

Overcoming Barriers to Implementing New Ideas

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Results for Development (R4D) is a global nonprofit organization working with partners in more than 55 countries to find new ways to help people in developing countries escape poverty and reach their full potential. We apply fresh thinking and rigor to emerging and stubborn development challenges — particularly within the fields of health, education and governance — and we pioneer and advance creative, high-impact solutions. We do this by conducting analysis that helps to inform and influence decision-makers; building platforms and networks that connect people and ideas; providing direct support to local change agents; and by combining these approaches to deliver meaningful and lasting results. This paper was prepared with support from the Rockefeller Foundation, Dasra, and the Millennium Water Alliance. It was authored by Erin Swearing and Emily Endres, with guidance from Nathaniel Heller. For more information, please contact Emily Endres: eendres@r4d.org.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Note on Terminology	ii
Executive Summary	1
Introduction	3
Methodology	5
The literature on learning	6
Barriers to learning and adaptation	9
Enablers of learning and adaptation	12
Recommendations	15
Learning in an ideal world	17

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In this report, we use a number of terms to describe certain players or functions relevant to this work. Below we offer definitions or distinctions for the reader's reference.

Implementing organizations: Organizations in the WASH Impact Network that participated in this research. These organizations are based in the countries in which they work, and are for-profit, not-for-profit, and hybrid WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) organizations. We also use the term "implementers" as shorthand.

Partners: Organizations that implement capacity development programs targeting implementing organizations. These are often international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), donor agencies, philanthropies, or large regional or national organizations that operate as intermediaries in collaboration with direct program implementers. Partners sometimes act as funders if they subgrant to implementing organizations.

Funders: Institutions, companies, organizations or individuals that provide funding to implementing organizations and partners for programs or projects. These could be foundations, bilateral or multilateral funders, or [impact] investors.

Learning: Often euphemistically referred to as "capacity development" in the international development sector. We use the term "learning" to: 1) recognize the existing capacity and expertise of implementing organizations; 2) recognize that implementing organizations should have ownership over their own learning processes; and 3) recognize that learning is not something one can accomplish, but a way of operating.

Adaptation: An activity that goes hand-in-hand with learning. We often use the terms together to recognize that adaptation must occur for learning to be accomplished in most contexts, as "what works" in international development in one geography rarely works in another without adaptation of some kind. Adaptation is the act of making small changes and adjustments to a program based on new information or changing circumstances. We call the ability to adapt "**flexibility**."

Learning events: Capacity development or networking events such as training workshops, conferences, collaborative and adaptive learning activities, or network meetings that are intended to share and promote uptake of knowledge.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From June 2014 to December 2016, Results for Development (R4D) convened a group of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) innovators from India and East Africa into a network called the WASH Impact Network. In partnership with Dasra and the Millennium Water Alliance (MWA), over 120 innovative country-based organizations across India and East Africa were identified, interviewed, and profiled on our web platform. In the 18 months of engaging with these organizations, R4D, Dasra and MWA provided learning opportunities and resources to organizations based on the challenges that they identified in an in-depth, network-wide survey. The resources and services we provided included monthly newsletters that shared online tools and highlighted organizations in the network, blog posts on topics relevant to the challenges faced by organizations in the WASH Impact Network, and in-person learning events.

There were two primary goals to this work: 1) to provide learning resources and opportunities to help implementing organizations overcome the challenges they identified; and 2) to better understand how the learning process works, from the birth of or exposure to an idea to the implementation of that idea, and to share lessons and recommendations to improve the way all stakeholders participate in this process. To accomplish this second goal, we integrated an action research methodology into our activities. Over the course of our engagement with the WASH Impact Network, we conducted 60 individual interviews, five focus group discussions and one survey. Responses from all sources were recorded, categorized, coded, and common themes were then extracted to draw the conclusions laid out in this report. We present those findings in the pages that follow and offer recommendations for funders, partners and implementing organizations.

Implementers that participated in this research identified barriers across three stages of learning: 1) Exposure to the idea, knowledge or skill; 2) Knowledge transfer from the individual learner to the relevant people within the organization; 3) Implementation of the idea, skill or approach.

EXPOSURE

1. Training workshops that don't fit the needs of participants
2. Training workshops that don't allow for participants to draw on real life experiences and tacit knowledge
3. Training fatigue

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

1. Organizational culture that does not encourage staff to challenge the status quo
2. Lack of action oriented tools for knowledge transfer
3. Lack of channels or processes within the organization for knowledge transfer

IMPLEMENTATION

1. Lack of time and human resources to test new ideas
2. Fear of failure
3. Inflexible funder or partner requirements – timeline, reporting, and activities
4. Lack of access to mentors and experts
5. Lack of funding for experimentation, learning and growth
6. Relationships with partners and funders that don't encourage autonomy and choice
7. Training programs that are not action-oriented
8. Lack of visibility

Implementers also identified factors that enable them to navigate the learning process more effectively. The enabling factors fall across three categories: 1) Organizational practices; 2) Resources, tools and learning events; 3) Relationships, partnerships and support.

ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES

1. Leadership and organizational structure that fosters feedback and idea sharing from staff at all levels
2. A culture that values learning and flexibility
3. Internal processes for sharing knowledge, feedback, and new ideas

RESOURCES, TOOLS, AND LEARNING EVENTS

1. Adaptable and context-specific tools
2. Follow-up support through access to mentors and experts
3. Learning events that are demand-driven and focus on tacit knowledge sharing between participants
4. Resources for learning including time, human resources, and capital

RELATIONSHIPS, PARTNERSHIPS, AND SUPPORT

1. Collaborative relationships
2. Support for communications and linkages
3. Failure is accepted and expected

Finally, we developed recommendations based on the barriers and enablers identified by implementers in the WASH Impact Network. Because there are barriers and enablers that exist throughout the learning process, the onus to improve falls on implementers, partners, and funders alike.

FOR IMPLEMENTERS

1. Prioritize knowledge sharing and learning at the leadership level
2. Implement flatter organizational structure
3. Dedicate time for internal knowledge sharing
4. Seek out collaborative funder and partner relationships
5. Build networks of peers and mentors
6. Invest in collaborative learning at in-person events

FOR PARTNERS

1. Provide resources for learning and adaptation
2. Promote the work of local partners
3. Engage collaboratively with local partners
4. Design learning events with the needs of participants in mind
5. Create adaptable and accessible tools
6. Provide support for staff growth and development

FOR FUNDERS

1. Allow for flexibility in workplans and program activities
2. Embrace smart and rapid failure
3. Provide core funding to invest in systems and staff
4. Foster collaborative relationships

This research highlights the interconnected nature of learning in international development. More effective learning programs will require a broader and more long-term view of how learning works. It will also require that all stakeholders in the learning process play their part in breaking down barriers and ensuring that the resources and relationships that support learning are in place.

The authors would like to thank the Rockefeller Foundation for making this work possible, as well as our partners, Dasra and the Millennium Water Alliance.

INTRODUCTION

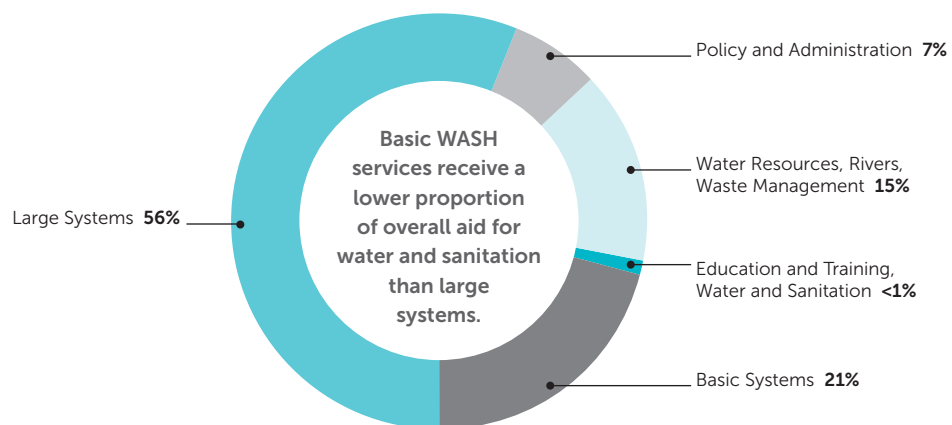
Local leaders can and should be leading the charge in accomplishing development goals. International organizations and funders are increasingly recognizing this and partnering with local organizations rather than delivering development programs directly. Due to a shortage of skilled workers in the WASH sector^{1,2} training and capacity building are now integrated into most program designs. However, Shauna Curry, CEO of the Center for Water and Sanitation Technology (CAWST), notes that, “training activities are often seen as secondary, rather than being a core strategy to achieve results.”³ This is reflected in the level of investment in training and education activities assessed by the UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS). Less than 1% of sanitation and water aid commitments went to education and training in 2012.

One of the barriers to increasing investment in learning is a lack of evidence that shows the impact of current capacity building investments. Capacity development professionals and funders attempting to monitor and evaluate their learning programs are often measuring the

wrong things, and then declaring success prematurely as a result. Ngai et al (2013) conducted a review of capacity building efforts in the WASH sector and found that only 39% of organizations conducting capacity building activities do any monitoring or evaluation of their activities. Of those, 30% solely measured outputs such as the number of participants, workshops held, or participant satisfaction. Less than 15% measured impact or outcomes beyond participation and satisfaction.⁴

Curry argues that “the limited ability to evaluate the quality and impact of training has obscured the ineffectiveness of many WASH training efforts.” Weaknesses in training design and evaluation slow progress towards filling the capacity gap in the WASH sector, and also waste resources invested by both funders and participants. To make better use of the time, financial and human resources invested in capacity development, there is an urgent need to examine the body of knowledge at our fingertips, especially knowledge coming from local stakeholders who have the best perspective on what works and what doesn’t.

BREAKDOWN OF SANITATION AND WATER AID COMMITMENTS BY PURPOSE TYPE, 2014



Source: OECD-CRS, 2014.

¹ UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS) 2014. Page 10. http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/139735/1/9789241508087_eng.pdf

² The International Water Association (IWA). Human resource capacity gaps in water and sanitation: Main findings and the way forward. June 2014. http://www.sswm.info/sites/default/files/reference_attachments/IWA%202013%20Human%20Resource%20Capacity%20Gaps%20in%20Water%20and%20Sanitation.pdf

³ <http://washfunders.org/blog/narrowing-the-wash-capacity-gap/>

⁴ <http://wedc.lboro.ac.uk/resources/conference/36/Ngai-1683.pdf>

One of the most important things we have to learn from local implementers is what helps them achieve long-term outcomes after a training. In other words, what helps them take what they learn in a training and successfully implement it in their program or organization? By talking to participants of learning activities, it becomes clear that even the best designed training can fail to achieve long-term impact because of the many barriers that arise when the time comes for putting what was taught in the training into practice.

At Results for Development (R4D), we call this the **"Monday Morning Problem."** After implementers identify a new idea that they want to integrate into their program or organization, they are faced with the difficult task of going back to work on Monday morning and finding

a way to implement the new idea. In other words, the Monday morning problem refers to the challenges that occur between learning about a new idea and adapting and implementing it successfully. R4D conducted action research with organizations in the Rockefeller Foundation-funded WASH Impact Network to better understand how to support organizations in their journey between learning, adaptation, and implementation.

We asked WASH implementers in India and East Africa to describe the challenges they face when implementing new ideas and to also identify some of the factors that help them more easily implement new ideas. This report captures those insights and provides specific recommendations for implementers, partners, and funders.



Initiated: 2015

Total Programs: 120

Geography: East Africa & India

Not for Profit: 90 (67%)

For Profit: 26 (19%)

Hybrid: 18 (13%)

Topics of focus include: waste disposal and reuse, menstrual hygiene, safe water and sanitation marketing.

WASHINNOVATIONS.R4D.ORG

METHODOLOGY

From June 2014 to December 2016, R4D worked with in-country implementers of WASH programs to provide learning opportunities, and at the same time try to better understand the barriers these implementers face when implementing new ideas. Over the course of the program, we conducted a qualitative study utilizing a series of surveys, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

First, a needs assessment was conducted with all 120 organizations in the WASH Impact Network to identify the biggest challenges facing those organizations. Based on the results of the survey, we conducted six in-country learning workshops in 2015 and 2016 in India and East Africa with regional partners, Dasra and the Millennium Water Alliance (MWA). The workshops addressed categories of need identified in the needs assessment, such as human resources management, monitoring and evaluation, strategic planning, marketing and communications, and operational financing.

During workshops, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 workshop participants in India and East Africa to better understand the barriers they faced when implementing new ideas, the ways in which WASH implementers access information, and the types of resources that are most effective in supporting the uptake of new ideas.

Five focus group discussions were conducted in 2016 with workshop participants in India and East Africa to identify barriers throughout the learning process from the “hotel conference room” to “Monday morning” and beyond, as well as the types of resources that are most effective in helping people and organizations implement new ideas.

Additional in-depth phone interviews were conducted with over 30 WASH organizations approximately six months after the first round of in-country workshops. Interviewees were asked to identify a new idea that they encountered in a recent learning event and trace the learning process from exposure to the new idea, through the embedding of the idea into their program or organization. Interviewees were then asked to identify the barriers they encountered during implementation, and the resources or conditions that helped them overcome those barriers.

Responses from all sources were recorded, categorized, coded, and common themes were then extracted to produce this report. The conclusions and recommendations in the following sections of this report are the product of 18 months of engagement with in-country implementers to understand what the learning process looks like, and what roles implementers, partners, and funders play in ensuring that learning is successful.

THE LITERATURE ON LEARNING

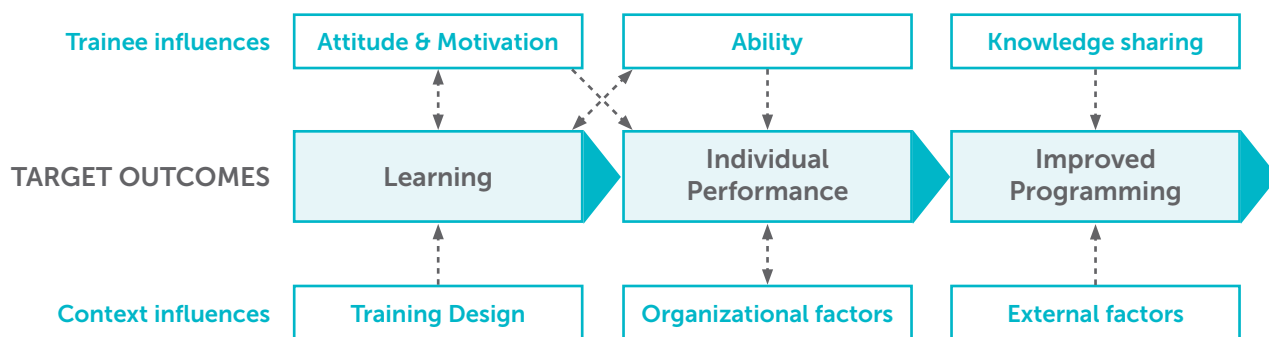
Throughout the literature on learning, there is a recognition that learning programs must consider the individual, the organization, and the enabling environment. Research by Plan International and the University of North Carolina Water Institute indicates that this is a process (Figure 1).⁵ Their review of existing training evaluation tools led them to develop a new framework that identifies the influencing factors at each of the stages of learning. The framework indicates that while traditional “classroom-style” training workshops can be one tool for sharing ideas, successful programs must provide support and opportunities well beyond the “classroom.”

The broader international development landscape is changing, as many sources note, and local organizations are demanding a change in the way that support is offered and relationships are structured. The traditional development ideology frames local organizations as “beneficiaries” in need of imported knowledge and expertise from the global North. However, as economies develop, the primacy of Northern funders and NGOs is diminishing. The civil society sector in most low- and middle-income countries is already robust and growing.

Knowledge and expertise is increasingly being generated and shared between organizations within countries. As experts at Capacity.org note in their review of trends in capacity development over 25 years, “capacity development is less what donors are doing for partners, but what partners are doing for themselves.”⁶ This indicates the need for a reevaluation of the roles of Northern NGOs and funders. The authors of a 5-year study on capacity, change and performance conducted by European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) argue that, “external interveners can only facilitate capacity development indirectly by providing access to resources, ideas, connections and opportunities.”⁷ Local organizations must play a leading role in how learning happens, with NGOs and donors playing a supporting role.

The Capable Partners Learning Agenda on Local Organization Capacity Development, a USAID initiative, notes that local organizations are increasingly rejecting the supply-driven, “standard package” capacity development program still being pushed out by many international players and are demanding a change.⁸ Experts at R4D recognized this need for a new approach to learning and reviewed relevant fields of research to determine

FIGURE 1



⁵ Jonny Crocker, Katherine F. Shields, Vidya Venkataramanan, Darren Saywell, Jamie Bartram, Building capacity for water, sanitation, and hygiene programming: Training evaluation theory applied to CLTS management training in Kenya, *Social Science & Medicine*, Volume 166, October 2016, Pages 66-76, ISSN 0277-9536, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.08.008>. (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953616304300>)

⁶ Ed. Heinz Greijin, Volker Hauck, Tony Land, Jan Ubels, “Reflecting on 25 years of capacity development and emerging trends.” *Capacity Development Beyond Aid*, 2015. https://www.die-gdi.de/uploads/media/CAPACITY_BOOKLET_ENG_WEB.pdf

⁷ Tony Land, Niels Keijzer, Anje Kruijer, Volker Hauck, Heather Baser, Peter Morgan. “Capacity Change and Performance: Insights and Implications for Development Cooperation.” European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM). Policy Management Brief, No. 21 (December 2008). <http://ecdpm.org/wp-content/uploads/PMB-21-Capacity-Change-Performance-Insights-Implications-Development-Cooperation-December-2008.pdf>

⁸ Thomas Dichter. *The Capable Partners Learning Agenda on Local Organization Capacity Development: Main Report*. USAID, fhi 360, Management Systems International (MSI). (Feb 2014)

what could be gleaned from adjacent fields including Adult Learning Theory, Diffusion of Innovations, Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning, Communities of Practice, and the Information Divide.⁹ Key recommendations from that separate study (published in 2015) urge international partners to tailor content and ensure it is relevant and applicable. This includes allowing local implementers to set the agenda while also involving them in the planning and design process. It also emphasizes drawing on the tacit knowledge of implementers through peer learning activities and learning by doing.

Beyond changes to factors that influence individual learning, organizational learning plays a key role in putting knowledge into practice. Several sources noted the need to consider how learning content fits into organizational culture, structure, and norms. Leadership from top management is needed to prioritize learning within an organization and create a culture around learning, but buy-in and inclusion of staff at all levels is also essential. Leadership that prioritizes learning helps to ensure that there are sufficient resources allocated to the learning

KEY RESOURCES ON ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

1. *"A New Look at Practitioner Learning in International Development"* by Sam Polk and Aprille Knox. Results for Development Institute (November 2015). A review of key literature from fields of study relevant to practitioner learning, including: 1) Adult Learning Theory, 2) Diffusion of Innovations, 3) Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning, 4) Communities of Practice, 5) Information Divide.
2. *The Capable Partners Learning Agenda on Local Organization Capacity Development: Final Report by USAID and fhi360 in partnership with Management Systems International (MSI) (February 20, 2014)*. To inform USAID's strategy for partnering with local organizations, partners fhi360 and MSI carried out a series of informative interviews with a wide range of local organizations.
3. *Capacity Development in Practice*, edited by Jan Ubels, Naa-Aku Acquaye-Baddoo and Alan Fowler (2010). This volume explores capacity development in terms of existing theoretical frameworks, roles and responsibilities of various players, best practices, and the future of capacity development.
4. *"Reflecting on 25 years of capacity development and emerging trends," Capacity Development Beyond Aid*, edited by Heinz Greijn, Volker Hauck, Tony Land and Jan Ubels (2015). Authors of Capacity.org look at the history of capacity development since 1999 to see what's been learned, and where the trends are pointing for the future of capacity development.
5. *The Challenge of Capacity Development: Working Towards Good Practice*, by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) (2006). This paper draws on 40 years of OECD development experience to see how the future of capacity development might be shaped by drawing out lessons learned. The main conclusion is that partner countries must lead in an endogenous process of capacity development, with donors and Northern NGO partners playing a supporting role.
6. *"Building capacity for water, sanitation and hygiene programming: Training evaluation theory applied to CLTS management training in Kenya."* By Crocker, Johnny, Katherine F. Shields, Vidya Venkataramanan, Darren Saywell, Jamie Bartram in *Social Science & Medicine* 166 (2016). Building off of existing training evaluation theories and models, Plan International and the University of North Carolina (UNC) Water Institute developed a framework specifically for evaluating WASH sector capacity development programs and use it to evaluate the effectiveness of a CLTS management training program in Kenya.
7. *"Capacity building: shifting the paradigms of practice"* by Allan Kaplan in *Development in Practice*, Vol. 10, No. 3 & 4 (August 2000). Kaplan describes six elements of "organizational life" that must be in place to effectively develop capacity.
8. *Capacity Change and Performance: Insights and Implications for Development Cooperation. Policy Management Brief, No. 21 (December 2008)*. Results of a 5-year study conducted by ECDPM on capacity, change, and performance. In addition to recommendations related to learning and adaptation practices, the authors provide recommendations for implementing more effective capacity development programs.

⁹ Sam Polk, Aprille Knox. "A New Look at Practitioner Learning in International Development." Results for Development Institute (R4D). (Nov 2015) http://www.r4d.org/sites/results-fordevelopment.org/files/New-Look-at-Practitioner-Learning_0.pdf

process (although this is a shared responsibility with Northern funders and partners). Allan Kaplan's influential thinking on organizational learning identifies access to resources as one of six elements of "organizational life" that must be in place to effectively develop capacity.¹⁰ Finally, testing and adaptation was also highlighted by key sources as an integral part of the learning process, as was strategically implementing learning and change management processes at the organization.¹¹

At the enabling environment level, the literature calls attention to a funding environment that often stifles the kind of innovation and sustainability that both grantees and grantors strive for. USAID's report on the Capable Partners Learning Agenda refers to the phenomenon of "projectization" in which local organizations are funded only project to project, and so often surface and disappear as donor-funded projects come and go. According to the report, local organizations experience power asymmetries

in their relationships with funders that make flexibility and open and honest communication difficult.¹² The ECDPM study echoes the need for external partners to develop relationships based on mutual recognition of expertise and more equal partnerships to enhance learning and performance.¹³

R4D's experience with implementing organizations in the WASH Impact Network builds on this body of knowledge, highlighting persistent barriers and recommendations from implementers themselves on how they, together with their international partners and funders, can overcome those barriers with better designed training programs. The remainder of this report describes what the "Monday Morning Problem" looks like for members of the WASH Impact Network. We offer concrete recommendations for implementers, partners, and funders to ensure that learning programs are their most impactful.

¹⁰ Allan Kaplan. "Capacity Building: Shifting the Paradigms of Practice." *Development in Practice*, vol. 10, no. 3/4, 2000, pp. 517–526., www.jstor.org/stable/4029579.

¹¹ "The Challenge of Capacity Development: Working towards Good Practice." Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). (2006) http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/capacitybuilding/pdf/DAC_paper_final.pdf

¹² Thomas Dichter. The Capable Partners Learning Agenda on Local Organization Capacity Development: Main Report. USAID, fhi 360, Management Systems International (MSI). (Feb 2014)

¹³ Tony Land, Niels Keijzer, Anje Kruijer, Volker Hauck, Heather Baser, Peter Morgan. "Capacity Change and Performance: Insights and Implications for Development Cooperation." European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM). Policy Management Brief, No. 21 (December 2008). <http://ecdpm.org/wp-content/uploads/PMB-21-Capacity-Change-Performance-Insights-Implications-Development-Cooperation-December-2008.pdf>

BARRIERS TO LEARNING AND ADAPTATION

In our engagement with organizations in the WASH Impact Network from 2014 to 2016, we wanted to understand the barriers implementers face when trying to implement new ideas or approaches. What does their “Monday morning problem” look like? Are there certain conditions or characteristics of training programs, organizational culture, or funder relationships, for example, that set them up for failure on Monday morning? Below we categorize the responses from implementers describing which stage of the learning process they encounter the particular barrier: exposure, knowledge transfer, or implementation.

EXPOSURE

1. IRRELEVANT LEARNING CONTENT

The content of training workshops is often supply-driven instead of demand-driven. When this happens, participants lack motivation to actively learn, but also lack a need for the particular knowledge or skill, and therefore have no reason to see the learning process through to implementation. In a focus group discussion with East African WASH program implementers, participants said that they attend training workshops and conferences purely for the networking opportunity because the actual content is often not very useful. Another East African WASH entrepreneur lamented about conferences, “WASH has gotten so huge, so if you attend a conference, you might find that it is the wrong conference for you. Over time, they have stopped targeting. They are not targeted. You feel like you are in the wrong place.”

2. PASSIVE INFORMATION DELIVERY

Respondents recognized that one-way, presentation-style workshops can be useful, but most often learning occurs between peers when they are able to share their experiences and give one another advice. Learning events that rely on this unidirectional method of information delivery—instead of drawing on the tacit knowledge and expertise of participants in the room—can fail to result in change on Monday morning because adult learners perform better when they are able to draw on their own life experiences. When learning is grounded in the learner’s own experiences, the knowledge is more likely to be implemented because it is highly relevant and applicable. An East African entrepreneur in the WASH Impact Network told us: “classroom settings for training

workshops I do not think are always useful. You may have a few sharp learners who can take something from that, but when I feel like you actually get something done within the community, something they can keep learning from, they will remember that thing.”

3. TRAINING FATIGUE

A WASH social entrepreneur in East Africa said, “I wouldn’t say workshops and conferences aren’t useful, but you get fatigued, especially if you don’t find what you’re looking for.” Many donor-driven initiatives require or pressure many local organizations and government officials to attend training workshops and join networks. When these learning events are general and unfocused, many participants begin to feel that they are wasting valuable time that should be spent on their actual day jobs. In addition, short project timelines mean that project-funded capacity development initiatives and networks come and go regularly, often repeating themselves in terms of focus and scope. Several respondents complained that high rates of turnover among government and international NGO staff prevents networks and working groups from gaining momentum. “People are there for two years and then they’re gone. So in terms of attending network meetings, you are going around in a circle. You are repeating exactly the same themes. They are explaining to a different group of people back to square one.”

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

1. ADHERENCE TO THE STATUS QUO

Respondents who worked within organizations with strict hierarchical structures reported challenges with transferring knowledge from external sources such as workshops, as well as internal sources such as colleagues working directly with communities. One program manager at a WASH organization based in India said that before they switched to a flatter organizational structure, the time to communicate between one level of the organization to the other was time consuming and inefficient. It slowed down the learning and adaptation process. Organizational cultures that do not encourage open communication and transfer of knowledge suffer when good ideas are unearthed because implementing staff are not empowered to speak up. They also suffer when ideas are imposed from the top down and staff

aren't empowered to push back. One respondent spoke about the challenge of changing this culture in their own organization: "Normally what happens is the boss decides, and everyone says 'yeah, yeah, let's do it,' but they know exactly in their minds that it's going to fail horribly and then it fails. They see it coming in their minds but do it anyway just because the boss said so."

2. LACK OF ACTION ORIENTED TOOLS FOR KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

After leaving a training workshop or other learning event, many respondents said they struggle to adapt what they learned to their particular context in order to implement it. Sometimes this is a matter of only having access to print or PDF versions of resources, versus easily adaptable versions in Word format, for example. Other times the problem is language or access to technology. One respondent described the challenge this way: "Internet is still difficult to come by here. I think that is true for most of rural Africa where most of these things are set up. People really don't read. We don't have a big reading culture. If you care to be teaching about something, you want to put it on a video maybe? But then how are you going to get the video to them? Writing about something? No, not really. People don't like to do research. They would rather information be in a format they can easily take up." Similarly, another respondent described how, "unless someone trains us and tells us which tools we need, it's difficult to just pick up a tool and start using it. Tools have to be really simple because we hand it off to the communities. Tools need to be appropriate."

3. LACK OF ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES FOR KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

For many resource-strapped organizations, making time for knowledge transfer is a challenge. If there isn't a regular procedure for coming together and sharing new ideas, it often doesn't happen. One program implementer in the WASH Impact Network lamented, "sometimes you get so busy that you neglect the need to share new ideas." Without standard learning processes in place, information is often shared ad hoc and it is the responsibility of individual staff to see the idea through... If I find something useful, I will often just share it with the GM (general manager) and the field manager. But it will be up to me to actually do something with it."

IMPLEMENTATION

1. LACK OF TIME AND HUMAN RESOURCES TO TEST NEW IDEAS

Many WASH program implementers reported struggling to find the time to dedicate to learning activities and implementing new ideas due to being short staffed. It takes time to communicate new ideas, test various adaptations, develop implementation plans for big changes and plans to measure the impact of those changes, and to train staff on new tools or processes. Some respondents said that the problem is a lack of funding to hire additional staff; others said that the issue is that they are unable to find people with the necessary skills. One program manager in Kenya relies on volunteers: "We can't keep the employees for long. We have volunteers for six months, and once they go we employ others. We have to train them how we use our social media, how we mobilize through social media. We have four people who are permanent here. Once we had 20 people and they finished their volunteer contract and then they went back to their university."

2. FEAR OF FAILURE

Organizations that prioritize the status quo lack the flexibility to engage in the try/fail/iterate process needed to improve on existing practices. This fear of failure can be a result of organizational culture or grantor-grantee relationships. On organizational culture, a respondent said that, "one of the barriers was that the organization had a culture of maintaining the status quo, and any changes that were made were taken as personal failures." A representative from a capacity development organization described the problem with funder relationships this way: "On the one hand, we want to show donors that we're successful, but often learning happens when we don't do things right."

3. INFLEXIBLE FUNDER OR PARTNER REQUIREMENTS

Many WASH program managers we spoke to reported that strict requirements from donors or partners prevented them from having the flexibility necessary to implement new ideas or adapt approaches based on new learning. Strict timelines and activities, as well as burdensome reporting processes, were some of the specific barriers mentioned. A WASH program manager in Kenya said, "When money comes from donors, restraints are attached. You can only spend money a certain way on a certain group for a specific impact from a specific process of implementing. You might realize that this community does not need wells right now. But because the donors have said 'this is money to build wells,' you dare not build schools instead." Many respondents said they feel trapped into a certain approach once they

receive funding and don't feel that they have the ability to adapt those plans, even if they learn new ideas that could make their work more impactful.

4. LACK OF ACCESS TO MENTORS AND EXPERTS

Once implementers learn a new idea or skill, they often run into challenges when they get into the implementation phase and confront new or unique problems related to their specific context or organization. For complicated processes, respondents expressed a need for extended technical support from experts. Training programs are often implemented without providing reach-back support for these kinds of challenges. An Indian WASH organization referred to these mentorship relationships and other learning opportunities as "intellectual grants." He said, "intellectual grants are more valuable than monetary grants. Intellectual grants will stay with you. Money will go."

5. LACK OF FUNDING FOR EXPERIMENTATION, LEARNING AND GROWTH

Even with the necessary flexibility, time and human resources, staff buy-in, and leadership, new ideas will often fail to be implemented without funds for the testing and adaptation process. One East African program manager said, "I think things are shifting, but the non-profit world is still fairly resistant to funding operational things that won't show returns within the fiscal year. If we could get capacity funders that make those resources available easily, you could see us driving along a lot faster." Another said: "Money is a barrier to implementing new ideas. If you create an action plan through a workshop or network, do the people who organize the workshops make sure you have funds and resources to carry out the action plan?"

6. POWER DYNAMICS

Tied to the provision of funds and the empowerment of grantees to adjust timelines and activities is a broader need for relationships that encourage grantees to speak up about challenges and provide solutions for better ways of doing things. This was not the experience of many respondents and they cited it as a barrier to growing and learning. They described the "learning" process as top-down and supply-driven. Speaking of international development organizations that seek to provide capacity building support, one program manager gave this advice: "You bring that outsider's perspective and because it is an outsider's perspective, it comes with 'this is how I've seen someone else do this, and this is how you should do this because I thought that was a neat way to do it,' and that is not helpful. It's better if you can come and say, 'we have seen other people solving their problem like this, how can we help you solve your problem?'"

7. TRAINING PROGRAMS THAT ARE NOT ACTION-ORIENTED

One respondent from East Africa expressed that most training workshops leave participants stranded when they get back to their organization "on Monday morning": "There is never a follow up process. You can go for a workshop, and decide you are going to do an action plan, and then find that you are actually not going to do an action plan. So when you leave, you have actually left so much. You have gotten so much knowledge which you are not able to go and use because you have not decided how you are going to implement." Capacity development programs that are purely workshop-based tend to ignore the broader learning process and fail to support participants in the critical knowledge transfer and implementation stages of learning, meaning that most knowledge is left unused.

8. LACK OF VISIBILITY

Related to the need for funding and technical support is the need for visibility and linkages. Many respondents said that they struggle to communicate results and be recognized by global funders or institutions that could provide helpful expertise. In a focus group discussion in East Africa, one respondent said, "If you don't have personal contacts there [where major funders are] it's extremely difficult to get anything done. You are just one of thousands."

Notably, the list of barriers at the implementation stage of learning—arguably the most critical—is the longest, while investment and support for learning at this stage is the lowest. The majority of resources in capacity development go toward the design and implementation of training workshops, conferences and meetings, while investment in follow-on support such as mentorship and coaching, as well as financing, time, and human resources for the implementation of ideas, is remarkably lacking. Action at the organizational and enabling environment levels is critical for addressing these challenges. In the following section, actions, relationships, and resources that are most beneficial to the learning process are identified based on responses from WASH program implementers.

ENABLERS OF LEARNING AND ADAPTATION

Responses to questions such as, “what helps you implement new ideas?” surfaced best practices for implementers, partners and funders. Respondents also highlighted the need for resources, tools, and well-designed learning opportunities to learn and adapt successfully. The major themes that arose across these categories are outlined below.

ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES

1. HORIZONTAL ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Open communication and flow of ideas between leadership, program staff and support staff is essential for implementing new ideas and sharing knowledge, according to respondents. This includes leadership that is accessible and open to feedback, and staff that are encouraged to contribute to the learning and testing process. Many of our respondents described their experiences moving from a hierarchical organizational structure to a more horizontal structure, and noted how it enabled more flexibility and learning. In a focus group discussion in India, one participant said: “Our CEO never behaves like a CEO. If the CEO doesn’t know something, they will say so and ask you for help. [...] We are a flat organization, so everyone has the opportunity to talk to upper management.”

2. A CULTURE THAT VALUES LEARNING AND FLEXIBILITY

In addition to a more horizontal structure and accessible leadership, respondents credited their ability to learn and implement new ideas to the broader culture at the organization. They described their learning culture as one in which staff expect to contribute ideas, to try new tools and approaches, and are not afraid to fail. One respondent said that they make this expectation clear upon hiring new staff: that they will not be expected to just carry out business as usual day in and day out, but will be regularly asked to try out new ways of doing things in an ongoing effort to improve. We spoke with staff from a large WASH capacity building organization about what they’ve seen contribute to successful learning: “A learning organization itself may have a culture that lets staff try new things, gives them the resources to

do so (even small resources), as well as the time to do so, and an openness to share what has worked and what has failed. And to be able to do so without fearing their superior will say, ‘oh, you’ve failed so you’re fired.’”

3. INTERNAL PROCESSES FOR SHARING KNOWLEDGE, FEEDBACK, AND NEW IDEAS

Another key enabler of learning that respondents identified was having routine processes that allowed staff to share knowledge and new ideas for improvement. Without regular processes in place, knowledge sharing often doesn’t happen as day-to-day needs otherwise take priority. These processes varied across organizations: some had monthly workshops or Monday morning breakfast meetings specifically for sharing new ideas, while others had tools to capture new information and an opportunity to share at regular staff meetings.

RESOURCES, TOOLS, AND LEARNING EVENTS

1. ADAPTABLE AND CONTEXT-SPECIFIC TOOLS

Respondents reported that having tools with which they can walk away from a training and easily adapt to their own needs is key to successfully integrating the new knowledge into their organization. Whether these are communication or educational materials that can be easily edited to fit the specific context, or simply “soft-copy” versions of frameworks or M&E tools instead of PDF or print versions, the ability to edit and adapt tools is an important enabler of the “implementation” stage of learning. The most useful tools will differ across contexts, often depending on access to technology. Some examples of useful adaptable tools are communications materials that are downloadable in many languages and with differences in depictions of people, homes, and landscapes; frameworks and templates in Word or Excel (versus PDF) that come with simple instructions for adapting and using them; or training manuals that can be broken up into short modules.

2. FOLLOW-UP SUPPORT THROUGH ACCESS TO MENTORS AND EXPERTS

Those respondents who had access to mentors, advisors or experts described them as key resources for the successful implementation of new ideas and approaches. One respondent from East Africa summed up the benefit of these relationships this way, and expanded on the best way to carry out the support: “When you talk about mentors, I think everybody could use more of that. One of the things I find very useful in working with ex-pats is not only somebody who has a skill, but somebody who is doing what I want to do. That is what is helpful for me. It might be cheaper to bring one expert to talk to a group of 100 farmers, but I don’t think that is as practical as taking two of those 100 farmers to go and experience something in this ex-pat’s face. So then they can come back and share with the other 100 farmers. Then they can already become the expert within a month. Instead of bringing the one foreign expert who will leave this community, take one from this community, make them an expert, and then bring them back into this community.”

3. DEMAND-DRIVEN AND INTERACTIVE LEARNING EVENTS

Responses from implementers echoed what we already know about adult learning and “what works” in capacity development. Respondents felt that learning events that are hands-on, participatory, and allow participants to draw on and share their own tacit knowledge are most effective. One respondent in India said, “the biggest learning for us generally comes from the people we work with. For example, in the case of MHM [menstrual hygiene management], the learning comes from women we reach out to in rural areas. The learning comes from the women who we collect cloth from in the city. It could well be a comment that someone makes about a product or a meeting that we do to reach out to women and talk about menstrual issues, and there we get to learn a lot about the issues that they face and the kinds of economic issues around menstruation that don’t get talked about much.” For that reason, site visits were the most popular form of learning cited by respondents, while workshops, conferences, and other in-person learning events were thought of as beneficial for the networking opportunities more than the technical content.

4. RESOURCES FOR LEARNING

When asked what they need to successfully implement new ideas, resources was the most popular answer. Respondents talked about the need for funding, but they also emphasized the need for human resources and time. They emphasized that these resources are necessary for the experimentation and adaptation process involved in implementing new ideas. One respondent from East Africa explained: “All these challenges are about funds. If we get funds, we would be able to bring in permanent staff and professionals and we would have money to train them, and we would be OK.” Another East African program manager said: “Money is a barrier to implementing new ideas. If you create an action plan through the workshop or network, do the people who organize the workshops make sure you have funds and resources to carry out the action plan?”

RELATIONSHIPS, PARTNERSHIPS, AND SUPPORT

1. COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Implementers we spoke with reported a desire for more collaborative partnerships with funders. They expressed frustration at the traditional grantee-grantor relationship in which they were often treated as contractors used to carry out predetermined programs designed by funders. Many local organizations see funders as a source of expertise that they would like to tap into, but would like to also be recognized for their own expertise. Many respondents said they value having mechanisms for information sharing with donors, including site visits. One respondent said, “What we need is site visits for partners and funders so they can apply their expertise to the gaps they see in our work. [...] We should develop a partnership versus just being a resource.”

2. SUPPORT FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND LINKAGES

Respondents in the WASH Impact Network said that support for amplifying their work and linking them with experts and advisors would enhance progress towards their learning goals. Local organizations often lack the connections and visibility to develop the externally-facing relationships they need for technical and financial support, especially when it comes from outside of their local context. During focus group discussions, respondents described the most beneficial donor relationships as those that facilitated referrals and linkages to other donors or technical experts to help implementers accomplish their goals.

3. PERMISSION TO FAIL

Respondents discussed a fear of failure, both within the organization and in their relationships with funders. In the learning process, it's necessary to feel empowered to try new approaches while not fearing negative consequences if the new approaches don't work or require further adaptation and experimentation. Grantee-grantor relationships which recognize that trial and error is part of the learning process will benefit from better communication and improved programming.

Much of what we heard from implementers about the barriers and enablers of their learning process reflects what we know from the existing body of literature on learning. Much of it has to do with the ability to be flexible: in the way that learners interact with new information and ideas, in the way they use their resources, and in the way that change and experimentation is handled at an organizational level. Based on what we heard from implementers, we share concrete recommendations below for implementers, partners, and funders (or impact investors) that can lower barriers and ensure that enabling factors are in place to better support the learning process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR IMPLEMENTERS

- 1. Prioritize knowledge sharing and learning at the leadership level:** Having support for learning and adaptation from management allows an organization to be more flexible—an essential component to implementing new ideas. Specifically, empower staff at all levels to contribute feedback and ideas, and provide the time and resources necessary for staff to test new tools or approaches. This requires both normative and rhetorical change as well as leading by example.
- 2. Implement a flatter organizational structure:** Flatter organizational structures enable ideas to flow from any direction and ensure that implementing staff are closing feedback loops after discovering and experimenting with new knowledge.
- 3. Dedicate time for internal knowledge sharing:** Having a method for sharing information, generating new ideas, and problem solving is an important aspect of a learning and adapting organization. These methods can range from weekly meetings where staff have an opportunity to share new information gained from learning events, to more intensive monthly brainstorming sessions for parts or all the organization.
- 4. Seek out collaborative funder and partner relationships:** To the extent possible, nurture relationships with funders and partners that allow the organization to be flexible—in terms of where funds are invested, and having the ability to change timelines and activities based on new learning. Seek out relationships in which the organization is treated as a partner in the program; this will enable the organization to contribute ideas and expertise, and approach funders or partners openly with challenges for joint problem solving.
- 5. Build networks of peers and mentors:** Peer organizations are key sources of context-specific knowledge and expertise. Foster these collaborative relationships and share knowledge and learning openly. When implementing a new tool or approach, seek out expert mentors—in-country or abroad—that are available and willing to provide ad hoc guidance on challenges that arise during the testing and adaptation process.

- 6. Collaborative learning at in-person events:** Optimize your learning time by seeking out networking opportunities or immersive learning experiences versus traditional workshops. Encourage funders or partners that may be organizing mandatory learning events to design them in ways that draw on the tacit knowledge of the participants, versus traditional classroom-style, teacher-student workshops.

FOR PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

- 1. Provide resources for learning and adaptation:** Ensure that local partners are properly resourced for learning and growth. Advocate for funding specifically for organizations to use for learning. This can be in the form of flexible funding, or funds earmarked specifically for staff training and recruitment of skilled staff, travel, supplies, and technical support for learning and adapting.
- 2. Promote the work of local partners:** Local partners need resources to learn and adapt, and amplifying their work can be one way of ensuring they have the opportunity to attain those resources long-term. Promote their work through your reports, websites, and social media. Facilitate introductions to potential future funders and seek opportunities for local partners to attend large conferences or other important networking opportunities, particularly those outside of their home context.
- 3. Engage collaboratively with local partners:** Recognize the expertise that each partner brings to the table, and foster a relationship that is collaborative and equal. Encourage open sharing of challenges and joint problem-solving.
- 4. Design learning events with the needs of participants in mind:** Follow best practices in designing learning events that draw out the tacit knowledge with which participants walk in the door. Encourage relationship building between participants that goes beyond the workshop. Ensure that learning activities are demand-driven and respond to challenges the participants face day-to-day.

- 5. Create adaptable and accessible tools:** Provide tools that participants can use to implement in real life what they learn in workshops or learning activities. Ensure that these tools are adaptable so that they can easily leverage them to address their specific needs. Incorporate activities at the end of workshops that allow participants to develop simple action plans for integrating the things that they learn into their organizations or programs.
- 6. Provide support for staff growth and development:** Contribute to internal staff development within partner organizations by providing training or mentorship opportunities, especially related to building operational capabilities within the organization.

FOR FUNDERS OR IMPACT INVESTORS

- 1. Allow for flexibility in workplans and program activities:** Organizations that are trapped in rigid workplans, timelines and budgets won't be able to course correct and improve programs based on new learning. Start with co-designing approaches with local implementers, and draw on their expertise. Then be clear about your restrictions as well as where you can be flexible. Ensure that there is room for honest conversations about what isn't working, or new approaches or tools local partners believe can improve results if implemented.
- 2. Embrace smart and rapid failure:** Be open to trying and failing, and communicate that to local partners. Ensure that partners know that they are expected to learn and adapt and seek constant improvement, and failing fast will not harm the relationship or future funding opportunities.
- 3. Provide non-project funding to invest in systems and staff:** Learning does not happen in a vacuum. Provide local organizations the resources to build the teams and systems necessary for implementing new ideas and approaches. Recognize that many of these improvements are cross-cutting and not necessarily directly related to specific project deliverables.
- 4. Foster collaborative relationships:** Communicate the expertise you bring to the table, and ask local organizations what expertise they bring. Encourage open and honest communication and joint problem solving. This type of relationship allows program managers to come forward with challenges and new ideas, and implement new approaches or adapt in order to solve those problems and improve programs.

LEARNING IN AN IDEAL WORLD

Based on the findings from this research, we offer this depiction of what the learning process might look like if all of the barriers were removed and the right enablers were in place.

From the beginning of the conversation, funders open lines of communication with local organizations they will be supporting and establish relationship norms that encourage frank and honest feedback. Funders communicate that fast and smart failure is expected to come alongside learning, adapting and innovating. Problems that implementers might face throughout implementation can be solved together with funders. Funders recognize the expertise that implementers have and offer their own expertise in support. Funders go to the community in which the program will be implemented, and attempt to understand the context, but they also attempt to understand the implementing organization—their organizational goals, the challenges that they face, and how they approach learning.

Every aspect of the program incorporates learning. In developing a budget, the funder ensures that there are sufficient and flexible funds for functions including experimentation, staff training, measuring results of tested ideas, and travel to peer organizations or learning events such as workshops or conferences. In developing a workplan or logframe, timelines and activities are flexible enough to encourage adaptation and rapid experimentation so the program can be adjusted according to new information learned or unforeseen problems encountered. Peer learning opportunities are included in timelines and budgets.

The learning opportunities that local implementers attend are designed with input from participants so that the content addresses real problems that they face in their programs, both technical and operational. The learning events provide a space for peers to learn from each other, and offer practical and adaptable tools for implementers to adopt into their organizations that may help them overcome their challenges. The learning events are action-oriented, helping participants envision and make plans for implementing the new knowledge and skills into their programs when they return to work. Many of the “presenters” are participants themselves, who

offer their experiences and insights to each other. Participants are paired with mentors or provided with channels through which to access ongoing advice as they take new skills back to their organizations. International development partners support the learning and growing process of local partners, acting as sources of expertise and amplifying the work of local organizations through their regional and global networks. They give credit where credit is due, and they ensure that local organizations are stronger and closer to their goals than they were at the start of the partnership.

Local organizations prioritize and institutionalize learning across leadership and staff. Staff are encouraged to communicate openly and honestly about challenges or opportunities they see, and the organization’s leadership supports this both rhetorically and in practice. Leadership embraces the testing and adaptation process with an eye toward constant improvement rather than simply maintaining the status quo. There are regular and structured opportunities for internal team feedback, problem solving, and knowledge sharing within the organization. These opportunities are non-hierarchical and encourage participation from all members of the organization.

This approach to learning rejects the traditional supply-driven and short-term nature of “capacity building programs.” Failing to take a *demand-driven and long-term approach* to capacity building or training, partners and funders can often exacerbate or create new challenges for implementers. Many local implementers are resource constrained and are now increasingly required or expected to spend those scarce resources attending trainings or meetings organized without their input and with little to no follow up. As a global development community, we have a responsibility to identify the ways in which we are helping local leaders accomplish their goals, and alternatively, the ways in which we might actually be making their missions more difficult. We have a parallel responsibility to broaden our perspectives on what “learning” is, and to consider what it might take to translate the learning that happens in the “classroom” into real change the following Monday morning.



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