Better Organisations

Survival strategies for the 21st century

Why change?

Most of our National Scout Organisations (NSOs) have structures and systems which have been in place for many years. Most of them were introduced when society was different, when the NSO was itself was different or perhaps bigger, and when the resources available to communicate with Members were very limited. Many existing structures are based on a hierarchical model with responsibilities duplicated at different levels.

Society is changing. People now expect to be consulted and involved in decisions that affect them; they expect to have access to information; and they expect organisations to respond quickly and efficiently to their needs. For organisations to be effective, they need to continue to change and have structures and processes in place to support that change. We in Scouting are no different.

Our Members are very passionate about Scouting and want to see it succeed; they also want to be involved in the process. To channel that passion NSOs need to continue to consult and inform them and then explain their decisions in a clear way. When it works well, this allows the NSO to make changes quicker and with less resistance; and the outcomes will be more easily accepted.

Our NSOs are facing increasing competition for young people and adult's time. More and more volunteer opportunities exist. We need to show that our NSOs are 'fit for purpose' for 21st century society and that we focus our limited resources on delivering excellent Scouting for young people, not supporting outdated and inefficient structures and systems.

What do we need to do?

One approach is to use the principles of the Learning Organisation (LO). Traditionally associated with business, this concept is also very applicable to Scouting. The LO concept was developed to help organisations cope with the rapid acceleration in the pace of change – a challenge also facing every NSO. Additionally, the LO approach is one that encourages Members to be involved and contribute to the NSO's development. Member involvement is a growing expectation at all levels and the LO approach will help us to meet that expectation.

The LO approach encourages the contribution of all Members and ensures that NSOs continue to learn and develop from their experiences. There are many publications available explaining the LO approach and, if implemented throughout a large organisation, it can be very complex. However, the principles are not complex and fit exactly with the Scouting principles of encouragement, consultation, involvement and empowerment.

What are the benefits of the Learning Organisation approach for Scouting?

Fits the philosophy of Scouting

The broad aim of Scouting is to develop young people to take a constructive place in society. It also aims to develop the adults who work with young people through training and development experiences. The LO approach encourages the development of people skills, working with others, expressing opinions and taking responsibility within the organisation.

Advances the involvement of everyone in setting the direction and strategy of the organisation

There is an increasing expectation in Europe that people will have a say in matters which affect them. The old top-down approach of issuing commands from a central office to be followed without question is no longer relevant.

There is also an expectation from our membership (both adults and young people) that they, too, will have the opportunity to contribute to setting the direction of their NSOs and take ownership of how this is implemented locally.

Supports the personal development of individuals

By giving our Members access to information and by involving them in discussions about the strategic direction of their NSOs, we are supporting their personal development.

Devolves decision-making to the most appropriate level

While overall strategies for our organisations are very important, they must be implemented in a way which takes account of local conditions. The LO approach encourages local empowerment and decision-making within a broad strategic framework; this approach is more likely to succeed as Members take an active role in contributing to and deciding the overall strategy.

Helps young people to develop the skills they need to contribute to their wider community

Encouraging young people to get involved in shaping and directing their NSOs is excellent practice for taking their role in society.

Promotes continuous evaluation and ensures that learning is taken into account

One of the key aspects of the LO approach is the rigorous review of the outcomes of actions. This ensures that we learn from our mistakes and equally important, we make sure that we take our good practice into the future with us, something that is too often forgotten in the change process.

Encourages creative solutions to organisational problems

By first informing our Members and then involving them in setting the direction and management of NSOs, we will be able to draw on a wide range of experience and expertise – often our Members are far more creative than our Committees!

How can we apply this to Scouting?

There are six key organisational behaviours that we wish to encourage in Scouting – behaviours inspired by the LO approach that will improve our organisations.

1. Involve and consult our membership at all levels whenever possible

- Include young people in decision-making as much as possible
- Use new technology to get the views of our Members quickly and efficiently
- Consult our Members on decisions that affect them

2. Flatten organisational structures

- Move away from our traditional hierarchical approach
- Reduce the layers in the NSO so that Members feel closer to where decisions are made

3. Share information and store it in an accessible way so that everyone can see the whole picture and can therefore contribute to discussions

- Share good practice – such as programme ideas for Leaders
- Share the reasons for decisions
- Share the background information used to make decisions
- Make information available in an accessible way – e.g. online

4. Encourage learning and personal development...this is what we should be doing in Scouting anyway!

- Make sure that Leaders, as well as young people, are continuously developed
- Make sure that those who manage Scouting (e.g. Commissioners) are trained and developed
- Make sure that decision-makers are trained and continuously developed
- Make sure our Leaders, be they local or national, are trained for the role and encouraged and supported to continuously develop

5. Regular external stimulus for the organisation's thinking and development

- Use research that impacts Scouting
- Have regular speakers and new ideas from outside Scouting
- Maintain links with other organisations and learn from them

6. Adopt a holistic approach to strategy

- Use research that collects views from Members
- Use research that gives an accurate picture of what is going on in your NSO
- Look outside of the organisation and use research from non-Scouting areas
- Ensure that your NSO has an overall strategic plan with a clear overall vision and development plan

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Some practical examples of organisational development in Scouting

Involving and consulting our membership at all levels

Scouts en Gidsen Vlaanderen of Belgium consults and involves its Members through a process that leads to a Group Leaders Conference that takes place every three years. Leaders at National, District and Local levels are involved in the process.

The process starts when, during the course of their work, national staff identify the topics which groups feel are important and put together a draft list of proposals. The proposals are passed on to the Districts where Group Leaders discuss them. Group Leaders then take the proposals and discuss them with Local Leaders and come up with changes or recommendations they feel are necessary. Once discussions have taken place at Local level, the revised list of proposals is sent back to National level where it is discussed and finalised.

When the final list of recommendations is put together and published, Group Leaders have the opportunity to discuss the list with the Leaders in their group so that together they decide on how to vote at the forthcoming Group Leaders Conference.

The process ends at the Group Leaders Conference during which the various recommendations are voted on and decided through a simple majority. The net effect of this process is that there is an element of buy-in by Leaders when changes are implemented because they have played a role in the process which led to the change.

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Flattening organisational structures

In Scotland, a region of the UK, the 30,000-strong membership was supported by a structure of 31 Areas and 98 Districts which had existed for many years. It was becoming increasingly difficult to fill the 150+ Commissioner roles and many Committee members were required to support this structure. At the same time, Scout Groups were short of Leaders. There was strong evidence that the system was inefficient with lots of resources being used to simply to support the structure; Scout Groups were not getting the support or communication they required.

The Commissioners and Committee members for the region undertook a broad, in-depth consultation with Members during which various options were considered. It became apparent that many roles and responsibilities were duplicated and that the having a Committee structure at each level required too many people. It was finally proposed that the structure should be changed to have only 8 Regions (replacing the old 'Areas') and 56 Districts.

It was also agreed that there should be clear definition of responsibilities at each level, avoiding duplication wherever possible. For instance, supporting the Youth Programme was the responsibility of Districts, whereas Adult Training was the responsibility of the Region. This change required redesigning the geographical boundaries and forming new constitutions and committees.

The result has been a clearer, more efficient and less expensive structure requiring fewer Commissioners and so releasing people to work with Scout Groups. It has also clearly focused the work: there is less overlap in roles and more direct communication. Scout Groups are now better supported. Scouting in Scotland is growing and Leaders now know where to get the support they need.

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Sharing information in an accessible way

In the Scout Association of Malta, the dissemination of information from Island Headquarters (IHQ) to Leaders relied on IHQ informing the District Commissioners, District Commissioners informing Group Scout Leaders, and Group Scout Leaders informing Leaders. Many Leaders had issues with this method of communication: if the information eventually reached them, it was late, incomplete and sometimes incorrect. This situation also led to questions about the transparency and efficiency of the organisation.

In 2007, one of the Members saw the need for an online database for leaders. It originally started as a private initiative which was soon adopted by the Association as its main information distribution system. Registered users have access to a web-based database that contains official documents, training records, resources, contact lists, announcements, reports and more recently a summary of the minutes of National Council, Executive and Policy meetings.

It took nearly two years for the project to be widely accepted; some leaders didn't trust the technology and others were suspicious that the new system would interfere with their operations.

Today, the benefits of the online system are recognised by all. Information is now readily available and this has reduced the 'us and them' mentality that existed in the past.

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Encouraging learning and personal development

One of the challenges some organisations face is getting their leaders to attend training courses and to concentrate on their continuous personal development.

Scouts Australia gave its Leader Training a new dimension by working with the Australian Government to have its Woodbadge training course recognised and accredited. As a result of this accreditation, parts of the training are recognised by employers and Members can have the training they receive in Scouting accredited to their work.

This has encouraged adult Members to participate in Woodbadge training because their skills will be recognised both within Scouting as well as within industry and the wider community.

A similar approach has been taken by Scouting in France, but there, government legislation prohibits a person from being a Leader without the necessary training. Leader training is provided by the Scout organisations but is recognised by the Government.

Providing regular external stimulus for the NSO's thinking and development

In the UK, the National Board was concerned that the Committee had become too big (32 people). People could not be recruited for their skill set as all the places were taken up by elected Board Members or appointed Commissioners. This led to a very introverted approach and big gaps in the skills required to run and develop the organisation.

After lengthy discussions, the Board recommended, and the Council accepted, that the Board should be made smaller (14 people) by removing many of the Commissioners, reducing the number of those elected and adding to the Board by appointing four Members for their skill set, one of whom would be the Chairman.

A sub-group was formed to search for new Board Members. Adverts were placed in national newspapers asking for applications. The Association was very pleased with the number and quality of people who applied from outside Scouting. In the end, four new non-Scouting Board Members were recruited, all national experts in various fields relevant to Scouting.

At the time of writing, the success of this move is not yet known. However, the UK Association is very confident that this new approach will enable quicker, more effective and more efficient decision-making informed by outside experts.

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Adopting a holistic approach to strategy

The National Board of KFUM-Spejderne in Denmark felt the NSO needed a renewed strategy and decided to start a strategy process in the spring of 2005. There was a strong urge to ensure that leaders at all levels were involved in the process. The Board also wished to make use of membership statistics and research from outside Scouting to make sure decisions would be taken on the right grounds.

The first step of the strategy process was to recruit people to a Strategy Taskforce and to make a plan for a systematic approach. At the following General Assembly everyone was involved in discussing and gathering input about a desired future for the NSO. This input was given to the Strategy Taskforce. Even though Leaders had already been involved at the General Assembly, interviews with Pack, Troop and Group Leaders and District Managers were conducted. Some number crunchers were asked to come up with relevant information, e.g. average scouting time and projections for membership numbers in the future. Another small group was asked to deliver a report with the newest research and trends about young people. Finally scenarios were set up and the Board agreed on a vision for the future. Everything was put together in a strategy document. The process took about 18 months from start to finish.

As part of the implementation, visits to local groups and districts were carried out all over the country. At the visits either a National Board Member or a member of the Strategy Taskforce presented the strategy. Following the presentation, everyone had time to discuss the strategy with the people responsible for designing it. In the end, all leaders in the Association were familiar with it.

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Further reading and more information

EuroScout Doc – Learning Organisation – http://www.scout.org/en/around_the_world/europe/information_events/resources/euro_scout_doc/learning_organisations