KM4dev contribution to Learning to Fly

The following is a compilation of experiences from individuals involved in KM4dev, a community of international development professionals who are interested in knowledge management issues and approaches. Because rotating peer assists have been used in various KM4dev workshops and has involved this community as participants and "peer assistees", we felt it would be a richer contribution if the different voices were put together.

1- What it is that makes rotating peer assists successful?

Time

Sufficient time allotted for each peer assist round is an important factor for success. But given that we are talking about a relatively short period of time (25-40 minutes usually), the fact that each peer assist gives an opportunity to gather many different perspectives within a short timeframe and find quick solutions in a creative manner contributes to making them successful.

Topics

Common concern for the topic is considered the main success indicator for rotating peer assists. The more people identify to and feel engaged by the problems presented, the better the outcomes of the discussions. The issue brought forward by the peer assistee also needs to be concrete and linked to personal experience for better results. It cannot be someone else's problem that is presented.

Process

Clear understanding of the process leads to successful rotating peer assists. It is important for the peer assistees, the peers and the facilitators to fully understand what is expected of them. A concise presentation of the context and issue by the peer assistee is also essential, although the assistee usually articulates his/her problem more specifically in the first round, taking longer to explain the problem. In the second or third round, he/she often will often rephrase their story based on peer questions and will be able to get to the point much more quickly, making appropriate solutions easier to identify.

The facilitator's role in recapping the comments of the previous round is also key. This enables the Rotating Peer Assist process to be an iterative one; it provides the opportunity to build on each other's ideas, moving from often general suggestions (in round one) into more refined solutions (in rounds two and three).

Rotating peer assists are most successful when they are done in one room and everyone can SEE what is going on, because people can "SEE" what it looks like to

share what they know. They recognize the value in sharing what they know because they can see people working together to identify insights/ideas to someone's problem (the flipchart also helps provide the visuals). They can see how their insights/ideas build on others to produce even better results for the peer assistee.

Trust

Peer assistees need to be willing to put a problem on the table, rather than presenting their "best face" for the process to succeed. In order to do so the level of trust within the groups needs to be high. Again, the facilitator plays an important role in creating a safe environment for the participants. That being said, the energy that is generated by the process has been known to lead to a form of competition, some groups wanting to "outdo" the previous rounds in finding good solutions! If respectful of others people's ideas, it can be seen as healthy…

2 - What are the keys to success?

- A good facilitator who can summarize the suggestions quickly and to the point, manages the participation of the peers, makes sure all contributions are noted and heard, and ensures dominant participants don't monopolize or polarize the discussion
- Good time management in keeping the rounds moving
- A relaxed and open atmosphere
- Common language or good translation services
- A large enough room
- Enough flipcharts and markers! (1 flipchart and 2 markers per peer assistee)

3 - What role do you play in them?

KM4dev members who replied have played different roles. Bellanet staff has mainly been facilitators but other respondents have been peer assistees, peers, as well as facilitators.

4 - What gave you the idea?

Bellanet's use of Peer Assists within a KM workshop first occurred in January 2002 in Thailand for participants in the ENRAP network. We were approached by a participant, who after hearing several examples of how KM is about peers in community helping each other, asked whether he could give him some advice on how to cope with his situation in northern Pakistan. He explained that his project had been very successful in organizing the community to come together to make decisions about how money should be spent, where wells should be dug, etc. However, he said, the problem was

that the locally elected officials felt undermined by the process and were quite firmly making the point that as "elected" officials, this sort of thing was their responsibility not the community's. Furthermore, the decision-making process was being subverted by the wealthier landowners who were trying to influence the decision making to ensure that wells were dug on their land, etc.

Not knowing how to help him, we suggested having a peer assist with the workshop participants. 40 minutes later, the project manager from Pakistan had written down pages of ideas and suggestions that he planned to try to apply back home.

The rotating peer assists came about in a KM4dev workshop in The Hague in November 2002 that Bellanet co-organized with other development organizations. Because there were more than 50 participants in the workshop, the group would have been too large for just one peer assist. We thought that splitting the group into three smaller groups and having concurrent peer assists, then rotating after a certain period of time, would be a clever way of using the technique with a larger group. And everyone gets to hear each story and to contribute to it.

KM4dev members who have used rotating peer assists in their own workshops (IICD, AUCC, CIDA) got the idea from participating as peer assistees or peers in either the aforementioned Hague workshop, or the subsequent May 2003 Ottawa workshop.

5 - How do you know when they have been really useful?

- The peer assistee says so through immediate and/or long-term feedback that what was learned was useful or applied
- The peers/participants say they have enjoyed the exercise
- The discussion is lively and contributions are plentiful
- People start using the technique to address their own problems

6 - What organisation(s) have you used them in and what sort of topics did you apply them to?

Bellanet has used them mainly in KM workshops with international development organizations on topics such as issues related to Communities of Practice, knowledge management and networking.

The International Institute for Communications and Development (IICD) has used rotating peer assists in a workshop on Communities of Practice to illustrate the technique and the power and value of communities of practice amongst mostly KS-practitioners. They also used them in with agriculture livelihoods practitioners as participants in a South-South Exchange workshop to tackle specific problems in terms of ICT-enabled community development.

The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada used rotating peer assists at a meeting of international development project directors (both Canadian and Southern directors) to facilitate sharing knowledge on 5 key topics such as promoting local ownership, adapting to major changes, and promoting sustainability in an increasingly risk-prone environment.

The Canadian International Development Agency used rotating peer assists in a workshop, which sought to transfer after action review and peer assists skills by applying them. Some of the topics covered were on building knowledge sharing into workplans, effective program approaches in low capacity countries, and mechanisms for quality and strategic alignment of projects/programs.

6 – What makes them different from a simple peer assist (question suggested by Steve)?

- Peer Assistees tell their story multiple times: Each time they tell their story, they help themselves articulate and understand their challenge more clearly. In the spirit of Dave Snowden's, we always know more than we can say, we can always say more than we can write down. Each telling enriches the teller's understanding
- Fresh insight: Three different groups and consequently three different dynamics get a crack at helping to solve the problem. This increases the chance of innovation and alternative viewpoints. The small groups sizes increase the chance of people being heard
- The Peer Assisters get multiple stories to engage with: This gives them chance to see a peer assist working in a number of different contexts. It increases the chance of people seeing the value in peer assists and increases the chances of them having relevant experience to contribute to one or more of the assist
- It keeps the energy high in a workshop: There is movement, people getting fresh stories, challenges, insights