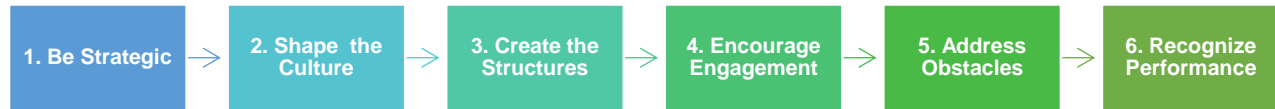# Creating a Learning Organization

Strategy Checklist

All of us work in a landscape where the pace of change is rapid and accelerating. To survive and thrive nonprofit organizations need to learn and innovate at the speed of change. This requires a **learning organization** where people are skilled at generating and sharing knowledge in support of the mission. In this strategy checklist we outline six ways to develop a learning organization. The suggested use is to apply the tool as a diagnostic and a roadmap for action. The CHS team is available to provide guidance and consulting support as you develop your vision of a learning organization.

1. Be Strategic	→	2. Shape the Culture	→	3. Create the Structures	→	4. Encourage Engagement	→	5. Address Obstacles	→	6. Recognize Performance

1 Be Strategic about Organizational Learning

The first step is to think strategically about connecting organizational learning to your organizational goals. To get started, consider these questions:

- ☐ What are our strategic goals right now?
- ☐ How are we progressing toward those goals?
- ☐ Do we have the team knowledge and expertise we need to be successful?
- ☐ What are our strengths and gaps in knowledge and skills?
- ☐ Do we have a strong culture of organizational learning?
- ☐ Do we have effective structures (policies, processes, practices, systems) to support organizational learning?

2 Shape the Culture for Organizational Learning

In this step the objective is to foster a culture of organizational learning by creating a supportive learning environment. Promising practices include:

- ☐ Inform the team that organizational learning is a high priority and supported by leadership.
- ☐ Specify objectives for organizational learning that support the strategic goals of the organization.
- ☐ Demonstrate openness to new ideas, and appreciation of differences in perspective.
- ☐ Try to create a pace of work that gives team members time to reflect on their work and generate creative ideas.
- ☐ Foster psychological safety so people won't be afraid to ask questions, name problems, and share ideas.

3 Create the Structures for Organizational Learning

In this step the objective is to create practical structures that support individual and team learning. Promising practices include:

- ☐ Think strategically about the types of expertise each team member could potentially develop and share.
- ☐ Work with team members to define individual learning goals for the near and longer term.
- ☐ Provide coaching, mentoring, and access to time-efficient learning to help people accomplish their goals.
- ☐ Devote portions of team meetings to focused sharing of knowledge and identification of knowledge gaps.
- ☐ Use 'after-action reviews' to engage the team in learning about what worked and what didn't in particular situations.
- ☐ Develop simple knowledge management systems to help people capture and share their know-how.

4 Encourage Engagement in Organizational Learning

In this step the objective is to encourage people to consistently engage in learning over time. Promising practices include:

- ☐ Model the way by being a learner and engaging in collaborative learning activities.
- ☐ Inspire a shared vision by asking people to share their insights on strengths and gaps in organizational learning.
- ☐ Challenge the process by identifying and addressing obstacles to organizational learning.
- ☐ Enable people to share their expertise to solve organizational challenges.
- ☐ Celebrate success when individuals and teams demonstrate positive learning and action for the organization.

5 Address Obstacles to Organizational Learning

In this step the objective is to identify and address obstacles that get in the way of organizational learning. As a first step for identifying obstacles, consider whether some team members:

- ☐ Are not aware of organizational learning as a strategic priority of the organization.
- ☐ Do not see routine learning as part of their job responsibilities.
- ☐ Feel too exhausted to engage in professional learning.
- ☐ Feel they have no time to engage in professional learning.
- ☐ Are not aware of their own strengths and how to use them.
- ☐ Hesitate to share knowledge for territorial reasons.
- ☐ Hesitate to share knowledge due to fear of criticism.
- ☐ Feel they need to conform to others' ideas instead of sharing their own viewpoints.
- ☐ Are overly deferential to external expertise as compared to their own.
- ☐ Feel left out of organizational learning by virtue of their position (e.g., front-line workers).
- ☐ Feel they are not empowered by leadership to use their expertise to solve challenges.
- ☐ Lack time-efficient training, tools, and tutorials.
- ☐ Lack efficient systems for capturing and sharing their knowledge.
- ☐ Lack supportive coaching and mentoring.

Strategies for addressing these obstacles will vary according to the setting, but a good starting point would be the promising practices outlined in Steps 2, 3, and 4.

6 Recognize Performance in Organizational Learning

In this step the objective is to consistently recognize and reward accomplishments in learning for individuals, teams, and the organization.

- ☐ Incorporate professional learning into team member job descriptions.
- ☐ Address professional learning in team member goal setting and performance reviews.
- ☐ Recognize team members for their individual learning accomplishments (completion of courses, demonstration of new skills, etc.)
- ☐ Recognize team members for sharing their knowledge and insights with colleagues.
- ☐ Frequently remind team members how a commitment to learning is helping the organization accomplish its strategic goals.

Community Health Solutions

Let's talk. At Community Health Solutions we have 20 years of experience helping people create strong nonprofits and healthier communities. To learn more about our services and supports for organizational learning, contact Stephen Horan (CEO) at shoran@chsresults.com or 804.673.0166. Also visit our website at www.chsresults.com.