

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

Adaptive Management: Engagement

What we mean by Engagement:

Engagement means working with others to build partnerships, trust, and open dialogue with stakeholders through open involvement, strategic and full collaboration, as well as effective communications. Engagement is a distinct activity that facilitates adaptive management by enabling proactive parties to focus on the quality of the process – not just the results.

How to do it:

Engagement requires a conscious effort to work together to implement activities and accomplish project goals by involving key stakeholders, partners, and project team members in the process. Access to leadership that understands the personality types, skills, and strengths of various team members serves as a key foundation to project success, allowing different people to contribute and engage on different activities and use their talents in the most relevant areas. And vice versa, engaging leaders in the work of the project increases the likelihood that they will be pleased with the results because their input was included throughout the process.

This is often accomplished by frequent in-person meetings or virtually via email correspondence, phone calls, webinars, or collaborative online spaces (such as project management systems, working groups, or file editing applications). These communication channels can be reinforced by a matrix management structure in which team members collaborate, cross-fertilize ideas, clearly articulate status updates and decision points, and learn from one another. In addition, transparency built on trust and openness helps foster engagement by creating space for mutual understanding and alignment of different workflows, particularly in collaboration with other partners. All these components empower team members, leading to greater appreciation and application for their skills and experience in ways that inform the process of activity and product development in an iterative manner, thus leading to creative, innovative results.

Why it matters:

In doing so, engagement empowers all parties to take ownership and have a stake in the project's success. It is essential to adaptive management because this style requires the input and feedback of partners and stakeholders who are intimately involved with project goals and implementation, and are informed and encouraged to make recommendations and decisions.

What it looks like:

As a way of internalizing the knowledge sharing principles that the KDMD Project embodies, approximately twice per month the team hosts “Knowledge, Sharing, and Learning in the AM” (KSLam) meetings as a venue to learn from one another in an informal, engaging atmosphere. Project staff are encouraged to present on something of interest to them, whether a professional passion, big idea, team building activity, or new skill, and involve the rest of the team in a discussion of the topic. Through this process of engagement, the team is able to learn about one another and find creative ideas to apply to their work.