2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

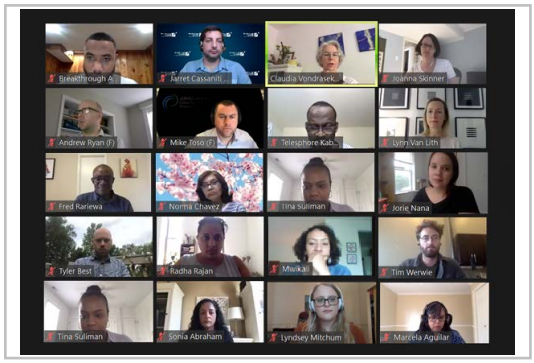
COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

Case Title:

Synthesizing Lessons Learned and Translating Them into Work Plan Activities

Name: Jarret Cassaniti

Organization: Breakthrough ACTION



Breakthrough ACTION Staff at a Zoom meeting.
Credit: Jarret Cassaniti

Summary:

Breakthrough ACTION, USAID's flagship social and behavior change project, has over 650 staff in 27 country teams. With the implementation of robust work plans happening mostly in silos, the project is challenged to fulfill a vision of linking people with each other, especially field to field. Teams work in many different technical areas, in different time zones, using different languages, and within different cultures. Reporting structures mostly focus on what the project achieved, not what it learned. Discussions among senior leadership pointed to the need for more intentional learning, feedback, and sharing systems.

Breakthrough ACTION implemented a lessons learned initiative, centered on a crowdsourcing and voting tool called 1-2-4-All. The initiative first brought together key technical staff within country groups to identify, filter, elevate, and synthesize the learnings which had applicability at the global level. The project collected over 80 lessons and then, in the first part of the initiative, chose 33 to work with. Staff implemented two additional steps—feedback and reflection—in a heterogeneous setting at an all-team meeting.

The light touch aspect of 1-2-4-All resulted in 57% of the country teams participating, despite the difficulties of juggling implementation, planning, reporting, and learning tasks at the same time.
In a post-meeting survey, 95% of respondents said the initiative resulted in one or more of the following benefits: expected additions or changes to a work plan, enhanced team thinking about a project pillar, and plans for additional learning through a formal knowledge exchange.

Which two subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA) Framework are most reflected in your case? Please reference them in your submission.

- Internal Collaboration
- External Collaboration
- Technical Evidence Base
- Theories of Change
- Scenario Planning
- M&E for Learning
- Pause & Reflect
- Adaptive Management
- Openness
- Relationships & Networks
- Continuous Learning & Improvement
- Knowledge Management
- Institutional Memory
- Decision-Making
- Mission Resources
- CLA in Implementing Mechanisms

1. WHAT: What is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?

With funding from USAID, Breakthrough ACTION works to increase the practice of priority health behaviors and enable social and structural support for improved health and development outcomes. The project has emphases on family planning/reproductive health (FP/RH); malaria; HIV; maternal, newborn, and child health (MNCH); nutrition; COVID-19; and the Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA), including Ebola. While firmly grounded in proven practices, the project's mission includes forging, testing, and scaling up new solutions to accelerate the adoption of healthy behaviors among individuals, families, and communities. To achieve this, Breakthrough ACTION is implementing creative and sustainable social and behavior change (SBC) programming, nurturing SBC champions, mainstreaming new techniques and technologies, and advocating for strategic and sustained investment in SBC.

Around the world, SBC work is seldom prioritized, with the health and development sector dominated by service provision. The sectors pay insufficient attention to the demand generation and social behavior aspects. Health itself competes for attention with infrastructure amongst local leadership in many national government systems.

Simultaneously, local donor priorities sometimes inhibit the cohesive strategies and resources needed to foster cross-country sharing of challenges, successes, and lessons learned. This results in project staff looking for small amounts of time outside approved work plan activities to pause and reflect, provide guidance, share recommendations, and offer valuable experiences to others on global projects.

2. WHY: Why did you decide to use a CLA approach? Why was CLA considered helpful for addressing your organizational or development challenge(s)?

October 2020 to September 2021 marked the global project's fourth year. Each buy-in has a unique work plan which the USAID mission guides. The project links buy-ins to Core workplans and global leadership in several ways, but some gaps remain pertaining to cross-project sharing. Breakthrough ACTION makes intentional efforts to facilitate South–South exchange as part of the knowledge management plan through peer assists. The project also prioritizes knowledge exchange via select meetings where participants present innovations and hold group discussions. These efforts result in periodic dialogues regarding the technical work needed to limit reinvention of the wheel and improve effectiveness.

In-country staff also engage in intentional and systematic quantitative data collection for monitoring, evaluation, and reporting purposes. Breakthrough ACTION publishes the synthesis of these knowledge collection efforts internally in the project intranet and project newsletter also communicates it to technical and managerial groups, including those primarily responsible for project leadership, monitoring and evaluation, and knowledge management. The knowledge shared in these fora ranges from general awareness to adaptation and implementation of learnings.

Discussions among senior leadership pointed to the need for more intentional learning, feedback, and sharing systems. General staff agreed on a need for robust commitment to developing learning functions and a pause and reflect culture across the project. The project decided to further integrate more routine knowledge management and CLA practices. Once implemented, leadership expected this work will stimulate innovation, foster better decision-making, and build more systematic exchanges, leading to better outputs. The project implemented a lessons-learned initiative as a result.

3. How: Tell us the story of how you used a collaborating, learning and/or adapting approach to address the organizational or development challenge described in Question 2.

Breakthrough ACTION asked country of implementation staff to engage in a lessons learned initiative to collect, share, synthesize, and build upon learnings generated across the project. It designed this initiative around social interaction and openness to increase the quality and quantity of learnings.

The initiative's purpose was to encourage a standardized reflective process within each country and then enable sharing the lessons identified across the project to facilitate problem solving and learning for everyone. In each country of implementation, staff identified lessons from the past 12 months that might apply to the global project. Lessons are experiences built on insights (also known as "ah-ha" moments) and then formulated as advice for others. Developing lessons from insights requires analysis and generalization by project staff. Lessons learned had to have relevance to one or both aspects below:
1. At least one of the Breakthrough ACTION's key pillars as described in the project strategy
2. An intractable challenge the team is trying to solve as it relates to project goals, as articulated in the specific USAID approved country of implementation work plan.

The project encouraged knowledge management focal points and staff leading the initiative within their country of implementation to deploy several probing questions to stimulate colleagues' thinking. These included:
1. Based on what your team has done, what did you learn that should inform future work?
2. What new recommendations do you have for others doing similar projects?
3. How did your team strengthen your SBC methodology to address key program components?
4. If you had it all to do over again, what would you do differently?

Additional guidance, borrowed from the USAID Learning Lab, stressed the initiative was not a call for traditional success stories and was not about actions and achievements as promoted in traditional reports. Instead, the initiative focused on what staff learned from both successes and failures as they implemented work. Lessons were not limited to something big but could be about one small practice that made an important difference in project work. Each team used a crowdsourcing and synthesis tool popularized by the Liberating Structures methodology called 1-2-4-All (also known as Think, Pair, Share). The 1-2-4-All tool begins with one staff member responding to a prompt. After a few minutes, they pair with another staff to share, compare, improve, or expand on their individual ideas. They then select one of the two insights to share with another pair. This process continues until there is just one large group. The responses are documented at each stage.

After each team completed the 1-2-4-All exercise, they collected the top three lessons and organized them along eight themes (the seven project pillars plus an operations category). Technical leadership reviewed the lessons for appropriateness in the category and then facilitated a conversation with staff during an all-team meeting.
During a subsequent all-team meeting, facilitators created Zoom breakout rooms for each theme, and attendees joined the room of their choice based on their interests. Ten breakout room discussions lasted 50 minutes and focused on the following prompts:
1. What specific aspects of this lesson learned need to be developed so other Breakthrough ACTION staff might adapt it?
2. Explain how the lessons might inform new or existing activities within the SBC field?
3. Identify the Breakthrough ACTION staff (in countries of implementation or global operations) who could benefit from additional conversations (such as a peer assist) on the lesson learned.
4. Once fully developed, what are the innovative or new channels for externally sharing the lesson learned?

The groups further narrowed the lessons down from 38 to 10, again choosing the most valuable for the entire project.

4. ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT: How has collaborating, learning and adapting affected your team and/or organization? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

The project produced 92 lessons using the 1-2-4-All process. Staff who did not participate using the tool provided lessons learned based on quick meetings to be able to engage in next steps. At this stage, the project's knowledge management advisor elevated the top three lessons from each country of implementation (38 in total) and categorized them according to project pillars. The three pillars with the most lessons learned were:
1. Institutionalize SBC capabilities and networks: 10
2. Place users and communities at the center of the work: 7
3. Operations (a supporting function): 7

During the all-team meeting, seven groups were able to respond in text to all four discussion prompts, adding to the technical resource base.

The results of a survey released five days after the completion of the initiative showed the initiative was successful in four different ways. Ninety-five percent of respondents who participated in homogeneous or heterogenous synthesis and analysis reported the initiative resulted in the following:
1. Expected additions or changes to a work plan
2. Enhanced team thinking about a project pillar
3. Expected plans to learn through a subsequent knowledge exchange
4. Trust built or developed among colleagues

After completion of the all-team meeting, and after the project met most of the Year Five work plan deadlines, leadership asked staff who submitted the 10 lessons learned to share the implications for their team in the subsequent year of work.

Lastly, Breakthrough ACTION made tentative plans to repeat the exercise in six months, although it then canceled this in favor of a comprehensive human-centered design approach focused on developing a more robust dynamic learning system.

5. DEVELOPMENT IMPACT: How has using a CLA approach contributed to your development outcomes? What evidence can you provide? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

The initiative brought about or reinforced learnings that led to strategic decision-making in how countries of implementation conducted their SBC work. The project expects results of the lessons to have far-reaching implications for Breakthrough ACTION's ultimate beneficiaries. Selected learnings implemented in Guyana, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and West Africa are described here.

In response to a lesson about using modified SBC guidance to expand in regions where it was initially implemented, staff in Guyana decided to scale back some aspects of the guidance that were resource-intensive as a way to reduce costs and speed up the process. A scaled-back version would allow the team fidelity to the process while increasing the chances that the stakeholder group would implement the guidance on their own.

The Ethiopia staff found that promoting the One Health approach using face-to-face SBC tools such as discussion guides and interpersonal communication skills was more effective in reaching households and community members compared to mass media. As a result, regional health bureaus and project partners made plans to expand the One Health approach to other project zones not supported by the Global Health Security Agenda.

In Nigeria, engagement with service providers as peer facilitators improved participation in training events. This led to the formal adoption of the peer facilitators at officer-in-charge cluster meetings as delivered over social media. Similarly, West Africa Breakthrough ACTION found that religious leader testimonials helped deepen discussions about the impact of restrictive gender norms and led to a plan to invite these leaders to formally participate in community discussions.

6. ENABLING CONDITIONS: How have enabling conditions - resources (time/money/staff), organizational culture, or business/work processes - influenced your results? How would you advise others to navigate any challenges you may have faced?

The 1-2-4-All technique allowed teams to quickly identify lessons learned and elevate the most significant ones of relevance to the entire project. A key benefit of 1-2-4-All is that it activates each member of the project, giving quieter staff a voice alongside more vocal staff. Another benefit is it engages the staff closest to those on the front lines and seeks their direct input, flattening hierarchy while maintaining quality control.

The crowdsourcing nature of 1-2-4-All also helps busy project leadership build on individual learnings of their staff in a systematic, transparent, and light-touch way. The process helps staff identify good ideas through the process of having many of them. It also includes different types of stakeholders using multiple rounds of, and types of discussion, analysis, and synthesis, building on the diversity of staff mindsets and learning styles.

Deployment of key psychologies in behavioral sciences also enabled the initiative to succeed. It addressed the curse of knowledge, a phenomenon whereby people who have recently come to a new realization have trouble understanding that others do not have that same knowledge. The initiative also utilized the self-discovery of solutions. When people discover new ideas firsthand, they are more likely to trust the validity of the idea and put it into practice.

Development practitioners interested in replicating this initiative should also encourage the sharing and analysis of negative lessons. Showing only the successful component of one's work shortchanges those who are interested in replicating or adapting the lessons. A description without disappointments and failures paints only a partial picture of the project's work, keeping the risky aspects hidden, like the base of an iceberg.