5.0 Practice Guidance – Capability Area #3: Experiential Learning

Peer Assist

Tips for learning before using a peer-assist technique to combine knowledge and expertise from a successful initiative with knowledge and expertise about a new context, in order to learn from the past and innovate for the future

Why use peer assist?

In many government offices, learning is rarely shared from one project to the next similar project in a new context. Opportunities are therefore missed to learn, gain efficiency through the reuse of information and knowledge created through past projects and the developing, testing and documenting of new knowledge and innovations.

The peer-assist process builds tacit knowledge, social networks and the quality of information in the repository by bringing peers together at the start of an initiative.

What to do:

Experts such as Collison and Parcell (2004) recommend that groups:

- have a clear purpose;
- identify a facilitator;
- select and schedule a logical date;
- involve diverse participants;
- list outputs and ways of achieving them;
- make the environment comfortable, perhaps away from the office;
- include some socialization time (for strengthening the network and leaving space for idea generation and insights that may not surface in a focused session);
- share information and context;
- ask lots of questions;
- make sense of results and present feedback, with a focus on learning and on who else might benefit;
- make sure there is agreement on actions, and document valuable information for future reference.

Rationale:

- Beneficial for innovation and knowledge re-use
- Links knowledge repository (best for stand-alone information) and peer-peer work (best for problem-solving and tacit knowledge creation and sharing)
- Culture change towards more recognition of knowledge, expertise and knowledge sharing is supported
- Individuals, who may move to other roles or retire, share expertise

When?

At the beginning of a project or process cycle

Whenever a critical new action could be informed by a similar past experience

What are the benefits?

- Knowledge re-use; time and money saved
- Better information for repository
- Tacit knowledge shared across a larger group
- Social networks and social capital strengthened
- Potential for knowledge creation and innovation
- Can be built into measures of good practice adoption

Pitfalls to avoid

- Trying to impose without the receiving group asking for help
- Experienceing facilitation gaps, such as vague purpose, superficial discussion and lack of agreement on results
- Trying to achieve without an in-depth face-to-face session
- Short-changing any of the major three elements: past learning, new context and combined ideas

To learn more:

Collison, C., & Parcell, G. (2001; 2004). *Learning to Fly: Practical Knowledge Management from Leading and Learning Organizations.* Chichester: Capstone Publishing (Wiley).