



Collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) have long been a part of USAID's work. USAID staff and implementing partners have always sought ways to better understand the development process and USAID's contribution to it, to collaborate in order to speed and deepen results, to share the successes and lessons of USAID's initiatives, and to institute improvements to programs and operations. Through this case competition, USAID and its LEARN mechanism seek to capture and share the stories of those efforts. To learn more about the CLA Case Competition visit [USAID Learning Lab at usaidlearninglab.org/cla-case-competition](https://usaidlearninglab.org/cla-case-competition).

Cultivating the CLA Enabling Environment: USAID Uganda's Mission of Leaders Program

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What is the general context in which the story takes place?

Uganda is a country striving to develop in the face of multiple, daunting challenges, despite long-term donor support, and a USAID portfolio that invests approximately \$330M annually, spanning agriculture, health, education, democracy and governance, natural resource-oriented programming. It is also a country, like many others where USAID works, in which rapid and/or unexpected change in the context can drastically affect programming within a complex landscape of donors, local actors and institutions. It was with this backdrop that USAID/Uganda, with targeted assistance from USAID/Washington, was the Agency's first to formalize the notion of Collaborating, Learning and Adapting, as part of the Mission's 2010-2015 Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS).

A year into the implementation of that strategy, soon after assuming her role at the helm of USAID/Uganda, Mission Director Leslie Reed requested the Mission conduct what she termed a 'temperature check', an organizational diagnostic, designed to provide insight into the status of staff engagement, morale and collaboration. The Mission simultaneously embarked upon the development of a 'Mission Leadership Charter' to outline those which Mission staff identified as particularly critical for success. These tools have since evolved to become key elements of what is now USAID/Uganda's multi-faceted Mission of Leaders program. As outlined in detail below, this program has become a critical platform for enhancing the various CLA capacities of the Mission staff and—we believe—has the potential to serve various stakeholders well beyond the Mission walls.

What was the main challenge/opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

In its early experience with CLA, USAID/Uganda prioritized the focus on the various stakeholder engagement strategies, learning activities, and adaptive management approaches that most directly incorporated CLA into its program portfolio. Such program-focused CLA activities included the drafting of learning agendas, embedding CLA language into all awards, and introducing a stronger learning focus into mission-wide portfolio review processes. Indeed most of these remain a priority, as the Mission consistently seeks ways to embed CLA into its portfolio most effectively. At the same time, USAID/Uganda has realized with increasing clarity that the very behaviors most fundamental to CLA would not be fully actualized without a broader enabling environment that might help to overcome the various counter-incentives, cultural barriers and basic capacity gaps that Agency staff face in the process. Prompting frank conversations, asking challenging questions that might counter prevailing beliefs, and introducing change requires leadership, teamwork, and an organizational culture that not only allows for these practices, but mandates them. Taking informed risks to test new approaches during project design and implementation, building collaboration across stove-piped teams and partner organizations who otherwise have incentives (and longstanding behaviors) NOT to substantively share information, and individual capacities to adapt to change—in a work plan, technical approach or business practice—requires leadership.

These organizational behavior challenges are further exacerbated by two additional factors: the complexity of the environments within which we work, and the ongoing transitional nature of Agency staff, particularly at the Mission level. First, development contexts worldwide are complex by nature, with longstanding and multi-dimensional problems, which can be reinforced by—or at a minimum potential progress limited by—social, cultural, historical and other factors that only serve to create even greater barriers for change otherwise prompted by development efforts. In the USAID/Uganda environment, this translates into the need for additional leadership that might transcend culture (or ethnic groups, for the Ugandan staff) or the relatively high context, hierarchical nature that most staff experience in a USAID Mission. These counter-incentives can slow change, stifle leadership and, as a result, inhibit programmatic success.

Second, the Mission environment is one of ongoing staff transition, both planned and unplanned, but particularly affecting the leadership levels of the organization. For Foreign Service Officers, the predictable but still relatively frequent changes at the Mission, Office and Unit levels introduces the possibility for significant differences in leadership styles and expectations, that might create additional disincentives for staff to 'buy in' to an approach such as CLA, particularly one that might require challenging current modes of working. For Ugandan staff members, there is still a relatively high degree of transition in and out of the organization, with limited and 'capped' levels of advancement. At USAID/Uganda this has been particularly exacerbated by Ugandan staff members taking assignments in 'third' countries, while the Mission of Leaders CLA approach has sought to develop leaders at all levels, in an effort to cultivate CLA-like behaviors and practices that further the Mission's goals, while also providing ongoing professional (leadership) development potentially outside the 'normal' roles of staff members.

In short, USAID/Uganda has come to view a revised causal pathway for CLA that captures the personal, team and organizational behaviors that are required to ensure the systems, processes and practices designed to support CLA are indeed utilized. Thus, the Mission of Leaders program is designed to respond to the need to invest in the personal, team and organizational flexibility, resilience and leadership required to truly operationalize and institutionalize the concept of CLA at all levels which, in turn, should be contributing to and furthering the achievement of our shared development objectives.

Describe the CLA approach or activity employed

An ongoing 'work in progress', the Mission of Leaders approach seeks to promote the vision that ALL staff members have a leadership role to play, no matter function or position within the Mission. The ability to lead, build relationships, learn what works, manage development processes and change...all of these are required for the realization of CLA, and the enhanced program results we believe it enables.

The following components make up the core of the Mission of Leaders program so far and represent an intentional approach to develop the individual, team and organization:

Leadership Behavior Charter – Collaboratively developed through task teams and internal consultations, the charter is a tool for staff at all levels to understand expectations and to know what good leadership 'looks like' for the Mission, recognizing the broad array of circumstances and resulting leadership requirements. In order to bring the charter into daily work life, staff members have explored the role and relevance of the charter through interactive exercises and off-site workshops.

Organizational Diagnostics – A foundation of the Mission of Leaders initiative has been a series of periodic 'temperature checks', whereby USAID Uganda staff contribute to and then receive the analysis for an assessment of staff engagement, as well as organizational issues and opportunities. Conducted with the help of an external consultant team, these diagnostics have informed a variety of other organizational development activities.

Insights Discovery™ – Insights Discovery™ was developed based upon the work of psychologist Carl Jung and captures individual preferences, across the axes of extrovert-introvert, sensing-intuition, and thinking-feeling. The model has been tested across numerous cultures and languages, maintaining strong reliability and validity. It uses the language of color to describe the unique traits of each individual, generating a profile booklet that illustrates that profile, and preferred communications styles and potential blind spots, for example. Each new staff member receives support from three on-staff accredited Insights resources, and participates in a tailored briefing. The Mission organizes periodic workshops to leverage the tool and enhance self-awareness, strengthen teams and develop interpersonal skills. USAID/Uganda has most recently coordinated Insights Discovery profiles for its current Chiefs of Party, including briefings on the tool.

Leadership Training – Learning from success, USAID/Uganda offers a tailored week-long leadership development course, modeled after the Agency's Emerging Leaders Program which includes specific CLA content. Designed to bolster skills and foster a leadership mindset, the training brings together nearly 30 representatives from across the Mission to support individual leadership approaches as well as serve as a launch pad for the participating cohort to enable change and continuous improvement throughout the Mission, its programs and partnerships.

Executive Coaching – A tailored approach to leadership development employed by USAID/Uganda has been a periodic Executive Coaching program, providing coaching services to a number of Mission leaders at the Unit, Office and Mission Leadership level. A combination of in-person and remote coaching sessions, the areas of focus are defined by the individual staff member.

Staff Transition Management – An important extension of the Mission of Leaders initiative has been the design and execution of staff transition support strategies, including exit, on-boarding and knowledge transfer. USAID Uganda has launched an explicit approach to managing staff transitions that includes resources to support knowledge transfer (e.g. access to video exit interviews from outgoing staff).

Chiefs of Party meetings and Engagement – In 2015 the Mission sought to expand the Mission of Leaders program beyond its own staff, and launched a monthly Chief of Party convening with USAID

Senior Leadership. These sessions seek to strengthen relationships among the Project Leaders and with USAID's Management Team, while enhancing collaboration leadership around shared development priorities such as youth development.

Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources or enabling factors)?

Some of the critical success factors for the Mission of Leaders program have been:

- **Leadership commitment** – USAID/Uganda's leadership have been unfailing in their commitment to these ideas, as well as the process by which we experiment with new activities and/or formats that balance engaging staff, creating an organizational development/change experience, and linking those experiences to the broader development outcomes we aspire to
- **Resources that can support the activities and external skills** – Without a doubt, USAID/Uganda would not have been able to successfully execute these activities without critical support from external consultants with the caliber of experience and ability to adapt and tailor interventions specifically to the Mission's needs and vision; and the financial resources, not necessarily easy to identify within USAID's budget constraints, are notable in terms of a consistent prioritization by the Mission to apply a combination of funding streams to these efforts
- **Internal skill base** – USAID/Uganda is somewhat unique in having a dedicated Organizational Learning Advisor that has served as designer, coordinator and/or active facilitator for a number of these activities; having this skill base resident in the Mission has been very important to the program's success, as has the ability for the CLA function, more broadly, to connect this work—in substance and socialization—to the Mission's strategy, CLA approaches, etc.

Challenges inherent to this approach have included:

- Akin to the challenges of measuring and mapping CLA-driven change in development outcomes, for example, USAID/Uganda's attempts at measuring change in an environment's ability to enable CLA in any meaningful way is, as yet, limited to self-reported perceptions, or techniques to capture inflection points in an anecdotal way. We hope to pursue monitoring and measurement approaches in the future of the program;
- Creating the space for busy staff, teams—as with so many organizations, just finding and committing to the time to design and participate in such organization-wide events is difficult among many competing priorities;
- Communicating the program goals and experience during the 'on-boarding' of new staff to the Mission; ironically, although the Mission of Leaders program seeks to smooth transitions itself, communicating what the program is all about, and conveying the key aspects of the organizational culture it fosters is, in itself, a challenge; and
- Limitation in organizational development capacity in the local market—although Uganda has several organizational development resources with whom the Mission hopes to further collaborate, the overall level of development for these services in developing county context can be mixed, at best, limiting the 'tailoring capacity' of the interventions pursued and driving up overall costs of implementation.

What have been the outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

It is the Mission's belief that USAID/Uganda's Mission of Leaders approach better equips us to:

- Institutionalize Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA), yielding better programs to achieve our development objectives
- Develop individual, team and organizational resilience to manage change—that which is coming from within the Agency and from our unique country context—and to seek and create change when it is called for, to learn and adapt
- Create a vibrant, evolving and coherent culture
- Seek creative solutions, question our own mindset and expand possibilities for what we do
- Engage and influence externally, to maximize our development resources, while managing stakeholder relationships effectively

In terms of attempts to measure these results, the Mission has attempted to capture these changes through:

- A periodic organizational diagnostic
- A leadership charter '360 survey' performance measurement tool
- Session-specific and retreat-wide surveys, on-the-spot feedback (i.e. rating scales, prompting questions with post-it responses, etc.)
- Culling of anecdotal experiences from staff and from implementing partners

So far, we have some limited evidence of the change we seek to create emerging:

- Workshop and session evaluations are consistently positive, albeit with room for improvement
- Over the course of three Mission-wide diagnostic exercises, the general 'picture' that shows staff engagement, confidence in leadership and similar metrics has improved, although important (if different) problem areas emerge each time
- The utilization of references to Insights Discovery (the 'color language') as well as the ever-evolving understanding of CLA and all its facets, continue to build within the Mission
- Most recently, approximately 5 partner organizations—have expressed serious interest and/or have implemented the Insights Discovery tool following initial Mission-led briefing to the Mission of Leaders program

We will continue to test various efforts to measure progress, and in particular, to focus on how our investments manifest in programmatic shifts and enhancements for better results.

What were the most important lessons learned?

Moving forward, USAID/Uganda intends to learn from this experience, continuously iterating to:

1. **Pilot new, varied modalities** for the individual, team and organizational development efforts that the Mission of Leaders program seeks to deliver, evolving the delivery mechanisms and formats;
2. **Continue to pursue ways to measure the costs and benefits** of these investments, through the application of tested M&E methods, as well as testing and iterating other approaches to capturing change along our proposed causal pathway; and
3. **Explore ways to adapt these activities to support local leadership development** – local government, private sector and/or civil society actors—as a development approach within our programs; by enabling the types of skills and behaviors that collaborating, learning and adapting embody, we believe we may be able to strengthen local systems that can sustain development outcomes well beyond our direct interventions.

For other organizations wanting to create an enabling environment for CLA, USAID/Uganda might recommend the following considerations:

Forcing the pause is a big challenge for busy teams. Leadership in reinforcing the ‘why’ of the connection from organizational development to achieving goals helps. The pace, tempo and mix of interventions has been an ongoing experiment for us, especially given we have very busy staff. Gauging the relative rhythm of an organization, its absorptive capacity, willingness to push out of a group ‘comfort zone’ into new experiences, etc. are critical to planning the timing and type of activities, whether they are held on an annual or ongoing basis.

What has NOT worked as well for these activities have been workshops where we have itemized a long list of action items coming out of a major meeting; more successful have been those where we commit to an organizational shift in HOW we work, and very targeted shifts in WHAT we do.

Any other critical information you’d like to share?

CLA is anchored in the programmatic and thus the skills and capacities most informed regarding ‘technical’ areas such as food security, maternal and child health, and private sector development. But equally vital to operationalizing and institutionalizing CLA are the skills, practices and experience in the areas of program design, management, monitoring, evaluation, learning and more broadly, development business processes such as those captured within USAID’s program cycle. But advancing CLA requires yet another, complementary set of skills and experience, drawing upon the disciplines of organizational development, behavioral science, change management and communications, for example. The Mission of Leaders experience has been a pivotal one for USAID/Uganda to challenge our assumptions about CLA itself, and to provide a platform for ongoing evolution of thinking and practice in this area. More resources and sharing from these various disciplines would be quite valuable, as we continue on the journey of identifying, applying and learning from these approaches. We look forward to sharing the journey with our peer Missions, Washington colleagues, and the many implementing partner organizations, donors and other collaborators working to promote these more iterative, adaptive approaches to development worldwide.