

Learning About Learning: Lessons on Implementing a KM and Learning Project from the USAID KDMD Project

Feedback Loops

What we mean by Feedback Loops:

Feedback loops (learning loops) are the application of the knowledge or learning cycle to business, project management, and implementation processes. They provide a semi-formal structure for trouble-shooting or capitalizing on opportunities and contribute to a responsive learning environment.

How it works:

It is first important to understand that feedback loops are used throughout project implementation as an opportunity for the project team and stakeholders to continuously discuss progress, identify improvements, and integrate new ideas or approaches. Feedback loops work by setting up mechanisms (meetings, events, reporting structures, etc) that provide the opportunity to analyze current processes and make corrections or improvements. As such, reporting and feedback become part of an ongoing process and are not postponed for the completion of any one activity or project. For example, the USAID Uganda mission has established “Big Picture Reflection” moments in which project activities are evaluated by key stakeholders in order to make timely improvements or course corrections.

Learn More:

Although it can be easier to bring people together and share ideas when they work in close proximity, it's also possible to engage people from afar. In-person conversations, whether through regular meetings or phone calls, provide a forum for open dialogue on a continuous basis. Reporting mechanisms are important, and project management systems (such as Basecamp) can circumvent some accountability issues, but nothing can replace the candor of personal discussions and brainstorming sessions. Another challenge of this approach is that it takes time to regularly meet and think through specific issues and options. This is not a “check it off the list” exercise, but a commitment to learning and improving that will ultimately heed better results in the long-term. Lastly, a caution that these discussions should focus on results and what's best for the project as opposed to contracts and legality. When the conversation turns to “what's in the contract,” the relationship changes and the ability to creatively problem solve is diminished.

Why Feedback Loops matter:

Feedback loops add a multi-purpose approach which adds value to work processes. With this approach a more iterative engagement process is implemented which ensures continuous learning and improved processes.

What it looks like:

Each week, the KDMD COR and Chief of Party held a check-in meeting. This is an opportunity to discuss progress on specific activities, share news, ask questions, identify potential challenges and concerns, and consider ideas for improvement or areas of growth. Key details or decisions are then shared back with the rest of the team, as appropriate, so that collective feedback can be generated or immediate changes and requests can be addressed.