

[MUSIC PLAYING] SPEAKER: Hello and welcome to the Harvard Center for International Development's weekly podcast. The Building State Capability program also known as BSC uses the Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation Approach or PDIA to help organizations develop the capability to solve complex problems and implement public policies. PDIA is a process of facilitated emergence, which focuses on problems not solutions and follows a step-by-step process that allows for flexible learning and adaptation.

Today's on CID's speaker series podcast, Anna Mysliewic, student at the Harvard Kennedy School interview Salimah, who discusses the challenges and experiences BSC has faced when implementing PDIA in the field. Salimah draws on experiences from BSC's work in Albania and Sri Lanka, as well as the recent launch of the PDIA toolkit.

ANNA MYSLIEWIC: Thank you, Salimah, for your talk today. It was super interesting. Looking forward to getting to chat with you more about PDIA. So to start us off, I wonder if you could talk a bit about the concept of capacity, because I think it often gets used as kind of a catchall in development programs. Every program wants to build capacity of somebody to do something, but it's often fairly vague what that means or what the actual goal of it is. But I'm sure that you all see idea of a more thoughtful and developed idea about it.

SALIMAH SAMJI: Thank you very much, that's a great question. The word capacity has really become this bad word almost, because what it generally tends to mean when people say capacity building is a workshop where people come. And I say people because sometimes, depending on where it is, whether it's a five star hotel another fancy country. It's the people who aren't necessarily the ones who need to be trained because it's a perk that their government is offering them to like go somewhere, whether it's to Harvard or wherever to take this course.

So there's no guarantee that whoever's going to go to this workshop is going to do anything with what they learn for a starters. And then second, it's just this workshop that they go to. They learn something and then nothing happens after. And the people who are doing this say, OK, we built capacity. And that's from what we've done and seen, that's not how you build capacity.

And for exactly that reason, we don't use the word capacity. We use the word capability, because it's really-- in fact, our program title is building state capability because it's not about capacity, it's about their capability to be able to do their job better.

ANNA MYSLIEWIC: Great. Thank you. Building on that, what is PDIA and how is it different than this kind of one off workshop that people get sent to as a job perk?

SALIMAH SAMJI: Yeah, so PDIA is really an approach of solving problems. And it's usually you would use PDIA for solving complex problems, where you have a lot of uncertainty and you need to learn because you do not know, whether you do not know the politics. You do not know the people and their ability. You don't know how much authorization you have. Just a lot of uncertainty just don't understand your context.

And then PDIA is a really good process to be able to use. PDIA

essentially starts with the problem. And whenever we work, we start with a problem that is nominated by people who want to solve the problem. So it is not us telling them you should do this. It's them saying, we want to solve this problem, can you help us? So you start with the problem and we have a series of processes that we use, which we call problem construction like constructing the problem, why does the problem matter to whom does it matter, whom should it matter to.

And then we have a process of deconstruction where we use the fishbone or the Ishikawa diagram to do that. It's a root cause analysis of what are all of the problems that you have. And once you've done that process, you then want to say, OK, now what, right? This is much messier than just me telling you what the problem is. And then we have a tool called the Triple A change space analysis, where in each of these bones, you ask yourself how much authority do I have? How much acceptance do I have? How much ability do I have?

And if you have all three, then you go for it and you do whatever it is that you think you want to do in that space. And if you don't, then probably you shouldn't do what you thought you should do. And maybe you want to start with smaller steps. You want to build, whether it's ability acceptance or authority. And then you kind of want to look at what sorts of solutions should you be thinking about to solve your problem.

It's not just best practice. A lot of people think about, oh, no, transplantation of best practice as a way to do stuff. But what they ignore is sometimes, there are positive deviants in their own context. People who've solved that problem already. And this is much better because they understand your local context and they've worked within it to solve this problem. So there's things that you can learn from there.

There's also latent practice where there are people in your area who actually have the solution, but don't have authorization to do anything about it or don't have the power to tell you what they think should be done, when they might actually have the answer, right? So there are people who may have the answer. You've just never asked them. And then there is existing practice, right? What are you currently doing and what's not working and why?

There's a lot of learning that can happen in the space of why did this fail. Looking at all of those, you can come up with some sort of a hybrid solution that you may want to implement. In PDIA, you also look at your authorizing environment, which is a term that we take from Mark Morris creating public value. And this is where you look at who are your authorizers, right? Whose authority do you need and for what?

And they're may be at different levels. Your authorizer isn't necessarily just the president or just a minister or just your boss. It might be different people for different things. And then they come up with action items they're going to take tomorrow. In PDIA, we have what we call action push periods, which are very short. They're usually one to two weeks where you try something. So you say I'm going to do this and then you do it and then you ask yourself for questions, what did you do, what did you learn, what would the challenges and what's next? We call this the PDIA iteration check in tool.

And that really helps you start thinking about OK were my assumptions

and that really helps you start thinking about, OK, were my assumptions wrong? What can I do differently now? And we find that when you have these shorter tighter iterations failure, which is what people really worry about is a non-issue because it's all learning. And you're iterating constantly every two weeks. So it's learning. It's all in the frame of learning.

Now when you say you come up with a grand plan of, oh, I'm going to do xyz and then it's going to take me a year. At the end of the year if you didn't do xyz, that looks like failure. But if one week you say, I'm going to do this in the next two weeks. And you know what actually know, we didn't because of this and that and the other. It's like, OK, great. Now we're going to do, right? The shorter time frames really helps with that. And we find with that process of these check ins, reflection, learning, adapting and doing, you really have an emergence of capability. People start to believe that they are able to do things themselves.

Another thing that I forgot to mention, in PDIA because they're complex problems, we always work with teams and we work with multidisciplinary teams. Because we believe that you can't go out a complex problem alone. You need a team who will work together to be able to help solve problems. So when we talk about the difference between PDIA, we're always in there for a long period of time.

So even in some of the work that we do where we do have workshops, it's not a workshop and then see you later. It's this continued interaction of like what are we doing next week and then the week after. And we do see this emergence of capability where people really believe they can do it. And you empower them to a point where you can really step back and you know you've done it, like you've changed them.

ANNA MYSLIEWIC: Thank you. That's a really rich and interesting description of your work. Curious could you speak a bit to what are the different ways that you put those frameworks in that process and to practice, and the places that you're active?

SALIMAH SAMJI: Sure. So we have three main ways that we work on what we call high touch, medium touch, and low touch. In high touch, the word high touch is that we are involved a lot. We work with governments where we are there every three weeks. So whether it is a check in with one of our fellows, or it's the faculty doing a workshop or something of that nature, it's us in country every three weeks.

Now, we've done this in Albania with 20 teams and 162 officials. We've done this in Sri Lanka with nine teams and 103 officials. And we're currently doing this in Honduras with seven teams and 66 officials. Then we have what we call the medium touch approach. And in the medium touch approach, we work with a collaborator organization who has scale, because we're a small team. We can't be everywhere at the same time.

And so one way we can actually get scale is by working with other organizations training them to do PDIA. So we worked with CABRI, and they're an intergovernmental organization based in South Africa. And we trained their staff to be coaches, PDIA coaches who would work with budget teams working on public financial management. And we did that for two years and we have worked with 13 teams in nine countries in Africa with them. And then we have our third way we work, which is

really our online course.

We offer a free PDIA online course where we will walk through the steps of PDIA. So the requirements are you come up with the problem, you come up with the team and then you sign into our course and we will walk you through how to work on your problem using our tools over a 15-week period. Now in this course, we have 1,112 people who have successfully completed these courses in 86 countries.

What we found with our PDIA online course now, in the first to the medium touch and the high touch, they see our faces. We interact with these people. In our online course, there is no interaction. It is entirely done online. They watch a series of videos. They read chapters of our building state capability book and then they have homework that they have to do that gets graded by a grader. So that's kind of the only interaction that they have.

And one of the things that's been really incredible for us to watch is that we don't necessarily need to be there to see this kind of emergence happen. We can see it in their homework. We can see them transform over this process. And then we do an evaluation at the end where they do share things like this. And one thing that we hear consistently, it's usually when I look at the problem and it's so complex, I would get stuck, I wouldn't even know where to begin. I had never thought that I could break this down and start with small steps. And we hear that over and over and over again.

ANNA MYSLIEWIC: That's really cool and that's sounds like you all have scope to kind of expand a lot further through the online means.

SALIMAH SAMJI: Uh-hm. We do. We're very excited. And one of the things that we'd really like to do is get more stories. We have some stories of the alumni learning journeys on our website. And we're hoping to start posting several. We have about 40 of them that we will be posting starting potentially next week.

ANNA MYSLIEWIC: Just to concretize a bit more even, what are the kind of problems that people are using the PDIA approach to make progress on?

SALIMAH SAMJI: That's a great question. So in the high touch with government teams that we've worked with, the problems are working on are things that you normally think about what governments do agriculture, tourism, energy, electricity, attracting foreign direct investment. Those kinds of things. When we work the medium term that we did with CABRI was all around public financial management.

So again, that's government. And it's them thinking through different issues in public financial management and budget processes, et cetera. In our online course where we have the largest diversity, right? Because we have 25% of the alumni are from NGOs and 43% are from the public sector. You see a lot more diversity in the types of problems. We've seen people tackle issues of gender violence. We've seen people tackle issues of maternal mortality. We've seen farmer suicides. We have seen blood transfusion.

And then your regular government types problems. But the variety of problems that you see is really, really fascinating. And they choose

their problem. When we look at people's application for the course, we're agnostic about the kind of problem you have. Our lens that we use is it a complex problem. Or is it like you know how do I build a road in which case you don't necessarily need PDIA for something like that.

ANNA MYSLIEWIC: So part of PDIA and it's part of the full name is this idea of iterative adaptation. So I'm curious what your own iterative adaptation process as a team has been. How have you changed your approach to PDIA based on what you've learned as you've gone about implementing it in different contexts?

SALIMAH SAMJI: Absolutely. We're firm believers in our approach and we really walk the talk. So whether it's the online course or it's our actual work that we do with governments, we are always iterating and always adapting on how we do things. Let me give you some concrete examples. When we first started in Albania, our first iteration with groups was to work with groups separately. And we found that working individually with separate groups, we quickly felt that we were becoming crutches. And that was not something we wanted to be, right?

People on the teams were asking us, oh, can you ask my minister this, or can you tell my boss that. And we did not really want to be the ones managing up for them. And it was them who needed to learn how to man a job. And we also realized that they needed other skills things like time management, leadership, motivation, all sorts of things like that.

And we thought, OK, maybe we need to really change this model and offer some sort of workshop also where these teams come together. And we always work with multiple teams and they can learn from each other. They can share what they're doing. And if you're in the same country context, there is a lot of similarity even though you might be working on different things. And you can also use that space to be able to teach them whether it's time management leadership or other sorts of things.

In our online course when we first offered the course, then I can go on and on, but I will just give you one example here. We were told that MOOC wisdom is that you will not have anyone take the course if it's longer than six weeks. And so we knew our course was going to be longer than six weeks. But we said, fine, we're going to make a part A and a part B.

And in our first iteration, we ran the part A and we were amazed at the response that we got. Even though the course ended December 28, people were still submitting homework. And you would think that they're on vacation, and they were on vacation, but they really cared enough to complete the course. And then we found that by splitting the course, you lost momentum. The next course started in January.

Getting people back to that level of motivation was really hard and we lost a lot of people. And that learning led us to say, OK, we're not going to do that again. If it's going to be 12 weeks, then so be it. Today the course is 15 weeks. And that also has been an iteration. We also at the beginning had two different courses. We had a principles of PDIA course and a practice of PDIA course.

And we learned that PDIA is not something conceptual. You can't teach it in the lecture because people don't understand. They have to do it.

And so we have in the last two years not offered the principles course because of that, and only the practice course, because you have to do it to learn it.

ANNA MYSLIEWIC: So what are the next frontiers for you on PDIA?

SALIMAH SAMJI: So the next thing we want to do is we have now-- you just heard the numbers that I've given you. We've work with a lot of people in a lot of places on PDIA. And we have always had a desire to build a community of practice. And just we're a very small team, we don't have the bandwidth to be able to do that.

So one of the key things for this year has been how do we activate this community of practice. And so we've hired someone and I am delighted that we have someone who's going to be focused entirely on how do we want learn how are people using PDIA, right? Once the course is done or once we leave their country, what are they doing? We don't necessarily have the bandwidth to follow up with people.

And how can we share those lessons much more broadly? And how can we provide to this community more things that they need, et cetera? I mean, our dream would really be to have this community grow learn together.

ANNA MYSLIEWIC: Well, thank you so much. This has been really interesting, and I wish you all the best of luck going forward.

SALIMAH SAMJI: Great. Thank you so much. It's been a delight.

SPEAKER: If you want to learn more about CID research and events, please visit cid.harvard.edu. See you next week.

[MUSIC PLAYING]