Strategic Learning

This knowledge brief will seek to explain strategic learning, specific elements of strategic learning will be outlined, and it's uses. How strategic learning has taken up in the food movement will be identified, along with how strategic learning impact's public health.

"Learning is dependent on the willingness to change, admit mistakes, and to take responsibility as a group. Collective learning must be negotiated, refined and tested. Strategic learning is useful to address the organization's approach to a complex problem by seeing what has worked, what has not worked and any limitations" (Leahy, Wegmann, & Nolen, 2016).

What does literature include about this theory?

Strategic learning allows organizations to learn, in real-time, how to adapt their strategies to changing circumstances (Leahy, Wegmann, & Nolen, 2016). It is a framework for decision making, where strategies or approaches are revised based on the feedback (Leahy, Wegmann, & Nolen, 2016). For an organization to be successful with strategic learning, it requires an understanding of how to plan, hold and act on conversations that are based on collective thinking. It requires an environment or culture that is supportive of learning and practicing new skills (Leahy, Wegmann, & Nolen, 2016). Learning is dependent on the willingness to change, admit mistakes, and to take responsibility as a group. Collective learning must be negotiated, refined and tested. Strategic learning is useful to address the organization's approach to a complex problem by seeing what has worked, what has not worked and any limitations (Leahy, Wegmann, & Nolen, 2016). Taking the context into consideration, learning from previous approaches enhances the system's decision-making skills for the future. (Leahy, Wegmann, & Nolen, 2016).

Cunningham (1999) stated that there are two orders to change. The first is changing within parameters, this is doing better than previous attempts. The second is a change that goes beyond the parameters. This is changing your approach to change, an example given by Cunningham (1999) is changing your mindset from "flying an aircraft" to "flying people." Change is always happening, and to remain static may result in losing track. Organizations need to live with the pace of change and welcome it. Change consists of a pattern change and changing accustomed habits to new ones (Cunningham, 1999). On the other hand, Carbaj (2019) explains strategic learning as the "extent to which efforts uncover key insights into future progress". This involves learning about what the system or organization is doing, their way of thinking and the way they are as a system. When confronting a challenge, the outcome is learning from the approach; what worked and what did not, as well as any strengths and weaknesses.

Both Carbaj and Cunningham's approaches look at learning from their strategies, evaluating the feedback and determining where changes in the approach need to be made. However, Carbaj takes it beyond the two orders of change and looks at three ways of learning from your feedback. Carbaj explains three ways of learning as 1) Single-loop learning is about what the system is doing such as limitations to core practices, relationships, and resources. 2) The double-loop is learning about the systems assumptions, understanding and thinking on the current challenge, the context and of the challenge and the system and any strengths, weaknesses, and limitations on the strategies. 3)Triple-loop learning is about the system as a whole such as triggers, habits and group dynamics.

Cunningham (1999) explains that training and learning are two separate things, and most organizations take ineffective approaches to learn such as forecasting the future, treating change as all one process and relying on textbook knowledge. Strategic learning is an ongoing process, and in organizations, it is learning that is done among each individual in the system to work as one supporting one another.

Strategic learning and the evaluation of an organization provide guidelines for decision making, confidence within an organization and a strategy to increase the value of an organization. Evaluation of strategic learning takes into account the impact and outcomes, the organization must determine how to communicate the results of the learning, adaptation, and change (Preskill, & Mack,2014 .

How has it taken up in the "food" movement?

Strategic learning is seen in the food movement through various agencies and approaches. One example is a Comox valley area food security assessment among disadvantaged communities, which included taking surveys and to assess the gaps in the current system. This initiative resulted in action plans such as Dad's night out where men gather and have dinners, cooking classes for mothers and children. These strategies helped to address the gaps for families that had barriers to accessibility of food (Prato & Cupelli, pp.6).

How does it impact public health?

Strategic learning is seen in public health in the changes health authorities make to better serve their communities. As seen in a study based in the UK, health authorities used public engagement to identify gaps in the health system. This approach allowed the public to take control of their health and the issues that affect their health rather than the healthcare system taking the lead. It helped to shift the power from the healthcare system to the communities, which encouraged engagement in health outcomes (South et al, 2019). Hospitals and healthcare systems generate feedback from patients, such as surveys to evaluate their strategies and learn from the community it serves.

Another way public health has demonstrated strategic learning is through the threat of the Ebola outbreak. From the outbreak, the feedback was taken in on what worked, what did not work and possible changes. It was determined that there needed to be better communication among the different acting parts of the health system, better screening protocols and methods (Carney, & Weber, 2015). In regards to surveillance, they took the approach mentioned by Cunningham (1999) of shifting your mindset from doing "public surveillance of the people" to doing "public surveillance for the people (Carney, & Weber, 2015)." Health authorities and systems look at the feedback of their approaches to address health issues and constantly change policies such as handwashing, ambulating after surgeries and even addressing patient to caregiver ratio for the different levels of required care.

Implications of the theory on the work of the KFPC

The KFPC has been involved in various projects such as Nourish, Social Enterprise, Food Policy Implementation and Gleaning Abundance Program (GAP). These four projects have utilized the strategic learning theory when evaluating their approach and reviewing feedback from attendees on seeing what has worked and what has not.

Nourish was an event that was held in 2019 that involved guest speakers to shed light on "Indigenous food sovereignty and poverty as the root cause of household food insecurities (Tapestry Evaluation and Strategy, Interior Health & Kamloops Food Policy Council, 2019)".They asked the attendees to give feedback on the event itself such to determine what worked, what did not and any suggestions for the future. They gained valuable feedback such as the event was an environment that encouraged meeting new people to network with, the "Open space" concept welcomed open discussion to express ideas for their communities (Tapestry Evaluation and Strategy, Interior Health & Kamloops Food Policy Council, 2019). What did not work for them was the informal presentation and length of speakers and they did not like the lack of interaction between the attendees and the speakers. Also the" lack of tangible steps towards actions" was expressed in the feedback. Some suggestions were to include workshops on food literacy, community education on causes of poverty, food sovereignty and the meaning of upstream (Tapestry Evaluation and Strategy, Interior Health & Kamloops Food Policy Council, 2019). The approach of gaining feedback from the attendees model the shift in strategy from "flying an aircraft" to "flying the people ''. This feedback can change the KFPC's strategies for their next meeting to cater to the requests of the attendees.

Social Enterprise was a project that was to create preserved foods and use the profits to increase food security and access to healthy fresh foods in the community (Klohn, Unger, & Cryderman, 2019). The process itself taught them valuable lessons of which they used as helpful suggestions for other non-profit organizations in search of starting their social enterprise (Klohn, Unger, & Cryderman, 2019). There are determining factors such as the budget that must be considered to determine a realistic pace to develop the program, and therefore it is recommended to start with a focus on a "minimum viable product" to directly sell to customers and receive immediate feedback, in this case, it was the farmers market (Klohn, Unger, & Cryderman, 2019). Strategic learning is ongoing, thus anticipating changing and adjusting plans and systems. This is using strategic learning as a decision-making tool within the organization, adapting to unforeseen obstacles and changing the strategy to progress further (Preskill, & Mack,2014).

The Food Policy Implementation Project was used to bring government, Indigenous communities, community partners and educational agencies and researchers to work together to address mutual objectives among them and determine how they can achieve their goals together (Kamloops Food Policy Council, 2019). The evaluation of the collective approach was determined effective to address gaps in the implementation of food policies (Kamloops Food Policy Council, 2019). It was noted through the importance of leadership and organization to keep the group on track, that it is necessary to accept uncertainty and be able to adapt to the group needs, for people in the group all

reacted differently to this approach (Kamloops Food Policy Council, 2019). This is similar to a triple loop learning described by Carbaj (2019) which takes into account the group as a whole as triggers, habits and group dynamics.

The GAP project is one that addresses food security by receiving donated fruits from producers to volunteers as well as agencies such as the Kamloops Food Bank (Candole, 2018). The Evaluation of the system looked at how to improve the project to meet the objectives set out by the KFPC as well as how the project is viewed from the perspective of the clients that use the service. The Evaluation was completed by obtaining feedback from the clients, literature reviews (Candole, 2018). It was concluded that there was a need to emphasize on food literacy and education on the program itself. To improve communications among the clients, improve the promotion of the GAP program as well as gradually expand the program at a sustainable pace with regular evaluations on the progress (Candole, 2018). Strategic learning is an ongoing process, and with the regular evaluations allows the program to understand the impacts and outcomes, the data may allow the program to learn from previous years adapt and change to increase the value of GAP (Preskill & Mack, 2014).

All these programs used strategic learning by taking clients' feedback or feedback within the organization to look at what worked and what did not work with their previous approach. However, there was a lack of diversity among those involved in the feedback. A noted diverse group in age, profession, ethnicity, religion, and culture to name a few are recommended to determine if a portion of the community is being heard or if the whole community is involved in the discussion. The lack of diverse representation makes it difficult for KFPC to determine what the needs are in the community.

KFPC may try to hold monthly meetings that would encourage groups that are outside the usual KFPC organization. It is ideal to invite people of different ages, religions, cultures, economic status and ethnic groups to participate and have their voices heard. Another method to reach more diverse groups is to possibly hold quarterly surveys in the community to determine if KFPC's core values are being addressed, this in term may advise them on their strategic learning on how to approach their communities to adhere closely to their values as well as improve or change their ways regarding decision making for policies and community projects (Carbaj, 2019; Preskill & Mack, 2014). With this approach they may highlight patterns, determine their weaknesses and strengths and learn what worked and what did not. With society constantly changing, the needs of communities and individuals will also change, therefore strategic learning is once again needed to maintain the pace with this change.

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