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practice assumes that valid evidence exists and is available and that the scientific findings are unambiguous and unequivocal. This is often not the case. Rosen, Proctor, and Staudt (1999) found that fewer than 14% of the research articles in social work journals addressed the development of effective interventions. Practitioners cannot therefore rely solely on robust evidence. They must also learn to acquire knowledge and competency in the helping process from their own and their peers' accumulated experiences backed by relevant theories. This is sometimes called practice wisdom (Dybciz, 2004). Similarly, social agencies must become institutions that support the development of practice innovations by engaging in organizational learning.

## ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

**ABSTRACT:** The professional commitment of practitioners in a changing society requires them to continuously acquire new professional knowledge. Since robust and relevant knowledge is often in short supply, practitioners must learn to acquire the knowledge they need. Similarly, social agencies must become institutions that support the development of practice innovations by engaging in organizational learning. This implies that they both adopt an organizational culture and create structural arrangements conducive to learning. Given this imperative, the following entry reviews the philosophical, conceptual, and methodological underpinnings of organizational learning as a strategy for guiding practitioners and organizations in a systematic endeavor to invent and manage knowledge. A methodology for the application of organizational learning in social services is presented.

**KEY WORDS:** organizational learning; evidence-based practice; reflective practice; knowledge management; practice wisdom; best practices

The professional commitment of practitioners in human services is to the needs of their clients in the context of their society. As those needs evolve, practitioners must acquire new strategies and a range of practice interventions for assisting their clients with the challenges they face. Yet, scholars disagree on the issue of the appropriate sources of knowledge practitioners should acquire and use in building suitable interventions. The positivist, and mainly quantitative, epistemology views rigorous research findings as the most efficacious way to support practice and to achieve desired outcomes. This model implies that practitioners should adopt an evidence-based practice mode of operation (Gibbs, 2003). Yet, evidence-based

### Organizational Learning

Since the mid-1970s and especially during the last decade, organizational learning has emerged as a "fundamental concept in organizational theory" (Arthur & Aiman-Smith, 2002, p. 738). Yet, despite the abundance of literature on the subject, organizational learning remains a subtle concept and without an accepted definition (Bontis, Crossan, & Hulland, 2002). There is, however, widespread agreement in the literature that there are two main key components of organizational learning: in order for organizations to promote a learning environment they must have both an *organizational culture* and *structural* support conducive to learning (Lipshitz, Popper, & Friedman, 2002).

The cultural aspect of organizational learning refers to norms and values that support learning and to their linguistic, ritual, narrative, and symbolic reflections. It can be assessed along four dimensions: (a) innovation—beliefs that support getting, sharing, and using new ideas to promote organizational work; (b) safety—beliefs that promote freedom of discussion and the ability to test ideas that may not always work out; (c) goal-centered—beliefs that encourage developing goals and setting long-range objectives to achieve them; and (d) leadership—an administrative philosophy that supports and rewards new ideas.

The structural aspect of organizational learning refers to learning mechanisms that allow practitioners to exchange information and to learn collaboratively. It can be assessed along four dimensions: (a) collaboration—staff regularly meet together to learn from each other and review program progress measures; (b) planfulness—staff set measurable outcomes to be achieved and make sure plans and activities link to outcomes; (c) diffusion—staff actively share their program successes with each other and with other related organizations; and (d) infrastructure—organizational resources and time are set aside to

promote learning (Orthner, Cook, Sabah, & Rosenfeld, 2006). In social work, supervision is probably the most common learning mechanism.

### Challenges

Several facets of social service organizations create unique challenges for promoting organizational learning. Social services are usually bureaucratic monopolies and part of the public sector. Although states and municipalities have privatized services, governments contract primarily with nonprofit organizations (Van Slyke, 2003). Therefore, competition, which is a major incentive to learn in the private sector, is often absent. Furthermore, social services usually have an inputs orientation whenever learning requires constant reflection on outputs and outcomes. Moreover, case-workers' activity consists mostly of client-practitioner dyads whenever regular team work facilitates collaborative exchange of information and organizational learning.

### Promoting Organizational Learning in Social Services

Sabah and Rosenfeld (2001) developed an initial systematic methodology for the application of organizational learning to social services. It has been since refined and applied in other countries, including the United States. The basic premise of the methodology is that in order to invent the knowledge they need, practitioners have to draw on a spectrum of existing knowledge sources and, predominantly, on their own practice expertise. However, this source of knowledge is mostly tacit and unsubstantiated. Therefore, the methodology, based on Schon's writing on reflection in and on practice (1983), aims to structure an enduring reflective dialogue among practitioners wherein they collaboratively externalize and share their tacit knowledge.

Moreover, the methodology intends to support the systematic verification of that practice wisdom, as well as that of other sources of knowledge, in terms of their capacity to generate new and effective actionable knowledge. It also intends to facilitate "double-loop learning" (Argyris & Schon, 1974), that is to allow practitioners to question the values, assumptions, and policies that underlie their present practice in addition to adjusting practice according to the disparity between expected and attained results. Finally, the methodology aspires to do more than smooth the process of inventing new knowledge. It seeks to transform social services into "learning organizations," that is, organizations in which practitioners "continually expand their capacity to create the results that they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where

collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (Senge, 1990, p. 3).

The methodology includes seven steps: (a) formulating a *learning question*, that is an unsolved major professional issue that the agency must solve in order to fulfill its mission; (b) assembling a *learning team*, that is a group of practitioners in the agency that directly address that professional issue in their daily practice; (c) gathering relevant existing knowledge from a spectrum of sources and specifically learning from prior successful attempts to solve similar issues; (d) formulating a tentative model that is an initial answer to the learning question; (e) implementing the model in practice and methodically improving it thru constant group reflection; (f) formulating and sharing the (never) final model; and (g) formulating the next learning question (Sabah & Orthner, 2007).

### Future Directions

There is still considerable work to be done to refine conceptual models underpinning organizational learning. Moreover, rigorous empirical testing of the impact of this methodology on discretionary decision-making, organizational effectiveness and interventions results is imperative in order to convince governments to invest in Organizational learning. Organizational learning has, however, already established itself as a promising model for guiding organizations and social workers to develop practice innovations, at both the micro- and macrolevels, using a continually evolving professional knowledge base. In the near future, the gradual introduction of information and communication technologies in social agencies will give practitioners from different agencies the opportunity to learn collaboratively. The development and use of virtual communities of practice combined with organizational Learning will enable social workers to share knowledge and to promote inter-organizational asynchronous learning. The application of technology and virtual knowledge sharing to promote learning across agencies is likely to strengthen and create new strategies for application of the organizational learning model.

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