

Capacity Building Handout – Lessons Learned

This very brief summary of lessons learned can be used as a handout for pre-departure briefings, for induction for newcomers to AusAID, to stimulate discussions in country programs etc. Remember however, that capacity building is a deep and complex subject and this is no substitute for substantive reading and preparation on the subject.



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The research literature has an abundance of lessons learned (as does AusAID from practical experience) – but the top handful which may be most useful are:

1. **Leadership** matters most – local leadership and ownership of the change agenda is critical. Buy-in from both the political and senior bureaucratic levels is usually necessary – one without the other is insufficient. Leadership should be visible, not just agreements with donors.
2. **Holistic approaches** work best, with attention paid to management and organisational change, not just technical fixes.
3. **Mobilising existing capacity** is often the key challenge for many organisations – applying existing capacity in different, more productive ways, rather than ‘building’ new capacity.
4. **Build on what exists** – build on local systems and knowledge, and avoid importing complex, sophisticated systems from other places.
5. **Incentives matter** – people are not motivated to work unless they receive a living wage and have a functional work environment. Includes advisers not setting themselves up with state-of-the-art offices while local staff make do with a local standard.
6. The **right advisers** can make or break implementation of any activity. They need a blend of good technical skills and interpersonal skills – the former without the latter does not work.
7. **Co-location** of advisers and staff facilitates communication and work, acts as an equaliser and avoids creating an isolated unit of expatriate staff.
8. The **pace of change** must be in the control of the partner country/agency – attempts by donors to force the pace undermine ownership and sustainability.
9. **Planning, coordination and sequencing** of activities is important – this should be based on an analysis of the problems, and include coordination of donor efforts.
10. **Training** is important but is maximised when embedded within a broader program of change, and most knowledge for work is best acquired in the workplace by actually ‘doing’ – which is where coaching and mentoring from well respected advisers comes in.
11. Be sensitive to and learn about the **culture** – it is an important influence on how change is introduced and managed.
Plus an important lesson from post-conflict countries:
12. **Don’t be tempted to bypass** weak government capacity and rebuild the country directly – it undercuts the more important long term strategy of developing capable organisations and also undercuts ownership.

Resources

Capacity Development Principles and Practices, November 2004, AusAID – available on AusAID’s intranet AKWA. While notated for internal distribution only, it can be passed to those working within the Australian aid program.

Prepared by Patricia Lyon, Principal Adviser Capacity Development, 02 9006 3340, August 2005