

Improving Your Organisation's Resilience – Taking a Path Less Travelled

By Alan Fowler, Elizabeth Field, and Joe McMahon

A much voiced concern is about how international civil society organisations (ICSOs) are coping with organisationally challenging times. Burkhard Gnärig's book [The Hedgehog and the Beetle](#) calls for better responsiveness to disruptive forces. Duncan Green's [discussion paper](#) on being *Fit for Purpose* under fast changing operating conditions does the same. Their approaches differ. But their message is similar. International CSOs need to consciously improve their resilience – that is, their preparedness for and responsiveness to shifting environments with a capacity for bouncing-back from external shocks, allied to abilities which constructively react to rapid changes.

One avenue for both building resilience and improving performance is employed in the business world. This pathway makes productive use of internal organisational troubles that are generated by external turbulence. Our study suggests that ICSOs can do this too. The external-internal connection is pretty straight forward. Outside disruptive forces, such as those which ICSOs face – disintermediation, growing competitiveness, cut backs and exploratory diversification in resource types - generate additional *uncertainties* which push the inside buttons of people's anxiety, generating differences of opinion that can escalate into intra-organisational conflict. For firms, if intelligently harnessed, the internal energy generated by organisational troubles can be an asset: a source of organisational strengthening and adaptations which improve performance. Featuring less in business cases is recognition that multi-cultural settings and the passion and commitment of ICSO staff can heighten the probability of troubles occurring, while making them more complex. But is this actually happening? And, if so, what effects arise and what can be done about making them a positive driver for transformation?

To find out, at the beginning of the year, as a voluntary initiative, a small team used a widely-distributed e-survey and informant interviews to create a 'landscape' of ICSO intra-organisational conflict: that is an actual or perceived incompatibility of opinions, styles, perspectives, goals or actions with effects that gain the organisation's attention beyond its original location or event. The headline picture suggests that: (1) internal conflict in ICSOs is not a crisis - but is quite significant; while, 2) the vast majority of ICSOs do not respond adequately to conflict; and (3) improving capacity to make conflict productive is envisaged to make a positive difference in organisational resilience and programme effectiveness. These and other findings, together with more detailed explanations of what follows below, can be found [here](#).

What can be done about it is *not*, it seems, to do nothing or to overly rely on a formalised conflict management system such as grievance and complaints procedures. Rather, to gain potential benefits, the approach required is one which actively and constructively responds to conflict because a 'healthy' environment for doing so already exists. This condition calls for dedicated attention to elements of leadership, creating an open, inclusive organisational culture, establishing fair, effective conflict processes and a commitment to building respectful relationships founded on conversational competence. Here, a rule of thumb is to assess the extent to which process stays on substance, where your organisation works positively with conflict by ensuring 'psychological safety' – individuals are free to be different, disagree and "think" against the grain. Look for frequency of instances where, ultimately, the people involved and the organisation as a whole learn something new, making 'relational capital' out of mistakes and differences. These elements build both individual and organisational capacity to analyse, respond to and adapt to changes in the external context, accepting decisions with which one may not agree, which enhances resilience.

Examples of constructively engaging in conflict are 'destigmatising' the topic, opening up 'trusted' spaces and places for dialogue, equating risk with opportunity and many more. Effective processes emphasise responding to disagreements at the lowest and most informal level possible, ensuring that leaders, members and staff have necessary skills for working with disagreements. They may include options for mediation or other negotiated or facilitated discussions, coaching and training. Making a pathway of consciously and positively engaging with internal conflict, often involves cutting through an undergrowth of aversion to acknowledging the potential value of conflict and disagreement as well as 'uprooting' a sense that dissent is disloyal or in some way personal. The track to be built should expand tolerance, embrace a sincerity to change allied to a spirit of acceptance by those who may disagree with the outcome.

At best there are principles and sensible steps, but no templates or models. In-house commitment and efforts to working constructively with conflict need to be the way ahead. As a starting point for arriving at a healthy conflict perspective, the study encourages ICSOs to get together in small groups of trusted and respected peers to talk through their experiences and support each other in opening up this less travelled route to resilience. As they say in many advertisements, try building this learning pathway and feel the difference. If you are interested in knowing more or following up on this work, feel free to contact any team member.

Alan Fowler alan@alanfowler.org

Elizabeth Field emjfield@googlemail.com

Joe McMahon jpmcmahon@jpmcmahon.com