

Tool 2D.

Supporting an adaptive learning approach

How to use this tool

A learning approach can help increase the efficiency, effectiveness and relevance of programming. While a learning approach should be important in any program, it is especially important when synergizing WASH and Nutrition programming in order to build the evidence base for what works and what does not.

Key things to consider when supporting a learning approach are:

- .Learning should not be seen as a vertical intervention; instead, current program processes can be reoriented to accommodate a learning agenda
- Implementing a learning approach requires support from senior management. A supervisor or chief who wants to support learning should make sure that senior management is briefed and supportive.
- Cycles of pause and reflect and action periods are the recommended methodology for learning, as shown in figure 1 below.
- Learning and adaptation agility: based on the learning pillars in figure 2, issues with a service delivery focus are likely to be quicker to adapt compared to those that require diverse stakeholders and a systemic approach. It is advisable to tease out issues with a systemic orientation versus a service delivery one when designing a learning program

Introduction to adaptive learning

A learning process involves a change in behaviors and mindsets as a result of experience (Mitleton-Kelly, 2007). While the concept of learning is not new, it is rarely applied regularly or systematically within programs. In addition, there is a need for an enabling environment that enables and promotes the development of a culture of learning.

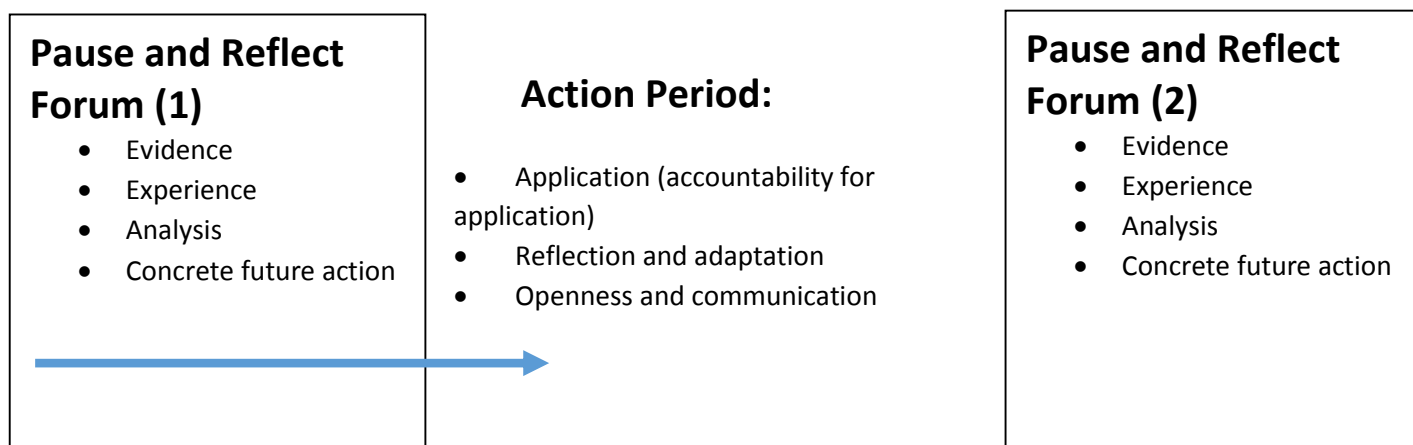
When designing a learning approach, consider the following key principles.

- **Problem-focused.** This is opposed to a project-driven approach in which actors focus on set targets and assumptions. Instead, the approach should be focus on analyzing and understanding what the overall problem is. This helps provoke reflection and questioning of assumptions, leading to the development of context-specific responses rather than transplanted best practices (Valters, et al., 2016).
- **Iterative/experiential.** Ideally, we learn by doing. Programs should be designed to allow space and time to question assumptions, to view failures as opportunities, to explore new possibilities and to take the decision to adopt changes based on the learning.

- **Contextualization.** While external evidence and experience is interesting to consider when designing and adapting programs, it is important that a learning approach focus on the issues being experienced by the program as well as on their contextual analysis. Stakeholders should be supported to design their own solutions. This can promote ownership, leadership and innovation.
- **Embedded in the program cycle.** Learning activities and processes should be considered during the conceptualization, planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation phases. Learning should not appear to be an independent process.
- **Supported by an enabling environment.** Management and leadership should be supportive of a learning approach and dedicated to questioning assumptions, designating resources such as finances, time and space, and supporting adaptability and flexibility to ensure adaptive decision making.

A learning approach methodology can take several forms. One that is suited to the UNICEF context is a process of pause and reflect forums punctuated with action periods. Figure 1 shows how the methodology would roll out. The pause and reflect forums are used to review program information, analyze what is and is not working and why, generate local solutions and decide on the best way forward. The action period is used to apply the learning and experiment, make necessary adaptations and communicate experiences and findings openly with relevant stakeholders. From the action period, stakeholders move into another pause and reflect forum and then into another action period, and so on. Changes can be both large and small, but they should improve program effectiveness, efficiency and relevance. Failures should not be hidden but should be directly confronted, addressed and used as key opportunities for learning.

Figure 1. Suggested learning approach



Evidence — use relevant program data such as quantitative and qualitative statistics from implementing partners, donor reports and third party monitoring (if appropriate).

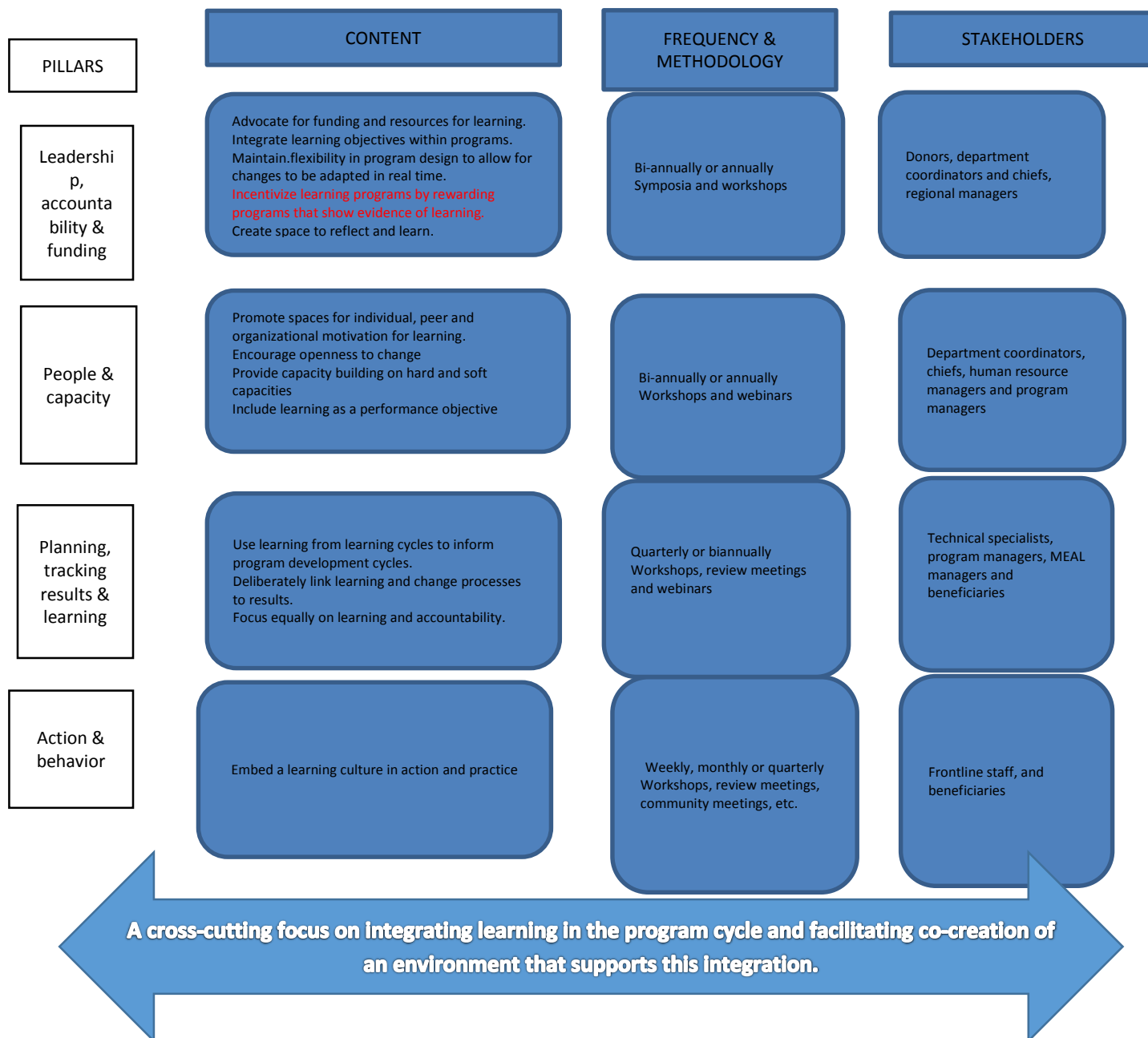
Experience — Consider the cumulative experience of all those professionals in the team. Use that experience to review the evidence. What is it telling you? What is working well in the program? What is not working? Where are the failures? What has been done in the past to address failures? What has worked?

Analysis — Looking at the evidence and using our past experience of similar situations, how might the team be able to address the current situation. Be creative, flexible and brave!

Concrete future actions — What should be changed? What is the timeframe? Who is going to do it? When will progress be reviewed to see if the experiment is working?

Figure 2 below is an example of how learning can be applied within the various pillars of a synergized program. It suggests possible content, frequency of contact, an example of a methodology to use and stakeholders. This is illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Figure 2. A practical learning application example



References

Mitleton-Kelly, E. (2007) *What are the Characteristics of the Learning Organization*. Global Environmental Management Initiative. Available at:
<http://gemi.org/metricsnavigator/eag/What%20are%20the%20Characteristics%20of%20a%20Learning%20Organization.pdf>.

Valters, C., Cummings, C. and Nixon, H. (2016). *Putting Learning at the Centre: Adaptive Development Programming in Practice*. Overseas Development Institute. Available at:
http://www.eadi.org/publications/publication_55149/