



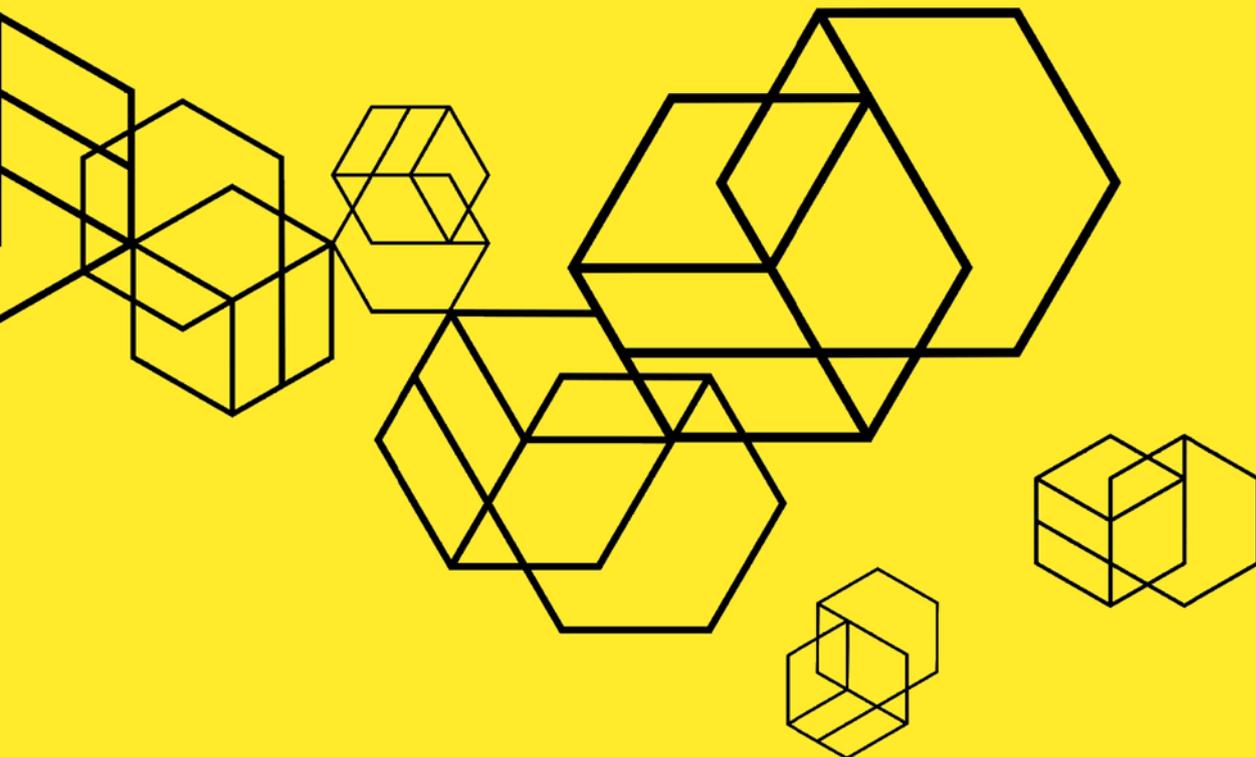
**SOCIAL
INNOVATION
COMMUNITY**

Case Study „Lernhaus“ Austria

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1. ABSTRACT

The Lernhaus, established in 2011, is an institution run by the Red Cross in Austria where children and youth between six and 15 years receive teaching aid and tutoring free of charge. Lernhaus provides this service mostly in a non-school environment with professional personnel supported by volunteers who work with children in small groups or individual settings. Early assistance, starting in elementary school is a key asset of the project. This helps to prevent early discouragement or negative routines settling in and thus to overcome deficits and social exclusion. For older children during their year of graduation (at age 15) the project offers specific modules for finding occupations or further forms of education. Lernhaus has one location in Vienna, supporting ca. 60 children and young people each year, and three smaller locations in Lower Austria (the province around Vienna) and two in Tyrol. These locations are generally smaller and tied closer to individual schools.

Lernhaus started out as a top-down initiative of socially responsible companies and executives seeking for an issue to address. It is a distinct and somewhat new project of a large NGO that is active in many fields. Entering a new and emerging field with a combination of externally hired project creators, fairly young project managers and volunteers, the project soon established its own domain, and managers enjoyed considerable discretion - but at the cost of some overburdening and staff turnover.

Stakeholders had to learn to balance their targets and publicity benefits against the operational logic of the project, and project managers learned to better transfer knowledge and also to formalise some procedures and practices: having disadvantaged youths negotiate targets with project managers, monitoring their progress with a software tool and improving both children's and volunteers' attendance through the introduction of a contract are new practices and methods with roots in new public management, consultancy and pedagogy.

2. CASE DESCRIPTION

The Lernhaus, established in 2011, is an institution run by the Red Cross in Austria where children and youth between six and 15 years receive teaching aid and tutoring free of charge. Lernhaus provides this service mostly in a non-school environment with professional personnel supported by volunteers who work with children in small groups or individual settings. Early assistance, starting in elementary school is a key asset of the project. This helps to prevent early discouragement or negative routines settling in and thus to overcome deficits and social exclusion. For older children during their year of graduation (at



age 15) the project offers specific modules for finding occupations or further forms of education. Lernhaus has one location in Vienna, supporting ca. 60 children and young people each year, and three smaller locations in Lower Austria (the province around Vienna) and two in Tyrol. These locations are generally smaller and tied closer to individual schools. The guiding principle of Lernhaus is to assist children to graduate from compulsory school and thus build capacities and opportunities for socially and/or economically disadvantaged groups. Even though the project does not exclusively target groups of migrants and/or refugees, a significant share of Lernhaus-children belong to these groups.

The new solution that is delivered by the Lernhaus is first and foremost the assistance for children in school related matters mostly in a non-school environment. Combining professional teachers and social workers and volunteers is nothing entirely new or innovative in itself, but leads to a high-quality service and positively widens interactions between children and the adults teaching them. The project relies on three distinct pools of volunteers: first, Red Cross volunteers who choose to work at the Lernhaus, second, the University of Business and Economy Vienna (WU Wien) initiated a programme in cooperation with the aid agency Caritas, under the name 'LernenmachtSchule' (Learning catches on/makes a school – a pun in German), where university students become volunteers for one of the participating organizations and third, cooperating companies send employees as volunteers to work at the Lernhaus (foremost the consultancy Accenture).

THE CONTEXT: The Austrian education system

Children and young people from socially and economically disadvantaged groups in Austria have very low projected levels of higher education and often struggle to get employment. The Austrian school system is notoriously socially selective. Children are streamed into higher or lower secondary education at age 10. Many schools offer classes only half-day, assuming one parent is available to provide childcare, supervise often extensive homework and educational leisure activities in the afternoon. This system renders public schools particularly unable to fully include migrant children and children of other disadvantaged groups into the education system. Families who lack social and/or economic capital and language skills, with parents often working long or antisocial hours for low wages, frequently struggle to keep up with the daily school routine. As the more advantaged children tend to gather in secondary school or grammar school ('Gymnasium'), children from poorer and lower-educated families tend to concentrate in lower secondary education (formerly 'Hauptschule', today 'Neue Mittelschule'). In general, the educational standard in lower secondary schools is significantly lower than in high schools and a common problem concerns the mediocre levels of German spoken and written by the children. Nonetheless, receiving a formal degree of lower secondary school is deemed critical for entering an apprenticeship, the paid, dual mode of vocational training in industry, some services or trades. Hence, tutoring and establishing café-like learning spaces (that may count as 'third spaces' in between home and school with extra possibilities for interactions and experience) appears as a social innovation that mostly compensates the deficiencies of the education system in including and supporting disadvantaged children and youths.



THE INITIATIVE'S HISTORY

The start: a charity fund looking for a purpose

The initiative has its roots in a charity foundation (KAA) established by a newspaper and several companies in collaboration with the Austrian Red Cross first to provide humanitarian aid for natural disasters. After 2011 the fund changed its emphasis. The founding members looked for targets for aid that were in line with Austrian regulations of foundations' public benefit status, with founding members' marketing strategies and CSR considerations, and opened the possibility to receive public funding as well. With this mix of objectives, focusing on children and young people as a target group seemed obvious. In cooperation with Accenture the project was expanded to a wider target group, including youth up to school-leaving age.

Founding members were the Austrian Red Cross, the federal guild for construction, the banking conglomerate Raiffeisen and the insurance company UNIQA. Other sponsors were acquired over time. An important partner was found in the University for Business and Economics Vienna, which established a project for distributing volunteer students to various initiatives and also hosted the Lernhaus. Two years into the project, the consulting company Accenture, a long-time (financial) partner and sponsor of the Austrian Red Cross was approached and invited to cooperate on the Lernhaus. Accenture in this cooperation provides financial funds, pro bono consulting (and IT application development).

Among partners, two conflicting logics can be discerned: on the one hand the funding partners strived for a publicly well-known showcase project. The Austrian Red Cross was focused on implementing a high-quality project, providing services for its clients. Accenture was most keen about getting publicity about the activities via the newspaper. Working out how to balance the different interests and outcomes between questions of quantity and quality, publicity and orientation towards its clients, and what the project evolved to over the years, took time and discussions. On the operative level, in the geographically and substantially divergent Lernhaus, managers of the sub-projects enjoy considerable discretion nevertheless. They took most decisions themselves and checked for approval later.

While early on the initiative worked on a small scale in terms of numbers of supported children, it continuously grew until in Vienna, it reached the facility's limits capacities around 2014/15. The initiative was then taken up in two other Austrian provinces by regional divisions of the Austrian Red Cross. The first Lernhaus outside of Vienna was founded in Neunkirchen, Lower Austria in early 2013. A second location in St. Pölten opened in in late 2013 in cooperation with a local elementary school (sharing the school facilities). The third location in Lower Austria was established in 2014 in Gänserndorf. In 2014 another Lernhaus was founded in Kufstein, Tyrol and in 2016 a Lernhaus in Wörgl, also Tyrol, opened its doors. There are also talks with the Styrian Red Cross Association about opening a location there. However, provincial Red Cross organisations need to find their own funds to set up a Lernhaus.



Gaining momentum and professionalization

While early on the initiative worked on a small scale in terms of numbers of supported children, it continuously grew until in Vienna, it reached the facility's limits capacities around 2014/15. Expanding the initiative was deliberately planned. The programme was set out to act as a model for the education for disadvantaged groups and, using publicity channels via the Kurier newspaper, strategically aimed for media and public attention for both the initiative and its sponsors. It was clearly designed as a blueprint for imitation by Red Cross associations in other Austrian provinces and for external actors. The Lernhaus for instance was an agenda point at an annual Red Cross meeting on migration, where other Red Cross province representatives attended and where local projects were made available for imitation. However, provincial Red Cross organisations need to find their own funds to set up a Lernhaus.

Even though the newly founded locations are based on the same principles and concept, they are no mere imitations but have been adapted according to needs, possibilities and the specific environment. Establishing a new location was driven by identifying the need for support and while the chosen locations satisfied this aspect, funds were scarce and it was decided not to use separate facilities, but rather to use existing structures or to cooperate with schools where the need was most prevalent.

Knowledge transfer happened concerning expansion to Lower Austria and expansion in Tyrol. Representatives from Lower Austria and from Tyrol visited the Vienna Lernhaus and learned about how to organize and structure such a project in their environments and within existing structures and possibilities. Even though the newly founded locations are based on the same principles and concept, they are no mere imitations but have been adapted according to needs, possibilities and the specific environment. As funds in the provinces were scarce, it was decided not to use separate facilities, but rather to use existing structures or to cooperate with schools where the need was most prevalent. As a result, the programme had to be adjusted to the existing context, using facilities when available, working with fewer employees and focusing on pupils from specific schools and also accepting restrictions imposed by schools. The Lernhaus branches in Lower Austria and Tyrol have no own facilities but cooperate with local schools and use classrooms at the school's premises in the afternoon. The focus lies only on elementary students; youths are not included.

Networks of projects

At present, the Lernhaus project is generally deemed a success and further regional expansion is possible, but there are structural and resource-based limitations - and other, similar initiatives in the field are also being developed. This is not seen as competition since Lernhaus is very aware of its limited resources and the operative level certainly has a preference for focusing on quality over rapid expansion.



Lernhaus was soon joined by other, similar initiatives with different roots in established and new NGOs, civil society and the municipality of Vienna. When the Lernhaus started, a Caritas Lerncafé in Graz was visited to see how work is done there. After the Lernhaus was already established in Vienna, Caritas decided to open Lerncafes in Vienna as well and for this purpose the founders visited the Lernhaus and information and knowledge was exchanged back again. The relationship between these programmes is described as very open and forthcoming. Over the past few years new players entered the field or established players extended their portfolio towards similar activities as a result of firstly, general concerns about inclusion in education, and secondly recent immigration. The programme 'Förderung 2.0' (Support 2.0) initiated by the social-democratic city government of Vienna (in response to the persistent lack of progress in national reforms of the education system) and the municipal community colleges (Volkshochschulen) aims at providing learning support for children. As neither the Red Cross nor KAA were involved in the implementation, it is debatable if the newly established initiatives were merely based on the apparent need for learning support or if they took the Lernhaus as a model.

There are few formal institutional structures that determine the network structure of the field, but there are regular meetings between professional sub-groups of organizations or individuals (regulars' tables). Organizations are usually open to share information with other players and cooperation is a mode to bundle resources or to get access to expertise. Jointly organized workshops, visits in other institutions or the simple transfer of clients to other institutions are common practice in the field and allow information and knowledge to spill to other projects or areas.

SOCIETAL IMPACT

End-users and volunteers

The Lernhaus foremost has impact on the participants' daily lives, improving their chances to successfully graduate from school, of participating in the labor market and of social integration. Due to the focus on high-quality services, the initiative has so far been limited with regard to the overall number of children and youths participating.

Besides the impact for the target group, the volunteer model allows for a wider expansion of social experience through the regular encounters between Accenture mentors, university learning buddies and Red Cross volunteers. These encounters are described by a mentor as extremely fulfilling. In a master's thesis on the project written by a volunteer the relationship is defined as 'modern volunteerism', where volunteers with different interests and motives are addressed and can be involved in the programme in tailored engagements according to their needs (Speckmayr, 2015).

Success and ways to get there were defined from the beginning. Success was defined as improvements in children's and youths' grades and graduation rates in school. Twice a year the Lernhaus employees write reports on the children's and youths' improvements and individual or project-



specific goals to concentrate on. This process is supported by a software application that helps monitoring the pupils learning progress, developed by the partner Accenture. Getting publicity-returns through the Kurier cooperation was also defined as an indicator of success for funding parties. Over time some of these initial goals changed, while others remained stable: Expansion plans were relying on the acquisition of new partners and funds. Likewise, expectations regarding publicity also fundamentally changed over time. Partners who had demanded regular coverage on the Lernhaus-engagement early on, later, with decreasing novelty of the Lernhaus, sensibly put less focus on this coverage.

Although the Lernhaus contributes to the reduction of educational disadvantages, its quantitative impact is not too great and over the past years many actors have started to work towards similar goals from varied starting points in education policy, other non-profit organizations and civil society. Still, the organization has some advantages over other actors that make them an influential initiative: with the Red Cross, it has a big umbrella organization that supports and helps to diffuse the idea and publicity is assured. Thus it can be argued that the initiative had more influence on the practice field than the bare numbers imply, but still must be considered a small project in a large landscape with many different actors.

TENSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Limited diffusion in Vienna

Even though the programme itself is regarded as rather successful in terms of assisting children and youth, enrolment numbers or attendance rates, there is still only one Lernhaus location in Vienna but already five in other provinces in Austria. There are (at least) two possible, interrelated explanations: first, friction between Austrian Red Cross and Viennese Red Cross over the responsibility for the project, and secondly, the political ties of the project.

Generally, in the current organizational structure of the Austrian Red Cross, the regional subsidiaries (on the province level) carry out actual project-work and accordingly have considerable discretion over their activities. However, Lernhaus was initiated on the federal level. This caused friction with the Viennese Red Cross which supposedly was not directly approached and offered to implement the project. Secondly, since the initiative started the founding members had repeatedly but unsuccessfully tried to approach the Viennese government for funding. This blockade may be ascribed to actors' different political camps (Christian conservative on the initiative's side and social democratic on the Viennese side) – a division that in Austria permeates wide sectors of civil society. These different political alignments made public funding and recognition difficult. There were several attempts to get the Mayor of Vienna interested in the project, but so far he has steadfastly declined every invitation. Possibly just because the subject and practice field is so uncontroversial in the general public's perception, competition and territoriality over small differences are exacerbated.



Budgets and staff turnover

Other constraints are somewhat common to the NGO sector. Despite having very potent funding parties, long-term budget planning is very difficult at Lernhaus. Pledges for funding usually are provided only for one year, making planning beyond this point very difficult for operative management as well as for the strategic side. Uncertainty about the project's future hampered the development and put extra strain on the employees.

The project also faced several crises due to staff turnover which at least slowed down the project's development. In the initial phase of project development an external person was hired to form a project around the idea. When the Lernhaus finally commenced, and was handed over to the Red Cross Division Law, Migration and Education, this person left, officially, because he saw his part fulfilled. However, the knowledge transfer that should have happened was difficult. Interviewees supposed the the external expert was offended by having his project wrested from him by the larger organization and was hence reluctant to transfer knowledge to the head of the Law, Migration and Education division who took over. In 2013 both managers of the Viennese sub-projects (for younger and for older children respectively) left the organization and the wake of these leavings created some confusion over the Red Cross commitment.. However, the project's continuation was never severely threatened. On the operative level a number of different people managed the respective sub-projects, usually only staying less than two years. Even though staff repeatedly changed over the years, the project itself was less affected than in the beginning, because knowledge was increasingly passed on to other employees and colleagues and processes were already running and established.

Reasons for these multiple changes of staff lay in the uncertainty of the positions' ranking in the organization: the Red Cross initially defined the positions as students' part-time work positions at a low entrant's pay grade, defining the work as rather unskilled. However, the positions' actual requirements turned out to be very demanding in terms of skills, workload, stress level, responsibilities and psychological strain. Consequently, project managers were likely to feel overburdened and undervalued.

CONCLUSION: LEARNING ACTORS; ACTOR'S LEARNINGS

Lernhaus emerged as more of a top-down charity initiative by established large partner organisations, and strategic adaptations of target groups and expectations took place on this level. Operations are run by Red Cross and since it is a new activity in the organisation, the Lernhaus locations enjoy considerable discretion in running and adapting their activities. Managers of the sub-projects made most decisions themselves and checked for approval later. This eventually led to an actual division of decision-making processes between the global strategic questions, which are discussed within KAA and decisions on the operative level which are taken by the respective local project managers. Learning also occurred on these levels separately: with its top-down character, the project's learning chiefly



consisted in negotiating partners' different interests, identifying an attractive and meaningful cause, and balancing CSR, upscaling and target orientations. On the operative level, project managers and employees developed the voluntary and informal learning and support settings in interaction with the respective local environments. However, the operative level managed to shift the focus of partner organisations somewhat to a focus on end-users and quality support rather than top-down target setting.

The stakeholder level - negotiating expectations

Two conflicting sides can be discerned in partner organisations: on the one hand the funding partners strived for a publicly well-known showcase project, [which they could add to their social responsibility list]. The Austrian Red Cross was focused on implementing a high-quality project, providing services for its clients. Accenture was most keen on getting media coverage of its activities via the newspaper (Kurier) in exchange for its significant financial, volunteer and IT development contributions. The company also pressured its long-standing partner organization, the Red Cross, to influence Kurier towards increased coverage. Working out how to balance the different interests and outcomes between questions of quantity and quality, publicity and orientation towards its clients, and what the project evolved to over the years, took time and discussions.

Accenture in particular shifted its expectations. The consultancy's role is in funding, but company's employees also work as volunteers in the Lernhaus and Accenture provides pro bono consulting. Accenture's participation was part of the mother company's corporate citizenship programme 'Skills to Succeed' which set out to "advancing employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for individuals by using technology to drive impact at scale". The entire programme was targeted to reach 250.000 people until 2015 (a goal which was achieved and has been expanded to reach 3.000.000 people by the year 2020). Accenture labelled the Lernhaus commitment as fostering education for migrants to 'make them ready for the labour market', which led to the extension of the programme to youths at school leaving age, and the Austrian branch always aimed at upscaling the initiative. In the earlier stages of the cooperation Accenture mainly focused on quantity and evaluation, pressuring the initiative to increase the numbers of participating children to reach the targets the company had set internally for its CSR activities. After around two years a meeting at the Lernhaus finally convinced the Accenture decisionmakers of the intrinsic value of the project as it was - and possibly of the limitations to rapid upscaling.

The project level

On the project level, knowledge was exchanged continuously both with other, similar projects and within the project. After the first bottlenecks when the original initiator left (see above), procedures and experiences were increasingly made explicit. Generally, the operative, project-level employees working with children are a major driver for the project to be successful. They provide the link between the



financial backers and the work on-site, explaining and demanding necessary strategic adaptations and orientation. From the start, their willingness to contribute went well beyond the regular employment contract and brought stability and was a significant driver for the project. In this way, the boundary between regular employment and volunteering became permeable. Overall, the employees' work with volunteers also contributed to a successful programme and their efforts to include volunteers into daily routine and assisting volunteers and children/youth to establish a trusting relationship secured high quality standards. The cooperation with the University for Business and Economy Vienna also contributed to this success. Volunteers from the university receive thorough training sessions and ongoing counselling provided by the university and its partners, and in this way volunteering contributes to students' education and skills - and may, indirectly, feed the experience of Lernhaus back into the education of future teachers and other professionals.

The Red Cross generally has substantial experience in managing and deploying volunteers. For the work with children and youth continuity and stability were recognized as vital. In this context, ensuring continuity in volunteer staff turned out to be far more challenging than the continuous participation of children and youth. Therefore the Lernhaus team decided to set up an informal contract between the older pupils and the volunteers, in which respective obligations were stipulated and signed by both parties. The contract on the one hand creates mutual commitment and on the other hand includes relatively clear cornerstones on the volunteers' mandatory presence. Volunteers need to be able to show up at least once a week and are required to tell the project managers in advance if they cannot make it. This move towards more formalized obligations was not undisputed, especially among long-term Red Cross volunteers, who saw their position and their accomplishments under threat, but regularity and long-term volunteer commitment could in fact be improved over time.

Usually the initiative is able to implement new information and knowledge into the programme. Some institutionalized regular meetings exist in the Lernhaus context. There are for instance regular workshops for volunteers and employees on varying topics, such as preventing violence or German as second language. Current project managers themselves are trained in educational contexts or are still in training and are thus able to use and apply newly acquired information at the Lernhaus. For successful deployment of new practices, room for testing and sufficient (time) resources are essential. discussion: learning and social innovation.

Learning concepts

Concepts of experiential and organisational learning can usefully be applied here. Experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) is a holistic perspective that combines "concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, active experimentation" (Moon, 2004). It is dedicated to the development, testing, evaluation and re-design of actions addressing issues that have been identified in diagnosis. Indeed, on both the executive and operative levels, stakeholders and managers inevitably learned "by doing" and interacting with their target groups, peers and the wider institutional environment.

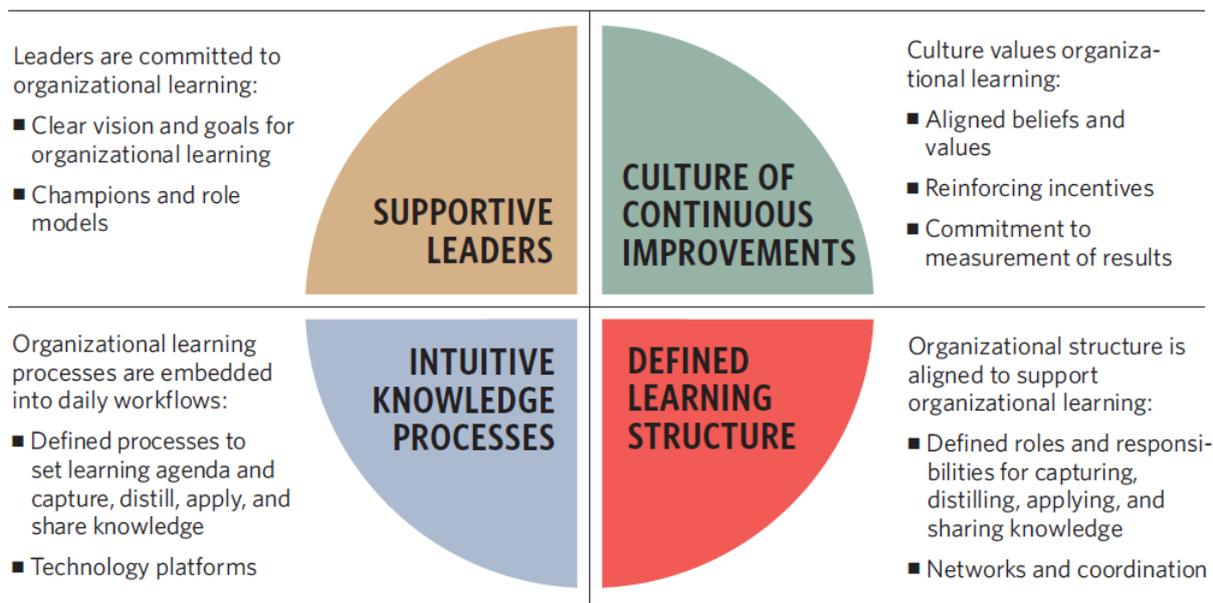


Organisational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Milway & Saxton, 2011) addresses the question how to translate the experience, knowledge and reflection developed by individuals to the organisation as a whole - a non-trivial task as the first experience of Lernhaus with the departure of a key project manager showed. Milway and Saxton (2011) identify four elements of organisational learning (Figure 1): commitment by leaders, a culture of continuous improvements, intuitively usable knowledge processes supported by technology platforms but still making space for face-to-face exchanges, and a defined learning structure.

Indeed, the organisation managed to improve its knowledge sharing processes - although the data do not suggest initiatives were very specifically targeted at organisational learning. Targets were chiefly set and monitored on the level of actual operations whereas stakeholders' strategic targets of upscaling and news coverage were toned down as the initiative took larger efforts to fit into its respective environments that turned out to be regionally, institutionally and politically diverse. Efforts to share knowledge across the Red Cross were taken up by regional sections, one initiative has been known to fail, and diffusion in Vienna was limited for both internal and external political reasons - but the issue of overcoming disadvantages in education is certainly addressed by a range of different projects with very varied roots. We may conclude that the project developed successfully by pragmatically adapting to limitations, retaining its focus on quality provision for its end users, and maintaining a certain "leanness" in its structure that does not leave space for very elaborate organisational learning provisions.

Figure 1: Organizational Learning

FOUR ELEMENTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING



Source: Milway and Saxton 2011, p. 47



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