CLA TOOLKIT

MANAGING STAFF TRANSITIONS THROUGH COLLABORATING LEARNING AND ADAPTING:
PRESERVING INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY AS STAFF COME AND GO

Introduction

Most USAID Missions and USAID/Washington operating units (OUs) have a set of guidance, policies, and templates to manage the administrative, logistical, and security aspects of onboarding and offboarding staff. Less often, however, is there a system in place to manage the transfer of institutional knowledge, contextual understanding, and critical relationships that have been acquired by the departing staff member to the arriving staff member. Often times there is a gap between when a staff member departs and the replacement arrives so, without a system in place to preserve it, this critical knowledge is lost. This can be the case for any position and hiring mechanism.

Furthermore, handovers tend to be transactional, focused on handing over tasks rather than the knowledge and relationships. This can lead to a variety of challenges both for staff and for the Mission/OU, including misunderstanding of priorities, culture, roles and responsibilities; duplication of efforts (arriving staff spending time redoing or rehashing things that have already been determined); and a disruption or discontinuation of critical relationships, both internal and external. Continuity of external relationships is particularly important given USAID's role in helping a country advance in its journey to self-reliance.

In both the public and private sectors, huge losses have resulted from lost institutional memory. Losses can be both tangible, as in Boeing's $1.6 billion loss tied directly to loss of staff knowledge[1], and intangible, as in the Australian Department of Defense, where "…the impact of knowledge loss may be traced directly to reduced capability in strategic activities at the organisational level, and indirectly to ineffectiveness and inefficiencies at the individual level."[2]

System for Managing Staff Transitions in USAID

For an operating unit, Mission, office, or team, a multi-faceted system for managing staff transitions is critical to ensuring that institutional memory is preserved and key relationships with internal and external partners are maintained and that it is done as efficiently and effectively as possible. The system

[1] When 9,000 senior employees retired, the Boeing management had to shut down production for more than 3 weeks as many skilled production workers left. Moreover, the company recruited workers from suppliers, which resulted in demands and shipments delays. Eventually, they had to shut down its 747 and 737 production lines and were forced to take a $1.6 billion charge against earnings to account for high costs and penalties for the late delivery of the jets." The High Cost Of Lost Knowledge. TallyFox, December 1, 2015. https://www.tallyfox.com/insight/high-cost-lost-knowledge

[2] Massingham, P. R. (2005). Measuring the impact of knowledge loss. In D. Davies, G. Fisher & R. Hughes (Eds.), Proceedings of the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management Conference (pp. 1-20). Canberra, Australia: Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management (ANZAM). http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2693&context=commpapers

for managing staff transitions can include clear roles, responsibilities, processes and platforms for capturing, maintaining and sharing knowledge. It can also include relevant templates and tools, such as standard questions for conducting exit interviews, or templates for new staff to develop individual learning plans.

Arriving and Departing Staff at USAID

Whether or not a system for managing staff transitions is in place at an operating unit, mission, office, or team, staff who arrive into a position or are departing a position always have important roles to play to ensure that institutional memory and key relationships are preserved as they transition.

Who this Tool is For

1. Staff in a Mission/OU working to build or implement systems that improve handovers, knowledge capture, and sharing across a Mission/OU.
2. Staff who are departing a position at a Mission/OU that may or may not yet have a comprehensive system.
3. Staff who are arriving into a position at a Mission/OU that may or may not yet have a comprehensive system.

This document is relevant for any position or hiring mechanism. While this document does not explicitly address what happens when someone arrives into a newly-created position, which has its own set of challenges, many of the principles, actions, and resources can be applied in that context.

Section 1 offers guidance for how to set up and implement systems at Mission/OU or office to ensure that all staff help preserve institutional memory and enable continuity of relationships. This section is for any staff in a Mission/OU working to build systems that improve handovers and knowledge capture and sharing across the Mission or OU. If a Mission or OU is just beginning to develop a system to manage staff transitions, you may want to start by developing a system within an office or team and then expand it out to other offices or to the Mission/OU writ large.

Section 2 includes key principles and actions individuals could consider following when arriving or departing a position, regardless of hiring mechanism and position. This includes staff new to the Mission/OU and staff who are currently in the Mission/OU and are moving into a new position.

Section 3 provides a select number of resources to help you take a systematic and comprehensive approach to manage staff transitions as effectively and efficiently as possible at the individual or organizational level.

Section 1: Offices/Teams/Missions/OUs

What Missions/OUs can do to develop and manage a system for staff transitions to preserve institutional memory and continuity of relationships

Listed below are key principles, actions and resources that Missions, OUs, offices, and teams can follow to systemically manage staff transitions and to ensure that institutional memory is preserved and there remains a continuity of relationships as staff come and go. When first setting up a system for managing staff transitions, Missions/OUs may want to start by selecting a few of the key actions to begin implementing from the list below.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- **Mission/OU staff need to buy into and contribute to an effective system for managing staff transitions - but you also need one person in charge of managing the system and transition processes.** It is important to develop clear procedures and roles, identifying the people responsible, and having leadership message the importance of following through to implement the system. For the Mission/OU, the system for managing staff transitions as a whole should have one person who takes overall ownership/stewardship over the system and there could be incentives for departing staff to put time into it. At USAID/Uganda, for example, the knowledge management specialist owns the processes.
- **Supervisors of a position in which there is staff transition should help support the transition** by ensuring the responsibilities of the position are clear. Supervising staff also have an important role to play in ensuring both the outgoing and incoming staff member prioritize the explicit tasks linked to knowledge transfer and transition management, among the many competing priorities that the individual may face.
- In a Mission**, Foreign Service National staff (FSNs) often have the most institutional memory, provide continuity, and are the experts on the country and culture, in addition to frequently having deep technical expertise.** They are critical to any successful staff transition in a USAID Mission. In particular, when foreign service officers (FSO) transition, there is often a gap and FSNs can help transfer key information from departing FSO to arriving FSO.
- **Knowledge of the organizational culture is important to be successful in any position** and having strategies in place to support arriving staff's successful assimilation into the organization are, therefore, critical.

USAID/Uganda

USAID/Uganda has a good example of a comprehensive system for managing staff transitions. The Mission found that successful staff transitions and knowledge transfer required advance planning, staff ownership of the transition processes, and ongoing mission leadership support. The comprehensive staff transition management system the mission developed was comprised of a number of components, including:

- A knowledge management platform
- Onboarding dashboard
- Delineation of specific roles and responsibilities
- Close collaboration among several mission offices to implement the system

This system was developed to be intentional and comprehensive to ensure that knowledge is captured and shared among all staff, regardless of hiring mechanism or position undergoing transition.

The Mission, overall, owns the staff transition process as part of its responsibility to capture the knowledge, challenges, and experience of exiting staff and to provide the best possible support to new staff to acclimate to the organizational culture and succeed in their positions.

KEY ACTIONS

- ☐ Have a **designated "steward" of the system for managing staff transitions,** preferably someone with longevity in the Mission or OU, such as an FSN**.**
- ☐ Work **in collaboration with EXO (in a Mission) or AMS (in a Washington OU) and other offices** to ensure that there are points of contact to coordinate various processes of onboarding and offboarding staff.

- ☐ Articulate **a clear process that serves as a "roadmap"** for the transition that all staff involved can follow and helps them to plan ahead. This could include tasks and timeline throughout a transitional period as well as pause and reflect moments for the system itself, to integrate adjustments as needed.
- ☐ Include a **standard set of tools and processes to capture and transfer knowledge.**
    - **Tip**: In addition to a standard briefing book on the mission's CDCS/OU's strategy, description of portfolio/programs/activities, country profile, position description, and/or organizational info, consider also including **a welcome memo** (to provide context , what to be aware of, watch out for, and what to prioritize when starting in the position); a **calendar** of key internal and external events and activities; **a process map** showing the flow of tasks and/or internal and external interactions, possibly linked to **key Mission Orders** for a given role; and **an annotated contacts list**.
- ☐ Consider codifying the tools and processes and addressing various types of staff transitions in a **Mission Order (or Bureau Order)**. This could include how staff interact, work across teams and work with external stakeholders during times of transition and also when a position in vacant.
- ☐ **Have sponsors for different content areas** of the Mission/OU. This may include country context; Mission/OU culture; country culture; CDCS or strategy, and relevant project and activity-levels of the Mission/OU program; sector specific considerations and cross-cutting issues such as private sector engagement or inclusive development. This can both provide greater orientation and also share out the responsibility in orienting new staff.
- ☐ In a mission, **provide selected FSNs a leadership role** as carriers of institutional knowledge and the cultural context—including as sponsors for incoming staff and/or as stewards of the overall system for managing staff transitions.
- ☐ **Facilitate both formal and informal knowledge sharing interactions** (such as facilitated conversations, briefings, orientations, training, coffee sessions, handover meetings, interviews, etc.) for new staff to become familiar with Mission/OU staff and organizational culture and begin the process of building relationships. Seek ways to integrate these into regularly held meetings or all-hands events, for example, to reduce the time burden while embedding transition tasks into the operations of the Mission or OU, whenever possible.
- ☐ Establish and maintain **a system for knowledge management** that captures the knowledge of Mission/OU staff, is accessible to all staff and is updated on a regular basis. Consider using technology to help you do this, such as an internal wiki.
    - **Tip**: Establish an e-file structure (that is not editable except by a couple of individuals) and standard operating procedures, so everyone is oriented to, and uses, the same filing system and can easily locate documents. This is particularly helpful during staff transitions.
- ☐ Early on, provide tools and resources for **staff to continuously capture knowledge** throughout the duration of their positions rather than wait until they are leaving. This helps ensure knowledge, key information, and relationships are captured in real-time, minimizing challenges with recall or the higher level of effort required for transition if waiting to capture knowledge right before staff depart. Refer to the Knowledge Management Sustainability Tracker in Section 3, "Select Resources", below or find it here.
- ☐ **In the event of a staffing gap**, formulate a plan with clear assignments. USAID/Uganda created a tool to "mind the gap" to help outgoing staff identify what needs to be done during a staffing gap. See link to "minding the gap" template in Section 3, "Select Resources" below or find it here.

- ☐ Consider carrying out **a CDCS (or other strategy) refresher exercise on a periodic basis** to refresh existing staff and orient new staff on the broader purpose of the organization and the logic and evidence behind it. Some Missions have incorporated interactive 'know our strategy' activities into an annual retreat or other all-staff event, including an element of cross-office team-building.
- ☐ If you have **a Mission/OU or team charter**, or another document articulating how you work together, share it and explain the context within which it has been developed and utilized. Ideally, knowledge management is part of that charter.

Section 2: Departing Staff and Arriving Staff

What you can do individually as you come and go to preserve institutional memory and continuity of relationships

Listed below are key principles, actions and resources that both departing staff and arriving staff can follow, individually, to help preserve institutional memory and continuity of relationships during the staff transition.

DEPARTING STAFF

KEY PRINCIPLES

- It is important to **identify what knowledge** you have acquired in your position that will be important for your successor to know. This includes knowledge of the context and what you picked up through experience working in the position (i.e., tacit knowledge) about areas like organizational norms, effective ways to maintain internal and external relationships, key resources to help you do your work, etc.). You may have also acquired knowledge of roles, responsibilities and tasks, priorities, and organizational processes and systems; knowledge of the culture and country and organizational context; and why and how choices were made (i.e., the thinking behind why things were done a certain way). What do you wish you had known coming in to your position? What do you think someone coming into your position should keep in mind that they won't hear right away?
- It is important to **identify different ways to effectively transfer that knowledge** to the incoming staff (regardless of when he/she arrives). Different types of knowledge may need to be shared in a variety of different ways (in writing, via video, passed on orally via a trusted colleague) depending on how complex, nuanced and/or sensitive the topic may be.
- **Relationships and networks** are important to maintain- not just the contacts themselves but (to the extent possible) the trust that had been developed and the understanding of the strengths and benefits of the relationship. This includes relationships with relevant partners, interagency and, in a mission, partner government counterparts and other local stakeholders.

KEY ACTIONS

- ☐ Involve colleagues when brainstorming on **which internal and external relationships are critical** to maintain and important to transfer to the incoming staff.
  - Another useful way to help with transfer of relationships, it **to bring a colleague into the relationship who can "mind the gap"** (between the time when the staff depart and the new staff arrive) and then introduce the arriving staff to the relationship, helping to establish trust.

- One way to pass on relationships is through **an annotated contacts list** (describe each person's role, what work is done with them, and best ways to engage with them and why). You can also use **influence network mapping or process mapping tools** to capture this information visually.

☐ Discuss with your supervisor a **written transition plan or guidance (such as a handover note or video**), including which portions of your portfolio will be handed over to incoming staff and, from your perspective, what are the key priorities in the future of the position.

☐ **Use hindsight and draw from your own lessons learned** to identify what knowledge is most important to transfer beyond formal tasks/roles. What do you wish you had known when you first started in the position? What would you change if you could do it over again? What do the incoming staff need to know in order to be successful in the position?

☐ Work with colleagues (such as FSNs in a mission) to **identify and brainstorm on multiple ways to transfer these various types of knowledge**. This may include handover notes, a welcome memo (to include context, impressions, opinions based on your tacit knowledge), an exit interview or briefing to Mission/OU leadership or colleagues, a video, or a series of planned telephone or in person meetings with the arriving staff over time.

ARRIVING STAFF

KEY PRINCIPLES

- **Some of the knowledge and information of a position is readily-available and tapping into that early on can save time and duplication of effort** later. This includes easily-accessed documents on strategy, projects, and activities (such as briefs, briefing books, notes, reports, fact sheets, and intranet).
- Reviewing key documents, however, is not enough. **Understanding the thinking behind documents such as strategies and designs, the interpersonal dynamics of relationships, the rationale for why certain decisions were made, and the challenges faced**, are essential to gaining contextual knowledge, and being able to draw connections early on between the pieces of knowledge being shared. This type of understanding will also help you in quickly building relationships with colleagues and internal and external partners.
- Characteristics of success when starting in a new position include demonstrating **an open-mind, a willingness to pause and fully understand the circumstances before making changes and being clear with yourself and others that you are in learning mode**. Cultivating these attributes from the very beginning allows you the space to listen, observe, inquire, and learn as well as find out all of the things you don't know. Regardless of your expertise and experience, there will be contextual factors that will take time to understand and it is critical to learn the institutional, cultural, and interpersonal dynamics and identify who knows what so you can draw on their expertise as you get up to speed.

KEY ACTIONS

☐ If possible, before your arrival, **reach out to the departing staff** to get his/her informal perspective and ask questions about context. More questions will always come up once you arrive, so you may also want to ask who your go-to person or people could be for additional information on any key issues the departing person raises.

- ☐ When beginning a new position, be clear with yourself and others that **you are in learning mode**. Take the time to listen, observe, inquire, and learn as well as find out all of the things you don't know. Be sure to fully understand the circumstances before making any changes in the short term.
- ☐ **Develop an individual learning action plan** that captures what you need to know about the institutional context, history, and interpersonal relationships surrounding your new role. This may include identifying what areas or topics you will need to get up-to-speed on, keeping in mind this list may evolve over time (and can serve as an ongoing tool well into your time in a new position). It may also include **your own set of questions** to ask the departing staff and colleagues to help transfer institutional knowledge while continuing your own learning.
- ☐ Identify and **access systems for knowledge management and readily-available key documents** to familiarize yourself with the mission/OU's portfolio and context (such as my.usaid intranet page, activity briefs, Mission/OU-wide reports, country profiles, etc.)

Section 3: Select Resources

Below are a few select resources to help Missions/OUs manage staff transitions systemically and to help departing and arriving staff to manage their own transitions. Links to additional resources are also provided below.

RESOURCES FOR OFFICES/TEAMS/MISSIONS/OUS ON SYSTEMS FOR MANAGING STAFF TRANSITIONS:

- Examples of FSN leadership and empowerment:
  - USAID/Rwanda's Inzira Iboneye video
  - USAID/Uganda's Mission of Leaders Program
- Overview of USAID/Uganda's system for managing staff transitions: PowerPoint
  - This PowerPoint presentation was presented during a CLA Community of Practice webinar in June 2018. USAID/Uganda's system for managing staff transitions is one of 8 components of the Mission's "Mission of Leaders" management philosophy and contributes to the mission's overall enabling environment for CLA.
- Also see "additional resources" below.

RESOURCES FOR DEPARTING STAFF:

- USAID/Afghanistan's staff transition resources, including exit interview guide, knowledge management checklist and in-processing guidance. The exit interview guide elicits feedback from departing staff on what was learned, what the mission can improve upon, etc.
- AFR/SD's Handover memo template and Exit Interview Guide
- USAID/Uganda's "Minding the Gap" template
- International Medical Corps Handover Toolkit

RESOURCES FOR ARRIVING STAFF:

- See FSO Randy Kolstad's list of things to think about when arriving to a new post
- Refer to FSO David Ratliff's blog "Behind the Wizard's Curtain: the First Two Weeks" which offers some lessons he learned when first arriving to a post and a suggested list of questions to ask when you arrive.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Getting Ready for Staff Transitions: How to Manage Knowledge Transfer: https://programnet.usaid.gov/library/getting-ready-staff-transitions-how-manage-knowledge-transfer
- Tips for Navigating Staff Transitions: https://programnet.usaid.gov/library/tips-navigating-staff-transition
- Knowledge Management Sustainability Tracker https://usaidlearninglab.org/library/knowledge-management-sustainability-tracker

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

› For more information, please email us at learning@usaid.gov