



## **PEER ASSIST**

**Inter-American  
Development Bank**

**KNOWLEDGE AND  
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**TECHNICAL NOTES**

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# PEER ASSIST



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## Peer Assist: Learning Before Doing

### Introduction

A disciplined approach to “Learn from Experience” is critical to the enduring ability of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and its regional partners to make effective knowledge-based decisions and optimize development outcomes. In order to achieve the desired results, learning before, during, and after everything we do must be ‘part of the way we work’ at the IDB -not something extra.

The IDB has developed several methodological tools that will help Bank personnel and their regional stakeholders identify, capture, and as applicable, share their knowledge for re-use by others. As shown in Figure 1, these methods to mainstream learning from our individual and collective experience in every phase of our project cycle (and other key operational processes) include the After Action Review,<sup>1</sup> Knowledge Capture Interview,<sup>2</sup> In Action Review<sup>3</sup> and Peer Assist.

Knowledge captured using these methods can be analyzed and organized using the ‘Knowledge to Action’ methodology,<sup>4</sup> which produces and organizes actionable ‘Key Learnings’ for re-use by their target audience(s). Key Learnings captured from individual projects can help teams solve current operational challenges and improve performance indicators. The cumulative capture of Key Learnings from multiple projects in a specific country, (sub-)sector, or business process allow for the compilation and validation of a critical mass of relevant knowledge, which can be disseminated effectively through an integrated online knowledge base and/or be leveraged to develop or update training or other capacity building efforts.

This way, the IDB can ensure practitioners are able to take advantage of what has been done and learned before in IDB operations, and make effective decisions based on the latest available knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see After Action Review, Inter-American Development Bank, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> For more information see Knowledge Capture Interview, Inter-American Development Bank, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> For more information see In Action Review, Inter-American Development Bank, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> For more information see Knowledge to Action (K2A), Inter-American Development Bank, 2012.

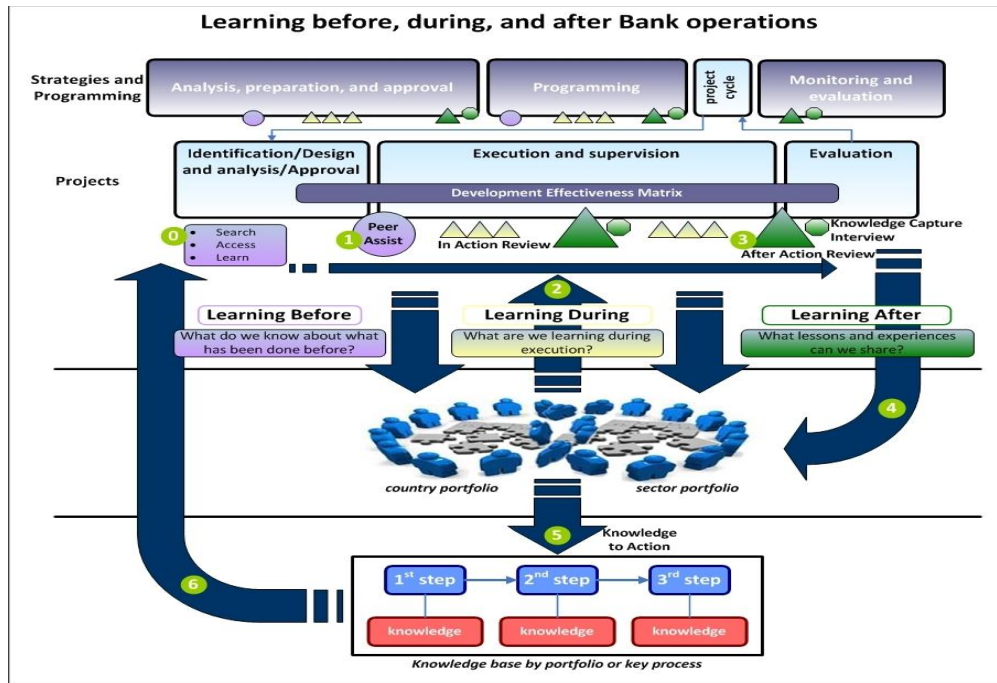


Figure 1. Learning from project experience -before, during, and after.

### What is a Peer Assist?

There are many ways to ‘learn before doing’, many of them informal: Calling a colleague, conversations over lunch or in a meeting, searching online or in specific knowledge bases, or learning within a Community of Practice or -more formally- in a virtual or physical classroom. Another more formal technique to learn before is the Peer Assist that helps teams take advantage of what has been learned from what has been done before.

A Peer Assist is a facilitated workshop, held face-to-face or virtually, in which a diverse group of participants from inside and/or outside the Bank share their experiences and insights with a team that wants to benefit from what others have learned, before it decides on a specific plan or course of action to deal with a significant upcoming challenge. Different from more informal peer to peer learning opportunities (e.g. networking, mentoring, Q&A, BBLs), the Peer Assist is a structured process designed to tackle challenges of greater complexity, uncertainty, or risk. Peer Assists therefore usually take between 4 hours and 2 days, depending on the complexity of the challenge to be addressed and the familiarity of the two teams with each other.

This ‘learning before doing’ technique targets a specific technical or operational challenge and aims to identify new ideas and approaches to addressing it. The Peer Assist is typically used before the start of the actual work. In other words, the Peer Assist does not ask, “Where do we start?” Instead, it departs from “here is what we are thinking, what do you think?” It provides the inviting (‘home’) team with a way to broaden the range of options considered and ‘test their plan’ before it is finalized and executed. Beyond the session itself, a Peer Assist often promotes ongoing knowledge sharing and builds lasting relationships and professional networks among participants.

The Peer Assist session is designed to create an effective space for knowledge sharing using the following dynamics:

- The ‘home team’, having requested a Peer Assist, shares what it knows and is thinking based on the context in which they are working

- The 'visiting team' (internal or external) shares what they know based on their experience and context
- Together they learn what they both know and what they can learn from each other
- They are then in a position to work together to brainstorm as to what is possible, either by adapting the plan or approach to work in the new context or by creating something new from what they both now understand, and
- Based on the newly generated understanding and learning, the 'home team' identifies follow-up actions and makes adjustments to its plan going forward.

### **What is the value added of a Peer Assist?**

Peer Assists are effective because they create an environment in which peers more readily share their knowledge with each other and learn from each other. Experience and knowledge is always situational or contextual. When challenges become more complex, successful knowledge transfer often requires more than a one way communication of what has worked in the past; it calls for the creation of an environment in which open two-way interaction enables the emergence of a shared understanding of how what has been learned previously can be adapted and applied to the new context or challenge.

The Peer Assist is designed to efficiently exchange and build on the knowledge of both participating groups. Often, the interpersonal connections built during the Peer Assist are leveraged in the weeks and months after to continue the learning and knowledge exchange process, adding value in both directions.

Not only can a Peer Assist help steepen a team's learning curve and prevent 'reinvention of the wheel' for challenges for which solutions already exist, it can help teams more effectively identify and mitigate risks ahead of time and avoid preventable mistakes in execution.

### **How can I set up a Peer Assist and what support is available?**

To be effective, Peer Assists sessions usually last between 4 hours and 2 days. This time frame is critical for trust to develop between the two teams so open and honest conversations that produce breakthrough insights and innovative approaches can take place.

Key steps to plan and carry out a Peer Assist include:

1. (team) Plan the Peer Assist well in advance to increase the chance that prospective participants will be able to fit it into their busy schedules
2. (team) Identify a facilitator (ideally not a member of the team) to support Peer Assist planning and execution
3. (team, facilitator) Clearly define the purpose and scope: What are the specific challenges to be addressed?
4. (team, facilitator) Leverage existing networks to identify a diverse group of participants from inside and/or outside the Bank
5. (team) Prepare and share in advance as much documentation as possible relevant to your project or specific challenge(s) with the visiting team

6. (facilitator, team) Prepare a detailed annotated meeting agenda, including opportunities for socializing between teams and for teams to work and think separately to ‘make sense’ of what they have heard (for a notional agenda for a 1-day Peer Assist, see Figure 2 below)
7. (facilitator, teams) Conduct the Peer Assist, identify actions for follow up, document and share outcomes
8. (team) Make decisions on planned approach based on insights gained and move to implementation
9. (teams) Follow up to track progress, maintain relationships, and take advantage of additional opportunities for knowledge exchange, as applicable. Consider options for further dissemination of what has been learned.

While these guidelines can help you plan and execute a Peer Assist effectively to tackle challenges of greater complexity uncertainty or risk, please keep in mind there are many variations on the concept of the ‘Peer Assist’, from inviting a colleague from another unit or organization in a 2 hour presentation and Q&A setting to week-long study tours on location. To help you decide what may be the best solution for your specific needs, the KNL team is available to provide in-depth methodological support. KNL can also provide facilitation support to teams interested in organizing a Peer Assist.

For more information, please contact KNL/KNM at [aprenderdelaexperiencia@iadb.org](mailto:aprenderdelaexperiencia@iadb.org)

**Figure 2. Notional Agenda for a Peer Assist**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Agenda</b>	<b>Who</b>
10.00 -10.20	Welcome and approach	Facilitator
10.20 -10.45	Introductions	Home and visiting teams
10.45 -11.45	What the home team knows	Home team
11.45 -12.15	Reflection: what stands out	Visiting team
12.15 - 1.30	<i>Lunch and social activity</i>	Home and visiting teams
1.30 -2.30	What the peers know	Visiting team
2.30 -3.00	Reflection: what stands out	Home team
3.00 -3.15	<i>Break</i>	
3.15 -4.45	What we now know together: Feedback and actionable recommendations	Visiting team (and home team)
4.45 -5.00	What else we need to know: Action items	Home team
5.00 -5.30	In Action Review, thank you, and close	Facilitator







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