ALNAP

Learning, evaluations and change[1]

Roughly 70% of change initiatives in organisations fail.[2]

While many evaluation recommendations are used in humanitarian organisations, those that require very significant changes (to organisational structure, power relationships and culture) tend not to be implemented.

There are many reasons for this:

- 'bad' ideas and recommendations

- interests and power politics

- largely unconscious (and natural) resistance to change

To understand how changes can happen successfully, it is useful to understand the process of change and learning at the individual and organisational level: how an existing reality is broken down and a new reality rebuilt.

The Gestalt cycle of experience (simplified here) can help us understand this process. Essentially it is a process of directing energy to awareness and change.[3]
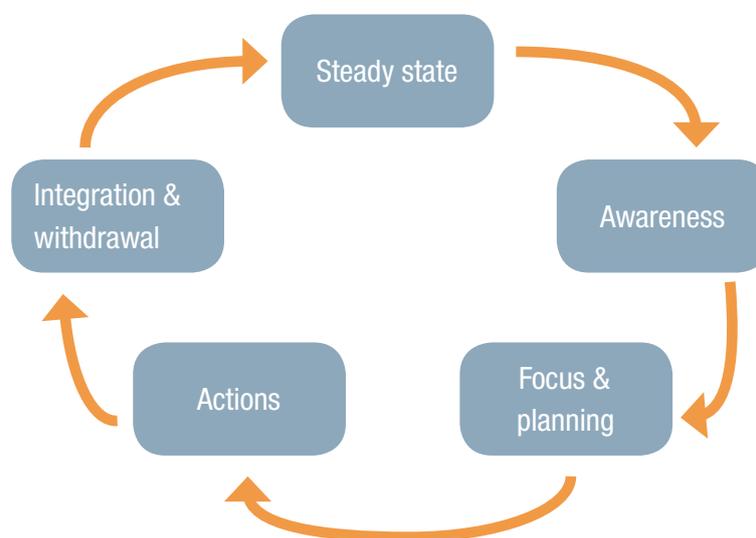
The process of change can be disrupted at any point:

Awareness – when sensation/information/need for change does not reach awareness or is deflected

Focus and planning – when energy and tension are diverted to activities that will not address the underlying situation: often trying to do new things in old ways

Actions – when other priorities (from the existing way of working) overtake the change activities: often accompanied by blaming

To prevent disruptions, evaluators have to anticipate disruption and plan for it:[4]

Awareness:

- Answer questions that concern people – focus on areas where energy already exists

- Ensure that the timing of results coincides with periods of greater awareness

- Grab attention by presenting results in concise and unexpected ways (flyers, films)

Focus and planning:

- Don't present recommendations or proposals for action: present the situation, and ask actors to determine what to do

- Consider root causes (use the '5 why's' approach, or similar)

- Ensure adequate resources, and 'clear the decks'

Actions:

- Have senior management model the changes

- Use a management grid (with care)

- Report to the board on progress

Throughout, a platform/network can be invaluable in drawing and retaining focus on the changes: involve this network in your change activities.

1. For more on the topic, see Clarke, P. and Ramalingam, B. (2007) Change in Humanitarian Organisations, ALNAP / ODI
2. See for example: Schiemann, W. (1992) Survey of fortune 500 companies, Across the board, April 1992; Reorganising for success, CIPD, 2003
3. This is a simplified version: the cycle of awareness, or contact cycle, was first identified by Joseph Zinker: Zinker, J. (1977) Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy. Brunner/Mazel Publishers, New York. It built on the original work of Fritz Perls, and had 7 stages: sensation; awareness; mobilisation; action; contact; integration; withdrawal. A good overview of these ideas is available in Nevis, E. (1997) Organizational Consulting: A Gestalt Approach, GestaltPress, Cambridge, Mass.
4. More examples are available in Hallam, A. and Bonino, F. (2013) Using Evaluation for a Change, London, ALNAP / ODI