

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

Adaptive Management: Expertise

What we mean by Expertise:

Expertise involves more than having a high level of knowledge in a particular technical area, experts must also be able to get their points across and draw connections between relevant concepts and approaches. This is relevant in an adaptive management environment because it takes a great deal of coordination and strategy across issue areas and skill sets to integrate feedback and learning, and to manage change responsively.

How it works:

Due to the holistic nature of the adaptive management techniques inherent in the knowledge management and learning discipline, the right leadership style is one that mixes aspects of a generalist's profile with characteristics of a maverick. Leadership should be visionary and tie different activities and programs together into a cohesive whole. Large projects will likely include a diverse team with varied skill sets (such as web development, communications, training, event planning, etc) and the ability to blend this expertise in a way that enhances project objectives is critical. Professionals with a combination of openness to change and anti-bureaucratic attitudes are best positioned to move projects towards these set objectives in creative, collaborative, and adaptive ways.

In conversations about expertise, teams should assess what skills they are missing and aim to find balance in their talent pool. When selecting new hires, look for a combination of technical versus management skills as well as flexibility and eagerness to learn. Ultimately, a strong level of expertise will support professional development and mentoring across the team, thus extending their expertise and raising the quality of work universally.

Why it matters:

In isolation, expertise has limited application. When experts are able to share ideas and engage people with various skills to complement their own, new ideas and information can be promoted in ways that extend their use and maximize impact.

What it looks like:

As the KDMD Project grew over time, the need for a new management structure emerged. A matrix approach was established whereby portfolio teams supported individual program activities. These portfolios included:

- Communications
- Knowledge & Learning
- Web Development
- Adult Learning & Training
- Assessing & Learning

Portfolio managers were then able to build the expertise of their teams and work together across portfolios to share ideas and best utilize individual talents. This involves a high level of coordination and collaboration, but was found to heed more cohesive, polished products and activities.