teams should be improved**: Peer review of projects should be promoted. Effective knowledge brokers should be identified and supported for mentoring. There should be a follow-up to e-discussions and webinars and they should be converted into learning initiatives. For example learning exchanges where staff visits projects and countries in turn, and act as knowledge brokers, sharing good practice and challenges between them. Importantly, the learning process should be intentionally self-reflective, and publicly communicated through social media or other appropriate channels.

Conclusion

The issue of staff behaviour is a common thread that links the two parts of the review. How staff lead, how partners behave in their daily work and with each other, define whether or not knowledge flows freely around the organisation. And while changes in structures, processes and resources can create the conditions in which KM flourishes; behaviour change is more likely to arise from small 'nudges. These small nudges could be questions to staff or modelling by leaders, or critical reflection by colleagues on a team's work, or triggers set in software systems.

"An organisation or programme's development depends on the quality of interchange and group reflection going on among the staff", said the Economist Intelligence Unit in 1996. KM surfaced in international development around the same time, with the World Bank a notable trailblazer. Since then, in most development organisations, interest in KM has tended to come and go, in waves. But the difficulty of improving programme quality without at the same time ensuring effective practice in, learning, knowledge sharing, communication and information management means that KM re-appears regularly in lists of organisational priorities. This is once more the case in the World Bank, for example, where KM is currently being promoted strongly in the Bank, with its' Water and Sanitation programme one of the leaders in the new wave. It remains to be seen whether this wave will land KM far enough up the beach to represent a permanent change in how the Bank operates.

The main conclusion from the KM review is that behaviour change should be the target of activities aiming to improve learning, knowledge sharing, communication and information management. The review highlighted that accountability cannot be devolved to a small group of specialists. For change to happen, all staff have to engage with a different way of thinking about learning, sharing and communicating their learning and how they store and manage records about their work. This does not require significant investment but systematic attention, led from the top, to how the culture of the organisation, its' business processes, reward and management systems that can be adapted so that they 'nudge' staff to behave in ways that ensure knowledge and learning flows more freely around WaterAid.

Acknowledgements

References

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COOPERRIDER, D. L. and WHITNEY, D.D. 2005 *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*. Berrett- Koehler Publishers: San Francisco.

Notes

i. Three questions were "Has anyone done this before?", "Who else is working on this at the moment? And "Who else might like to know about this?" Credit to Jo Lyons, currently working with Oxfam GB, for the distillation.

Contact details

About the author: Pete Cranston is a freelancer and has worked with various organisations on learning and knowledge management.

Aditi Chandak is a learning and knowledge advisor working at WaterAid. She has experience of working with communities; conducting, analysing and disseminating research to influence policy and practice.

Name of Principal Author: Pete Cranston
Address:17, Bedford Street, Oxford, OX4 1SU
Email: pete@euforicservices.com
www: www.euforicservices.com

Name of Second Author: Aditi Chandak
Address : WaterAid, 47-49 Durham Street, London, SE11 5JD
Tel: 020-7793-4596
Email: aditichandak@wateraid.org
www: www.wateraid.org