

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

### Adaptive Management

#### *What we mean by Adaptive Management:*

Adaptive management is a form of management with extra flexibility built in. While adaptive projects have goals, they are not prescriptive in how they get there and instead provide space for learning and reflection which is essential to the successful implementation of knowledge management projects. There is a sense of direction with monitoring and adjustments built in.

#### *How it works:*

Adaptive management is not without structure, in fact, strategic planning, goal setting, and workplan development is at the core of this approach. The difference lays in that the focus of an adaptive approach relies on a “Statement of Objectives” as opposed to a “Statement of Work.” In this way, there is an emphasis on the objectives and the paths to achieve them become iterative and can change over time. Decisions are continually reassessed to determine the best, most effective or innovative ways to accomplish these broader goals. The beauty of an adaptive approach is in the flexibility, ensuring that projects don’t get caught in a cycle of delivering outdated or unusable products and activities. (see figure 1)

Timing is an important aspect of adaptive management. This has implications in communications whereby information should be shared readily and transparently so as not to allow problems to fester or deadlines to pass without fair warning. Issues should be raised early and often so that a reasonable solution can be identified and acted upon before they escalate. Timing also matters in terms of monitoring and evaluation. Programs shouldn’t wait for final evaluation results to know how things have gone. Establish milestones and check in along the way. The consequences of recovering from a product or activity that was way off the mark are more significant than the time and energy that it may take to create checks and balances along the way.

Other critical aspects of adaptive management include accountability, customization, engagement, evolution and sustainability, expertise, relationship building, and staffing.

#### *Why it matters:*

The cost of doing the wrong thing is much larger than recalibrating to get it right. Ultimately this process of adaptive management will ensure an outcome that is relevant and timely.

#### *What it looks like:*

Each year the KDMD Project created workplans to support the goals of its 13 individual programs. These workplans served as guide, however over the course of the year changes often occurred. Some activities were eliminated if they no longer made sense in the larger context. Other activities were added. New products emerged as new ideas and tools were introduced. As new staff joined the discussion, priorities shifted. In the end, the purpose of the workplan was to establish a framework and track progress towards stated goals, but the actual tasks were quite flexible and frequently updated.

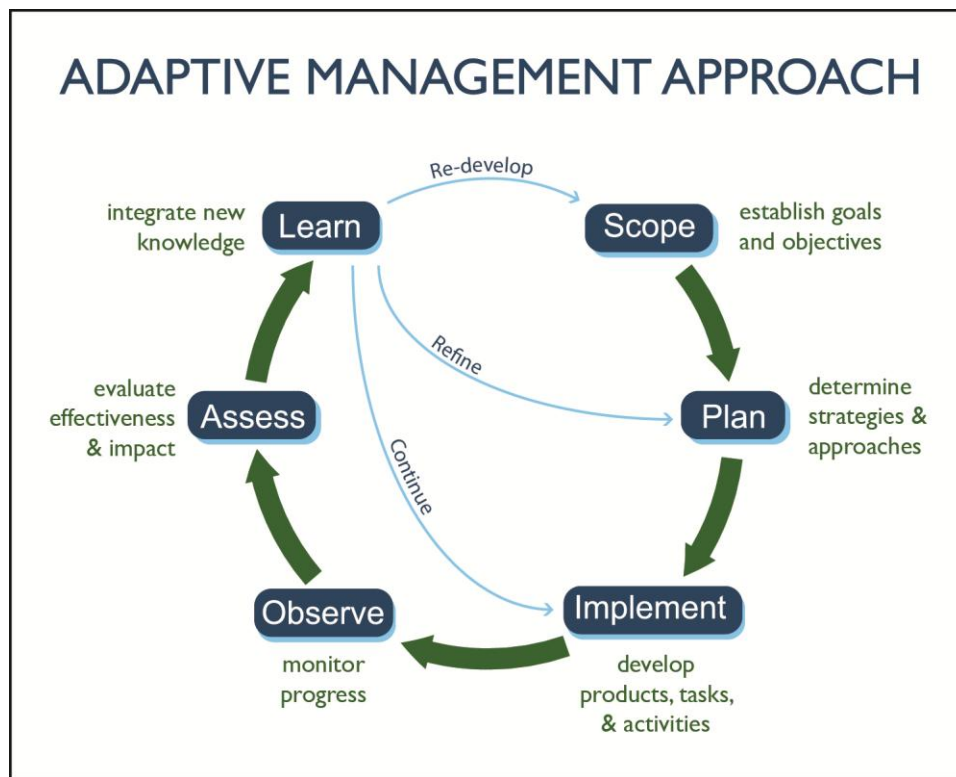


Figure 1

*Learn More:*

Tight feedback loops will provide an opportunity to discover and resolve issues quickly. Additionally, After-Action Review (AARs), semi-regular assessment sessions, give team members and stakeholders a sense of how things are going – what’s working, what’s not, and what needs to be changed. By documenting this feedback and embedding new ideas, approaches, and solutions into future activities, a project team can adapt over time and work towards continual improvement.