**Resources for Implementing the
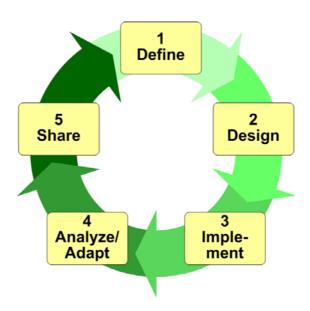WWF Project & Programme Standards**

Step 5.4

Performance and Learning Culture

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Contents

This document is intended as a guidance resource to support the implementation of the *WWF Standards of Conservation Project and Programme Management.* Although each step in these *Standards* must be completed, the level of detail depends on the circumstances of individual projects and programmes. Accordingly, each team will have to decide whether and to what level of detail they want to apply the guidance in this document.

This document may change over time; the most recent version can be accessed at: https://intranet.panda.org/documents/folder.cfm?uFolderID=60992

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Performance and Learning Culture

"Culture is an abstraction, yet the forces that are created in social and organizational situations that derive from culture are powerful. If we don't understand the operation of these forces, we become victim to them." Edgar Schein, 2004.

What is a Performance and Learning Culture?

A **performance culture** may be defined as:

*   an organisational environment with a strong focus on results, monitoring and managing performance and a real desire to improve. Performance relates to the achievement of goals and objectives and the successful completion of activities.

A **learning culture** may be defined as:

*   "an organisational environment which enables, encourages, values, rewards and uses the learning of its members both individually and collectively." (Bruce Britton[1]) Conscious learning involves looking at what you set out to achieve, reviewing the extent to which you have achieved it, and exploring what worked, what did not work, and why – always with an eye to improving your interventions. To do so, it is necessary to look at the assumptions upon which you based your interventions and to be open to incorporating lessons and good practices from elsewhere.

These two important cultures can be connected, and developed in such a way as to be mutually supportive/ synergistic – a true learning culture will strengthen performance, especially in the medium-long term, and a focus on performance can accelerate learning.

Culture is far bigger than any individual project or programme, and creating a supportive and effective performance and learning culture within a project is dependent on the wider

> **Box 1. Organizational Culture in Theory**
>
> An organisation's culture includes three levels:
>
> *   **Level 1 Artefacts:** tangible attributes like offices, awards and recognition, the way that staff dress, and hows staff interact with one another and with outsiders. These are the symbols, phrases, words, unconscious habits and patterns of organisational life.
>
> *   **Level 2 Espoused values:** official culture – slogans (e.g. for a living planet), strategies, goals, vision and mission statements, annual reports, HR policies.
>
>   Levels 1 and 2 reflect the culture of an organisation, but they are not the culture itself. This can be found in
>
> *   **Level 3 Underlying culture:** assumptions, norms and values. These are the deepest and least visible elements of an organisation's culture. They include the "unspoken rules" of the organisation and are the ultimate source of values and actions.
>
> All three of these levels exist within a project, and you should be conscious of these if you are to embed an effective performance and learning culture within your project. Levels 1 and 2 are relatively easy to identify; Level 3 can be accessed by identifying and "decoding" the artefacts of Level 1 and values of Level 2.
>
> *Source: Schein (2004)*

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[1] Britton, Bruce (2002). *Learning for Change: Principles and practices of learning organisations.* Sundbyberg: Swedish Mission Council. p.15

context. There is strong cultural interdependence at the project, office and WWF Network levels, and conscious effort needs to be made at each of these. This guideline recognises the need for action at all levels, but focuses primarily on the requirements for effective project management.

Why a Performance and Learning Culture Is Important

Performance and learning are strongly linked. Both contribute to a culture whereby successful achievement of goals and objectives are considered key. Without a performance and learning culture that values, encourages and supports learning and improvement, project teams will miss key opportunities to identify and utilise learning to improve the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of their project and contribute to the wider knowledge of the WWF Network.

It is relatively easy to incorporate performance and learning into the first two levels of culture (Box 1), but without the less visible elements of level three, performance and learning may be reduced to "lip-service" and box-ticking exercises rather than being a valued element of the project.

When to Create a Performance and Learning Culture

Ideally, you need to create a supportive culture for performance and learning at the very beginning of a project and maintain it throughout the lifetime of the project. In a sense, "setting the culture" is an important precursor to starting the project cycle. If your team is empowered to critically question assumptions and understand values, structures and power relations that affect decisions, and your team strives to deliver the best performance possible and learn at each step, you have a much better chance of success. However, if your project is already underway, it is never too late to start!! (A separate guideline - Checklist for Embracing Learning - provides an overview of what should be considered at each step of the project management cycle.)

How to Create a Performance and Learning Culture at the Project Level

A culture cannot merely be categorised as "good" or "bad", "functionally effective" or not. Hence it is not possible to present a one-size-fits-all approach or step-by-step process for creating a performance and learning culture. Instead, this guideline highlights key issues and guidance on how to think about these within an individual project context.

Assessing Your Existing Performance and Learning Culture

Box 2 lists some characteristics of what a project with an effective performance and learning culture would look like. As a first step, consider how your project team measures up against these characteristics. As a key element of the desired culture is openness, your team should assess itself to reach consensus on what the culture is like currently and where steps are needed to make it more effective.

> **Box 2. Characteristics of a Performance and Learning Culture**

1) Senior managers focus on strategic issues, quality of delivery and lead with clear vision, rather than focussing on tasks and operational issues.

2) Senior managers focus energy and emphasis on setting what is done in the context of the Network's vision and objectives.

3) New ideas are constantly sought and tried – the team manager makes it part of his/her responsibility to ensure that team members are given personal encouragement to contribute to the improvement of the project (without displacing or losing the good practice that you already have).

4) There is an openness to internal and external challenge and a willingness to take and stick to tough decisions and tackle difficult problems. Team members and the wider stakeholder group feel free to enquire about and challenge each others' (and their own) assumptions and biases. There are few (if any) subjects that cannot be discussed.

5) Learning is given adequate resources – there is a recognition that learning takes time and it may also require other resources, including funding

6) Staff are rewarded for the contribution they make towards the project's learning and given recognition for their efforts. Internal politics and power relations are not allowed to get in the way of sharing experience and knowledge

7) There is cross-functional working and cross-programme and inter-Network communications

8) Managers facilitate discussions at meetings on how performance can be improved and invite questions from staff. Meetings are designed to encourage two-way communications

9) All team members understand how their work contributes to the project goals and objectives. Everyone has a sense of responsibility for the performance of the whole project team, and accountability for results is clear. Learning is accepted as a legitimate activity – it is seen as an integral part of each team member's responsibility, not something that must be done on the individual's own time

10) Staff and senior management central to implementation of evaluation/review recommendations are involved throughout the evaluation/review

Taking Steps to Strengthen Your Performance and Learning Culture

Culture change does not happen overnight – often it involves letting go of long-held views; challenging our own and others' assumptions can be an uncomfortable process. Support from senior management is essential for a performance and learning culture to develop – however it also requires the engagement of every member of the team for it to flourish. Hence change comes about through both top-down and bottom-up approaches.

Below are a number of principles and practical suggestions when looking to strengthen your performance and learning culture. While all are important, you may need to prioritize which you choose to implement for practical purposes.

> **Align Official and Underlying Cultures**

The WWF Standards of Conservation Project and Programme Management and accompanying guidelines form part of our official culture and are a clear statement of WWF's belief in being a

performance and learning organisation. Teams that visibly subscribe to the Standards by implementing not just the requirements, but by also adopting what is set out as best practice, will be embedding performance and learning within their underlying culture.

This will contribute to all of the characteristics listed above.

> Be a Role Model

It is essential for project managers to lead by example, demonstrating in their own attitude and behaviour the culture what they desire within their team. Project managers must also be aware of giving consistent messages with regard to culture. For example, if you say that you want your team to contribute ideas and learning, then ensure that time and processes are in place to enable this, and be prepared to listen and discuss contributions.

Project managers should focus on strategic issues, ensuring that the overall goals and objectives of their project contribute to Network goals and objectives; setting the direction and trusting their teams to carry out day-to-day implementation.

This will contribute to all of the characteristics listed above, and specifically to 1 and 2

> Promote Openness and Honesty

Openness and honesty are two key attributes within a performance and learning culture.
- Be open to new ideas – seek out best practice from elsewhere to inform decisions about the direction of and processes within your project
- Create an environment where team members feel free to enquire about and challenge each others' (and their own) assumptions.

Simple ways in which to do this include: adopting the ethos that "no idea is a bad idea" and is therefore worth discussion/consideration; initiating dialogue and discussion across the team and with partners; and ensuring that you are transparent about decisions that are made.

This will contribute primarily to characteristics 3, 4, 7 and 8.

> Create and Maintain a "No-Blame" Culture

An open and honest environment can only flourish where staff feel safe to share mistakes and admit where things are not working. Steps can be taken towards ensuring this by looking at mistakes as an opportunity to learn and improve. Simple actions that can help move towards this are:
- Share dilemmas and invite input to find ways forward. This reorients challenges/mistakes into a positive frame upon which positive action can be taken.
- Recognise that this approach can save much time and money and can lead to increased impact.
- Individuals should introduce areas that have not worked well that they themselves have been involved in – not about areas that are other people's responsibility. Senior managers should model this behaviour.

This will contribute primarily to characteristics 3, 4, 6, 8 and 9

Box 3. Example of Being Open to Input from Others

Within the Kenyan Good Woods project, the project team needed to mobilise farmers to join an FSC certification scheme. Initially the project aimed to train 400 farmers and have them join the scheme. Two members of the project team began visiting farmers in one district in 2002 to explain the potential of certifying and selling neem timber to carving co-operatives. If farmers showed interest, they were registered for future training. Realising that two people were not enough to achieve this massive task, the team adopted a training of trainers approach. They identified approximately 200 farmers by October 2002. At a project team meeting, other implementing partners pointed out that this approach was bound to fail – farmers were not self-selecting, which put their long-term commitment to certification in doubt. As a result of internal discussions, the team agreed on a process to involve farmers in sensitisation through public meetings called with the help of village elders. To be able to standardise the training that was delivered, and for repeat use in the future to expand the scheme, the team also agreed to develop training manuals.

As a result of this approach, over 1500 farmers were sensitised and an amazing 1570 farmers registered and received training by the end of 2004.

This example demonstrates how being prepared to share challenges openly and accept ideas from others (in this case a local NGO partner) can turn a problem around and achieve a significant impact.

> **Listening and Seeking to Understand**

Time spent in productive conversations is instrumental in embedding performance and learning within the project culture. Spending time listening and asking questions of other team members, partners and stakeholders can have a number of positive impacts:

- It deepens understanding of what is happening within the project and beyond – this can in turn lead to the identification of ways in which improvements can be made;
- Team members feel that their ideas and contributions are valued – which in turn can generate ideas for improvements and contributions to problem-solving. Feeling that their input is valued is also a great motivator for team members;
- It opens the way for more collaborative working; and
- It helps to create an open environment in which genuine learning can take place.

This will contribute primarily to characteristics 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8

> **Make Time for Learning**

Learning should be made a legitimate activity – part of legitimate work responsibilities and not something done on an individual's own time. This can be achieved through embedding learning into existing processes. This takes place most effectively when learning is made a specific objective (both for the project, and for individuals). It is critical to schedule time for review and learning into the project cycle (See guideline on Step 4.4 Adapt Your Plans and Budgets for further details)

Smaller ways in which this can be achieved include making "project review" an agenda item at team meetings (providing opportunities for individuals to share key lessons that they have learned, or for a challenge/dilemma to be presented for discussion by the team with a view to identifying a way forward). This will only be effective if sufficient time is allowed. You can also ensure that, where appropriate, workshops have a clear learning component.

Project managers must ensure that office/Network politics and power relations are not allowed to get in the way of sharing experience and knowledge. This may involve identifying or lobbying for 'sponsors' of learning within your office, region or the Network, to ensure that learning is not only protected, but also institutionalised.

This will contribute primarily to characteristics 5, 8 and 9

> **Be Innovative**

Your team should be prepared to try things that are new but put in place steps to monitor how/whether these work. You should also be prepared to take remedial steps. You can do this by:

• Encouraging each member of the project team to come up with ideas and solutions

• Thinking outside the box- don't start with what you have, or what you are doing, but think about what you want to achieve

This is not about being reckless and squandering resources on ill-conceived activities, but about taking intelligent risk.

This will contribute primarily to characteristics 3, 4 and 5

> **Give Feedback**

The giving and receiving of feedback is one of the best ways to facilitate an individual's personal and professional growth, reinforce appropriate behaviour, and improve performance. Giving honest, open, consistent, and timely feedback will reinforce the culture of performance and learning that we are seeking to establish and maintain. Feedback should not just be top-down; feedback should also take place from the bottom-up and horizontally.

Remember it is as important to be open to receiving feedback as it is to give it.
(See guideline on Step 5.3 Feedback and Evaluations for more information)

This will contribute primarily to characteristics1, 2, 3, 6, 8 and 10

> **Focus on Priorities**

Check how what you do contributes to your project goals and objectives; and how your project contributes to Network goals and objectives. If tasks that the project team are undertaking do not contribute to these, then ask yourselves why you are doing them and consider cutting them. The team should raise these questions at the design stage and again at any stage where the project is being reviewed.

Ensure that everyone within the team understands not only WHAT the priorities are, but also WHY these are the priorities and HOW their work contributes to these. Project Leaders must ensure that all members of the team are clear about what work they need to undertake to achieve these priorities.

Stephen Covey[2] states that "effective management is *putting first things first*." What the "first things" are will have been determined in the Define and Design Steps. It is the responsibility of everyone within the team to put them first every day.

This will contribute primarily to characteristics 1 and 2

> **Provide Recognition and Reward**

In order to perform well, staff must be motivated – not just by material rewards, but by getting satisfaction out of the work, the achievements, and/or the knowledge that their effort is seen and appreciated. Do not underestimate the power of recognition.

- Acknowledge inputs of individuals or teams
- Provide opportunities for team members/partners to represent the learning to others

Recognition should be timely – if left too long before being given, it can sound insincere and can give the impression that it is lip service.

This will contribute primarily to characteristic 6

> **Promote Understanding Through Participation**

Ensure that all team members understand how their work contributes to the project's goals and objectives. This can be done by using a participatory approach where the entire team contributes to the thinking at the design stage and is involving the team in review processes can help this.

Box 4. Example of Promoting Understanding

In November 2004, programme teams from Nepal and Bhutan attended a workshop for both office and field staff, part of which focused on their logframes and monitoring plans. The workshop involved extremely intensive sessions in which programme teams revisited their activities; reviewed and clarified understanding of the activities; discussed and reached consensus on the intended conservation and livelihoods impacts of each activity; and developed approraite indicators. A participatory appraoch was used; with dialogue and discussion encouraged to ensure that all views were aired and heard, and understanding was deepened. A key success of this workshop was that the exposure of field-based staff to action plan development gave them a better idea of the bigger picture and why they were doing what they were doing. Field staff also became much more confident about expressing their opinions.

This will contribute primarily to characteristics 4, 8, 9 and 10.

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[2] in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (2005)

> **Accountability Through Reporting**

Reports (e.g. Technical Progress Reports and Financial Reports) are a key opportunity to provide feedback to senior management and donors on project impact. Most people appreciate the opportunity to talk about their work, as long as the reporting system works effectively. Again an open and honest approach will demonstrate the fostering of a performance and learning culture. In a "no-blame" culture, sharing challenges and problems as well as successes is a powerful way of developing greater understanding. Likewise, involving donors can help stimulate new ideas and solutions. It is important that senior management or donors use the reports and provide feedback to project teams on the content of their report.

Providing lessons as feedback through reports holds the potential to be valuable means of sharing learning with a wider audience.

This will contribute primarily to characteristics 7 and 8

> **Demonstrate Trust**

Many of these elements of a performance and learning culture link to trust:

- If you are open and honest people will trust you.
- When project managers delegate responsibility, it demonstrates that they trust members of their team to carry out the work.
- In an open environment and "no blame" culture, individuals will trust their manager and other team members to be supportive when they share lessons and challenges, and admit to mistakes.

Trust is the highest form of human motivation. It brings out the very best in people, and is therefore integral to achieving conservation impact.

This will contribute to all of the characteristics.

Responsibility for a Performance and Learning Culture at an Office and Network Level

At the beginning of this document, we identified that commitment to a performance and learning culture must exist at the project, office and Network levels. The responsibilities at a project implementing office, donor office and Network are summarised below.

Project Implementing Office

- Ensure that mechanisms are in place for individual performance reviews.
- Provide mechanisms to manage poor performance in a constructive and timely manner.
- Support and encourage learning, recognising that time and resources are needed for these activities to take place.
- Encourage cross- project learning, and ensure mechanisms are in place to enable this to happen.
- Provide recognition of individuals and teams for high performance and contributions to the organisation's learning.

- Post project information and reports on the Project Database.

Donor Office

- Support and encourage learning and sharing of lessons and good practices, recognising that time and resources are needed for these activities to take place.
- Seek to understand before providing feedback on performance of a project.
- Provide timely and constructive feedback on performance and lessons reported.
- Be open to changes and modifications of projects based on analysis and learning.
- Seek to maximise the impact of learning from projects by acting as a conduit to disseminate lessons and good practices to appropriate audiences.

Network

- Support global mechanisms that facilitate the dissemination of lessons and good practices and opportunities for staff to collaborate and learn from each other (both virtually and face-to-face).
- Don't allow network politics to get in the way of high performance and learning.
- Support the identification and tackling of capacity gaps in order to increase performance and learning capabilities.
- Maintain the project database, data management systems, and a databank of lessons learned across the Network (institutional memory).
- Actively seek to identify and remove barriers and blockages to high performance (e.g. eliminating unnecessary bureaucracy).

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