

# TACIT KNOWLEDGE

## KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT BRIEFS

*These briefs are written to support USAID and partners with Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) throughout the Program Cycle. They utilize experience from the KDMD project to share good practices, how-tos, and lessons learned about concepts and activities related to knowledge management and learning.*



The USAID Knowledge-Driven Microenterprise Development (KDMD) project designs and implements state-of-the-art knowledge management (KM), learning, and collaboration tools and approaches and promotes collaboration among practitioners to speed innovation and adoption. KDMD seeks to maximize the impact of USAID's knowledge and learning investments, and implements strategies and processes to coordinate learning and knowledge sharing across the full range of investments and activities for our USAID programs.



## ABOUT TACIT KNOWLEDGE

Addressing tacit knowledge is critical for effective organizational learning. Although tacit knowledge can be challenging to identify and manage, creating processes and practices that facilitate its capture and transfer can allow organizations to create efficiencies and improve their learning practice. This document provides guidance on methods for identifying, capturing, and transferring tacit knowledge based on experiences from the USAID-funded Knowledge-Driven Microenterprise Development (KDMD) project.

### What is tacit knowledge?

Tacit knowledge is intuitive and personalized knowledge about how to do something, accumulated through experience. It includes the beliefs, attitudes, skills, capabilities, and expertise that an individual uses to perform an activity. Tacit knowledge can be difficult to transfer, as it is deeply rooted within a specific individual and the way that the individual performs specific tasks.

Explicit knowledge, on the other hand, is formalized knowledge and information that can be documented (in documents, databases, books, etc.) and replicated. The majority of knowledge is thought to be tacit while only a small portion is explicit. However, knowledge is rarely either fully tacit or explicit, usually falling somewhere in between.

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## HOW-TOS

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### Identifying Tacit Knowledge

First, determine what types of knowledge or skill sets are most critical for your project or activity. What would someone new to the activity need to be able to do? Consider the following questions to help identify critical tacit knowledge<sup>1</sup>:

- What knowledge and skills are essential for your project or activity to operate successfully?
- Are any of the knowledge and skills at risk of being lost if key personnel stop performing the activity?
- If so, how would you prioritize these knowledge and skills?
- Who knows how to do this activity? Who are the experts? Who would you ideally like to clone in this area of expertise?
- Who needs to know how to do this activity?

### Capturing Tacit Knowledge

Once you have determined the type of tacit knowledge you would like to document and who can provide it, consider interviewing those who possess the tacit knowledge. Some questions to ask include:

- What are the steps that you go through to complete your task/activity? Why does each step matter?
- What are the most common mistakes you or others have made?
- Who do you have to talk to in order to complete the task/activity?
- How do you know when you're over your head?
- How do you know when to ask for help? What's the appropriate way to ask for help?
- What are the rules and which ones can you ignore?
- How do you know if the task/activity is completed and if it has been completed satisfactorily?

The following tools, activities, and practices can also facilitate knowledge capture:

**After Action Reviews (AARs)** are assessments conducted after a project or activity that allow team members to discuss what they learned, review successes and challenges, and identify action items to improve the next iteration of the activity. During an AAR, a facilitator typically shapes and guides the discussion while a designated note taker ensures detailed documentation of the discussion. After Action Reviews help promote continuous learning and improvement among staff. For more information on After Action Reviews, please read the [AAR Knowledge Management Brief](#) in USAID's Learning Lab library.

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<sup>1</sup> Trautman, Steve. "Knowledge Transfer: Preserving Your Secret Sauce." [www.stevetrautman.com](http://www.stevetrautman.com). October 2011.



## The KDMD Wiki

Hosted by Wikispaces, KDMD used its wiki to capture and share the project's approach to knowledge management and accumulated experience. The KDMD wiki:

- Served as the project's informal knowledge base
- Documented and identified best practices for the project
- Fostered collaborative and effective work across individuals, teams, and activities
- Enabled KDMD to continuously improve products, services, and processes

KDMD's wiki was structured according to the four key areas in the knowledge cycle – knowledge generation, knowledge capture, knowledge sharing, and knowledge application. All pages were tagged with key terms to help navigation between pages. Key documents and resources were uploaded to the wiki and several templates are available for the creation of new pages to standardize information across the site.

KDMD team members were encouraged by project managers to contribute to the wiki. Top contributors were rewarded with formal recognition and small incentives during monthly, project-wide meetings.

## Exit interviews or staff

“downloads” help capture an individual's tacit knowledge before they leave an organization or project. Consider utilizing the questions listed above during an exit interview. The format of exit interviews can range from informal discussions to video interviews.

Documentation may take the form of meeting notes to more formal handover documents. Allow deviations from set interview questions during an exit interview since these conversations are often the ones that result in unexpected but valuable information and feedback.

**Wikis** are websites that allow members to collaboratively add, modify, or delete content. Many wikis can be set as private to protect internal learning and information, and they can be housed on community websites or intranets. Many companies provide both free and paid subscriptions to online wikis including [Wikispaces](#), [Docuwiki](#), [Twiki](#), and [Wikkawiki](#).

## Transferring Tacit Knowledge

These tools and activities can help facilitate knowledge transfer:

**Mentoring** can be an effective method of transferring tacit knowledge from one team member to another. Mentoring can be as formal or informal as desired, but expectations should be discussed between both parties prior to the start of the activity. Shadowing is one approach to mentoring that allows one staff member to observe how another staff member implements an activity from beginning to end. USAID has shown its commitment to mentoring by making it one of the USAID Forward progress indicators—measured by the number of people each mid-to-senior level manager actively mentors.



**Peer-to-peer learning** (which can include learning networks, communities of practice, and working groups) is a way for individuals with a common interest to come together to share knowledge, learning, and experiences in a particular topic area.

- Learning networks are small, structured, time-bound groups, focused on a specific learning outcome or deliverable. Facilitation among the learning network members as well as creation of a learning agenda and deliverables is recommended to ensure maximum knowledge exchange and capture. For more information on learning networks, please visit the Learning Networks Resource Center on USAID's Learning Lab at

<http://usaidlearninglab.org/learning-networks>.

- Communities of practice are larger groups of individuals interested in a specific topic or technical area. Their structure and focus will depend on the groups' interests. Communities of practice are often comprised of "core members," who manage and facilitate the network's activities as well as an "outer circle" of individuals, who contribute occasionally.
- Working groups are similar to communities of practice but are usually smaller and formed to produce an agreed-upon deliverable within a specified time.

### The GROOVE Market Facilitation Mentoring Program

The GROOVE Market Facilitation Mentoring Program (MFMP) was developed and piloted by the GROOVE Learning Network, a USAID-funded learning network comprised of CARE, CHF International, Conservation International and Practical Action. Designed to increase staff capacity to act as market facilitators and manage sustainable, pro-poor value chain development initiatives, this program provided structured mentoring guidance to emerging market facilitators within their organizations. Below are a few of the lessons learned from formal mentor/mentee programs:

- Obtain executive buy-in with a project or organization

- Coordinate quarterly reviews with mentors/mentees to share good practices and challenges
- Monitor and evaluate the program's overall performance and share data with key stakeholders
- Match mentors and mentees carefully, looking at the knowledge and information the parties are interested in sharing, their motivations, and the resources required.

To learn more about the GROOVE Market Facilitation Mentoring Program, please visit <http://microlinks.kdid.org/library/groove-market-facilitation-mentoring-program-overview>



**Spatial arrangements** can play an influential role in facilitating the transfer of tacit knowledge. Designating communal work spaces physically encourage team members to interact and share experiences. This should, of course, be balanced with available private spaces for individualized work and more formal meetings.

### KDMD's "Q" Zone

Five team members of the KDMD Communications Portfolio sat close together in open cubicles in what was named the "Q Zone" (after the "Q" in QED Group). This spatial arrangement encouraged spontaneous and immediate interaction and allowed the team to collaborate easily and provide each other with quick feedback. This ongoing dialogue helped promote sharing as well as creative and innovative thinking.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The KDMD project found that a number of principles facilitate the capture and transfer of tacit knowledge. These include:

- ✓ **Adaptability and creativity:** Tacit knowledge is based on experience which typically requires trial and error. Allow individuals the chance to explore different approaches and tools to determine the best ways that they learn and share knowledge.
- ✓ **Team dynamics:** A strong, close, and open team is invaluable to tacit knowledge sharing. Trust in team members and respect for their work creates an environment of

open collaboration and learning. Consider investing time and resources into team building activities if possible.

- ✓ **Incentives:** Make knowledge sharing a part of everyone's job by including it in job descriptions and rewarding positive behavior. Incentives can range from the informal (an acknowledgement in a meeting) to more formal (a certificate or plaque), but all reinforce the idea that sharing knowledge is beneficial for the individual, the project, and the organization.
- ✓ **Q&A:** One of the best ways to learn how someone does something is to ask them. This can be done informally (in the hallway) or formally (through a mentor/mentee program). Allowing the time and space to ask questions not only helps the person asking the questions but also those who provide the answers by prompting them to think through their response.
- ✓ **Openness to discussing failure:** Just as it is important to document success, it is also important to acknowledge and document challenges. To encourage the capture and transfer of tacit knowledge, an organization and project staff should be open to sharing both sides of the coin.

The adage 'we don't know what we don't know' is especially true when it comes to tacit knowledge. By creating supportive environments and employing some of the tools and processes described above, organizations will improve their learning practice and encourage the exchange of this valuable, but often overlooked, knowledge.



## Resources

Botha, Anthon P. et al, *Knowledge: Living and Working With it*, Juta and Company, Ltd, 2008

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Polanyi, Michael. *The Tacit Dimension*. Doubleday & Company Inc, 1966.

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