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

**Adaptive Management: Relationship Building**

*What we mean by Relationship Building*

Relationship building is the process of continuously developing trust, sharing ideas, and communicating expectations. Successful adaptive management requires strong relationships between key stakeholders to maintain progress and achieve goals.

*How it works:*

Relationship building takes effort and time but it's well worth the investment for the ease of decision-making and information sharing in the long run. To initiate this process, a hierarchy of needs should be established where all the individuals involved understand each other's priorities, constraints, and motivations. At the same time, a value alignment takes place which reinforces the belief that everyone is working together in the best interest of the project to accomplish shared goals. Throughout project planning and implementation, demonstrate competence by delivering quality products and activities and making constant improvements. During this process, it's important to communicate early and often in order to solidify reassurance and trust.

Dynamic and open leadership on both sides is decisive for relationship building. Team leaders should be able to identify competence and spur initiative by seeing and hearing excellent ideas from the team. In addition, they should ask for feedback in order to correct mistakes and continuously learn.

*Why it matters:*

In order to successfully learn and adapt, a level of trust and transparency is required. In this way, parties are more cooperative and invested in achieving shared goals. When things go wrong, issues can be resolved proactively and course corrections applied more efficiently.

*What it looks like:*

Over the five years of the KDMD contract, there were three CORs and three Chiefs of Party. Each change required a new series of relationship building efforts and luckily there were opportunities for transition in each case. This overlap allowed for new members to observe the open and trusting environment that they were stepping into and allowed them to continue with that same posture and basis of trust. Of course, each relationship is unique based on the priorities and preferences of those involved, but in every situation the culture of the project enabled mutually respectful relationships to develop and evolve through frequent, open communication.

Trust building, communication, time, and empathy are critical components of a relationship building process. When building trust, one needs to be open and honest in addition to being available to listen, discover, and understand. To demonstrate that needs and requests have been understood, partners should offer innovative solutions and problem solve together to determine the best path forward. Things don't always go as planned and effective communication in relationship building entails constant rethinking and discussion concerning successes, challenges, and improvements. This open communication in a trust-based relationship can reveal

missteps or failures at earlier stages which provide opportunities for timely resolutions. Lastly, empathy is vital. By listening and empathizing, both sides can understand the context and the challenges that come with it. There is an active attempt to "put yourself in the other's shoes."
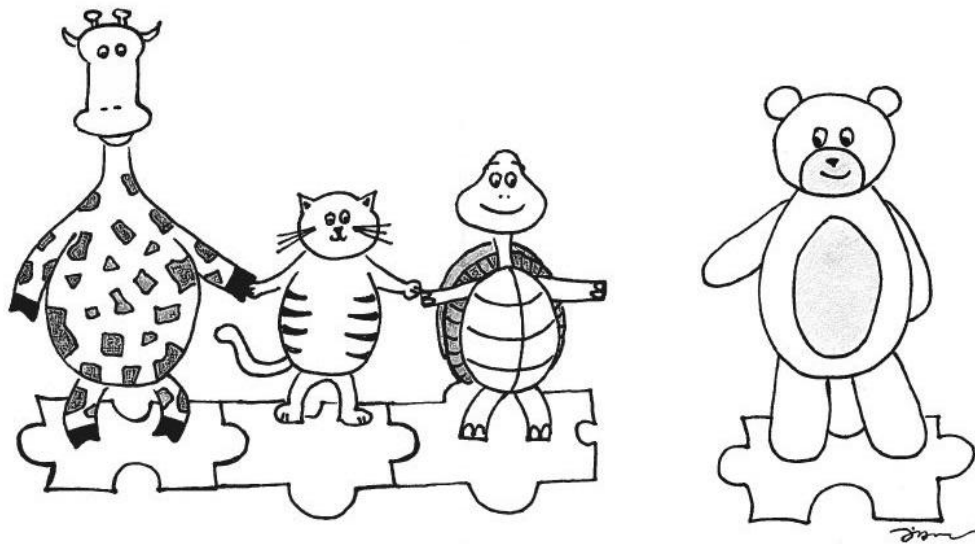


*Illustration by KDMD's K&L Specialist, Joy Chen, and an example of building relationships to learn—and utilize—unique talents.*

*Learn More:*

When approaching a new relationship, it might be helpful to ask the following questions in order to establish a common ground and mutual understanding:

- How do you like to receive information?
- What do you hope to accomplish?
- What are some of the challenges that you're dealing with?
- Where can I provide support?
- What other factors are at play?
- What type of feedback are you receiving?
- What information do you need to share with others?
- What else are you working on?
- What does your calendar look like? What's the best time to check in?
- Am I understanding this correctly? How do you understand this?