

Seven Virtues of Highly Effective International NGOs

Some thoughts from Rick James

We know what to do in supporting OD. International NGO (INGO) proposals and good practice guides are littered with references to the importance of 'ownership', 'participation', 'integration'... A lack of knowledge is not the problem. Our real problem is that we do not implement what we know. Why is this?

Fundamental human weaknesses of pride, greed, and impatience get in our way. International NGO support for OD with partners is often driven more by self-interest than by knowledge of what works. To improve our support for OD, we therefore need to confront these 'deadly organisational sins'. Instead we must consciously cultivate holy virtues. Only by combining existing professional OD knowledge with virtues of humility, patience and a genuine commitment to others, can OD support become truly transformative. Such an approach would be a radical witness to a secular aid world.

Vices and virtues

In our personal lives, we know the importance of someone's character. So too with organisations. Character is at the core. It goes deeper than vision and values. There has been plenty of useful attention given to vision and values in organisations recently. But we all know many INGOs with great vision and values, yet their behaviour does not reflect what they say about themselves. Sin is not just an individual problem for our private lives – it is also an organisational phenomenon. The extent to which we live out virtues or vices determines who we are as people and organisations.

A recent study of INGO performance in capacity building (James and Hailey 2007) concluded that although INGOs know how to support capacity building amongst partners, many do not follow their own good practice guidelines. They do not practice what they know because they succumb to 'deadly sins':

Obviously not *all* INGOs are guilty of *all* sins, but the list does reveal some of the darker sides to our work, which we conveniently tend to ignore.

The importance of such sins in organisational life echoes findings from the business sector. For example, executives at a NASDAC conference when asked to identify the major cause of leadership failure concluded that it was 'hubris'. 'Pride is so damaging because it leads to impatience, an unwillingness to build consensus, inability to receive criticism and unwillingness to endure periods of trial and uncertainty' (Delbecq 1999:348).

Holy Virtues?

If vices are at the heart of the problem, surely virtues must be at the heart of the solution. Virtues are more than just values. They bring in notions of moral absolutes; of right and wrong. While values looks at peoples' underlying assumptions and expectations (which can be good or

bad), virtues asks about right and wrong. While values are now common parlance in management, but virtues have been largely ignored until recently. Yet virtues are obviously not a new concept. Aristotle described virtue as the state which makes a man good and which makes him do his work well.

But this neglect of virtues in management appears to be changing. An increasing number of organisational writers and theorists are investigating the apparently positive relationship between organisational virtues and performance (Caza 2002, Cameron, K, Dutton, J and Quinn R 2003, Moore and Beadle 2006 Manz et al 2008). They explore the relationship between being able to practice excellence in a particular field and the institutional virtues needed to protect and extend that. They argue that institutional virtues are needed to resist 'the corrupting influences and constraints in the external environment' (Moore and Beadle 2006)

So to counteract the temptation to deadly sins and be more effective in supporting OD, INGOs need to cultivate seven 'holy' virtues:

Humility
Compassion
Patience
Determination
Generosity
Self-Control
Honesty

Perhaps we should not be surprised that questions of effectiveness ultimately take us back to Biblical basics. An extensive University of Chicago research project into leadership values in over 40 countries and with 17 million respondents concluded: 'the list seemed too easy, too obvious – almost like sitting down with a zealous Bible student and asking, "What are the virtues the bible teaches us to practice?"' (Lebow and Simon 1997: xxv).

Seven Virtues for Effective OD

Any agency wishing to encourage OD with partners, must cultivate the necessary organisational virtues to support this. Otherwise they may succumb to opposing vices. For international NGOs supporting OD such virtues might be:

Conclusions

To support OD effectively, we have to address organisational sins and cultivate organisational virtues. But the world in which we operate is not 'virtue-friendly'. External contextual factors undoubtedly constrain our ability to put into practice what we know. The aid environment rewards INGO control, market share and growth. There is no immediate return on humility and patience. To emphasise such virtues may look foolish in the short-term.

Faith based organisations can provide leadership here. We can be a witness to a different reality. With eternity in our hearts, we must surely look beyond the short term. We first must acknowledge and restrain our vices – be ruthlessly honest with ourselves about our own agendas and imperfections. But we need to go further. We need to cultivate the antidote of holy

virtues. Living out virtues of humility, compassion, patience, determination, generosity, self-control and honesty would transform OD practice. What would happen if we started measuring our organisation and appraising our staff performance against these benchmarks? It would be a radical witness in an aid world that rewards pride and even greed. Such a witness would transform lives.

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Moore, G. and Beadle R, (2006), 'In search of organizational virtue in Business: agents, practices, institutions and environments', *Organization Studies*, No. 27, pp 369-90

The Seven Virtues were derived from the HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychomachia>" \o "Psychomachia" Psychomachia ('Contest of the Soul'), an HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epic_poetry" \o "Epic poetry" epic poem written by HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prudentius>" \o "Prudentius" Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (c. 410) entailing the battle of HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goodness>" \o "Goodness" good virtues and evil HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vice>" \o "Vice" vices.

Organisational Virtues in Capacity Development

Humility: Modest behavior, selflessness, giving of respect – opposes pride.

We know OD is an endogenous process, not something you can do to another NGO. Therefore international NGOs need to recognise they cannot do it alone; it is a collective effort. To support OD well also requires the humility to be open to learning and change your own organisation where it is inhibiting the process.

Compassion: Kindness, contentment, satisfaction - opposes envy

Compassion is about putting partner needs first; wanting the best for their organisation, not your needs (e.g. for improved reporting). True compassion includes a sense of justice for the poor. It can be salutary for any INGO to (re)assess their actions against their mission. Sometimes they inadvertently find they are taking a competitive stance to other INGOs for their own benefit, rather than ultimately for the benefit of the community.

Patience: forbearance, peace, ability to forgive – opposes wrath
OD can be difficult and frustrating. It involves changing power and relationships amongst stakeholders. People do not change as quickly as we would like. In consequence, for INGOs to be effective they need to be patient. OD does not always work. It can often be a process of trial and error. INGOs need the patience of character to learn from failure

Determination: Diligence, passion, courage - opposes sloth
Good INGOs are relentless in implementing good practice. They have disciplined thought and actions, realistic goals, clear strategy, good practice methods, rigorous monitoring and evaluation systems, innovative organisational learning, flexibility and accessible documenting. They push themselves to do what is right, not expedient. They demonstrate their commitment to OD by investing quality resources (finances, staff, and management time).

Generosity: Sacrifice – opposes greed
To implement good practice OD requires a generous attitude. Generous in sharing learning and in looking to what others can receive from their inputs (not putting their own interests first). Being generous means focusing on what is good and life-giving in a situation, not just the obvious problems.

Self-control: Mindfulness of other, temperance – opposes gluttony
Implementing good practice OD requires international agencies to be mindful of others and their surrounding context. They exercise self-control, not merely poaching the best local NGO staff because they can pay them more. They are careful stewards of their resources, including staff time.

Honesty: Openness, purity – opposes lust
To implement good OD programmes requires honesty. Any agency brings an agenda into a programme. It is important to acknowledge this self-interest in order to be able to manage it and control it. Good international agencies are consistent – being as open with their partners about internal information as they demand from them.

Seven Deadly Sins of INGOs

Pride – seeing ourselves as better than others –
Pride is the original seven deadly sins and the source from which others arise. Pride underpins INGO thinking that 'we know better' or 'we can do it ourselves'.

Greed – the acquisition of wealth or a longing to possess something - INGOs pre-occupied with their growth often take on work that could and should be done by local partners. They prioritise visible results for donors before impact on the poor.

Lust – seeing others as means to our gratification -
Some INGOs lust after control, power and status. They are primarily interested in what others can provide for them. They use other 'partners' as means to their ends.

Gluttony – thoughtless excess, over-consumption or habitual greed -

Some INGOs are guilty of gluttony, through their over-consumption of limited local human resources; in 4X4 vehicles overwhelming communities; in inflating salary levels and fees...

Envy – a desire to have something possessed by another –

Envy may be at the root of INGO failure to collaborate with other stakeholders. INGOs can view others as competitors. As a result, they fail to work together and learn from each other.

Wrath - intolerance, impatience, discrimination or extreme anger –

Wrath undermines development when it leads to impatience. When artificial project deadlines prove unrealistic, this can lead to frustration and even anger.

Sloth – reluctance to make an effort, laziness, fail to use talents

Most INGOs are very busy, but can be lazy in prioritising. They may not actively seek to develop and implement learning. Some lack the determination to see it through.