

The Virtual Leadership Development Program

LEADERSHIP = RESULTS

Do improved leadership skills lead to results? Just ask the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) team members from the Ethiopian Interfaith Forum for Development Dialogue and Action (EIFDDA) who participated in MEASURE Evaluation's second offering of the Virtual Leadership Development Program (VLDP).

Established in December of 2002, EIFDDA is an alliance of faith based organizations (FBOs) with development experience in diverse locations in Ethiopia. EIFDDA's aim is to strengthen the capabilities of member agencies to translate their respective religious values into their development interventions, thereby improving the social, economic, cultural, and spiritual prosperity of Ethiopians living in poverty. EIFDDA's major areas of intervention are in:

- HIV and AIDS prevention and control;
- good governance; and
- peace building and conflict resolution.

The VLDP team was composed of six EIFDDA staff members: the planning, monitoring and evaluation department head; the monitoring and evaluation coordinator; and four program officers involved in collection and use of data.

The team's organizational focus and its composition, challenges, and results are all typical of the teams that participate in the VLDP, a 13-week Internet-based learning program that strengthens the capacity of teams to meet health challenges by developing action plans addressing real organizational or programmatic challenges.



FIGURE 1: EIFDDA TEAM PREPARES FOR THE VLDP.

PRIOR TO THE VLDP — According to team member Dr. Habtamu Woldeyes, a program officer who is EIFDDA's HIV/AIDS unit coordinator, prior to the VLDP, results were compromised by a lack of focus on goals and objectives, poor planning skills, a focus on individual contributions rather than on team work, and a lack of alignment within EIFDDA.

When the VLDP launched in September 2009, the team embarked upon the program with high expectations. All of the team members were eager to learn leadership skills that would help them manage projects, use M&E more effectively, and improve teamwork.

Despite their high expectations, the team also had some initial concerns about the program. They had not participated in a virtual program before and worried about whether their Internet connections would be adequate. They were also concerned about the time commitment required to complete the program, since they often travel to field locations for their jobs.

OFF TO A GREAT START — The team started off well at the beginning of the program. A Manage-



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ment Sciences for Health (MSH) employee experienced in the VLDP was visiting EIFDDA's offices on another project just weeks after the VLDP launched. The MSH employee observed the team in action:

During our sessions, I noticed some familiar hand-drawn [VLDP] charts on the wall, and at the conclusion of our time the group was eager to share ... [their overall experiences] with me.

I made two observations: first, there is obvious authentic learning going on there. I mean authentic in the pedagogical sense — there is application, contextualization, and synthesis based on the real conditions of their office. Second, there is real pride there. This group is really proud of their own self-examination and learning experience.

FALLING BEHIND — Despite this strong start, the team fell out of communication during the following month and the VLDP facilitators became concerned. Competing priorities and frequent travel to the field were affecting the team's ability to participate fully in the VLDP. As team member Hadi Nesru reported:

In the previous three weeks ... almost all the VLDP team members were dispatched around all corners of the country [and were] engaged in exhaustive M&E activities. Due to the remoteness and inaccessibility of the areas, most of us had disappeared and failed to communicate [since we did not have Internet services]. It's only when we rushed back to the office that we are able to log in We are now back to business ... saying "life goes on." Hence, we galvanized our energy and started to work on module 3 [of the VLDP] as a team and individually.

This gap in participation came during module 3, the most demanding module in the pro-

gram, when the teams begin using the VLDP Challenge Model to develop their action plans. This module requires teams to:

- identify the team's mission and vision;
- explore the current situation relative to the team's vision;
- articulate their desired measurable result (based on the SMART criteria of being specific, measurable, appropriate, realistic, and time-bound);
- dig deeply to understand obstacles to achieving their desired measurable result and the causes of those obstacles; and
- articulate the challenge statement of "how do we achieve our desired result when we face the following obstacles?"

BACK ON COURSE — To get back on course, the team demonstrated outstanding commitment by working on its action plan while traveling and on weekends. Team members learned through this experience to focus on their goal, to work together, and to apply all of the leadership practices and skills they had learned during the program.

CHALLENGE AND DESIRED MEASURABLE RESULT — EIFDDA's completed action plan focused on achieving the following desired measurable result:

In collaboration with EIFDDA's management and technical staffs as well as with member faith based organizations (FBOs) and other stakeholders, develop/finalize materials to train EIFDDA and member staff in developing M&E indicators, data collection tools, data reporting formats, electronic database and M&E guidelines by 30 June 2010. Identify and schedule first training for 30 program managers and M&E staff in its application to begin starting July 2010.

The team's challenge statement was:

How can our team develop HIV M&E

indicators, data collection tools, data reporting formats, electronic database, and M&E guidelines for EIFDDA and its members while most M&E staff are not well trained and the importance of M&E is not recognized by managers at all levels?

The action steps in their plan focused on aligning and mobilizing team members and their management staff, refining and promoting the use of data collection tools, developing training materials, and providing training (figure 2).

RESULTS — Not only did the team achieve their desired measurable result within the six-month implementation period, but they also used a “training-of-trainers” model that allowed them to increase the total number of people trained. The first 30 people trained “cascaded” their training to over 240 additional people by 30 June 2010.

As a result of this training, all nine member organizations improved their data reporting using the new format and, as a result, EIFDDA’s required reporting to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria also improved. Going forward, having data in a consistent format will allow EIFDDA to give member organizations feedback on its M&E systems and will lead to even better data reporting in the future. The next step for the

team, then, is to work with member organizations to improve their systems and ensure that data is of high quality and useable.

Team member Dr. Woldeyes attributed the team’s success in achieving its goals to the following:

- **Vision and focus** — During the VLDP, the team developed a vision and a focus for M&E. This moved the team members from concentrating on their own work as individuals to acting as a team working toward a common goal. Although the team was drawn from different depart-

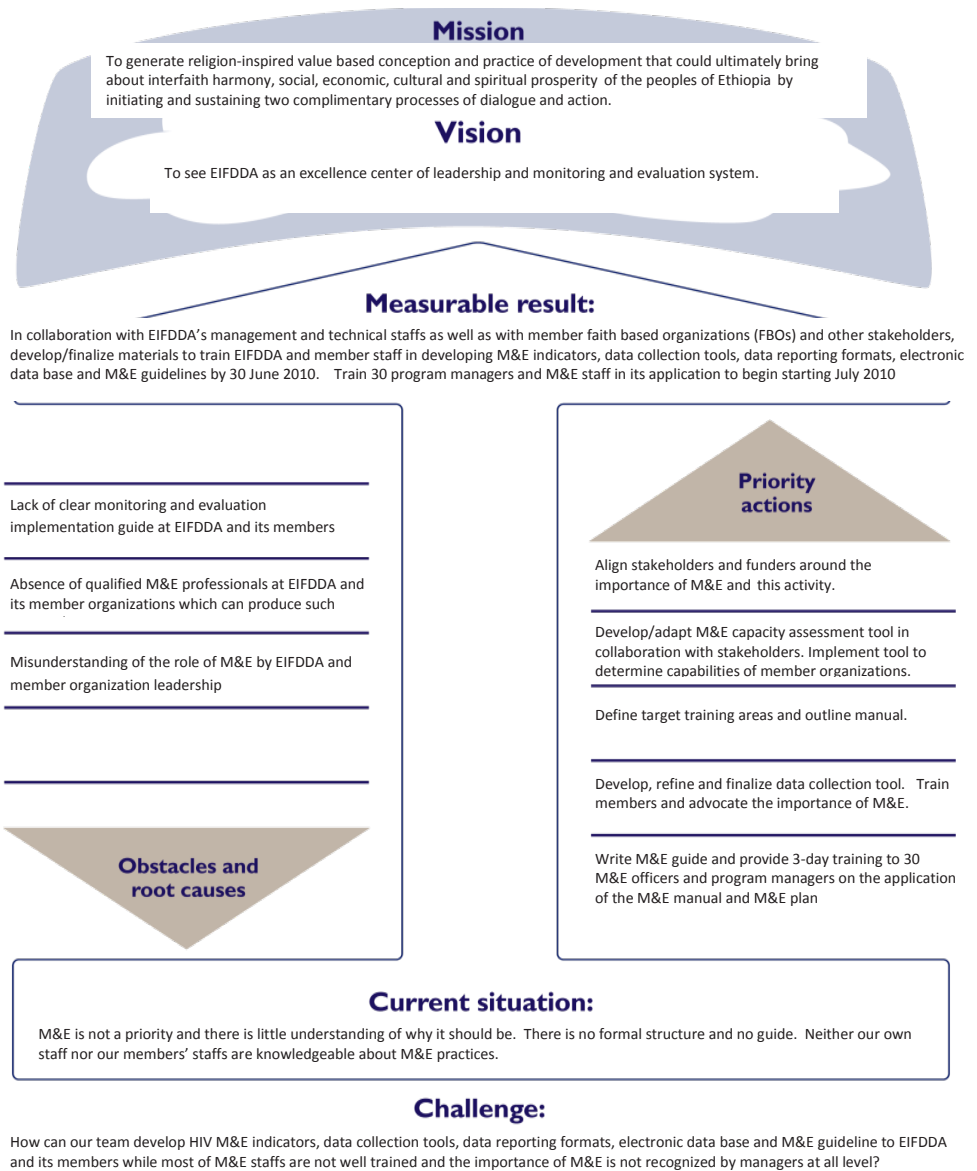


FIGURE 2: EIFDDA’S CHALLENGE AND MEASUREABLE RESULT MODEL.

ments in EIFD-DA, through the program they were able to assess organizational priorities and determine that data collection and other M&E systems were top priorities for demon-



FIGURE 3: M&E TRAINING AT ETHIOPIAN CATHOLIC SECRETARIAT.

strating programmatic results to donors and other stakeholders.

- **Action plan** — During the VLDP, the team was able to create a clear plan of action. Through step-by-step implementation of the plan and a clear focus on the result they wished to attain, they were able to achieve their desired result.
- **Aligning and mobilizing stakeholders** — Using the leadership practice of “aligning and mobilizing,” the EIFDDA team was able to obtain funding for the VLDP from World Learning, a nongovernmental agency. Team members also convinced their own senior management of the importance of this project.

To achieve these results, the team overcame an initial lack of support and funding, as well as time constraints and competing priorities. However, they overcame these obstacles by using strategies, such as meeting regularly, to maintain focus and momentum.

CONCLUSION — In an early entry on the Café, the VLDP’s on-line asynchronous chat room, Dr. Woldeyes wrote about why leadership development is so important in order to strengthen health systems and organizations:

I am a medical doctor by profession. We are very much deficient in working as a team though ... health work

is teamwork. The community’s perception of, and too much respect for, some health professionals (like doctors), the kind of boasting, pride, spirit we get when we are in medical school ... [can]

make such professionals poor leaders, since they don’t have good communication and relationships with others. Leadership is all about others. I think the system where [medical professionals] work must be visionary and [medical professionals] have to also learn about leadership skills. ... Somebody has to deliver us!

In recognition of the importance of leadership and the impact that the VLDP had on them, the team members have spread the VLDP principles and lessons learned throughout the organization, through staff and departmental meetings. In addition, the team:

- created an assessment based on the leadership competencies assessment used in the VLDP;
- conducted an organization-wide assessment of leadership competencies using this new tool;
- transferred the learning from the VLDP to the entire organization; and
- empowered departments to use the VLDP materials and tools to develop leadership competencies of their own departmental teams.

So ask this team “do improved leadership skills lead to results?” Their resounding reply is “yes,” Clearly, for this team, leadership = results.