# ENHANCING PARTNER AND SYSTEM-LEVEL LEARNING: *8 Tips from MEL Managers*

Effective learning is a key driver of market systems change, with the potential to enhance system competitiveness, resilience, and inclusiveness. Shifting the Locus of Learning: Catalyzing Private Sector Learning to Drive Systemic Change recently outlined a rationale for enhancing the scale and quality of learning in a system and identifying 10 strategies programs can contextualize to catalyze learning. These strategies are also backed with robust examples from 13 programs doing this work across 11 countries.

To deepen insights on what MSD Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Managers have experienced in putting several of those strategies into practice, the Feed the Future Market Systems and Partnerships (MSP) Activity convened a series of peer discussions as part of a larger initiative (see Figure 1).

This brief shares the collective learning and experience on this topic of three senior MEL Managers who were interested in and had experience with this topic. The group represented full-time, program-based MEL Leads working on MSD programs funded by USAID and DFAT, based in Fiji, Albania, and Kosovo working for Adam Smith International, SwissContact, and DT Global, respectively.

From those discussions, this paper synthesizes eight tips from MEL Managers for practically enhancing partner and system-level learning:

1. **Identify the right decision-maker(s) at potential partners.**

2. **Use a co-creation process to identify learning opportunities.**

3. **Use diagnostics and assessments to strengthen partner and system capacity for actionable learning.**

4. **Use a phased capacity strengthening process tied to behavior change.**

5. **Measure partners' continued investment in and use of learning—not the continuation of specific learning activities.**

6. **Work with sector-level institutions for scale but be aware of risks.**

7. **Leverage informal communities of practice to share learning.**

8. **Use the right terminology to talk about partner and system-focused learning.**

## 1.  IDENTIFY THE RIGHT DECISION-MAKER(S) AT POTENTIAL PARTNERS

The decision-makers who must have buy-in for and approve investment in learning-oriented activities will vary substantially across potential partners. This will differ based on the types of learning activities being considered and the size, sector, and level of maturity of the organization. In the case of learning activities oriented around a partner's customers, larger companies (e.g., banks, telecoms) may already have a business intelligence manager or unit that may be the natural entry point since they are focused on data collection and analysis. Smaller companies typically do not,

> This brief uses the term 'partner' to refer to firms, industry groups, government institutions, and other stakeholders in a market system that a program might "partner" with, formally or informally, to advance objectives, such as through collaboration, co-investment, technical advisory, exchange, and coordination.

and in those cases the marketing or business development manager may make the most sense. For learning activities relating to a company's staff, and for companies that support the lifelong learning of their staff to enhance retention and build their human capital, the human resources manager may be the right starting point. In smaller companies, the company's leader may ultimately approve all of these decisions and be the right place to begin.

Across the programs represented, MEL Managers emphasized that programs can easily waste a lot of time talking to people who cannot make a decision on whether to move forward. Accordingly, understanding potential partners' decision-making structures and the right decision-makers should be part of the outreach process as it will be worth the investment.

## 2.  USE A CO-CREATION PROCESS TO IDENTIFY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Partners' investments in learning will be most durable and effective if they address their own priority information gaps, not externally mandated obligations. Accordingly, learning-related discussions should be incorporated into early partner conversations around identifying collaboration opportunities, planning initial activities, etc. This co-creation process can ultimately enhance partners' learning "muscle" itself if it is approached in a facilitatory way.

To increase the likelihood of learning-enhancing activities being built into those plans, MEL Managers discussed these three helpful conversation starting points, described more below:

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| Understand the business problems partners are facing and their current learning activities. | Identify if there is a link between enhanced learning and business growth. | Understand the incentives of counterparts in the company. |

Understand the business problems partners are facing and how they currently learn or discover. Some businesses already recognize the need for additional information to help address major problems they are encountering, while others are unclear of the benefit that additional information about their customers, suppliers, or employees would provide. In either case, a facilitated conversation to explore how they are currently learning about the biggest issues they face can yield insights.

> **FIGURE 2: ANALYZING FIRM LEARNING NEEDS IN LIBERIA**
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> One participant shared how GROW Liberia's upfront contextual analysis found farmers in Liberia regularly faced challenges with new pests and diseases that lowered their agricultural productivity. In speaking to agrodealers, GROW Liberia would ask about their understanding of the issues that farmers faced and whether and how their businesses were addressing them. In many cases, agrodealers acknowledged that they did not have a strong understanding of what these diseases were and whether their current product offerings could address them, but indicated they were interested in understanding more.

Identify if there is a link between enhanced learning and business growth. The link between enhanced learning and business growth, when it exists, will vary by company and depend on cost and growth drivers. For businesses seeking enhanced sales and profitability, some things that have worked for participants included asking whether understanding profitability by geography or product line, for example, would help make better business decisions. For businesses struggling with employee turnover and low productivity, participants have explored with businesses the extent to which they understand the drivers of those issues. In the GROW Liberia example above, these semi-structured conversations often resulted in agrodealers recognizing the advantages that learning about and stocking products that could best fight these new pests and diseases would have, including particularly increasing their sales, customer loyalty, and profitability.

Understand the individual incentives for learning. While understanding the bigger company picture is often critical, counterparts will typically prioritize initiatives that impact the performance metrics that are tied to their role. Understanding whether and how learning-related investments can further their own individual needs is often key to building buy-in. For a business owner, benefits that appeal to their legacy, competitiveness, or identity may resonate most effectively. For a middle manager in a larger firm, helping them obtain better numbers in the next quarter that enhance their career trajectory versus others in the company who are not as learning-focused may be a key incentive.

### 3. USE DIAGNOSTICS AND ASSESSMENTS TO STRENGTHEN PARTNER AND SYSTEM CAPACITY FOR ACTIONABLE LEARNING

Our programs typically conduct a range of studies. If applied appropriately, these bolster our partners' and target systems' learning capacity. MEL Managers can play a key role in maximizing their learning potential.

For example, Skills 4 Jobs (S4J) conducted annual assessments with partner schools in Albania to prove and improve program-related results. Given the wealth of information the assessments provided for its partners, S4J began to share and interpret the results with them in reflective workshops. Later S4J revised the assessment instruments together with the schools so they could understand and learn from the tools. After a few years of coordinating on the implementation of the assessments, the schools have started using the assessment tools independently from the program. They use the results to touch base with students; understand their needs and concerns; improve the curriculum, teaching methods, learning materials, and extracurricular activities; and as promotional information to attract more students to their schools.

Another example from S4J was introducing tracer studies (i.e., surveys that measure students' employment situation after entering the labor market). The partner vocational education and training (VET) institutions initially did not monitor graduate success rates. When the program started to implement the tracer studies, many providers challenged the process and were not happy with the results.

However, as results slowly showed improvements in indicators such as labor market outcomes of the graduates, the data were increasingly used by the institutions. The tracer studies have become a primary driver of adaptation. For example, tracer data showed that graduates of food technology programs were not obtaining relevant work or were taking very low-skilled positions. Accordingly, the relevant VET institution closed the program. VET institutions have used the data to diversify their training offerings, market the success rates of their programs to potential students, and inform strategic planning and budgeting processes.

The tracer monitoring system has now been adopted by the relevant national agencies and institutionalized. Now all VET institutions must use tracer systems and report on results annually. This drives national decision-making, is used to assess the performance of the VET institutions, and informs accreditation processes. The national agencies use aggregated tracer data to revise national curricula of underperforming courses.

## 4. USE A PHASED CAPACITY STRENGTHENING PROCESS TIED TO BEHAVIOR CHANGE

Where the program plans to invest in directly strengthening multiple partners' learning capacity, participants found it was best to use a phased approach. The sequencing introduces more foundational skills first that are prerequisites to subsequent supports. For example, partners would be supported to enhance their capacity to analyze existing data prior to investing in new data streams. This better ensures capacity supports are meeting partners' needs and hence being effectively absorbed and applied. Each phase of capacity strengthening should lead to a clear improvement in the business (e.g., faster generation of financial data). Finally, each phase should be responsive to partner learning: inevitable challenges can be used as opportunities to build partners' skills in diagnosing, investigating, and addressing problems.

This approach can directly enhance partners' ability to problem solve and identify solutions to apply. One example of this is how GROW Liberia used a three-stage approach to maximize the effective use of resources with their agrodealers, as the following figure illustrates:

**Phase 1** of the agrodealer development program **built the capacity of agrodealers** in basic ICT-based record keeping, customer tracking, inventory, and financial management. These supports were provided sequentially based on demonstrated skill application.

**Phase 2 focused on shop improvements, branding, and marketing**. A small budget supported agrodealers for shop improvement - expanding their shops, building proper shelves to showcase their products, and separating their agro-inputs from their other products.

Shops were supported to test marketing activities e.g., installing signs advertising their location and running radio ads to increase their visibility to potential customers in their districts. Agrodealers asked customers over the first season how they had heard of them, then maintained only the most effective activities.

Agrodealers were linked with village-based sales agents to better understand what farmers were planting, challenges with new pests, and product requests.

**Phase 3 linked the agrodealers that had graduated from Phase 2** and thus demonstrated the quality of their operations to a large agro-input distributor to source higher-quality products on credit.

During the two-year implementation period, 22 of the 48 agrodealers who were provided with learning supports advanced to Phase 3. The linking of Phase 2 graduates to a large agro-input distributor provided a strong supplementary incentive to the agrodealers to advance through the phases, as they would access high quality inputs more regularly and on credit to avoid running out of stock. For the agro-input distributor, agrodealers who had advanced through the phases represented more reliable and trustworthy customers.

GROW Liberia also rewarded the "best learners" with prizes (e.g., laptops; computer-based accounting software; smartphones with training materials on good agricultural practices; cash to seed purchasing inputs from distributors), which caused some agrodealers who had dropped out to rejoin the program.

### 5. MEASURE PARTNERS' CONTINUED INVESTMENT IN AND USE OF LEARNING - NOT THE CONTINUATION OF SPECIFIC LEARNING ACTIVITIES

As MEL Managers, it is critical that we are measuring whether our support to partner and system learning is working. In the GROW Liberia staggered learning intervention highlighted above, there was regular monitoring on whether partners were identifying and applying learning in each phase. This included whether agrodealers were adjusting their pre-season input orders based on input sales records (e.g., prior demand, inputs demanded by season) and actual inventory levels leveraging inventory control systems.

We have learned that partners continuing to apply specific learning strategies may not be evidence of learning. It could be evidence of lack of interest, a poorly designed intervention, and/or effective adaptation based on learning what strategies did and did not work. An important takeaway from the GROW experience is that partners dropping certain learning activities can actually be understood as a demonstration of learning, in that they realized they were longer required. Figure 3 shows the findings of GROW Liberia's impact assessment on which learning strategies agrodealers continued and discontinued.

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FIGURE 3: **ANALYZING CONTINUED APPLICATION OF LEARNING**

*Continued*:

**Inventory control and financial record keeping:** Agrodealers could clearly see the value in maintaining these. A few agrodealers even said that they could now leave their business with their staff to manage and take holidays, or even focus on other businesses as they now knew how to track loss or theft of items in their absence.

*Mixed*:

**Branding and marketing activities:** Agrodealers dropped some activities like radio marketing while maintaining others like promotional signs and selling during market days.

**Use of sales agents:** From the original set of eight sales agents who were training and selling to farmers at their farms, the agrodealers continued to work with one or two of the best-performing sales agents who made it their full-time focus.

*Stopped*:

**Customer tracking:** Agrodealers stopped customer tracking after two years given a perception that they had a good understanding of their needs.

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Therefore, it is more important to understand whether partners are continuing to invest in their learning, even if it is not in the form supported by the program. Shifting the Locus of Learning: Catalyzing Private Sector Learning to Drive Systemic Change discusses various measurement options, such as the business

innovation index[1] that has been used on several programs to determine how business innovation is evolving over time. Another is to use a systemic change framework to examine partners' ongoing commitment to learning initiatives.

### 6. WORK WITH SECTOR-LEVEL INSTITUTIONS FOR SCALE – BUT BE AWARE OF RISKS

Many of the examples above are about working with individual system actors, and participants noted these strategies can create significant results.

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FIGURE 4: **SCALING UP LEARNING RESULTS IN ALBANIA**

S4J began working individually with just six companies offering apprenticeships. As the individual companies gained knowledge and learning from hosting apprenticeships, their example led more companies to adopt the practice. Six years later, 1,700 companies are partnering with VET schools to offer an apprenticeship program. There is now a firm connection between the private sector, VET institutions, and the government that is creating a demand-driven national training system. The American Chamber of Commerce has approached S4J to help with establishing a skills development unit to serve their members. Additionally, eight technology firms have joined forces to establish the Albanian Alliance for Apprenticeship.

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However, strategies focused on enhancing sector-level learning capacity can also create impact at significant scale, as the examples outlined in as Shifting the Locus of Learning: Catalyzing Private Sector Learning to Drive Systemic Change demonstrate. The COMPETE Activity in Kosovo worked with the information and communications technology (ICT) sector association to establish a data unit that would conduct and disseminate research to Kosovan ICT companies on potential new markets. To do so, COMPETE contracted data analysis experts that worked with the association to produce the research reports based on the learning demands of members. The association has since hired two full-time staff who are dedicated to this function and serving the needs of their members.

Participants noted the need to carefully consider and mitigate the potential challenges that working with these groups can bring. This has meant:

- Assessing organizational capacity levels upfront. From our experience, some sector associations are not viable partners for supporting system learning. Necessary characteristics have tended to include having strong leadership and a vision for financial sustainability that does not depend on ongoing donor support. Market systems assessments are one tool to spot this via their identification of core systemic constraints and potential partners to address them.

- Considering how reliant sector-level work is on particular policies and regulations. A changing or incomplete regulatory framework can mean cancelling interventions that have been piloted and invested in. For instance, a regulatory change in Albania prohibited students from spending more than 50 percent of their practical learning time in companies. This threatened the S4J-supported apprenticeship model. S4J adjusted by first understanding the implications for and positions of companies, training providers, and students. Their collective disagreement with the policy was fed into advocacy efforts that proposed improvements to the regulation and the joint drafting of a national roadmap for work-based learning.

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[1] MarketShare Associates. *Practical Tools for Measuring System Health*. Washington: USAID, 2016.

## 7. LEVERAGE INFORMAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE TO SHARE LEARNING

Participants shared a range of strategies MEL Managers and their colleagues can use to enhance system-level learning capabilities. One that particularly stood out, alongside developing open-source learning materials and facilitating the documentation and sharing of successes, was facilitating communities of practice (CoPs). CoPs are a type of informal organization that builds trust while facilitating knowledge sharing. S4J launched FRYMËSO (which means Inspire) in October 2020 as an online CoP for vocational education and training in Albania. This Facebook group is an online platform where teachers share their know-how and experiences. This has included successful practices for online learning, video tutorials explaining how to perform specific tasks, and webinars on how to support online and blended learning.

This initiative was born as a response to teachers' needs to connect to each other during COVID-19-prompted shifts to virtual learning. Through this online CoP, teachers had access to information, experiences from colleagues, discussions, continuous development opportunities, and inspiration from other professionals. The CoP has grown to a platform with over 900 members combining exchanges, tutorials, and a 'Frymeso' Newsletter.

## 8. USE THE RIGHT TERMINOLOGY TO TALK ABOUT PARTNER AND SYSTEM-FOCUSED LEARNING

The language of learning is something that can confuse peers working within our programs, with partners, and even ourselves at times. We found it particularly easy to confuse program-oriented learning with partner- and systems-oriented learning. At first, we used the phrase "MEL as an intervention area" as the discussion starting point during these MEL clinics. However, that created connotations of program-oriented learning. We then shifted to talking about the nexus of learning, and that created more clarity.

Since this is a new concept for many, using clear language is critical.  This issue also applies to how we talk with potential partners. The adjacent textbox shares some common language used by the private sector to describe learning.

> **Must We Call It Learning?**
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> The private sector learns to solve problems, make adjustments, or change course. However, they may not use the term "learning," which can feel vague and like development-speak.
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> Other phrases that may resonate better:
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> - Market Research
> - Business Analytics and Intelligence
> - Customer Insights
> - User Experience (UX)
> - A/B Testing
> - Portfolio Reviews
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> *Source: Shifting the Locus of Learning, 2023*