

Cultural Learning Organizations: A Model

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I. Cultural organizations as project-based organizations

Nowadays the cultural sector is mainly project-based. This is particularly marked in the visual art sector where art centers, temporary visual art organizations, festival organizations and even art museums organize their activities through projects¹, most of them short-term. This confers special characteristics to their work and influences the way in which this sector is structured. Similarly this project-based nature impacts on how organizations and their members learn about their successes and failures and how this knowledge is kept and diffused inside and outside the organization itself.

Three kinds of groups can be distinguished in the visual art organization sector: those which have a permanent physical and staff structure²; those which have a stable staff but do not have a venue³; and those which are born for a particular project and disband when this project is finished.⁴ In the first group, owning a permanent physical space to produce their projects and having a stable staff to implement them create a special tension with its project-based nature and have different consequences in organization life. Public non-profit art organizations can usually be included in the first group. Due to their public origin, they normally have a physical site and are allocated a fixed staff to perform their purpose. This is, in general, the case of public art museums and centers.

¹ Exhibitions, events, festivals, performances etc

² For example, art museums and art centers.

³ For instance, visual art organizations which conceive and carry out projects, that will be shown in different physical venues or public spaces.

⁴ They do not have either a venue or a permanent staff. This is the typical case of first editions of festivals, for example. It is also the case for collective artist projects.

Project-based organizations are those organizations that “do most of their work in projects and/or have a main emphasis on the project dimensions rather than the functional dimensions of organizational structure and processes” (Sydow et al., 2004, after Lindkvist, 2004)⁵. Contemporary art museums and art and cultural centers tend to be ‘quasi-pure’ project-based organizations. And I say ‘quasi-pure’ because project-based culture coexists with some permanent functions like the administration, the preservation of collection and archives or the library, for example. This project-based nature exists, however, side by side with a permanent organization structure. This not only has significant implications in management but also in the topic of this paper: learning.

Thus, projects in cultural organizations tend to be very autonomous and encapsulated, giving rise to the situation that other organization members⁶ who are not participating in them often do not know about their existence and makes their coordination difficult within the organization. This creates ‘knowledge silos’ (Sydow et al., 2004) not accessible to other organization members. Moreover, people are focused on the projects on which they are working and do not have time or interest to think about other organization issues. Similarly, although after the completion of certain projects there are normally meetings where problems are discussed there is not normally a formal system of project reflection after finishing the projects (or during project execution). New projects have to be implemented and people need to become immersed in them, without having time to think about what happened in the previous one. Deadlines and time-pressure inject a method of fast operation that is viewed by most of the people I interviewed to be incompatible with reflection on experiences and with drawing conclusions and learning lessons for future work. Likewise, as every member tends to carry out his specific expert tasks, little shared knowledge comes out. Learning in these

⁵ Lindkvist, L. (2004) ‘Governing project-based firms: Promoting market-like processes within hierarchies’. *Journal of Management and Governance*, 8, 3-25.

⁶ Working in different Departments or even in the same.

projects tends to be local (Prencipe & Tell, 2001) and there are no organizational instruments to incorporate this knowledge inside the permanent organization structure. Knowledge is kept 'nested' in every department. Besides, there are numerous external temporary team members⁷ who leave once their project is finished, which implies that their knowledge and expertise does not remain within the organization. Moreover, every project is unique and temporary which makes it difficult to extract lessons that can be used in future projects. Furthermore, focus is on outcomes and not on the process of documenting or codifying lessons. This is a typical characteristic not only of project-based organizations, like most art organizations, but also of public non-profit organizations that are more concentrated on the service they provide than in reflecting on organizational improvements and learning.

Art and cultural organizations rely on people-embedded knowledge and therefore, could be defined as what Prencipe called, 'explorer' organizations that "emphasize experience accumulation processes and knowledge transfer through people-to-people communication" and lacks formal tools for "the re-use of project knowledge" (Prencipe & Tell (2001:1381)). Thus, permanent organizations as museums and art/cultural centers, influenced by a pure project-based mentality, behave in a similar way to temporary visual art organizations and film companies⁸ which are created for a particular project and disappear when the project is finished; in those cases knowledge is embedded in people's experience and there is no attempt to codify or store that knowledge. However, what is not being taken into account is that, in all these museums and art/cultural organizations there is a stable structure that could and should help to keep organizational memory about its work and could be supported by learning systems to foster innovation. Systems of project-based knowledge reintegration could be implemented to spread project- and people-embedded knowledge inside and through the organization, although it should be noted that time-pressure, highly nested project practices and uniqueness

⁷ Freelancers like technicians, curators, support staff etc.

⁸ See DeFillippi & Arthur (1998) for a thorough research about project-based organizations and organizational learning grounded on film industry.

and temporality of projects make capturing and sharing project knowledge difficult and can, therefore, obstruct organizational learning.