

Using Learning to Reach Your Mission

Originally published by Philanthropy News Network (PNN) as part of PNN's "Challenges of a New Century" series

By Bill Tucker
Chief Knowledge Officer, Isoph
© Isoph Corporation
www.isoph.com
February, 2001

Isoph works with social sector organizations to develop successful knowledge-sharing, learning and collaboration initiatives.

“We live in an economy where knowledge, not buildings and machinery, is the chief resource.”

–Peter Drucker

Using Learning to Reach Your Mission

Gary Becker, University of Chicago Professor and Nobel laureate, estimates that roughly 70% of a nation's wealth is now in the form of human capital rather than physical capital. Knowledge has become a key competitive asset not only in the private sector, but also for national governments and public sector organizations.

This should be good news for the nonprofit sector. While nonprofits don't have huge bank accounts, they do have knowledge. Whether it's in education, the environment, healthcare, or any number of fields, nonprofits hold vast treasures of knowledge. Yet, just accumulating knowledge rarely fulfills an organization's mission. It's the strategic dissemination and utilization of knowledge – strategic learning – that changes policy, leads to a better program, or creates opportunity.

Two Examples

Both corporations and public agencies increasingly see strategic learning as a mission-critical function. Thus, they use training not just to increase an individual's skills, but to foster learning across an organization. This learning enables adaptation and change, coordination of goals, and the linking of multiple partners, funders, and clients. Two examples, one from the public sector and one from the private sector, illustrate the strategic application of learning. In both cases, learning is directly related to an organization's bottom-line goals, whether they be mission-based or financially motivated.

In 1996, the World Bank's new president declared that the Bank would strive to become the “Knowledge Bank”. Each staff member now devotes two weeks per year to knowledge creation, sharing, and learning. Staff participate in over 100 different “thematic groups” to create and share knowledge in key domains such as early childhood development, school health, and disaster relief. “Sharing knowledge” is now an integral part of the Bank's mission statement. Thematic groups actively create and disseminate tools to promote learning both within the Bank and among its many partners and loan recipients – leading to results that directly support the Bank's strategic goals. (Complete article online at http://www.cio.com/archive/110100_davenport_content.html.)

KPMG, a large consulting firm, used strategic learning to rapidly upgrade and adapt its organizations' skills for a changing marketplace. KPMG realized that every one of its consultants needed to understand e-commerce and Internet technologies, regardless of the industry with which they consulted. Utilizing a combination of online courses, books, white papers, and traditional training, KPMG rapidly upgraded the skills of 8,000 consultants, allowing the company to remain at the forefront of its industry and provide its clients with comprehensive Internet strategy services.

Application to Nonprofit Sector

So how do these examples play out in the nonprofit sector? Similar to KPMG, nonprofit organizations must face constantly changing needs, legal regulations, and social issues. Collaboration and coordination, both within and across organizations, is essential. For instance, imagine thousands of human services organizations quickly adapting to new welfare reform laws. Likewise, picture hundreds of youth development agencies and all of their youth workers coordinating their programs around agreed-upon developmental

outcomes for youth. In these cases, the objective is to provide staff persons and agencies with the tools and knowledge to improve the outcome of their work with clients.

To reach this objective, entire collaboratives and all of their associated staff persons must coordinate action – requiring learning across geographic and organizational barriers. Strategies to achieve these goals could include online courses, classroom-based training, peer networking, consulting, and additional resources. To support this work, a foundation could emulate the World Bank – using its knowledge and tools, along with financial resources – to help these groups achieve their programmatic goals.

Organizations and collaboratives must articulate and assess their goals for learning, not just in terms of individual skills attainment, but in relation to their strategic plan and mission. Strategic learning can be as grand as the example above, or as basic as ensuring that all of the people involved in creating an organization's budget (program directors, fundraising staff, administrative staff, and board members) have basic financial management skills and a common framework to approach the budgeting process. Our sector's knowledge base is an incredible asset -- it's up to us to use this knowledge strategically in the pursuit of our missions.

About the Author

Bill Tucker leads Isoph's client development and strategy consulting activities. Recognized as one of the leading experts on the use of online learning in the nonprofit sector, Bill's work focuses on helping clients develop strategies that incorporate both sound learning design and sustainable business planning. His areas of expertise include program planning and design, partnership facilitation, marketing and dissemination, curriculum development, and sustainability planning. Bill is also a contributing author to *Making E-learning Work in the Nonprofit Sector*, published by brandon-hall.com.

Since 1995, Bill has worked with nonprofit and philanthropic organizations to develop successful learning programs. As director of training and publications at CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, Bill led nonprofit management and technology training programs for over 6,000 nonprofit staff persons each year. Bill's experience includes service as a VISTA volunteer, director of one of North Carolina's largest youth service programs, and leader of a national award-winning community development project featured on the cover of USA Weekend Magazine. He also founded the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network, one of the oldest and most successful Internet-based nonprofit communities.

Bill holds a master's in business from the Stanford Graduate School of Business, a master's in education from the Stanford Graduate School of Education, and a joint undergraduate degree in public policy studies and political science from Duke University.

For more information, please visit www.isoph.com or email at bill.tucker@isoph.com.