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A purposeful muddling through: Is everyone struggling with adaptive management like my team?



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Karri Byrne introduces a new report on a neglected topic: the incentives and constraints to adaptive programming across the donor-implementer relationship.

Recently, I was part of a team from MarketShare Associates that looked at adaptive management and why it was so challenging for donors and implementers alike. It's one of those things, isn't it? Something that makes sense when you read about, but seems so hard to apply to your own team. [Tim Sparkman](#) and I had both managed big, complex market programmes, and knew very well the pitfalls and opportunities of those programmes – we spent a lot of time talking about them over beers and burgers – and wishing that it was easier to explain to donors or our own colleagues why adaptive management is so important.

Important... and HARD. Sometimes really hard. We both felt relatively successful at navigating the murky waters of adaptation in market systems programmes, and had learned so much. 'Other people need to know this!' 'We need more programmes like this!' we would say to each other.

So we were delighted when BEAM Exchange gave us an opportunity to explore it more. We talked to over 60 implementers and donors from a variety of contexts and types of market programmes – I thought it was really important that we made sure to talk to those who were not sold on the idea of adaptive management, or didn't understand it. After all, it is easy to get confirmation of your idea when everyone already thinks just like you.

The report [The road to adaptive management: knowledge, leadership, culture and rules](#), is the result of those interviews – and what fascinating people you are! We could have written an entire comedy sketch just from the quotes we got from all of you about your triumphs and failures (sometimes epic) and tenacious desire to keep learning.

For those who don't have time to read the full report I'll give you some of the headlines:

In answer to the question above – yes. Everyone is struggling just like you. Donors. Implementers. Programme staff. Compliance staff. MEL staff. Everyone. But there are some really good examples out there, and the report provides a few suggestions on where to focus your attention first within your team.

We found that there are four 'baskets' of issues: Knowledge (do we really know the rules?); Culture (broken into sub-categories of office culture, national culture, organisational culture); Leadership (if the boss doesn't support it, who is really going to stick their neck out?); and procurement and contracts (because most operational support systems weren't really built for flexibility). The report explores the challenges in each of these baskets, and provides examples of how other organisations are managing them.

It's clear that many practitioners want and need adaptive management – we learned that there are many creative ways that people are sneaking it into their offices and projects, even when the environment is not conducive.

For me there were two really big eye-openers: First, there is no donor-implementer divide here. Donors are as frustrated with the lack of flexibility as implementers are, and each wishes the other would 'get with the programme', or heaps praise on those individuals who 'get it'. I love hearing this because it gives me hope that it may not be that hard to address these challenges as it initially seems.

The second eye-opener is a head-slap, 'well, duh' kind of eye opener. It's that the Culture basket is far more important than we initially realised. This colours the other issues of knowledge, leadership, and operational support. Whether people feel comfortable and confident raising issues and making changes is absolutely a function of the incentives or constraints they experience in their immediate team environment.

There are lots of other good points in the research: how adaptability is personal, the issues around staff turnover, 'numbers for the minster' and how they drive the attention of a programme, how teams develop work-arounds when the rules are too strict, inflexibility of budgets or M&E systems.

Yes, there is something for everyone there. And that's what I think it is going to take to make our projects more adaptive...it's going to take a little bit from everyone.

[Read the report](#)

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