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

Resetting the Relationship

What we mean by Resetting the Relationship:

Often, the relationship between contractors, USAID, and other program partners is rigid and technical, driven by task orders, deliverables, and timelines. In an effective knowledge management (KM) and learning context, that relationship is collaborative and involves internal and external guidance; one in which all parties are seen as knowledge peers.

How it works:

Leadership is extremely important in establishing and setting the tone for this relationship, which includes active engagement across the project and opens up USAID-contractor communication protocols at all levels of the project team based on defined roles and responsibilities. Rather than escalating all communications through the top tiers of management, project staff are empowered to communicate directly with USAID counterparts, who are seen a colleagues. This allows for more efficient information flows, decision-making, and activity implementation.

How to do it:

The backbone of this approach is successful collaboration. All team members, but especially the leadership, need to have a

Why it matters:

By working together in a collaborative relationship, the potential impact of program effectiveness is maximized. The immediate outcomes of this relationship include effective communication, coordination, adaptive management, and joint problem solving.

What it looks like:

Large projects, especially, tend to have a lot of moving parts and pieces that require constant and immediate input and decision-making in order to keep things operating smoothly. When this communication runs through one or two people, as it often does, bottlenecks can occur and the work suffers. The KDMD team recognized this challenge early on and reconfigured communication flows by empowering staff to use their expertise and best judgment, and to connect directly with project leadership when necessary. One way of streamlining this effort was by establishing semi-regular Office Hours where any member of the KDMD team could sign up to meet with the COR to ask questions, request approvals, and share status updates and key deliverables.

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shared understanding of the project's objectives and a joint responsibility for achieving them. They accept their co-dependency: their respective successes are bound together and they work in concert to accomplish these objectives.

In order to do this, frequent, collaborative, symbiotic coordination between the project leadership members is a necessity. This may include:

* Formal communications, such as work planning and activity design and consistent, frequent progress tracking

- Operational communications on day-to-day issues along with consistently revisiting priorities, resources, and trade offs
- Informal communications that includes open, honest feedback between leadership and team members to share what's working and what's not. These iterative discussions improve performance over time.
- Tough talks; proactive communication to resolve challenges early and effectively (staff issues, lack of performance, etc.)

This type of relationship also requires mutual trust and personal respect. Where warranted, the contractor then has the freedom to innovate, take risks, and make mistakes (and correct them quickly) Project team members need to understand when it is time to lead and be innovative, and when to step back and accept guidance. By extension, USAID leadership should understand when to let the contractor run, and when to gently tug on the reins. This can be established through open, honest dialog and a demonstrated commitment whereby the contractor puts client service first. This is evidenced by a predisposition to "get to yes" (in other words, the contractor's default response to client requests under a support services contract is yes and they work together to determine the best approach given competing priorities and the realities of staff capacity and budget implications); an understanding of USAID's priorities and the ever changing nature of the development environment, which explains why priorities can seemingly shift quickly; proactively addressing challenges and comparing and contrasting options to make the best decisions; flexibility and creativity; and going the extra mile when it's within scope.

As knowledge peers, it's important for contractors to provide guidance and make recommendations based on their expertise. Strong managers communicate clear benefits, costs, risks, and trade-off of options to USAID decision-makers. This is especially important in the scoping phase with a new clients or activity. Be honest about challenges, especially when it comes to things like measuring return on investment. In a fast growing field, there isn't always a standard way to capture and measure benefit. There are multiple tools and methods to track progress, however; select the right approach based on established expectations. In addition, realize that "USAID" is not a single entity, and that there are multiple stakeholders and personalities with diverse, and sometimes divergent, opinions. Present options to project leadership and recommend a course of action among them with clear rationale. Obtain input throughout the project so that decision-makers are fully aware what the project is doing, and why. Since change is inevitable, focus on the early adapters, then the first majority. Use iterative approaches to rolling out new solutions rather than the "big bang" approach. It's important to scope and fully understand what people want to solve, then slowly and strategically obtain buy-in for significant changes. Understand that leadership members take calculated risks to promote innovate practices. It's vital for the contractor's team to provide a level of support that builds trust with them and gives them the comfort level required to take chances. And last but not least, never, ever, ever surprise the client on a support services contract, especially when shifting priorities have budget and scope implications.

This process of resetting the relationship between contractors, clients, and partners to maximize KM and learning and impact is not without its challenges. When you pull back the curtain on project implementation, things can get messy. People can say the wrong things. Misunderstanding and misinterpretations can arise. Building the trust that leads to a successful collaboration takes time, but it's well worth the effort in the long run.