

MARCH 2021

GOOD PRACTICE BRIEF

DISTRIBUTIVE LEADERSHIP

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Junior and mid-level staff are capable of stepping up in new ways and have a desire to do so—everyone may one day need to lead.

Empowered staff feel more confident and inspired to grow, which benefits not only their professional development and careers but also the organization and its performance.

Staff need an enabling environment where they can individually work toward their goals, fully backed by leadership and supervisors.

Leadership should regularly leverage data from the organizational wellness dashboard to measure progress, gather suggestions from the survey, and analyze the results to inform steps forward.

BACKGROUND

In October 2017, the Center for Education (DDI/EDU) established office culture and organizational effectiveness as one of the five Office Strategic Priorities for 2018, which was based on input from office-wide consultations. Between November 2017 and January 2018, EPIC facilitated five focus groups that involved all staff to identify best practices, best moments, existing strengths, and pain points. The seven benchmarks and associated behavioral indicators that emerged from these focus groups formed the Organizational Wellness 1.0 survey instrument, which served as a baseline for the office to measure progress and provide feedback in each key area over time.

One of the major takeaways from the organizational wellness exercise was the call for a shift from the traditional top-down style of leadership and the concentration of leadership in the hands of a few toward a more distributive leadership style, where a diverse range of staff are provided appropriate opportunities to lead. Distributive leadership was subsequently established as a priority, and the office agreed to empower and more intentionally provide opportunities for younger and mid-level staff to lead and manage tasks, working groups, and key operational processes.

GOOD PRACTICE

Over the course of the project, EPIC supported efforts to empower young and mid-level staff to lead; some were institutionalized, while others are still aspirational. Organizational change, including shifting toward distributive leadership, is often complex, not linear, and never complete. Leaders need more than just

opportunities and a new position; they need to develop skills in leading up, leading down, leading across, and leading beyond (meta-leadership). This includes knowing how to build relationships and connections, and understand and work in challenging contexts, while accepting the responsibility for co-creating effective systems and a healthy culture. Attracting, training, developing, and retaining good, high-performing staff that can shift into new challenges and roles is necessary for organizational success. The following were successful practices that supported DDI/EDU's journey toward creating a more distributive leadership office culture.

DEVELOPING INDIVIDUAL SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

EPIC facilitated sessions with staff on leadership development, which included technical, conversational, emotional intelligence, and relational skills. With DDI/EDU leadership encouragement, EPIC offered individual coaching to determine growth areas, and provided the support to enhance competencies, confidence, and awareness of self and others.

EMPOWERING AND ENABLING DISTRIBUTIVE LEADERSHIP FOR A RANGE OF STAFF, ESPECIALLY JUNIOR STAFF

EPIC supported the decision by leadership to provide younger staff with opportunities to take action and make decisions within DDI/EDU. DDI/EDU leadership used the following methods to help empower and support young and mid-level staff:

- Delegating tasks and projects and checking in periodically without micromanaging so staff felt trusted and in control of their day-to-day activities.
- Encouraging staff to broaden their work by taking on tasks not only within DDI/EDU but in working groups in DDI and other parts of the Agency.
- Providing universal access to leadership training that included sessions on emotional and conversational intelligence, Myers–Briggs Type Indicators, giving and receiving feedback, DiSC, and communication.
- Helping create overarching enabling conditions, such as solidarity, respect, peer support, and personalized support for individual success.

TAKING FREQUENT PULSE CHECKS AND FOLLOWING UP ON THEM

Based on these values and desired individual and collective behaviors defined by DDI/EDU, EPIC developed a customized organizational wellness instrument to provide a process and metric for “taking a pulse” and treating symptoms and causes of DDI/EDU's organizational health over time. These organizational wellness dashboards helped measure progress on delegation, agency, decision-making, respect, role and responsibilities, and staff empowerment, and helped gather feedback to make course corrections. Dashboard results informed discussion and priority setting during strategy sessions and all-staff meetings.

The organizational wellness dashboards enabled DDI/EDU to:

- Give staff anonymity when completing a survey, which allowed them to provide honest and open feedback.
- Share composite results with all staff, providing a common understanding of strengths and pain points, and steps to improve and make adjustments along the way.
- Provide leadership and staff with periodic and real time awareness of the current situation, trends, and climate in the organization.
- Gain an understanding of why or why not trust was being built within the organization.

OUTCOMES

Through EPIC's support for distributive leadership, younger staff were challenged with new opportunities and assigned to lead the process for significant initiatives, such as the development of both the [USG Strategy on International Basic Education](#) and the [USAID Education Policy](#). Other junior staff also stepped up in various ways. For example, some staff shined in their new role as Activity Managers for existing mechanisms. Others took initiatives to foster wellness and increase efficiencies in DDI/EDU by building social relationships, organizing fun/social cohesion activities, and developing better onboarding, clearance, and travel processes. Still others took on tasks in working groups outside of DDI/EDU.

This DDI/EDU transformation is also prioritizing the need to cultivate leaders. The new matrixed structure is intentionally designed to respond to the various untapped skill sets across its staff and better use those capabilities for supporting Missions and partner country stakeholders. Furthermore, staff were empowered to take the lead for different functions and priorities. Advancing the Center, the Bureau, and the Agency in technical leadership, cadre development, evidence and learning, and client services will not be accomplished by siloed teams and the concentration of power within the hands of a few, but rather through drawing upon a diverse range of skills, knowledge, and energies among and across different people and skill areas at the right times.

LESSONS LEARNED

The following are reflections and insights to assist DDI/EDU to continue to cultivate, empower, and retrain leaders at all levels.

GO BEYOND THE ALLOCATION OF LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Distributive Leadership is not just the allocation of leadership opportunities to different people; it is about the perceived fairness, transparency, and equity/inclusiveness in the selection process over time—and it is about the new leader distributing opportunities and fairness with the group he/she/they are a part of.

- Supervisors and peers should be thoughtful and intentional about supporting emerging leaders.
- Recognize how power relationships, formal and non-formal, could enable and/or hinder new leaders' efforts.
- Support the building of skills in meta-leadership

Thoughtful support means having the kinds of conversations that are truly helpful and lead to the desired change. Often feedback creates defensiveness and proceeds on the assumption of deficiencies and knowing/having one right answer, even though different approaches have validity. Similarly, what kind of guidance is needed from person to person, context to context, and task to task? Seldom will one size fit all. Thoughtful support requires getting to know staff, their capacities, their pain points, their motivating forces, the requirements of the job/task, and the limitations that might exist in a given context. Intentional support requires a commitment to the other person's dignity, self-respect, and interests in professional development. An inclusive approach to professional and organizational development will not happen by accident or chance. A deeper awareness of what brings about individual, group, and organizational change requires commitment to an intentional vision, and the ability to learn and adjust along the way.

While distributive leadership is about offering greater professional development opportunities and job satisfaction to a wider range of people, it is also about attracting, enabling, and attaining them. Ultimately, it means having the people, culture, and systems can increase DDI/EDU's effectiveness, people who bring in skills

and positive, constructive attitudes, emotional and social intelligence, and a willingness and recognition of the need to contribute to common goals. Education and development challenges seldom have solutions that are only technical. A successful organization will attract and build the skills and competencies that are needed for today and tomorrow.

BE REFLECTIVE

DDI/EDU should periodically reflect upon the leadership style(s) and cultural norms identified as important. Some suggested reflective questions include:

- Do we as individuals, groups, leaders, or colleagues, or our programs and investments, reflect power relationships, practices, or a privileged view of the world that is dismissive or disrespectful of others?
- Do we have an appreciative culture that builds on what works, best moments, our strengths, and creating the conditions so that we can all be at our best and be a part of bringing out the best in others?
- Do we expect or require others to do what we are not willing or seemingly unable to do ourselves?
- Do we value and practice diversity, inclusion, and equity in the way we act with each other, with our partnerships, and with partner countries and their stakeholders?

BE ITERATIVE

DDI/EDU should consider an iterative, in-real-time strategy for change that includes a shared vision, goals, priorities, benchmarks, structures, and systems—and their relationships and actions. A periodic (every 3-4 months) reflection should gather and discuss what is working/not working and why, and any needed adjustments. This is separate from traditional strategic plans that are done every four or five years, with annual or mid-term reviews. A more frequent cycle should include a contextual analysis, which would provide insights on what is changing, and what are the emerging challenges/themes within USAID, a new USG administration, and the global and national contexts of the international education sector.

This brief was created by Education Performance Improvement, Communications and Knowledge (EPIC), a five-year activity (2015-2021) of support services to the Center of Education (DDI/EDU). EPIC consisted of activities in four key areas that were implemented simultaneously: performance improvement through organizational effectiveness; professional development, training, and learning for all staff; knowledge management, generation, brokering, uptake, and use; and internal and external communications, engagement, and partnerships.