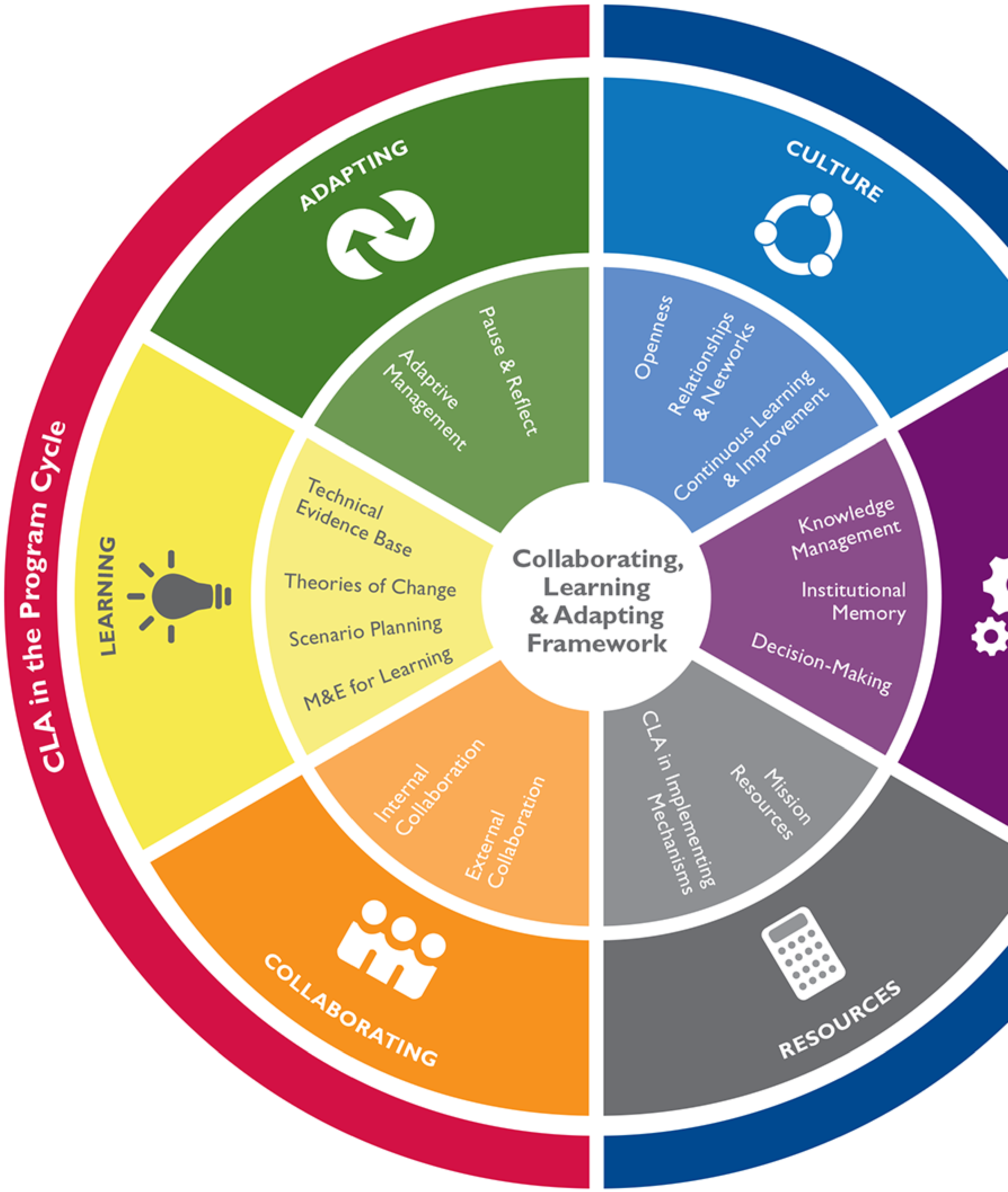
USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

CLA TIPS

FROM THE BUREAU FOR POLICY, PLANNING AND LEARNING



Tips for:

- Getting started
- Planning for CLA
- Developing a Learning Agenda
- Engaging Stakeholders
- Using M&E for Learning
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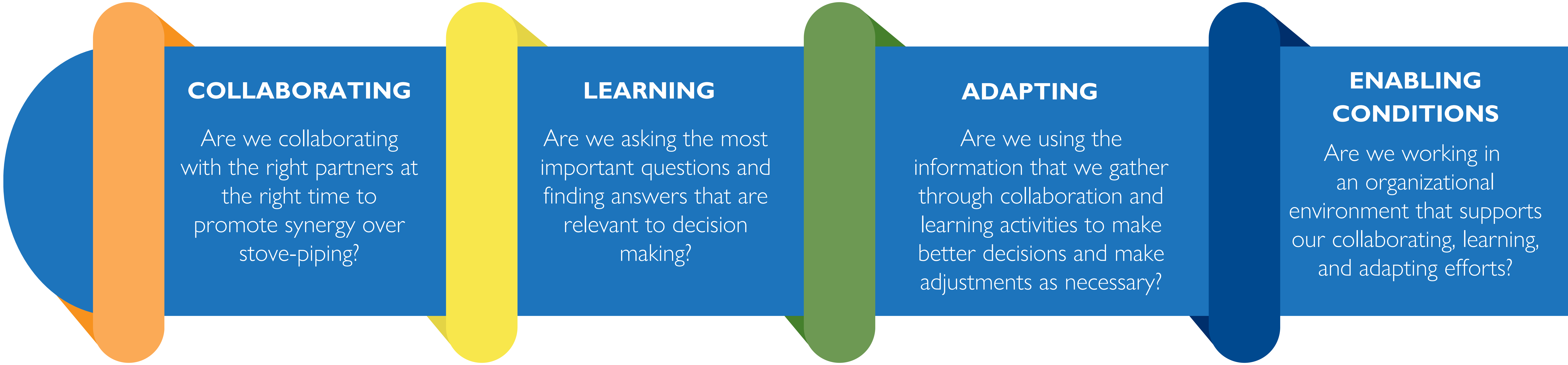
Introduction

Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) is a set of practices that help us improve development effectiveness. Learning has always been part of USAID's work, and most USAID missions and implementing partners are already practicing CLA in some way. Our aim is to make CLA more systematic and intentional throughout the Program Cycle, and to dedicate the resources necessary to make it happen. In the simplest terms, integrating collaborating, learning, and adapting throughout the Program Cycle can help development practitioners address the above challenges by thinking through:



The tips offered here come from our collective learning to date about how to meaningfully integrate CLA practices and principles into your work.

Tips for Getting Started

Integrating CLA into our work helps to ensure that our programs are coordinated with others, grounded in a strong evidence base, and iteratively adapted to remain relevant throughout implementation.

One size does not fit all. One of the most important points about CLA is that it looks different in every mission or bureau—and that's as it should be. CLA isn't about following a template but about really thinking about what works for your situation and context. The solutions are as diverse as the needs—let's embrace that.

Get people involved strategically. To be successful, Missions should encourage strong participation of technical and supporting offices. In many cases, CLA efforts may be housed in and managed by the program office, but technical teams have strong roles to play in identifying and implementing the CLA approach. Implementing partners, government counterparts and other stakeholders should be strongly encouraged to participate.

Share the results. If you hear about CLA efforts that others in your team or Mission are working on, help to tell the story. ProgramNet's CLA Community of Practice for USAID staff, blog posts, and the annual CLA Case Competition are all great ways to share. Additionally, help others across the Mission recognize the CLA potential in the work that they are already doing. Sharing the learning will enable the Mission to identify ways to adapt its programming to be more effective, replicate or scale-up promising practices, and avoid repeating unsuccessful approaches. Everyone at the Mission has a role to play in making our programs more effective, so share information broadly.

Tips for Planning for CLA

The CLA behaviors we adopt should fit the specific context and needs of our work. The CLA plan in the Performance Management Plan (PMP) focuses on collaborating, learning and adapting at the strategy level. Activity Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) plans address these issues for activity implementation.

CLA is not a separate workstream. Practices and principles of collaborating, learning, and adapting should be integrated into existing processes to strengthen our development work and improve aid effectiveness.

Keep it simple. Your planning process can be 'right sized' to help you define and prioritize CLA approaches that fit programmatic priorities as well as the amount of time you have available. If you use the CLA Maturity tool, there is no expectation that you will go through the entire tool in a single session. Similarly, rather than focusing at the outset on big changes, you may want to start small and build. In any case, it will be important to set realistic expectations for how and to what extent you will improve your CLA practice. For example, you might decide to incorporate moments for reflection or analysis into meetings you already hold.

Think holisically. Even when we start small, it is important to keep the bigger picture in mind. The CLA Framework brings structure and intentionality to a wide variety of tasks and approaches by helping you prioritize targeted areas for improvement. The CLA Framework can also help you identify existing strengths that can be built upon to improve your practice in another area. For instance, a team with strong "pause and reflect" practices but a weak understanding of the technical evidence base for part of their program might decide to use existing reflection opportunities to review and/or incorporate new evidence into programming discussions.

Tips for Developing a Learning Agenda

Integrating CLA into our work helps to ensure that our programs are coordinated with others, grounded in a strong evidence base, and iteratively adapted to remain relevant throughout implementation.

Stay open and curious. Be open to the possibility that your development hypothesis/theory of change could be wrong.

Collaborate with stakeholders. Learning agendas provide opportunities to engage in iterative, consultative processes that can foster engagement and buy-in, enhance learning agenda relevance and use, and facilitate coordination and collaboration. However, it is also important to know when and how to limit consensus-building to keep efforts moving forward and avoid "consensus fatigue."

Include learning activities that go beyond traditional M&E. Learning for continuous improvement often requires multiple knowledge sources. These should often include monitoring and evaluation activities, but they can also include activities like in-person group seminars and workshops, formal presentations among working groups and communities of practice, and the collation and dissemination of case-studies and stories related to tacit knowledge and experiences.

Keep your learning agenda alive. As you begin to answer your learning questions, further questions may arise, leading the team to question the theory of change, adjust learning questions, or modify learning activities. By evaluating your learning agenda periodically, you can ensure its continued relevance.

Tips for Engaging Stakeholders

By engaging across technical and support teams, with other USAID units, or with local communities, host governments, and partners we can identify areas of shared interest and potential cooperation. This helps us avoid duplication of effort, share what does and does not work, and develop innovative approaches to shared development challenges.

Make sure your engagement efforts are resourced. You can't engage stakeholders if you don't make the time to do so.To be successful, ensure that you have devoted the appropriate resources (time and human) to your work. If you need help, visit the Resourcing CLA cluster.

Effective engagement takes trust. Stakeholders have to know that we value their thoughts, opinions, and experiences. Building these relationships takes dedicated time, but it allows greater focus on the end development goal. Trusting relationships also enable us to connect with a broader network to increase situational awareness and contextual understanding that can further inform program implementation in many ways.

Facilitate, rather than create, development. Genuine engagement and collaboration requires taking a facilitative approach—one that prioritizes interventions led by and among existing actors at strategic points within a system rather than direct interventions provided by a development outsider. In many programs, using community-driven, participatory approaches throughout the Program Cycle will increase local ownership and, most likely, sustainability of results.

Tips for Using M&E for Learning

Before we plan our activities, we need to know what we are trying to do and what we need to learn to ensure that the data we collect will help us make decisions. It is important to remember that monitoring, evaluation, and CLA are not the end goal, but rather the means by which we achieve our development outcomes more effectively.

Be strategic and prioritize. Our M&E systems can provide vast amounts of rich information and potential for learning, but we often do not have the absorptive capacity to take it all in. We need to make deliberate choices about what learning can contribute most to our development objectives and what data will support us in that effort.

Focus on openness. The strongest learning happens when there is openness to talking about challenges and unexpected outcomes at all levels, including with implementing partners and other stakeholders.

Accountability and learning go together. You don't have to choose between accountability and learning—they go hand in hand. Develop your M&E efforts to support these complementary objectives.

Timeliness matters. Timely M&E activities can go a long way to informing key decision-making. Plan your M&E activities so that you have the relevant information in time and current to make critical decisions.

Tips for Practicing Adaptive Management

USAID's work takes place in environments that are often unstable and in transition. Even in more stable contexts, circumstances evolve and may affect programming in unpredictable ways. For its programs to be effective, USAID must be able to adapt in response to changes and new information.

Focus on results and impact. Adaptation comes more naturally to staff who have a strong interest in learning about whether their work is achieving the results it set out to achieve, and who have an inclination toward action-oriented reflection.

Adaptations should be based on data and evidence, not on a whim. Adaptive managers should be able to critically review, understand, and use information to make decisions and carry out actions based on those decisions.

Embrace change. Adaptive management requires comfort with uncertainty, flexibility to change, and the humility to admit what one does not know or when things have not worked as expected.

Tips for Integrating CLA in Activity Design & Implementation

By integrating collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA) throughout the activity design and procurement process, you help to ensure that implementing partners (IPs) have the capacity and the flexibility to reap the full benefits of these approaches.

Build on CLA approaches already emphasized at the strategy and project levels. The degree to which you incorporate CLA into an activity design depends upon the particular priorities, capacities, resources and needs within the Mission, the nature of the country program, and the operational environment.

Tailor the type and intensity of CLA approaches to fit the activity and its objectives. Building in adaptive management through CLA practices, skills, and processes can support enhanced development results, recognizing that the type of CLA practices and the degree of intensity may vary from activity to activity. For example, activities that fully embrace a locally-led development approach would require more intense investment in community or other stakeholder engagement strategies.

Use M&E to learn, as well as to meet reporting requirements. The MEL section of an activity design should be written with an integrated focus on learning, such that the MEL system captures and reports on how the activity is progressing, and feeds that into an adaptive management approach.

Support local actors and foster locally led development. Organizational learning and adaptive management improves our ability to coordinate our efforts in service of local development partners. CLA is especially useful for designing and implementing activities that catalyze and facilitate local ownership and sustainability.

Tips for Enhancing Organizational Culture for CLA

A team or organization's culture is its set of shared norms and beliefs - both spoken and unspoken. Culture is continually communicated, reinforced, and changed, including through encouragement or discouragement of specific practices and behaviors. The health of the culture shapes the team or organization's capacity to solve problems and innovate, engage in CLA practices, and create a positive enabling environment.

Identify champions for change. Work with colleagues from across the organization - including leadership - to determine what the team needs in order to be successful. Seek to understand the incentives of these champions, including recognition, increased influence, and a desire for better development outcomes.

Define your needs - begin with the end in mind. Launching and sustaining an effort to increase organizational effectiveness and CLA capacity requires focus, energy and motivation.

Small can be beautiful! Scale your interventions based on time and resource constraints. You do not necessarily have to embark on large-scale organizational development efforts to see improvements in your culture. Even a 15-minute after-action review at the conclusion of a meeting can spur meaningful knowledge sharing, learning and adaptation.

Strengthen positive aspects of your existing culture. Rather than build new systems from scratch, identify current processes, meetings, and Program Cycle touchpoints to foster a CLA-friendly and healthy organizational culture. For instance, look for opportunities to bolster openness and participation in an upcoming portfolio review, CDCS mid-course stocktaking, or procurement process to enhance team and organizational culture.

Tips for Resourcing CLA

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to resourcing CLA because each Mission and organization's needs will be different.

Think beyond financial resources. You don't always need money to integrate CLA. Think first about what resources you already have access to. What existing processes or opportunities can be leveraged?

Be realistic and right-size your resource needs. You never want to under- or over-resource your CLA efforts. Our focus has always been on "right-sizing" your CLA approach and practice to your context, needs, and objectives. We are not collaborating, learning, and adapting for the sake of it, but to be more effective. And if that's the case, we need to accurately budget for our CLA efforts.

Don't under resource your efforts. Some common items that may be forgotten when planning for CLA include: the time it takes to coordinate logistics for large, in-person events; the technology needed for virtual collaboration; effective facilitators with familiarity in adult learning and participatory approaches; time to carry out and manage assessments and other learning efforts; and the resources needed to help stakeholders communicate about, internalize, and use evidence.

Encourage others to resource CLA. Collaborating, learning, and adapting should not only be an internally focused effort within USAID missions or international partners. We should model CLA with our local partners and counterparts, and encourage them to dedicate the resources required to collaborate, learn, and adapt effectively. If we don't, we won't leverage the learning that exists among local partners, have critical local stakeholders to work with, or be able to increase the level of ownership for development programming among local actors.

Tips for Managing Knowledge

By creating and implementing effective processes to capture, distill, and share knowledge - especially institutional memory - within our organizations, we can ensure the best use of an expansive knowledge base that is built over time and is often forgotten about.

Keep it simple. Start small and think about your priorities so you can be strategic. Effective knowledge management seeks to get the right information to the right people at the right time and in the right format. Be sure to keep barriers low and establish systems that easily facilitate this, such as easy-to-use templates, a knowledge management platform, or making space to share knowledge in regular meetings.

Develop a knowledge-sharing mindset. We learn continuously throughout the day, but how often are you prompted to share that knowledge? Consider asking questions like: Who else needs to know this? Have I shared this with them? Where should I share it? Where can this be stored so it is easily accessible by others? Challenge yourself to think broadly about sharing knowledge beyond your team; think about your office or organization and the wider development community.

Dedicate resources for knowledge management in everything you do. Don’t let it be an afterthought. Reinforce a knowledge-sharing mindset by setting aside time in daily/weekly schedule to document and share tacit knowledge you think others may need. To reinforce the practice of managing knowledge, allocate space in the budget and the schedule for capturing lessons-learned and applying what you learn along the way.

Tips for Conducting Portfolio Review and CDCS Mid-Course Stocktaking

Well-designed Portfolio Reviews and CDCS Mid-Course Stocktakings can enhance strategic collaboration and stakeholder engagement, strengthen knowledge transfer among staff and partners, and address organizational practices and culture to better enable adaptive management.

Clarify what it is you need to know. Build consensus early in the planning process with the Mission Director and leadership to identify clear objectives for the session, and avoid turning the portfolio review into an annual briefing that may prevent focusing on learning and adapting or addressing higher level results.

Plan for engagement and follow-through. The success of your efforts will depend not only on the substantive focus but also on who is engaged, the format of that engagement, and appropriate documentation of and follow-through on results. While portfolio reviews and mid-course stocktakings are often internal discussions, there are no limitations on involving external stakeholders when their contributions support your goals.

Divide and conquer. Co-planning an event like this doesn't have to mean endless meetings and everyone doing a bit of everything. Often it makes sense to take a divide-and-conquer approach to spread the effort of planning and facilitating across several colleagues. But you'll be better able to weave together the threads of the event - its format and structure, information gathering and analyzing, topical priorities, and implementation - if you regularly discuss the whole agenda as a team, paying particular attention to where sessions can build on and reinforce each other.

Tips for Designing Meaningful Pause & Reflect Moments

Creating opportunities to pause and reflect is a key component of learning and adaptive management. These moments make time for thinking critically about ongoing activities and processes as well as planning for the best way forward.

There is no one way to pause and reflect. Many different activities can be considered pause and reflect activities. A pause and reflect session can be an in-person after action review meeting, or facilitated as a Google Doc staff journal that is open for input on a quarterly basis. The important thing is the intention of the activity as a thinking and learning opportunity.

Set a purpose. Determining an agreed-upon purpose with participants is a useful first step when undertaking a pause and reflect session. This common understanding sets the tone for the session and encourages participant investment in the discussion and outcomes.

Be inclusive. The most successful pause and reflect sessions seriously consider how to involve participants in a way that meets their needs and diverse learning styles, while holding a safe space for sharing different perspectives.