

Adapting to the COVID-19 world: a case study of collective learning in a social entrepreneurial organisation

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine how a social entrepreneurial organisation in Sweden collectively learned to adapt itself to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach – Using an abductive approach, this study conducted single case fieldwork on a social entrepreneurial organisation called SFE. The following research questions were asked: What are the changes in collective learning conditions that SFE has to face during the pandemic? What are the outcomes of collective learning during the pandemic in SFE?

Findings – This study results indicate that collective learning conditions were changed by restructuring the organisation's design and teamwork during the pandemic, which facilitated sharing of knowledge and experiences. This collective learning helped the organisation develop new virtual projects during the pandemic. Another result of this collective learning was the members' new shared understanding of the organisation's vision.

Research limitations/implications – This study hopes to broaden the understanding of the relationship between collective learning in organisations and organisational adaptation in times of crisis.

Practical implications – This study can help leaders of social entrepreneurial organisations understand what changes are necessary to create a team that collectively learns.

Originality/value – The data had the advantage of being gathered as a real-time process, and the researcher witnessed how the organisation achieved adaptation as it happened and not just through its members' reflection of it as a past phenomenon.

Keywords Collective learning, COVID-19, Social entrepreneurial organisations, Organisational adaptation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Working from home (WFH), social distancing and travel restrictions significantly affect the nature of work and life during the pandemic. These restrictions forced many organisations to adapt to the new social realities by changing, redesigning and reorganising the way they worked. Previous studies on organisational adaptation show that collective learning and sharing knowledge and experiences are crucial factors for organisations to change and adapt their practices (Real *et al.*, 2014; Broekema *et al.*, 2017; Azadegan *et al.*, 2019;



Dobrowolski, 2020; Zgrzywa-Ziemak and Walecka-Jankowska, 2021). In this regard, face-to-face communication, interaction and participation in different activities both inside and outside of formal work are significant for organisations' collective learning capabilities (Urban and Gaffurini, 2018). However, WFH highly constrains everyday interaction in organisations (Green *et al.*, 2020). The limited interaction between colleagues, in turn, inhibits collective learning capabilities in organisations because recent studies signify that sharing experiences and knowledge exchange are much harder for co-workers while WFH because of the lack of natural interaction between colleagues (Rudnicka *et al.*, 2020; van der Lippe and Lippényi, 2020).

According to Kirchner *et al.* (2021), organisations had to restructure their practices during the pandemic to create different ways of communication and interaction between team members. It is important to stress that collective learning and knowledge sharing in virtual teams are not new phenomena and have been studied even before the pandemic. For instance, in her study of collective learning conditions in virtual teams, Dixon (2017) highlights the significance of clear routines for organisations' learning ability. In addition, she points out that virtual teams need to change and re-establish their routines in response to changes in the external environment (Dixon, 2017). In addition, Ren (2020) argues that a lack of shared understanding resulting from a lack of social presence is a severe challenge to virtual teams. Majchrzak *et al.* (2020) also argue that virtual teams should have generative processes that ensure productive knowledge-sharing collaboration. Although we can identify similar problems for virtual teams both during and before the pandemic by comparing these studies, there is a significant difference between the two. Virtual teams before the pandemic were usually optional, and organisations could plan them beforehand and create appropriate routines for working in virtual teams. During the pandemic, however, organisations were forced to WFH and virtual teams without preparation which is less studied.

Research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social entrepreneurial organisations noted that the pandemic has significantly affected non-profit social entrepreneurial organisations (Maher *et al.*, 2020). For instance, the National Forum for Voluntary Organisations in Sweden has pointed out that social entrepreneurial organisations and civil society can be devastated or unable to recover after the COVID-19 pandemic (Forum, Giva Sverige and Fanna, 2020). This is mainly because these organisations usually do not have enough economic power to overcome crises with more financial investment for developing affected areas (Golensky and Hager, 2020). Therefore, they must rely on their existing knowledge, experiences and expertise to survive crises.

This article, therefore, aims to investigate how a social entrepreneurial organisation in Sweden called "Sweden for Everyone" (a pseudonym hereafter referred to as SFE) adapted its practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. To understand the adaptation, it will be explained how conditions for collective learning while WFH in SFE changed. The article seeks to answer these research questions:

- RQ1. What are the changes in collective learning conditions that SFE has to face during the pandemic?
- RQ2. What are the outcomes of collective learning in SFE during the pandemic?

Collective learning for organisational adaptation

Learning in organisations can be studied from the individual, team and organisation levels. Nevertheless, the focus of this article is on collective learning in teams, as many theories

acknowledge the significance of collective learning in teams for organisational change and adaptation (Senge, 1994; Dixon, 1999; Decuyper *et al.*, 2010; Van den Bossche *et al.*, 2011; Rebelo *et al.*, 2020). Borrowing from Döös and Wilhelmson (2011), this article defines collective learning as:

[...] learning through interactive and communicative action creating synergy. Thus, collective learning brings about shared knowledge and understanding concerning something that was not previously known or understood among the interacting agents. It is also usually referred to as resulting in a common capacity for action and competence (Döös and Wilhelmson, 2011, p. 489).

Therefore collective learning in teams can result in various outcomes from more abstract ones such as generation of new knowledge and ideas, to more concrete ones like development of current projects (Van der Haar *et al.*, 2013).

Because the definition above pays attention to interactive and communicative actions, in this article, the emphasis lies on promoting the cruciality of dialogue and discussion at the team level as the cornerstone of collective learning where the implicit individual knowledge and experiences can become explicit organisational knowledge (Dixon, 1998; Ohlsson, 2014, 2021; Larsson and Knudsen, 2022). This view considers teams as systems that should constantly process information, experiences and knowledge reflexively to learn (Schippers *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, this conceptualisation demands an inspection of whether the daily practices of interaction and communication are inclusive enough to create appropriate conditions for collective learning because how team members communicate can significantly affect how they share information, knowledge and experience (Wilson *et al.*, 2007; Rasche and Scherer, 2014; Lau *et al.*, 2019; Nellen *et al.*, 2020). As a result, the characteristics of the team play an essential role in shaping conditions for sharing knowledge, experiences and, ultimately, collective learning (Wang *et al.*, 2012; Ahmad and Karim, 2019). Many researchers pointed out that for collective learning to occur, team members should engage in reflexive dialogical practices, discussions and constructive communication (Cunliffe, 2002; Cunliffe, 2003; Ohlsson, 2013; Berg Jansson *et al.*, 2020). As a result, the way team members communicate, socialise and interact with one another or, simply put, how communicative practices are organised influence collective learning conditions and outcomes (Bell *et al.*, 2012).

According to Dixon (1999), collective learning in teams is a continuous process which leads to changes, transformation and development of the practices; thus, collective learning in organisations and organisational adaptation are two ongoing processes that are inseparable and constantly reinforce each other. Organisational adaptation can be defined as undertaking actions that lead to changes in an organisation to reduce the distance between an organisation and its environment (Sarta *et al.*, 2021). Adaptation, therefore, requires changes in different aspects of an organisation, and literature on organisational adaptation identified two forms of changes: intentional (planned) and unintentional (unplanned) changes (Van Woerkum *et al.*, 2011). Intentional changes are responses to drastic conversions in external environments such as the rapid escalation of social, economic and political events (Jacobsen, 2019) or severe crises such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. These kinds of exogenous alterations require immediate responses from organisations; therefore, intentional changes become necessary for organisations to catch up with the pace of changes in the external environment, as organisations are embedded parts of the broader social context and need to adapt to the pressures externally imposed on them (Tsoukas and Knudsen, 2005). On the other hand, unintentional changes result from continuous individual and collective actions, and organisations' members are usually unaware of them. Unintentional changes are usually consequences of intentional changes (Van Woerkum *et al.*, 2011; Jacobsen, 2019). Collective

learning and organisational adaptations are usually studied considering intentional (planned) changes because these are more conspicuous and easier to identify, while unintentional (unplanned) changes are often unnoticed. This article will pay attention to both.

Data collection and analysis

This article is part of a PhD project where first it was studied how the founders of five social entrepreneurial organisations learned to generate the idea and create a social entrepreneurial organisation (Eslahchi and Osman, 2021). Three of the organisations also initially accepted that the researcher to further study their respective organisation. However, in late 2019, two of these organisations merged together, and a new chief executive officer (CEO) took charge of the newly established organisation. The new CEO disagreed with being studied, arguing that they did not have time to be the subject of a study considering their situation. Thus, the project investigated only one organisation conducting single-case study research. Single-case study in the context of this research means a detailed description of an organisational situation (Mariotto *et al.*, 2014). This method has its advantages because it can thoroughly examine the complexities of social life in organisations (Stake, 1995). The results of single case studies cannot be generalised, yet, they offer insight and understanding of the broader population (Gerring, 2007).

Moreover, an abductive approach was conducted for the analysis of the data. Although there are different ways of abductive analysis (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014), in this article, this approach was used as a navigational map to identify anomalies and generate reasoning by examining those anomalies. The abductive approach makes the anomaly understandable by scrutinising the unexplained to reach the best plausible explanations in a generative process (Johnstone, 2007; Sætre and Van De Ven, 2021). Concerning this approach, a three-step coding (descriptive, thematic, analytical) procedure was applied (Gibbs, 2007; Saldana, 2015). In the first step (descriptive coding), the material was coded based on what they were about, through which some themes emerged from the data. In the second step of coding (thematic coding), the themes that emerged in the first step were used as codes which include: “changes in communication and interactions”, “changes in operations” and “changes in shared understanding”. The last coding step (analytical coding) aimed to create an analytical understanding of the themes; therefore, in this step, two new meta codes (“adaptation” and “collective learning”) were used to understand the relationships between the themes and construct meaning about them.

Although the pandemic impeded the study, it was a novel opportunity for the researcher to witness how SFE achieved organisational adaptation as it happened, not just through its members’ reflection of it as a past phenomenon. The data have the advantage of being collected in a real-time process because data-gathering began two months before the pandemic (January 2020) and continued until four months into the pandemic (June 2020), meaning the researcher observed how SFE adapted itself to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. The initial aim was to study collective learning in formal and informal settings; therefore, the researcher observed both everyday work and informal activities such as after-works, lunches and other free-time activities like concerts in January and February. From March 2020, due to WFH, it was impossible to study the organisation as planned; therefore, the study was limited to observations of virtual meetings. The extent of data is as follows:

- Thirty-seven observations (43.5 h). Eleven observations were conducted in physical settings before the pandemic in January and February 2020. Also, 26 virtual meetings were observed from March to June. Although most of the data used in this article are from the observations gathered after the emergence of the pandemic, the data gathered before the pandemic helped the researcher to understand the way

SFE was structured and how they worked by constantly comparing the before and during pandemic material.

- Thirteen interviews (8.5 h recorded audio). The CEO was interviewed four times; one in the beginning, two during the process and one at the end of data gathering. Other members of SFE were interviewed once at the end of the data gathering in June 2020. All interviews were semi-structured. Except for the first interview with the CEO that was conducted before the fieldwork, the notes from the observations were used for developing interview questions. Therefore, interviews played an essential role in interpreting the observations. Interviews were conducted in Swedish and translated to English by the researcher. Pseudonyms are used for the participants in the text.
- Various documents such as the organisation's structure, operations workflow and some internal surveys about working situations were also used in the analysis. These documents assisted the researcher as supplementary materials to clearly understand the organisation's structure and division of tasks, the organisation's values and goals before the pandemic.

SFE is a small-size non-profit social entrepreneurial organisation founded in 2013 to facilitate the integration processes of refugees and immigrants into Swedish society by creating different activities that encourage the participation of refugees/immigrants and people who are established in society. The organisation consisted of 8 full-time employees, 2 interns and more than 20 volunteers during the data gathering. Before the pandemic, SFE had several projects focusing on social integration, such as a buddy program, workshops in schools, food projects and free social activities (e.g. sport, theatre, dance and museum). According to the organisation's documents, the organisation's vision is a society where everyone participates on equal terms and feels trust. Through their projects, SFE aims to provide a mutual exchange that broadens perspectives, reduces language barriers and breaks prejudices.

Furthermore, by creating friendships at the individual level, the organisation hopes to provide the necessary conditions for a well-functioning multicultural society. From the beginning, it was one of the SFE's goals to open up society by creating the possibility for people to access the public sphere as much as possible. Naturally, all of SFE's projects required the physical presence of participants in different social settings. Because of their dependency on physical activities, SFE was forced to pause all of its projects soon after the pandemic outbreak. This makes it an interesting case to understand how a small social entrepreneurial organisation used its knowledge and expertise to survive the crisis during the pandemic.

Findings

In the analysis of the empirical data, three themes emerged: "changes in communication and interactions", "changes in operations" and "changes in shared understanding". The findings are divided into two parts. The first part answers *RQ1*, describing how changes in communication and interactions impacted knowledge sharing and collective learning conditions in SFE. The second part answers *RQ2* by showing how changes in operations and shared understanding can result from changes in collective learning conditions. These altogether demonstrate how SFE members collectively learned to adapt themselves to survive exogenous changes during the pandemic.

Changes in collective learning conditions

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisation was divided into several areas. According to the organisation's structure, each member was responsible for a specific area and was in direct contact with the CEO to develop their respective projects, and only received help from others to implement their work whenever necessary. In an interview in January, the CEO explained their way of working and argued that in this way, they worked more effectively:

The employees have their own area of responsibility. In this way, if I have thoughts about social activities, for example, then it is better that I talk to X about what is on my mind than others [. . .]. Everyone, of course, helps to do things, but I want one person to be in charge [. . .] I think it is better and more effective that I, as the CEO am in contact with everyone.

Agnes, a Project Manager who, before the pandemic, was responsible for organising the activities, shared the same picture:

[. . .] it is easier to see that this is my area of responsibility; does it work or not? This makes it easier for the employee to see their role. I think that has made the efficiency to be improved a lot.

As others also explained in interviews, work was perceived to be more effective in this way; however, this way of working resulted in limited communication and interaction between team members and hindered sharing of knowledge and experiences because SFE contained different work areas with limited interactions among employees regarding the actual work. Thus, each person was in contact with one or two other colleagues with few mutual work-related interactions. Several staff members used the term "islands" in separate interviews when referring to their working and interacting before COVID-19. For instance, Sofia, a Project Manager who before the pandemic was in charge of the buddy program, believes that before the pandemic, they did not work as a team:

I do not perceive that we worked a lot in a team, but we helped each other when needed. We had talked a lot about being a whole organisation, but it was unclear what it should look like in practice. We became accustomed to working on our projects on our islands.

Sofia explains that they were aware of having isolated islands before the pandemic and wanted to solve this problem. However, they could not take any actions because they did not know what to do without affecting the efficiency of the work, and also, as others also mentioned in interviews, they had a lot to do before the pandemic and did not have much time for these changes. The pandemic affected SFE in two ways. Firstly, they had to WFH, meaning they needed to find new routines to work virtually. Secondly, and most importantly, because all of SFE's operations required the physical presence of the participants, SFE was forced to pause all of its operations and needed to develop new ones. To tackle these challenges, they could hold onto the existing organisational structure, meaning that each project manager in direct contact with the CEO could try to find an alternative way for their respective projects to work during the pandemic. However, instead of going on this path, they attempted to formulate new projects collectively as a team by collective engagement in a new organisational goal mediated by the new form of organisational communication and practices. Subsequently, becoming a united team led to creating new organisational practices in SFE where they mobilised all the organisation's resources, knowledge and experiences in a particular direction in which everyone was involved regardless of their position. Anders, who, before the pandemic, was the coordinator of SFE's national volunteers' network, explains how he could feel isolated when working in the office before the pandemic, but now he experiences talking more with the whole team while WFH:

Before [the pandemic], when we worked in the office, it could be very divided. For example, I am very good at isolating myself with my headphones in my ears listening to music sitting in a corner and working. I mostly talked about my job in the office to one or two the most, but now we are talking to everyone.

This issue is something that Carolina, who was an intern at SFE from January to June, noticed as well during the short period that she was part of the organisation:

I think we meet more in the whole group now, which was not before in the office because then everyone was here and there busy with their projects. So, I feel that this [the pandemic] has led to a boost in the team spirit.

In late April, the CEO sent an online survey to staff with questions about the work situation during the pandemic. After that, they had a meeting about the results of the survey, in which the issue of the whole organisation becoming a team was one of the main topics:

Jenny: In our meetings before [the pandemic], we mainly talked about practical issues, but now we talk a lot about strategic issues as well.

Sofia: Another thing is that now we all almost do the same tasks since other projects are paused. So, it is kind of good to know what others do as well.

The CEO: Yeah, I could see from the survey that team feeling is high now.

What they refer to as a boost in team spirit can be seen as a result of changes in communication and interaction in SFE. By creating a virtual communication and interaction framework, they had at least three online meetings every week where everyone participated. In Monday meetings, they talked about practical issues; in Wednesday meetings, they discussed more strategic matters, and on Friday afternoons, they had virtual after-work. Sometimes, they even connected via online communication platforms even if they did not have a meeting and talked with one another to simulate the office environment.

WFH forced them to use solely online communication platforms. This issue was a critical factor for changes in interaction because this compelled SFE to redesign its internal communication system and partially redefine responsibilities, which led to a new temporary and unofficial organisational design during the pandemic. A significant change was that online platforms became the most crucial resources used during this time, not only as ways of participation in internal communication and interaction but also for organising and implementing activities during the pandemic.

Besides online communication platforms, they also used other interactive software for presentations and gathered members' opinions. These tools made it easier to share their ideas, knowledge and experiences and eventually reach conclusions during the meetings. For instance, in almost every meeting since March, the CEO posed questions using an interactive platform, and everyone could respond to the questions on their computers or mobile phones; and they could simultaneously see the results. This tool even generated word clouds and visualisations of the responses. These helped them construct more effective meetings, understand better how others think and continue the discussions more concretely. The possibility of creating breakout rooms was another significant function that facilitated discussions during meetings. In early April, the CEO informed the team about this function and suggested using it in their meeting. A week after that, it became a regular part of their meetings, and whenever they needed to discuss more strategic matters, the team was first divided into two or three smaller sub-groups using breakout rooms, and then everyone gathered again in the main group to discuss what they talked about in smaller groups, a

process that was repeated several times in each meeting. The empirical findings presented in this section suggest that changes in communication and interaction in SFE during the pandemic influenced collective learning conditions because by using virtual communication platform, the level of sharing information, knowledge and experiences increased, and they had more possibility to discuss them. The organisation positive attitude towards virtual communication was also a significant factor for changing collective learning conditions because instead of seeing them as a source of stress and distress SFE tried to incorporate them in their daily activities. The CEO played a crucial role in this process because due to his facilitative style of leadership other team members had the possibility to actively engage in virtual interactive and communicative actions.

Outcomes of development of collective learning

Allowing everyone to participate in the strategic planning and designing of new projects was vital for developing and implementing them because team members brought in their experiences, knowledge and expertise from their specific work areas and collectively discussed them to create new projects. After postponing their activities in March, they started discussing what they could do in the new situation where social distancing was imposed, and people were encouraged to avoid any kind of unnecessary physical interaction with others. After several meetings, they developed a virtual project instead of their buddy program, which was the organisation's core activity. This project became popular and received media coverage from newspapers and Swedish television (TV) programs. After this experience, in May 2020, they launched another virtual project called Online Language Café, where bigger groups could join an online meeting and discuss various themes. These changes in operations could be hard to achieve without new routines for communication and interaction that facilitate collective learning by creating possibilities for dialogue and discussions.

Besides developing new projects, the changes in collective learning conditions also resulted in a more fundamental yet implicit outcome. It was mentioned that previous studies identified the lack of shared understanding as a challenge for virtual teams, but SFE achieved a new shared understanding during the pandemic that especially concerns the role of technology and digital tools in the organisation.

Organising physical activities have always been an essential goal of SFE. Before the pandemic, most of the organisation's members were unwilling to conduct virtual and online activities because they believed that in an era where many people spend much time on their cell phones using social media, it was necessary to create the opportunity to expand people's social boundaries and be physically present in society. For instance, a discussion in a meeting in February 2020, just some weeks before the emergence of COVID-19, revealed members' reluctance to include more online tools in their activities. In this meeting, where they were discussing ways to optimise the implementation of the activities, one member suggested that using online tools could be an option to help project managers to reduce their direct involvement and instead focus more on strategic tasks. However, many opposed the idea of diminishing the project managers' active involvement, arguing that their physical presence in participants' first activities was significant. They argued that by personally meeting participants in a public place, they could create a safe environment for participants and give them enough information and guidelines about what to do, mainly because SFE's target groups were refugees and immigrants who were new in Sweden and may not be familiar with the city and society in general.

Nonetheless, personally meeting the participants and organising physical activity was impossible during the pandemic, and virtual activities became the only way to conduct any

activity. In the beginning, the virtual projects were supposed to be a temporary response to COVID-19, but after their implementation and recognition of their advantages, the staff gradually embraced it as something convenient and practical that suits the new social environment. In a meeting in April 2020, just a month after the initiation of their first virtual project, they evaluated the advantages and disadvantages of the virtual project and accepted the virtual project as a fact that will stay with them even after the pandemic. It became apparent that the pandemic would last for several months, and the argument was that after running the virtual projects for months, it would become a natural part of the organisation that would be challenging to stop. They even discussed the possibility that they might change the organisation's vision and identity in the future because of this issue.

Agnes: The problem is that we do not know how long the situation will continue; if it is about some more weeks or a couple of months, then maybe we can continue like this, but if it is a year, we should consider drastic changes [in organisation vision].

Anders: Yeah, If the situation continues, for example, one more year and we need to do everything digitally, we have to change the organisation's identity, which is not always cool.

Natalie, who has always been against online projects, in an interview in late June, acknowledged the advantages of virtual projects and explained why this shift happened:

I still strongly believe in physical activities, and I think it provides the most significant value. But I think there are many benefits to virtual projects as well. It is better to have a digital meeting than nothing at all. Or it might be a way to maintain the relationship if participants cannot meet physically every time, or maybe the first meeting can be over the video, something like an ice breaker and meet later when it feels a bit more natural.

This new shared understanding is apparent when in May 2020, they re-evaluate their buddy program to make it more efficient as a preparation for the post-pandemic world. In their meetings, they discussed and reflected upon their experience with virtual projects to discover how they could include some digital tools in the buddy program to reduce the involvement of the staff and volunteers. What they try to achieve in this meeting is what most of them opposed in another meeting in February, as explained before. Another example that manifests the multidimensionality of this new shared understanding is a meeting in June. In late spring 2020, the spread of the virus seemed to be under control, and many people in Sweden gradually started to pay less attention to social isolation guidelines. Therefore, during one meeting in early June, one of the staff asked others for their opinions about restarting some of their ordinary activities that required physical meetings between people, an idea that most of them opposed:

Natalie: At the beginning of March, we decided to stop all of our physical activities due to Corona. Now it looks that the situation is somehow under control. Therefore, I want to start a discussion about what you think about gradually starting our one-to-one meetings.

Martin: I think we should continue virtually at least until the end of summer. We can start our ordinary projects in September if the situation is ok.

Ingrid: I agree. We should follow the government's recommendations; therefore, I think we should continue virtually until they change the recommendations.

The CEO: I am entirely for total isolation. As an organisation, we are responsible both for society and our participants.

Ellen: I know that we may not be able to reach our contracts' goals, but we can work harder after summer if the situation allows.

Sofia: it does not seem that the situation is getting better. Many people are tired and follow the recommendation less, but it does not mean that the situation is back to normal. There are more significant social problems that are more important than our organisation. We should think about this.

Natalie: ok, we have a consensus about it to continue virtually

As the above excerpt indicates, they opposed the idea of doing any activities that required a physical presence in society because of a new shared understanding of the reality. Before the pandemic, SFE's vision has constantly been increasing people's mobility in the public sphere by organising various social activities. Nevertheless, during the pandemic, they identified a much broader vision for themselves which was society's well-being in general. These two examples signify that SFE members' shared understanding changed during the pandemic, alongside changes in the organisation's practices and operations. This new shared understanding, in turn, created a common ground for the organisation's members for their collective actions.

Virtual projects and a new shared understanding can be recognised as outcomes of changes in collective learning conditions during the pandemic. The theory section elucidated that the literature about organisational adaptation discusses two different types of changes: intentional and unintentional. Changes in operations and developing virtual projects were intentional, and SFE members actively strived to develop new projects. However, after several months of the adaptation process, all the changes gradually led to a new shared understanding, which was not something they intentionally intended to happen.

Table 1 summarises the study results in relation to research questions.

Discussion

Redesigning the organisation's way of communication and interaction facilitated the exchange of knowledge and experiences and, subsequently, changed collective learning conditions in SFE. It is noticeable that decreasing the bureaucratic level and creating a flatter organisation does not necessarily lead to collective learning in teams. For that reason, collective learning cannot be simply considered a by-product of a less hierarchical organisational structure (Hsu and Lamb, 2020). Changes in organisational structure should provide a route to possibilities for increasing the exchange of knowledge and experiences for collective learning to occur. Therefore, understanding collective learning conditions needs to go beyond a mere analysis of organisational structure and design; it should also specify the content and scope of the changes and requires the unfolding of events over time.

RQ	Results
<i>RQ1</i> . What are the changes in collective learning conditions that SFE has to face during the pandemic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Forced virtual work – Becoming a united team
<i>RQ2</i> . What are the outcomes of collective learning in SFE during the pandemic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – New virtual projects – New shared understanding

Table 1.
Study results in relation to research questions

Moreover, even if collective learning takes place, it does not mean that it will automatically lead to organisational adaptation; thus, to understand the complex relationship between learning and adaptation, learning should be analysed in terms of specific processes in distinct conditions (March, 2003; Pedler and Burgoyne, 2017). The theoretical approach of this article entails that when studying organisational adaptation, the focus should not be on changes at the individual level as separated events. Instead, the changes should be considered part of a bigger whole. For an organisation to be considered adapted, it is not enough that one or some members of the organisation change their way of thinking and doing; it is necessary that the majority change their behaviour and, most importantly, reach a shared understanding about it. A team that collectively learns and incorporates those learnings into its activities can adapt to exogenous changes more effectively. Building upon the empirical finding of the study, we can argue that a particular organisation has been adapted when its members act differently than before and perceive events in another way because organisational adaptation tries to balance an organisation's external situation and its internal condition. In this way, organisations are perceived as dynamic social systems where collective learning conditions are examined through lenses of how teams evolve through social interaction between individuals (Dixon, 1998, 1999).

In this regard, collective learning conditions in SFE were changed when the organisation's members changed their way of communication and interacting during the pandemic. This suggests that collective learning conditions were influenced by collective actions situated in a specific time and space (Nicolini, 2009; Svabo, 2009). In the case of SFE, reaching a level of "team-ness" played a substantial role in creating collective actions because the organisation could use implicit individual expertise and knowledge to create a shared action arena where everyone could communicate and interact. A key element in this process was that the increased level of team-ness was bottom-up rather than a decision forced by the CEO. Therefore, organisational adaptation was a groupal and participatory process that was facilitated by virtual interactive and communicative actions. This supports previous studies' argument that possibilities for reciprocally influencing adaptation processes can lead to more effective organisational adaptation (Štreimikienė *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, teammates not only learn from each other by sharing knowledge and experiences but also develop an increased ability to act together (a collective competence). They achieve this when they make their understanding available and examine each other's perceptions, leading to new ways of thinking where different ideas are woven together. For everyone's perspective to emerge, communication must have the character of reflexive dialogue and a willingness to achieve mutual understanding (Dixon, 1998; Cunliffe, 2002). This implies that individual learning is necessary but not sufficient for organisational adaptation to occur (Curado, 2006) which is impossible without appropriate conditions for collective learning because adaptation involves integrating lessons learnt from experiences into organisational routines (Berkhout *et al.*, 2006).

As also noted in other studies (Mittendorff *et al.*, 2006; Iverson and McPhee, 2008), the unique social mechanisms in organisations can stimulate learning if there are possibilities for participation in practices that lead to collective learning or hinder it if there are destructive interactions that prevent individuals from participating in these practices. In SFE, a clear possibility of full participation in the practices was created for everyone during the pandemic to plan and develop new projects regardless of their status in the organisation. Exogenous changes in the environment during the pandemic required SFE to assess a new way of organising to repair social order and practices for reaching social proximity while following physical distance during the pandemic (Cozza *et al.*, 2021). SFE achieved this by

incorporating new technological tools in internal communication practices and operations. This technology-mediated work helped SFE create new practices during the pandemic.

A more fundamental yet implicit change was also recognised in SFE. During the pandemic, a new shared understanding of the organisation's ethos and how they worked was achieved through continual and dynamic communication and interaction while practising the work when members of SFE frequently discussed their visions, goals and identity. When members of SFE collectively made sense of new practices and reached a shared understanding about them, they transformed those practices into institutionalised routines that they would continue even after the pandemic. The notion of routines is a foundation of organisational adaptation because old routines are replaced by new ones to match changes in the external environment. Routines include a wide range from procedures, rules, guidelines and strategies to culture, beliefs and ways of thinking in organisations (Berkhout *et al.*, 2006). Replacing old routines with new ones is not a mechanical choice between a set of alternatives; this is a gradual development resulting from the social process of collective doing, experiencing, reflecting and learning. The acceptance of using technological tools was a clear example of the new shared understanding of routines in SFE. It is essential to remember that shared understanding does not inevitably imply that everyone thinks alike; instead, it alludes that these goals and values were collectively negotiated, discussed and agreed upon. Hence, the shared understanding resulting from collective learning was a way to reach a consensus on the diversity that team members bring to the team. Diversity signifies that people have different experiences and knowledge that create diverse pictures and understanding of the world (Santos *et al.*, 2021). This new shared understanding indicates that practices are more than just the sum of visible activities in organisations. They are both ways of doing things and understandings that make practices alive. Therefore, for a successful organisational adaptation, organisational practices and organisation members' understanding of those practices require some changes, and the ability to learn collectively is crucial here.

Conclusion

This article aimed to offer a theoretical contribution on the empirical ground by examining how a social entrepreneurial organisation collectively learned to adapt to a new social environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, collective learning was studied concerning organisational adaptation and change. Based on the results, one can argue that collective learning in SFE was a result of complex social practices. Individual learning is usually tacit, and it is through collective learning in teams, that they become explicit and negotiable to others. As was the case for SFE, when they moved away from working as different separated "islands" towards a united team, they could create better ways of communication and interaction to transform tacit individual knowledge into the explicit collective knowledge, which was a direct result of, and key to their adaptation to the COVID-19 world.

Furthermore, how team members communicate and interact shapes collective learning outcomes. This perspective implies that collective learning occurs through acting in social situations; therefore, the learning conditions and outcomes change as soon as these situations change. Hence, collective learning cannot be understood without references to specific social and historical contexts, places and times.

This study may broaden the understanding of the relationship between collective learning in organisations and organisational adaptation in times of crisis. As argued, learning from everyday experiences and collectively discussing them is crucial for organisations to change and adapt themselves. The result of the study can also be helpful

for leaders and managers, especially those active in small-size social entrepreneurial organisations, to understand that changes in organisations' structure and design do not necessarily lead to collective learning; instead, these changes should entail a clear possibility for participation in discussions and dialogue where team members can share knowledge and experiences and reflect upon them.

A notable limitation of the study is that the data-gathering process started two months before the pandemic's outbreak and lasted until four months into the pandemic. Therefore, the study did not investigate SFE in the post-pandemic era. The modes of participation during the pandemic, namely, involving everyone in planning and developing new projects, may not be practical when they restart their ordinary projects. Therefore, a follow-up study is necessary to understand what will happen in SFE after the pandemic and how they use the learnings and experiences they gained during the pandemic.

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Further reading

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