

Peer Assists

Introduction

In Learning to Fly (Parcell and Collison, 2001), the learning cycle is described as made up of three elements:

- Learning before doing, or the process of learning before undertaking a task, activity or project
 - o facilitated by Peer Assists
- Learning during doing, or the process of learning whilst undertaking a task, activity or project
 - o facilitated by After Action Reviews (Tool 22)
- Learning after doing, or the process of learning after undertaking a task, activity or project
 - o facilitated by Retrospects (Tool 22)

The Peer Assist is a tool which supports 'learning before doing' processes. Using the same principles as scientific peer review, it begins with the premise that, for any given activity, someone else has done something that is at least broadly similar. In order to use the peer assists, a team or group first needs to identify the right group of people, and then uses a systematic method to benefit from their insights/experience. If conducted effectively, peer assists can promote learning, and be used to strengthen mutual learning between people and groups within an organisation.

Detailed description of the process

- Develop a clear definition of the problem to be addressed. It may be worthwhile doing some background research on whether similar issues have been, or are being, faced elsewhere. The definition should include a set of hoped-for outcomes from the peer assist process. Step 1 will help focus the peer assist meeting, and will also provide a long list of potential participants.
- Enlist participants. Participation can be generated either through open invitation or selection. In general, it is worth getting a good mix of people playing a range of roles across different locations, and from different positions in the organisational hierarchy, with the proviso that peer assist work best when there is some common ground, and scope for open honest interactions. Consider including people from outside, but only if this will not disrupt internal sharing. It may be worth bringing in outside experts after the internal process has been completed.
- Time the meeting carefully. The peer assist meeting should take place early enough to ensure that: i) the required participants are given enough notice and are available, and ii) the lessons can be applied effectively by the team calling the peer assist.
- Run the peer assist meeting. Effective peer assist meetings comprise six parts.

- o Part 1 – the learning team presents context, history and ideas regarding the task or issue at hand. This should occur in an open and flexible manner to enable redefinition in the session.
- o Part 2 should allow the participants to consider the problem, and discuss issues of interest –namely, what has been covered, and what hasn't been covered.
- o Part 3 should be a session in which participants consider what the learning team might need to know to address the problem and where might they find that knowledge
- o Part 4 of the meeting should be for the participants to reflect on what has been learned from the others and to examine options. Again, the learning team should not be the focus here.
- o In Part 5 of the meeting, the participants should present feedback to the learning team and answer specific questions. This should be informal, and deal with what has been learned, what options there are and experiences elsewhere. Begin with the positive and then move on to options to do things differently. When presenting what has worked elsewhere, participants should be encouraged to describe rather than prescribe.
- o In Part 6, the team who called the peer assist should acknowledge the contribution of the participants. There should be a commitment to a timeline for delivery of an action list of key lessons learned, and what the learning team are going to do differently as a result. Finally, all the participants should be invited to reflect on what they learned, and how they might apply it going forward.
- Develop a set of lessons and related options to shape the learning team's decision-making process and provide pointers to future actions. This document should be shared with the peer assist participants for final comments and suggestions, and then placed in a publicly accessible area such as an intranet.

Key points/practical tips

- Ensure everyone is clear about the purpose of the peer assist and their roles:
 - o Learning team listens in order to understand and learn
 - o Participants share knowledge and experience to help resolve the challenge without adding to the workload.
- Participants should be given briefing materials in advance so they have time to prepare.
- As well as the participants themselves, an external facilitator and note-taker are essential. In particular, the facilitator should be from outside the teams concerned, in order to make sure the diverse needs of the participants are met.
- Allow time for the teams to socialise. Rapport is essential for open learning.
- Although the peer assist process is designed to provide input for a specific purpose or project, consider who else might benefit from the lessons learned. Always look out for opportunities to share and reuse knowledge and learning.

Example: ODI civil society engagement peer assist

As part of a very important proposal which had potential implications for the whole organisation, the RAPID team at ODI called a peer assist to gather together experiences of different researchers working with Southern civil society organisations. The range of people was diverse, with over 20 different thematic experts present, which was a few more than is usually considered ideal for a PPA. The session was facilitated very carefully, using the peer assist process. The outcome was a set of ideas for the substance of the proposal, as well as a list of previous projects of relevance, further internal contacts and useful external contacts. Key participants also shared documents of relevance, and an intranet page was created to store all of these in one location. A number of participants volunteered to be on a panel at a later stage to help bolster different areas of the proposal. Follow-up interviews were also conducted to capture stories of successful ODI engagement with this increasingly important group of stakeholders. Overall, it was one of the most extensive and systematic internal learning exercises conducted at ODI. The outcome was that ODI was awarded a Partnership Programme Agreement by DFID, the first time a research institute had ever done so. The ideas generated at the peer assist have since helped shape the resulting multi-year, multi-million pound Civil Society Partnerships Programme.

Sources and further reading

- Collison, C. and G. Parcell (2001) *Learning to Fly*, Oxford: Capstone Publishing.