

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

Adaptive Management: Customization

What we mean by Customization:

Customization is the process of managing a project or activity with creativity and tailoring approaches and deliverables to meet specific needs. In an adaptive management, customization reflects the learning process and allows for variation and adaptation throughout project design and implementation.

How Customization works:

The process of customizing products and activities starts from the very beginning during the discovery phase which helps establish the “fit” between approaches and objectives and builds trust among the project team. One rule of thumb when it comes to customization is making sure to ask open-ended questions on specific topics. Asking questions provides the opportunity for stakeholders to cast their vision and voice any concerns they may have. During this scoping process, clarity is provided on schedule, budget, time, scope, and objectives.

Following the discovery phase, products and activities should be designed iteratively so that there is a back and forth conversation to ensure that the final product matches expectations. Working at different levels is important in this approach, with strong collaboration among the project team combined with occasional leadership check-ins for approval and feedback. When all partners feel ownership for these efforts, the customization process can yield a more streamlined approach with faster iterations and overall positive results.

When working with new partners, have them talk to others who have been through the process before and can describe the experience. This will help them understand what to expect, what works

Why Customization matters:

Customization provides the opportunity to develop a unique solution in response to specific needs, objectives, and audiences. This approach leaves room for continuous learning through an iterative process of discovering what works and what doesn't, and making adjustments along the way to find the right balance that ultimately creates the most impact.

What it looks like:

Following the 2011 redesign of the Feed the Future website, KDMD was asked to create a “Private Sector Hub” in which businesses could find information on partnering with the U.S. Government on issues of global hunger and food security. Although the objectives were clear, the approach was less certain. Over an intensive three-day planning session, visions and expectations were shared and a solution was identified that met both the needs of key stakeholders as well as the realities of the user interaction. Over time, mock-ups were designed, discussed, and tweaked; focus groups held; and the highest levels of leadership were engaged in key decisions to ensure a final product was created that everyone would be happy with.

best, and establish a sense of familiarity and trust. In addition, be prepared to talk about services and options in multiple ways. Since the process of customization can feel ambiguous, this will help new adapters understand the value and outcome of investing in this approach. It's always important, however, to underscore that examples are illustrative and there is no "off the shelf" solution to designing many activities and products. Stakeholders will come with a concept in mind, and the function of customization is to work through a discovery and iterative design phase to determine the best, unique approach to meeting objectives. Over the course of the project, check-in meetings will help to tweak and shape the final deliverable. In fact, customization should be seen as a series of experiences and not just the final product in and of itself.

