Sept. 22, 2022

Beyond superheroes and wish lists: what makes a good MSD Team Leader?

Mike Klassen

All blogs

Perceived shortages of MSD Team Leaders (TL) threaten programme quality and amplify diversity and inclusion problems.

MSD practitioners are taking part in a large-scale participatory study to identify and refine TL competencies, with preliminary findings shared in this blog. The next phase of this process is to explore new ways to recruit and support leaders in MSD programmes.

Effective MSD programmes are delivered by effective teams that are shaped and guided by TLs. While significant resources have been invested in programme teams to hone their application of MSD, what about MSD TLs themselves? Are good MSD TLs unicorns, perfectly formed magical creatures, or even demigods? Easy to conjure on paper or in a storybook, but hard to locate in the wild?

The perceived shortage of strong MSD Team Leaders is a recurring problem. A key symptom is the small pool of eligible candidates constantly being recycled on MSD programme proposals. Some causes of this problem include restrictive hiring criteria, and biases in the recruitment and promotion of MSD TLs. Recruiters acknowledge prioritising explicit criteria (advanced degrees, years of experience) in searching for 'a safe pair of hands' that donors implicitly trust to steward public funds, regardless of their MSD aptitudes. At worst, this leads to recruiters proposing TL candidates who 'may not always be the best people for the job but you go with them because either your bid gets thrown out or someone else goes with them.[1]' At

best, it reinforces the barriers that designate who can and cannot aspire to this important position - leading to many TLs being white male expatriates[2].

For the past year, the DCED's MSD Working Group has explored what competencies make successful MSD TLs. We interviewed 10 past, current and aspiring TLs, and surveyed 65 highly-experienced MSD practitioners[3] to gain a range of views.

Our findings identified five 'domains' of MSD team leadership deemed critical to success:

1. **Shaping the team's learning culture**: culture, motivation and capacity
2. **Creating the space to operate**: politics, relationships and expectations
3. **Managing across functions**: integrating HR, operations, finance and MEL
4. **Strategic view of market systems**: experimentation, feedback and learning within a broader vision of systemic change
5. **Core MSD technical knowledge**: the MSD approach and management implications

In June 2022 we gathered feedback via an interactive workshop. More than 40 participants - including donors, implementers and consultants - reacted to the domains and shared their ideas on how to move forward. Here is what they had to say:

> **The domains resonate, but they need contextualising.** Every programme has unique needs, and the TL requirements vary depending on the donor, programme size, sectoral focus, country and team composition. There is no universal template for MSD TLs.

> **Be careful what you wish for.** There is still a risk of putting too much pressure on one person if the domains spawn a stifling 'wish list' that makes the role seem unattainable, further excluding a more diverse pool of candidates.

> **Leadership teams, not just leaders.** Broaden focus to the overall leadership team rather than anchoring on one individual TL.

> **TLs are learning too**. MSD TLs need time and space to learn how to master a complex and daunting role. Gathering mentorship, coaching and capacity building resources that exist (and identifying those that don't) could make a huge difference to supporting TLs. This can also reduce turnover and its associated problems.

> **Competency models are useful, but not sufficient to change the current system.** Wider changes are needed to how programmes are designed, awarded, and implemented. Shared competency definitions can help, but they are not the full solution.

- **How TLs are recruited.** Practitioners showed real demand for practical examples of hiring practices, including donor perspectives on TL criteria and assessment.

- **Cultivate the next generation**. The domains can provide a useful roadmap for middle managers on MSD programmes, as part of intentional pipeline strategies.

Given the palpable interest in pushing the conversation further into the practical realm, we are now launching Phase 2 of the MSD Team Leaders workstream. This will focus on defining and solving practical challenges around recruitment and development of MSD leaders. Drawing on the knowledge clinic methodology, we are proposing two clinics on MSD TLs.

Clinic 1: Recruitment of MSD Team Leaders

Discuss a range of recruitment processes and the opportunities for improvement and change. Take stock of existing screening approaches, interview questions, case study scenarios and how they have been adapted to particular MSD programme needs.

Clinic 2: Support and Development of MSD Leaders

Map out archetypes of MSD programme leadership team structures and the competencies of key leaders occupying different roles. Explore career pathways for future TLs and the influence of other leadership roles on making the jump to TL. Assess needs and options for tailored professional development for TLs, including coaching and mentoring.

Get involved - apply to participate in one of the clinics

The call for clinic applications is now open, until 15th October 2022. Apply via this online form to participate in a facilitated forum to share insights on MSD programme leadership teams.

We are looking for managers and leaders from donors and implementers actively involved in recruiting, hiring, developing and supporting MSD leaders.

For full information, check out the MSD Team Leader Clinic Prospectus

[1] https://thecanopylab.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Inclusion-Leadership_FINAL.pdf

[2] https://www.devex.com/news/usaid-chief-of-party-system-is-flawed-applicants-and-recruiters-say-103890#.YxhrqyzX5i0.linkedin

[3] 50% of respondents were current or past MSD Team Leaders