



PAPER 1

An innovative approach to knowledge management for humanitarian organisations

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1 Abstract

This paper describes a model of knowledge management (KM) designed specifically for humanitarian leaders and managers. It is designed to empower local teams, support localisation, and strengthen sector-wide outcomes. This systematic management-led model provides common terminology and vision that will guide managers as to how to energise the powerhouse of their organisation – teams who work directly with local civil society organisations (CSOs), government and the people affected by disaster. The practical guidance may also be used by local CSOs and government directly.

The model can be characterised as management-led KM – as opposed to individual-led KM, which relies on individuals to access new knowledge or convert new learning into action. It is designed to be ‘bottom-up’ and increase the response team’s effectiveness and efficiency. The model builds on Deming’s adaptive Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle and the International Organization for Standardization’s continuous improvement slope. It includes systematic learning from others, learning from within the project, and improving the performance of others across the sector. Improved practice is captured, using a risk-based approach, to avoid the need for team members to reinvent the wheel.

By adopting this more structured and accountable KM process, leaders and managers can build a solid foundation for teams to deliver more than the sum of their parts, maximise the use of resources and strengthen partners, government and other humanitarian actors to better meet the needs of affected people.

2 Introduction

Knowledge management (KM) has been interpreted in many ways in development and humanitarian response. In this paper, KM is defined as “a way of managing work, paying due attention to the value and effect of an intangible asset, namely knowledge” (Milton & Lambe 2016:p7).

The author is a water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and integrated adaptive management system specialist. She used her experience in developing effective bottom-up management systems in corporate, development and humanitarian response, as well as working with and for civil society organisations (CSOs), to develop the model.

3 Model

3.1 Individual-led knowledge management

Knowledge management often consists of placing key reference documents on an intranet or common drive, establishing communities of practice, documenting and sharing good practice, or running webinars. These are invaluable processes, but rely on individuals accessing that knowledge, and most importantly, converting new knowledge into improved practice. This has been termed individual-led KM, and can be considered a case of managers providing a supply of knowledge.

3.2 A management-led knowledge management model

The systematic process of line managers supporting local teams to access knowledge and convert it into improved practice has been called management-led KM. It supports the demand for knowledge and includes effectively disseminating emerging practice to support sector-wide improvement.

At the core of management-led KM, as displayed in Figure 1, is:

1. The response team. Management-led KM supports the powerhouse of the organisation to improve local decision-making for a more adaptive, contextualised response.
2. Support for continual improvement using Deming's adaptive Plan-Do-Check-Act management cycle:
 - a. **Plan:** develop a policy, strategy or plan (note: not necessarily the local team's responsibility);
 - b. **Do:** implement the plan;
 - c. **Check:** monitor, evaluate and/or reflect to identify what is working and what is not; and (critically)
 - d. **Act, or Adjust:** change the plan or practice based on lessons learned in the Check phase.

Humanitarian response and development is often weak in the Act phase. Implementing approaches such as MEL (monitoring, evaluation and learning) and adaptive management can strengthen this phase. Following the iterative Plan-Do-Check-Act/Adjust cycle continually improves outcomes for the affected population and moves the team up the continual improvement slope. Best practice (the flag in Figure 1) is an aspirational and ever-changing goal that is always pursued but never achieved.

3. Development of an effective 'wedge' to capture key knowledge. This is needed to avoid loss of good practice (the ball moving back down the slope) when team members leave or between humanitarian disasters. It may take the form of a short guide, terms of reference, a training manual, or even a 'walking wedge' – a designated person to consult about the latest local good practice. The keys are that:
 - a. the wedge is used. It is not a wedge if it sits on a shelf and is never opened; and
 - b. it provides more benefit to the response team than the time it takes to produce and maintain.

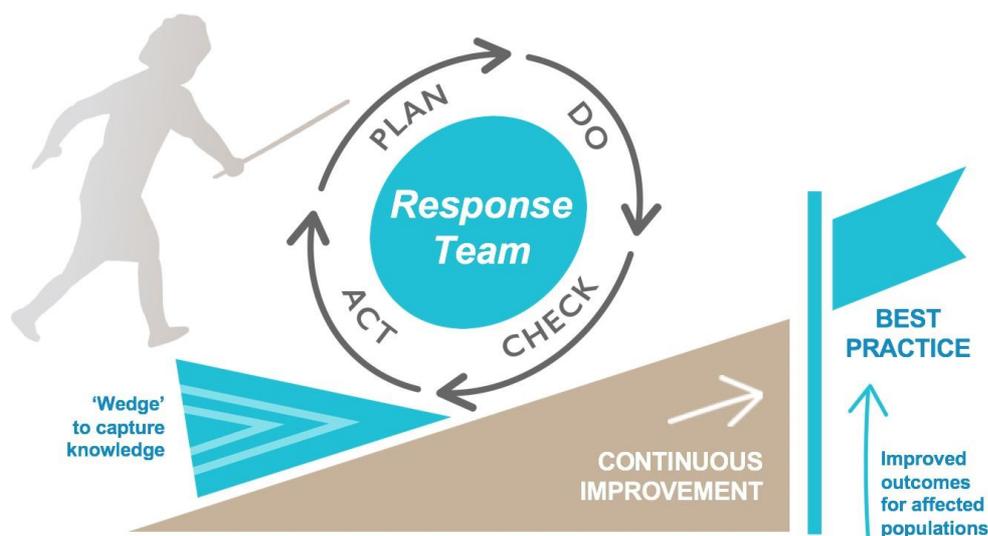


Figure 1: The continuous improvement slope (adapted from International Organization for Standardization (ISO))

Putting management-led KM in the context of humanitarian response (Figure 2), it can be seen that the response team in turn supports continual improvement within local actors and affected communities. This supports localisation and strengthens the resilience of the local community. Moreover, the team members are not working in isolation; they can access a body of knowledge, at global and local levels, and within their own organisation.



Figure 2: Representation of an international organisation's humanitarian response

The purpose of management-led KM, as shown in Figure 3, which builds on the above structure, is to put systematic management approaches in place to support the response team to:

1. **go beyond good or emerging practice** – improve practice after learning from local or global policy or experience, research, experts, or internally, taking due account of intellectual property;
2. **'act', institutionalise (the wedge) and continually improve** – efficiently convert feedback, evaluations, and lessons learned into changed practice. Institutionalise key knowledge by creating effective wedges. Systematically support response teams to continually improve; and
3. **improve the performance of external actors** – share emerging and good practice tailored to improve the performance of others in the sector, as opposed to marketing stories or many conference papers.

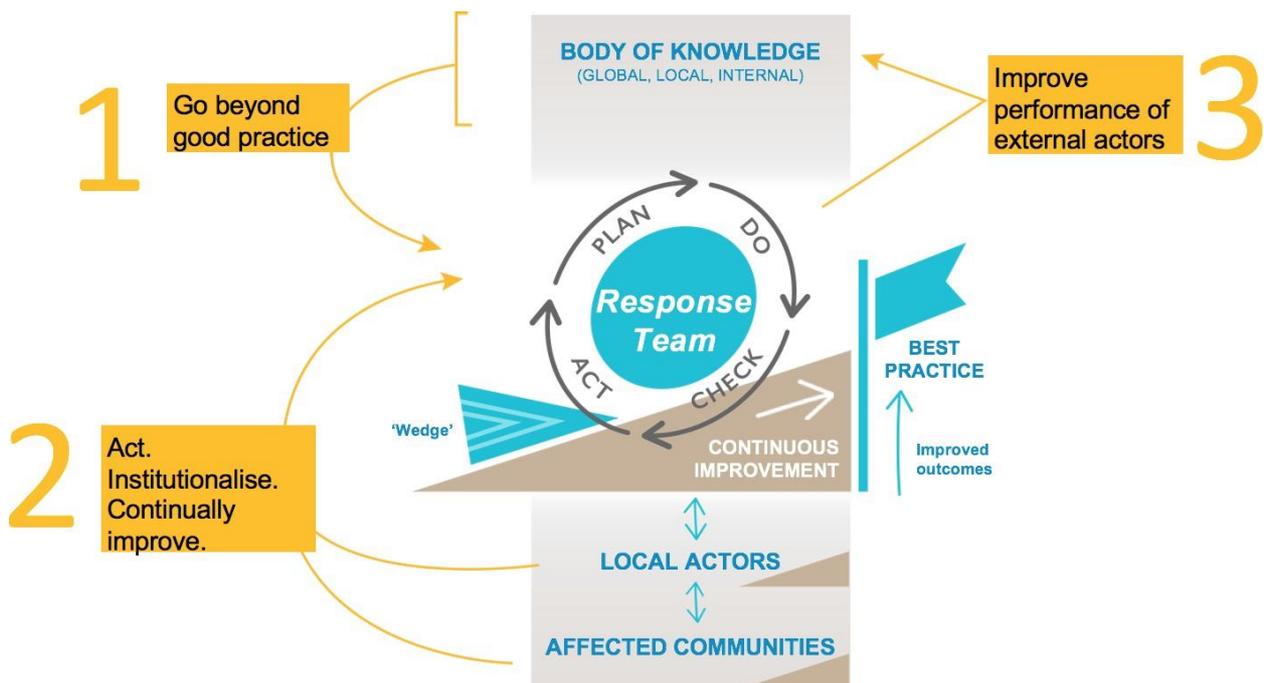


Figure 3: Core components of management-led knowledge management

Leaders and managers can develop and strengthen systematic management-led KM approaches by ensuring clear roles, responsibilities, and (simple) processes such as in the following examples.

- **Plan:**
 - Prioritise, with the response teams, key 'high-risk' topics to be addressed collectively on an agreed schedule, such as how to best support government or improve community resilience. This could bring together researchers, government, global experts and local WASH team members to produce contextualised good practice designed to form an effective wedge.
- **Do:**
 - *Go beyond good practice* (learning from local, global, internal experience): collaborate with other organisations (on projects, monitoring and/or evaluation) or develop regional rapid response teams of national staff to strengthen walking wedges.
 - *'Act/adjust, institutionalise (the wedge) and continually improve'*: support time-limited response teams to convert new knowledge into improved practice, by:
 - conducting real-time evaluations (RTEs) early, say six weeks into an emergency, when there is active demand for improved practice. Country managers should be actively involved and follow up agreed actions. RTE process improvements can be captured in the RTE terms of reference (the wedge).
 - identifying simple tools for teams to use, such as peer assists or after-action review. See 'Tools for knowledge and learning: A guide for development and humanitarian organisations' (Ramalingam 2006).
 - *Disseminate effectively to improve performance of external actors*. Produce material for a specific target audience of WASH specialists. See the principles in the Water Engineering Development Centre's eight-page 'Spreading the word further: Guidelines' (Fisher et al. 2003).
- **Check / Act:**
 - *Check and take corrective action*. Use a simple '5 whys' approach to help the local team identify the underlying cause(s) of near-misses or problems and assign local action. Consider adopting approaches used in international development, such as adaptive management, problem-driven iterative adaptation, and collaborating, learning and adapting.

4 Summary and Conclusion

Adopting a management-led KM approach will assist humanitarian organisations to empower response teams which, in turn, can empower local actors and the people affected by the emergency. This will improve outcomes, accountability and the effective use of resources.

References

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