

Rich Fuchs
Regional Director, IDRC
Southeast Asia
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Tacit Tools: Homemade Knowledge Management¹

Introduction

Canada's International Development Research Centre had a large skeleton in its closet. Despite its reputation as an innovative and knowledge-intensive development organization, it had a lingering knowledge management deficit that grew larger every year. The only formal system the organization had for learning from its circa \$120 annual million investment in applied research development projects was almost completely broken. And, it hadn't been working for almost a decade.

As a medium sized organization¹, IDRC was too small to rely principally on formal systems of information management and big enough that entirely informal systems wouldn't provide the necessary knowledge and information Aspread@. Despite its good international reputation, IDRC had a millstone around its neck that wouldn't go away. The formal Project Completion Reports (PCRs) that were supposed to provide for both learning and accountability in the organization weren't being completed.

Despite several campaigns to eliminate the backlog there were 500+ of these reports that were overdue going back almost 10 years. The experience, knowledge and information from the development projects that its 60+ Program Officers helped to broker wasn't being documented, shared or disseminated.

An almost continuous cycle of organizational change in the 1990s contributed to management's inability to resolve this issue. By the time Canada's Office of the Auditor General had identified this as a major challenge to the organization's mandate in its 2001 Report, the problem had grown to very large proportions. The backlog of 500+ reports, the fact that the organization's programs had changed and many program staff had left the organization presented a compelling set of obstacles to finding a fix.

¹ Rich Fuchs is the former Director of Information and Communications Technologies for Development in Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). On October 1, 2006 he became Regional Director of IDRC's Southeast Asian office and programming. He was chair and led the process of organizational change and development learning described in this article. He extends his appreciation to Rohinton Medhora for editorial and content advice on several drafts of the manuscript as well as to Fred Carden and Sarah Earl for working collaboratively to help make the changes described possible.

and the Enemy is Us!

A small group of managers inside the organization were charged with the responsibility of trying to fix this 10 year old conundrum that was now out in the open with the Auditor General's interest in the matter. Rather than accepting the numerous prevailing myths² about the situation, they decided to undertake their own research with Program Officers to find out why they didn't complete the reports.

Senior Management appointed a research group, led by the newest member of the Senior Management Committee. They conducted a telephone survey with 39 of the 58 Program Officers who had been delinquent with their PCRs. The results ran counter to the prevailing myths. The Program Officers didn't complete their PCRs because most (66.2%) indicated that what they learned occurred principally at the start-up phase of a development project rather than at the very end (12%) when the Completion reports were supposed to be written. The PCRs were slated to be completed when Program Officer's imagination and learning was at its nadir!

But there was a much more revealing result from the research: something almost everyone knew, but hadn't articulated or documented. Program Officers didn't think management paid attention to PCRs. They correspondingly gave the reports a very low rating in their assessment of how important they were in development decision-making.³

The PCRs had become a rubric and administrative device which actually had no effective use inside the organization. Little wonder that they weren't being completed.⁴ Fixing the problem meant completing both the backlog and redirecting dysfunctional organizational norms that had crept into everyday practice. No-one actually seemed to care very much about the reports outside of a small circle who had failed to fix the problem on several previous occasions. Few, if any, on the Senior Management Committee had even read one of the reports.⁵ It was a classic case of "do what I say" not "what I do."

the free lunch

These early research results were presented to Senior Management. The President of IDRC was quite taken by the approach and the new insights to a lingering problem. She decided to champion a renewed process within the organization. At the recommendation of the research group, the President volunteered 15 people from across the agency to take the research results and find new solutions. The "volunteer" list was provided to the President by the senior manager leading what had now become a re-engineering crusade.

Few of the people who were volunteered were from the senior ranks of the organization. Indeed, more than half of them were women in the most junior professional roles and most of them were relative newcomers to the agency. Unburdened by any personal association with the legacy for why these reports hadn't been completed before, they were both open to innovation and motivated to make a name for themselves in the organization.

Over the course of 18 months, the APCR Working Group@ moved through alpha and beta phases of developing, testing, revising and adopting a new approach to learning and accountability within IDRC. The group met on a periodic, almost monthly, basis. And lunch was provided! The lunch was an unusual perk at IDRC. Lunches were generally reserved only for important visitors from outside the Centre. As a cross-divisional group of employees, working over their lunch hour to do voluntary planning, the lunch came to symbolize some return on their additional investment of time and imagination. It also provided an additional incentive to attend a meeting that wasn't at the core of their usual daily routine. And, if lunch was generally only provided for important visitors, what the new Working Group was doing surely must be important!

Experiential Learning-...Tech Tools Show Special

One among the original research group (the Author who led the group) had previous experience as a social research consultant. He was accustomed to conducting interviews while keyboarding respondent comments, both live and over the telephone. This provided a clue to a new way forward to learning and documenting the business of development at IDRC.

This clue needed, however, to be demonstrated and experienced. Rather than simply talking about the idea, he showed up at an early Working Group meeting with a telephone head-set, notebook computer and proceeded via speaker phone to interview a Program Officer from outside the group. This Alearn by doing@ approach became the principal methodology of the Working Group.

Immediately after the live Ademo@ interview, inexpensive telephone headsets were given to all of the Working Group members. They agreed to try the technology themselves in practice interviews with Program Officers. This broadened the experiential learning considerably. It also provided a test base for how long the interviews would last and how best to record them. As well, it underscored how much more powerful the tacit learning was from actually conducting the interview as opposed to the documentary learning of reading the interview transcripts after the fact!

This important point helped to guide further decision-making on how to proceed. Rather than locating responsibility for PCR interviews within a specialist role in the agency, multiple professional and senior management roles were given Ainterview@ responsibilities within the new system. Not only did this reflect the Amany hands make light work@ principle, but it also distributed the superior tacit learning much more broadly throughout the organization.

Perhaps just as important, the working group members who returned to their offices with new headset technologies were sending an unmistakable message. Something new was occurring at IDRC and management was investing in the people and the process associated with it. Soon thereafter, telephone headphones became the norm, rather than the exception, at IDRC.

A New Charter

Having learned how to use their new headphones and to keyboard while interviewing, the Working Group reported back to Senior Management. Each of the Working Group members affixed their signature to a letter that was drafted to the President and submitted at a Senior Management Committee meeting.

At this high level meeting, they also demoed a live interview, using their headsets and speaker phone at the meeting, and all of them were invited to be in attendance. Working Group members were getting more than a free lunch and headsets for their efforts. They were increasingly getting recognition at the most senior levels of the organization for⁶ successfully working together to solve a longstanding organizational problem.

Training Tips the Point

Their alpha phase completed, the Working Group now needed to expand the group of experienced users with the new system. While the members themselves were confident in their new approach, other busy professionals inside the organization weren't so sure. Was this just the emperor in new clothes? What was all this celebrity about for a system that had only been tested by just a small circle of "believers" in the agency, many of them new to the organization and in more junior professional roles?

When 21 professional staff from each of the agency's programming units were selected for a day of formal training in the new system, there were two types of initial responses. Some were delighted that they had been specially selected to broaden their professional experience with the new system. Others were outright sceptical that their busy schedules were being burdened with a full day away from their desk.⁷

An experienced social research consultant² who had done previous work at IDRC was contracted to plan and deliver the training. He was supported by management members from the original research group. The training focussed on basic social research and interviewing techniques. At the conclusion of the training day, members of the IDRC Senior Management Committee participated in a debrief of the day's experience.

Even the sceptics had agreed that the training was extremely valuable. They now saw how the new system might actually work and that the information and knowledge of professional staff could improve the performance of the agency. The 21 of 22 respondents to the closing evaluation of the day rated their experience as an 8.6 on a scale of 10. The transfer of imagination, vision and innovation from a small group of early adopters had successfully built a bridge to reach the early majority!

² Dr. Michael Quinn Patton, University of Minnesota, was the consultant.

Tie a Red Ribbon

All of the efforts of the Working Group had focussed on designing a new system for learning and accountability from development projects. Little had yet been done to deal with the backlog of 500+ PCRs that remained incomplete. The Working Group developed a system of positive reinforcement to build momentum for completing the backlog. Roughly one-third of the backlog were for programs that no longer existed and where the responsible program officer was no longer in the organization. These projects were “amnestied” from the system, leaving a more realistic, but still burdensome, goal of 300+ to complete.

Next, they developed a system of Aprogress meters@, similar to those used in fundraising campaigns. These 12 X 18 posters, indicating what proportion of a Director=s staff had completed their PCRs, were posted to each of the Senior Manager=s doors. This created an initial flurry of progress. Another system was devised whereby a red ribbon was taped to the door of each Program Officer who had completed 100% of their backlog and each Program Director who had all of the PCRs completed in their section of the agency. This was followed by a posting to the organizational intranet listing the names of Program Officers who had completed all their backlog and congratulating them on the accomplishment.⁸

The negative sanction of listing the names of those who had PCRs outstanding was considered but never used, at least not officially. In a relatively intimate organization like IDRC, the Adelinquents@ names came to be unofficially known. One among these, a 20+ year veteran of the organization, commented to the author that *A3 people came up to me in the corridor today and told me I should get the damn reports done!@* Informal social control prevailed. He got all of his outstanding PCRs completed and so did everyone else.

By the time the Working Group handed its final Beta Phase report into Senior Management, the 500+ backlog had been completely cleared, overcoming a decade long deficit in the organization. A new system for learning from development experience had also been tested, accepted broadly and officially adopted within the organization.

Two years later the Senior Management Committee receives bi-annual reports on the number, and parties responsible, for incomplete PCRs. When it comes time for annual Performance Ratings, completing PCRs is now a very real variable in the consideration of performance-based monetary reward. Something that had previously been a “wink-wink-nod-nod” rubric, has changed to be an activity that many staff actually look forward to completing and for which there is a material reward.

ALF Moving up the Value Chain

A change in the normative structure for reinventing processes to learn from development projects had been achieved. Just as important, a new set of milestones that anchored Senior Management support and engagement for the process was also established and is now in its third year of implementation.

The organization committed to hosting an Annual Learning Forum (ALF)⁹ where staff and management would take a day from each year to formally document and disseminate the principal lessons that had been learned in the previous year. The format for this event was to include a special item called A7 Minutes of Shame[®] whereby the 3 Program Area Directors would have to explain before all assembled why any of the PCRs within their area of responsibility had not been completed. This never had to happen as the Directors had managed the completion of all their reports before the first ALF event.

More important, the Annual Learning Forum provides an environment within which all members of Senior Management and staff can engage in tacit learning from the development projects that have been completed in the previous year. The ALF event itself is also documentary in that the learning across the organization is documented in an annual report from the proceedings. Accordingly, tacit learning becomes formal in a teachable moment when staff and Senior Management are assembled together for that special purpose.

The second year of implementation saw the hosting of “mini-ALFs¹⁰” within each Program Area and Regional Office in the organization. There was some collegial competition among all of these units but the results were unconditionally positive and enthusiastic. Clearly the Annual Learning Forum was becoming embedded in the annual cycle of the organization’s life. One of the program groups that had more experience with information technology organized a six-week e-ALF. To a person, each of the participants described it as being the most effective online learning experience they had ever had. Using podcasts of “celebrity interviews”, skype-voice-mail boxes for verbal feed-back and rotational hosting of the week’s discussion among the different divisions in the program, the experience was described as being “akin to what gets learned and the relationships that get formed in an executive MBA course.”

Other mountains to climb.

When the Working Group was first being launched, one of its members had asked those responsible for electronic data systems to await the human and organizational changes before new electronic system changes were introduced. He was afraid that the technology would drive the changes rather than the need for real-time learning itself.

Despite the fact that they were included in the Working Group from the very beginning, those responsible for electronic systems were slow to design lighter-touch, data capture, search and retrieval systems, different from their legacy systems, that could be used by the entire organization. The integration of reinvented electronic data systems that configure with the new human and organizational systems was yet another mountain to climb in the organization.

In a multi-lingual organization, an anglophone manager interviewing a francophone Program Officer half-way around the world on the telephone can be very challenging for both parties. Accordingly, alternations have been needed in the system to accommodate language. Not everyone can keyboard at near verbatim-interview speed and revisions in the assigned roles for interviewing have to be introduced as well. The new system has brought with it the need to factor in ongoing training, especially for new staff, in interviewing and participating in the new system.

It is clear that more is being learned from completed projects and that the “accountability” factor in the organization has improved considerably. Less clear is whether what gets learned at the program unit actually adds up to common organizational learning which influences longer term program strategy and priority. It will take more time and more ALFs to learn if that is the case.

Some senior directors report that their occupational role has been transformed to that of a “learning coordinator” as they complete the interviews at the end of each project. They take the lessons and communicate them to other staff or to other Senior Managers to disseminate the learning experience. Others Directors complete their PCRs, and find the experience to be a bittersweet one. While it is valuable, it takes time from other important duties. This differential motivational circumstances underscores the need for continued champions of the new system and for a series of milestones that senior management actually use to measure progress and performance.

Tacit-Tools: Home-Made Knowledge Management (HMKM)

This entire re-engineering exercise was developed, planned and implemented by the staff themselves. The only consultants engaged were to assist with one day of training and, at the very end, a small contract to develop some possible solutions for redesign of electronic data management to accommodate the organizational changes that had been adopted.

This successful clearance of a backlog of more than 500 reports and the design, testing and implementation of an entirely new system for leaning and accountability was based on several fundamental principals that can be generalized.

Tacit knowledge is best captured early when it is fresh and at a Ateachable moment@. Organizational learning has to be scheduled to provide for the tacit-capture at the optimal time. It also needs to be organized such that it represents an opportunity for illumination through interaction rather than the burdensome completion of forms.

Changing organizational learning patterns means transforming normative behaviour and the cultural systems that support them. There is no “quick-fix” only a systemic solution. Once normative patterns are altered, as they have been in the case of IDRC, the change elements need continued nurturance and support along with some institutional lynchpin, like the Annual Learning Forum, which remind the organization that ‘everyone has to do this.’”

As well, in serious learning organizations senior management not only has to demonstrate its interest, but it needs accountability milestones that clearly indicate this commitment. The participation of management cannot be only “top down”. It needs to be a participant and to demonstrate that its decision-making is dependent on the sharing and dissemination of professional knowledge. Senior management needs to position itself in the “line of fire” of interactive knowledge sharing among professionals in the organization. It also needs to be, and to be seen as an activist, advocate and beneficiary of the re-engineered systems.

¹ IDRC has 400+ staff located in 6 regional offices and an Ottawa headquarters and an annual budget of \$115 million (CDN).

² The Amyths@ included that Program Officers just needed to be disciplined for lack of completion or some new incentive system was required. Earlier campaigns to resolve the problem, based on these myths, had been tried without success.

³ On a 10 point scale they gave Management=s rating of PCR’s importance as 4.1 and their as 4.3, ratings that were mirror images of each other.

⁴ The newest member of the management group undertaking the research recalls having read several PCR’s and when he mentioned this at a Senior Management Committee Meeting, no one in the room could recall ever having read one themselves!

⁵ In a meeting of the Senior Management Committee soon after he started at IDRC the author asked people assembled in the meeting who had read a PCR in the past year. No one replied in the affirmative.

⁶ Several of the Working Group members actually received promotions during their time with the group.

⁷ Dr. Michael Quinn Patton, University of Minnesota, was the consultant.

⁸ A suggestion had been made to post the names of those who had yet completed their reports. This was abandoned as a violation of professional privacy in the organization.

⁹ The President agreed to launch her messaging for the Annual Learning Forum with a photo holding a soft toy of the ALF (Alien Life Form) television character from the 1980=s.

¹⁰ The most recent “mini-Annual Learning Forum” was held in the virtual reality world of “Second Life” (www.secondlife.com).