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Stacey: Welcome to the premiere episode of the Leaders In Learning podcast series, a product of the Collaborating, Learning and Adapting Team at the United States Agency for International Development, USAID. My name is Stacey Young and I'm delighted to welcome you to the first of a seven-part podcast series that I'm co-hosting with my friend and colleague, Piers Bocock. Hi, Piers.

Piers: Hi, Stacey.

Stacey: Starting from a theory that effective learning organizations are more impactful to development organizations, leaders in learning is a seven-part podcast series that explores promising practices in building learning organizations through interviews with a variety of knowledge management and organizational learning leaders in the international development sector.

[0:01:00]

As a senior learning advisor in USAID'S Office of Learning Evaluation and Research, and the Agency's Bureau for Policy Planning and Learning, my job is to lead the effort to improve USAID's organizational learning capacity, and my co-host, Piers, is the Chief of Party for Knowledge Management and Learning Contract, which supports our team on this mission.

Together, Piers and I set out to interview a wide range of leaders and the disciplines of organizational learning, organizational development and knowledge management in the international development sector to see what we could learn from their experience, perspective and approaches, right, Piers?

Piers: That's right, Stacey but not only did we have a lot of fun doing so but we've used the – some of the wisdom perspective, experience, lessons and advice we got from those leaders in learning to plan out what we hope is a really interesting collection of episodes that delve into a range of specific components of successful organizational learning programs, in the hopes that we can compile and synthesize some keys to success for ourselves, as well as other champions of learning in the development sector.

[0:02:00]

But before we dive into what we mean by learning and development, can I take a moment to list our various learning leaders?

Stacey: Yeah, sure, go for it.

Piers: And perhaps let me set the stage for a moment. As is happening right now with the rain falling outside on a grey Washington spring afternoon, the interviews that we did with our leaders in learning varied in setting and timing.

We did some in London as part of a different sponsored conference that brought together different donors and implementing partners in learning. We did some over the telephone.

We did some in person, in our offices here in Washington. So bear with us if the sound quality varies a little bit but just know that the spirit is there. In fact, you know what I'm gonna do, I'm not gonna tell you the names of the people. I'm gonna let them introduce themselves.

Stacey: Oh, good.

Chris:
[0:03:00] Okay, Chris Collison, so independent consultant advisor, and work with a whole range of organizations, and so I tend to change my title depending on what the client wants me to be, but fundamentally I advise, support, help, connect around the overall themes of organizational learning and knowledge management.

Karen: My name is Karen Mokate. I work with the Inter-American Development Bank, and I am Chief of Knowledge Management at the IDB.

Duncan: My name is Duncan Green. I work for two organizations Oxfam GB and the London School of Economics.

Rob: So my name is Rob Cartridge. I am the Head of Global Knowledge at an International NGO called Practical Action. We are based in the U.K. and we work across South Bay, Africa and Latin America.

Allison:
[0:04:00] So I'm Allison Evans. I'm Chief Commissioner of the Independent Commission for Head Impact which is an independent body set up here in the U.K. in 2011 to scrutinize the effectiveness of U.K. Aid.

Gwen: So my name is Gwen Hines. I am Director of the International Relations Division from DFID, the U.K. Department for International Development.

- Tony:* So my name is Tony Pryor. I'm with the Policy, Planning and Learning Bureau of USAID, especially in the office of strategic and program planning, SPB to its friends.
- Clark:* My name is Clive Martlew and I work for the Department for International Development. It's in the U.K.
- Tom:* So I'm Thom Sinclair and I work for CGAP, which is at the World Bank. CGAP is the consultative group to assist the poor.
- Terry:* Yeah, so I'm Kerry Albright. I'm Chief of Research Utilization and Knowledge Management based at UNICEF's dedicated Office of Research – Innocenti.
- Stacey:* Well, it's quite a line-up, isn't it, Piers?
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- Piers:* Indeed.
- Stacey:* And I have to say that I think we both agree that it was really wonderful to talk with them all. The challenge was trying to boil down 10 fascinating conversations into a set of distinct episodes, but we did, and I think we've got an interesting set of episodes to release as part of this series. Shall I talk a bit about how we did that?
- Piers:* Yes, definitely.
- Stacey:* Okay, so through the course of reviewing the 10 interviews that we conducted, we realized that we'd been working toward a learning agenda of our own, as we sought to address a number of key learning questions related to the value of systematic intentional and resourced organizational learning and knowledge management to improve development outcomes, and we've designed the episodes around those questions.
- Here they are. In the first episode we just give an overview of the series and present our theory of change. The second episode explores why organizational learning matters in international development.
- [0:06:00] Episode Three explores the role of evidence and data in organizational learning efforts. Episode Four asks what aspects of organizational culture contribute to learning capacity.
- Episode Five looks at formal and informal leadership in creating a

learning organization. Episode Six explores how organizations are integrating intentional learning into their day to day work, and Episode Seven, the series finale looks at the future of organizational learning and international development.

So Piers, any thoughts on the overall series? Why do you think listeners should be looking forward to it, and do you want to talk about the theory of change behind leaders in learning?

Piers:
[0:07:00] Yeah, absolutely, and first off, an important point to make up front. I think everything that you will here in this series, while it is tailored to international development is applicable across any number of sectors, and in fact, listeners don't know this but when we initially designed this series, we thought about bringing in champions of learning and knowledge management from other sectors, but decided to focus this first series on international development, because that's where we work.

But to your question, so part of our theory of change that this series relates to is the belief that if we can provide and talk to, and hear from informal and formal leaders in organizational learning with champions of organizational learning, if we can provide them with the evidence, resources and space to incorporate intentional learning behaviors into their work, then they can help their organizations become more effective at learning and therefore more effective in contributing to development impact.

Stacey:
[0:08:00] Yeah, that's right Piers, and I think other parts of our theories of change are also relevant to leaders in learning, you know, having to do with the work that we do at USAID to establish policy guidance around organizational learning so that we have some requirements but also a lot more kind of helpful suggestive guidance around how to infuse collaborating learning and adapting into how we design our programs, how we manage their implementation, and how we assess them.

[0:09:00] So the policy piece I think is really important, and I wanted to flag that. Another part of how we approach this work, and therefore part of our theory of change has to do with that capacity building function of champions, but also of others who may not yet see themselves as champions, and really approaching that systemically, so that we're looking at how we transform the behaviors of individuals throughout an organization, and also how we transform the processes that shape how those individuals work and collaborate with each other.

Piers: Yeah, absolutely, and tying it to the leaders that we spoke to, another part of the theory is that we can identify from people who have had success in incorporating intentional learning efforts into their work. We can borrow and learn from them so that others who are working in this sphere can feel like there are things they can try, they're not alone, which is something that we've talked about before.

So being able to hear from people who've really made an impact through intentional systematic and resource collaborating, learning and adapting really adds value and weight to those who were trying to do this work on a day to day basis.

Stacey:
[0:10:00] Yeah, I think that's right. So Piers, one more thing that I think might be interesting to our listeners is how you and I came to this work. Can you share briefly your journey to becoming what I certainly consider a leader in learning?

Piers: Sure, and Stacey, we ask this question of a number of our leaders in learning how they came to this work. Did they set out to be working in organizational development, and organizational learning or knowledge management, and invariably the answer was no, of course not.

So I started out really as a communications guy. I just started out in advertising. I had studied film in college and have always --

Stacey: Really?

Piers: Yeah, yeah.

Stacey: I almost left grad school, so I could study film.

Piers: Really?

Stacey: Yeah, but I couldn't.

Piers: Okay, so that's our next thing, we're gonna make a movie together.

Stacey: Okay, it's a deal.

Piers: Maybe we'll just start with You Tube videos of our interviews for the next series [laughter.] But I've always been fascinated by storytelling and my undergraduate degree in filmmaking didn't take me very far.
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So I got into advertising and ended up actually working for a government partner, shall we say? Back then, we would call them beltway bandits, doing a lot of writing and editing, and in the early days of the Internet, sort of jumped on that bandwagon as a way to share and connect people who are working in disconnected offices.

Stacey: Did you make a gazillion dollars and retire at 27?

Piers: Unfortunately, not. That was – I tried to because I did start up a web development company, right at the wrong time. In fact, we were just kinda hitting our stride, working with non-profits when the dot com crash happened and --

Stacey: Ah, sorry.

Piers: -- yeah, that's okay but I learned from it and what I learned from it is that people want to connect. People want to get information. They want to get messages across. They want to connect with each other but it doesn't always work to have a written report.

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And so something was sort of tickling me there, and as I continued to work with non-profits and small businesses, what I found was that actually small businesses could be much more dynamic and much more nimble, and why was that?

Because people were connecting with each other, and talking and sharing knowledge, and so I ended up actually being recruited out of business school by my fairy godmother in development, Linda Namick, hi Linda, to go work with DAI and on economic development work but again, it was all about sharing knowledge and not in a way that we were telling people how to do stuff, but sharing how others were addressing similar challenges, and I loved that.

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I completely burned out. I think I did 20 trips in 18 months or something like that.

Stacey: Oh, wow.

Piers: So then I went to the private sector and I think I had – I think that was the second knowledge management title I had but that was back in you know the '90s where being a knowledge manager, people looked at you funny.

When I got back into development and really focused on knowledge management as my primary discipline, there weren't

many of us. You were one of them and there were a few people out there who were doing this thing called knowledge management, and when we would get together, it felt like it was a support group.

Stacey: Right.

Piers: It felt like oh, you have knowledge management in your title. Do you know what you're doing? Because I don't but it's – you know this was a thing and we could see it coming, and we could see the value of it but it was something that was tacked on at the end, perhaps to wrap up a project but not necessarily to actually make a project more effective.

[0:14:00] But I've had the good fortune at working with a number of great knowledge management initiatives, including Johns Hopkins and management sciences for health, CGIAR, and all of those were looking at how one can help our end stakeholders by giving them the context and information, and approaches that have worked and could be applicable if it worked for them, and you know it's interesting, finally coming back around to working with organizations to help them be more effective instead of working in agriculture or health, or economic development.

It has been so exciting to see USAID really make this shift towards becoming a learning organization and huge amount of credit I think goes to people like you and Tony, and a number of other champions across the agency; Zachary and Peggy DiAtamo, people who have seen this coming and seen the value, and just plugged away and plugged away, and plugged away until the sector was ready.

[0:15:00] I'm sure that's way too long but that's how I got here. How about you, Stacey? I'm going to turn the tables.

Stacey: Sure, okay. Yeah, I just wanna say that's such an interesting evolution and it's neat to see you come full circle back. A few interesting aspects of your biography that I did not know.

On my side, I've always been interested in change processes. In college and then in graduate school, I spent a lot of time studying social movements and social change, and also being a political activist, and so change for the better has always been a really fundamental driver for me.

After grad school, I taught at a Liberal Arts college for a while,

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including courses on social movements and social change, and public policy, and then I had the opportunity to move to East Africa, and I started working in international development then. I worked for 10 years as an independent consultant; five of those in East Africa, and I worked broadly across sectors.

I worked on a project for Swedish SIDA. We always said Swedish SIDA then because that's when there was still a Canadian SIDA. This was my first consulting job. They were looking at shifting from working with the government of Kenya, to working with civil society organizations, and they wanted a desk study on what the issues were involved in a donor, working with civil society organizations.

They wanted a directory of all of the organizations in Kenya that worked in the AID sectors that they were interested in, and they wanted in-depth interviews with leaders in those sectors, and I got to do all of that, and it was really the best introduction to international development that I could have had.

Piers:

And knowledge management actually.

Stacey:
[0:17:00]

And knowledge management, exactly. Yeah, and so I went from there to working – I did a lot of work in the health sector because I had worked both academically and as an activist on HIV and AIDS issues, so I worked on those issues.

I worked on agriculture issues. I worked on – I worked with Rockefeller and Ford on issues of philanthropy and development change, and just really got to operate in a wide swath of development issues, and meet a tremendous number of interesting people.

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A really nice bookend to my 10 years as a consultant was my final project which was writing a book for the Ford Foundation about their work in East Africa, over a period of 40 years and through that, I got to understand the history and evolution not only of Ford's work but really of how American institutions have approached international development generally, sort of moving from direct support to governments, to working with civil society organizations; looking for ways to enter into sectors such as human rights and family planning, not as the first leaders but in the wake of smaller, often Scandinavian organizations that were earlier risk takers in the sectors and so on.

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So that was a great part of my career and I learned a great deal, and took my focus on inter-disciplinary learning that I had really cultivated in my PhD research to a much more practical level through my work as a consultant, and then in 2003 I joined USAID as senior knowledge management advisor in the Office of Microenterprise Development in the Economic Growth Bureau, and started working in this area called knowledge management, which I had been doing without knowing what it was.

So that was a wonderful opportunity because I came into an office that was doing really exciting sectoral work, and saw the need to leverage their knowledge in order to be more impactful. So that spoke to all of my interest in change for the better.

Piers:

Had you ever heard that title before?

Stacey:

So you know, not really. Not really, and when somebody said there's a job, it's called Senior Knowledge Management Advisor, it's in the Microenterprise Office, I told them that they should hire my friend, Evelyn Stark who had been working in microfinance.

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I knew here from Uganda, from living in Uganda and they did hire Evelyn as a microfinance advisor and then they came back to me for the knowledge management piece.

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So that was win-win but yeah, I didn't really know what that was, but as I got into it, it just made so much sense, and it was such a great time to be able to work with leaders in that sector and to be able to grow a practice in microenterprise that then sort of reached out to other parts of the economic growth bureau, and other parts of the agency, and then ultimately to move in 2011 to the policy bureau to take that work, agency wide; and that's the collaborating, learning and adapting work that we've been doing for these several years together, and in collaboration from the very beginning with USAID missions who have been so forward-learning in this space. So in a nutshell, that's how we are here to fit together.

Piers:

It's a long and winding road, and I think a lot of people who work in knowledge management and organizational learning probably can relate, but a couple of things had just popped out of me when you were talking that I recognized in real champions for knowledge management and organizational learning is passion for possibility, and when you get that spark and you realize hey, this is – these approaches can be catalytic and I want to help.

Stacey: Yeah, that's right and I think those of us who stick with this work and really advance it are the ones who see it as catalytic, who see the potential, who see the need for a systemic approach.

Piers:
[0:22:00] And that's what's so exciting, and we hope that you will enjoy for the series is hearing how there are approaches and systems that are important but there are characteristics too, and cultural elements; the enabling conditions within an organization and characteristics of individuals that allow them to be successful in making this something that is integrated throughout their work. So I'm really looking forward to these episodes as they roll out.

Stacey: As an I, Piers. So I hope we've set the table for the leaders in learning series. We look forward to sharing the rest of the episodes with our listeners, but before we leave, I want to take this opportunity to thank you, Piers for your knowledge and thank Amy Leo, our intrepid podcast producer.

I should also acknowledge the Office of Learning Evaluation and Research, and USAID's Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning, which helped resources series. Until next time, thank you for joining us on Believers in Learning podcast.

Voiceover:
[0:23:00] USAID Learning by Podcast is a production of USA Learning, implemented by Dexis Consulting Group and its partner, RTI International, on behalf of USAID's Office of Learning Evaluation and Research and the Bureau for Policy Learning.

The opinions in this podcast do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Government. Our music is by Podington Bear.

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