

# Getting from skills to better performance – what do we know?

11.06.2010 - Nils Boesen

## Introduction

Individual competency development is only one aspect of the “capacity butterfly” – and often, individual competency development does not translate into the other three parts: organizational, system or network capacity enhancement.

This note offers a conceptual model for discussion the issues that determine whether and to what degree individual competency development – learning - is likely to lead to performance enhancement or not at these other levels. Further, the note briefly summarizes recent stock-taking exercises.

The note look at learning linked to workplaces in an individual organization or in a sector system. It does not look at training in the education system as such. The note covers in principle both off-the-job and on-the-job learning, and all forms of support to such learning: ad hoc training events, more systematic and longer term approaches; study tours and peer-based learning; etc.. While the focus is on the public sector, most observations cover private sector skills development processes as well.

## From skills development to performance

Figure 1: From skills development to performance – the long chain

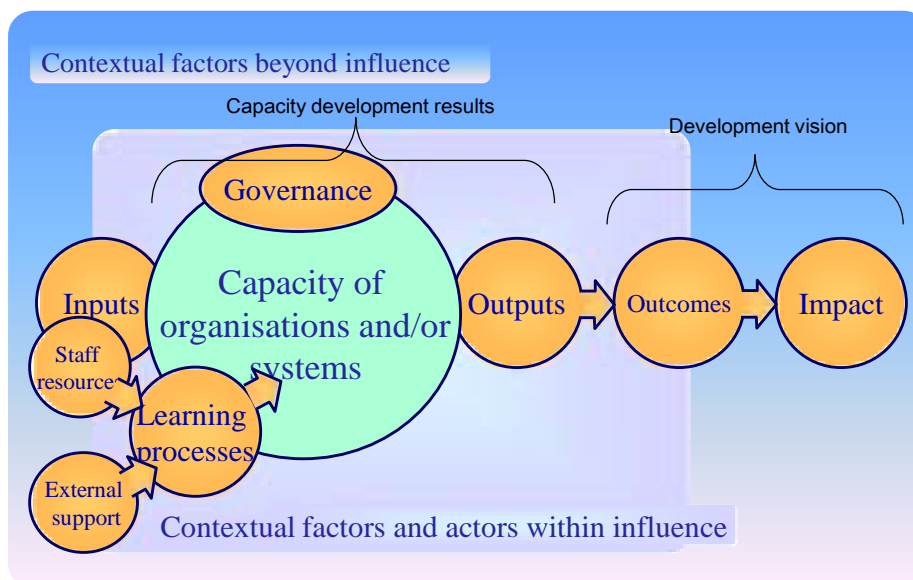


Figure 1 illustrates the well-known fact that there are several factors that influence whether skills development will lead to enhanced individual, organizational or systems performance – not to speak of desired outcomes and impact. Simplified, the factors include:

- The wider context in which the learning takes place. The context in which organizations are embedded is shaped by broader political, institutional and socio-cultural factors, availability of adequate resources, cross-sector incentives in the public sector, informal patterns of incentives and loyalties, etc. If the general incentives to perform are strictly limited – modest material rewards unrelated to performance, career prospects linked to connections and loyalty, and initiatives and independent action punished rather than rewarded – then additional individual skills are unlikely to transform into performance.
- The incentives determining whether individuals will participate, and their motivation for attending the learning processes. Are they driven by their managers because these want improved performance, or is the training or study tour (with associated perks) more part of the benefit package – or are skills development (and certificates) seen as an opportunity to get employment somewhere else?
- The quality of the learning processes (relevance for present or near-future tasks, for the wider organization or system; the quality of syllabus, methods, trainer(s) or facilitators' experience etc.)
- The quality of the learning processes (including timing, environment, actual adaptation to learners' needs and expectations, actual performance of those shaping the opportunity for learning (trainers, facilitators; distance learning providers etc); and attentiveness of learners).
- Incentives and opportunities to use the acquired skills, knowledge and attitudes in the workplace or, through networking, in the broader system.
- The availability of other internal factors required to transform the deployment of enhanced individual capacity into organizational or system capacity which results in enhanced services or regulatory performance. A trained team of monitoring specialist may apply their skills and produce superior performance statistics – but if management decisions are mostly influenced by factors unrelated to actual performance as reported by the monitoring team, then the performance of the organisation or system as such may not improve.

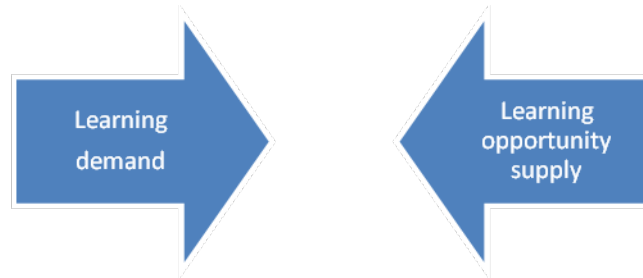
The conceptual model above (“an open systems approach”) illustrates why learning process cannot be assumed to lead to anything unless other factors are conducive. They do not necessarily lead to learning, nor to individual performance, nor to organisational and system performance. And, the further down the chain the goals are set - and the more ambitious they are – the more factors need to contribute positively to ensure that these goals are achieved. To stay with the example above, the capacity and performance of the monitoring team may enhance as a result of training (and a few other things). But monitoring is an intermediate function, and monitoring results are not ends in themselves – and to get from better monitoring in e.g. health to better performance of the health system is a much wider challenge, and a much more ambitious goal. A cow does not get fat by being weighed!

## **Demand, supply – and their relation**

From a different point of view, it is also useful to look at demand for learning, supply of learning opportunities<sup>1</sup> – and how these to relates and interacts.

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<sup>1</sup> The somewhat awkward terms “learning” and “learning opportunity supply” are used instead of “training” and “training supply” to underline that learning is a process with the learner – and that the learning opportunities are not confined to traditional training.



It is thus commonplace to look at Training Needs Assessments (TNA) that supposedly identifies learning needs – and then identify and/or tailor-make the supply of learning opportunities to this demand. It is also commonplace to argue – not least in the context of development assistance - that training and other skill development processes should be demand-led to be effective.

The real difficulty is to make practical sense out of not only what in particular “demand” means, but also how demand and supply actually “meet”, relate, shape and influence each other. Even if learning opportunities are supplied for free and people are paid to attend, it is often assumed that it could still be in some sense demand-led<sup>2</sup>. That may be possible, but demand is at least somehow less firm than it would be if the learner had to pay by his/her own purse, or from the budget of the organization. On the other hand, it may also be that what is initially clearly supply-driven training may end up transforming the performance of an organization that just did not believe it needed certain training.

These conceptual models outlined above are helpful when looking at the findings in recent reviews of training in the context of development assistance.

### Recent findings about training effectiveness<sup>3</sup>

In accordance with what is already implied above, the following key findings characterizes many donor-supported training interventions:

- *Context factors are not taken into account:* In many circumstances training is ineffective because complex contextual factors negate the potential effectiveness of training and other learning based interventions.
- *Training individuals may not be an adequate CD response* and is rarely one in and of itself.
- *The ability to learn* is an essential, underpinning capability for other aspects of sustainable CD. A narrow, instrumental skills focus may have limited effects in many service and product areas.
- *Short-term and ad hoc training approaches have limited impact.* They may even do harm when training offers from different donors end up taking key staff away from work
- *Training has often been poorly defined and implemented* as the response to CD needs.

<sup>2</sup> Economists would normally argue that demand includes a willingness to pay a price – so while you can need and use a free good (e.g. air to breathe), there is not no demand for it (you cannot – yet! – sell air to breathe).

<sup>3</sup> This section builds mainly on OECD’s recent meta-review “Seeking Better Practices for Capacity Development: Training & Beyond”, OECD, 2010. But see also the other documents uploaded on <http://capacity4dev.ec.europa.eu/swiss-learning-training-and-cd-support-performance/resources-training-and-capacity-development>

- *Content is often poorly adapted to the local context, and not delivered in the local language. Many training themes apply a distinctive “modern” vocabulary of terms that find few parallels in some languages.*

It follows from the above factors that training cannot be considered on narrow terms:

- The design of training should both be informed by in-depth understanding of local context and identification of opportunities and constraints, and appropriately aligned to broader CD initiatives;
- Training is best used as a component of work at multiple levels of organisation and country systems, however defined;
- Activities need to go beyond training towards processes that support learning
- Achieving sustainable CD impact calls for long-term perspectives, with strategic links between short-term activities, such as training courses, and long-term learning and change goals for sustainable CD impact.
- A results orientation can help to ensure that proposed training activities are appropriately implemented to meet identified needs, and that progress and the contribution to overall CD needs can be monitored and evaluated;
- The quality of training design and training cycle management is fundamental to success;
- Greater attention needs to be paid to translation of resources and materials, for adaptation of concepts to local context as well as into local languages and this can be achieved through more effective use of local resource providers.

The key message here is the same that would apply for other donor support to capacity development, like e.g. technical assistance: On the demand-side, ownership of and commitment to a wider change agenda with relatively tangible results matters, and this has to be embedded in a reasonably enabling environment. On the supply side, the stamina to take a long term and flexible approach, and the technical and pedagogical quality matters, including the careful adaptation to the demand, context and learning environment of the learners.

This, again, requires that demand and supply meets in a profound and comprehensive dialogue at the level of strategies, tactics and operational practicalities that can put learning and the desired individual, organisation and systems performance in the centre of attention – without overlooking or being naive about the inevitable tensions in a relationship where opportunity costs may be low, incentives not related to performance may be considerable, and the asymmetries between the partners – in relation to information and resources – are significant.