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Technical Brief

Lead Lab in India: Innovate, Do, Review

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Participants at the Lead Lab workshop attempt the "marshmallow challenge," a team-building exercise.

"It was great having an opportunity to interact with supply chain personnel from other states. I look forward to sharing more during the monthly phone calls."

—Lead Lab Participant

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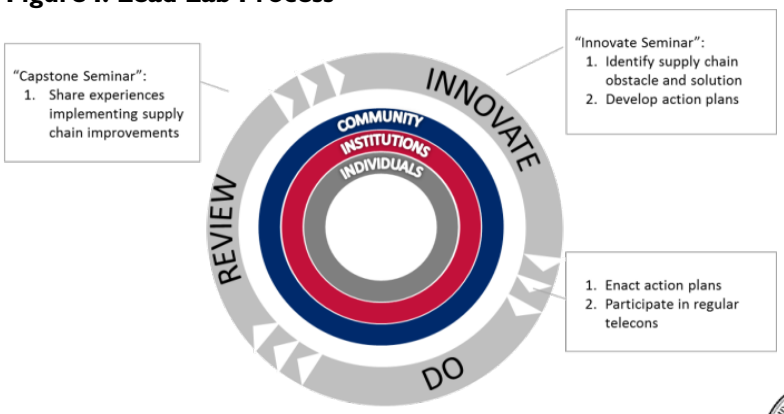
A robust and resilient supply chain is necessary to provide health workers and clients with essential medicines and other public health commodities. However, operating a public health supply chain requires motivated leaders who are capable of fulfilling essential supply chain functions. In India, the USAID | DELIVER PROJECT developed an initiative to build the capacity of leaders at the state health mission (SHM) and central levels of public health commodity supply chains. The initiative, called the 'Lead Lab,' is a process designed to help leaders collaborate, identify, and solve real supply chain problems they face in the organizations they lead. The experience is also intended to encourage participants to form a 'leadership community of practice.'

Supply Chain Lead Lab Vision

The Lead Lab initiative is based on a framework that leads participants through a three-phase process in which they (1) "innovate" solutions to commodity availability problems that involve individuals, institutions, and communities. Participants then (2) implement or "do" their solutions, and (3) meet to "review" them. The Lead Lab exercise in India helped senior supply chain staff at the state and federal levels prioritize their supply chain challenges and create a strategy to overcome one of them over a four-month period.

Figure I. Lead Lab Process



Innovate: Building Leadership Competencies...Using Marshmallows

The innovation seminar was held in February 2015 for the six state-level cohorts (Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Bihar, and Maharashtra) and participants from USAID | India, Gavi/UNICEF India, WHO Southeast Asia Regional Office, CDC, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

During the seminar, the group split into teams for a "marshmallow challenge," which instructed them to use 20 sticks of spaghetti, a yard of tape, a yard of string, and a marshmallow to build the tallest free-standing marshmallow-topped structure possible. After the exercise, the group discussed their teams' strategies, if a leader emerged, and if so what s/he did. The exercise taught participants the importance of collaboration, innovation, and creativity. Following the marshmallow challenge, each participant was asked to complete a leadership style self-assessment and develop a plan to improve his/her leadership traits.

By identifying challenges and opportunities based on their experiences, supply chain assessments, and SHM strategy, Lead Lab participants were able to define leadership and construct an approach to facilitate change in the supply chains they manage.

The Lead Lab

The Lead Lab is designed to teach best leadership practices to participating supply chain leaders in order to:

- Empower leaders to take ownership for their role within the public health supply chain.
- Augment the position of the public health supply chain as a core component of a ministry's business model.
- Position leaders to operate as "change agents" to enact personnel and organizational improvements within the public health supply chain.

Do: Implement Actions Plans

Participants returned to their places of work to implement the action plans they developed at the innovate seminar. Each plan outlined a problem, suggested a solution, and noted desired outcomes ('vision'), as shown in the plans from the following states.

Haryana

Problem: Poor data quality and visibility, leading to non-use of logistics data for decision making.
Solution: Establish standardized processes and data collection forms.
Vision: Better forecasting, procurement, inventory control, and distribution with the help of better data and standardized processes.

Himachal Pradesh

Problem: Non-existence of specific supply chain unit.
Solution: Form a supply chain committee at the state level.
Vision: High-quality essential drugs at all facilities in the state.

Jharkhand

Problem: Lack of forecast data for fast-moving (frequently used) drugs and medicines.
Solution: Develop a forecast for fast-moving drugs and medicines.
Vision: Increase availability of at least 100 fast-moving drugs and medicines.

Uttarakhand

Problem: Vendors do not respond to request for proposals (RFPs) at the state/district levels.
Solution: Create a procurement act that entices local vendors to participate in state-issued tenders.
Vision: Increase vendor response rate to RFPs.

Participants met via a webinar for an update and to discuss their experiences implementing the activity plan. In addition, a technical expert gave a presentation on forecasting and supply planning.

Review: The Change Agents

A Capstone seminar in June 2015 was the final phase of the Lead Lab. After discussing their plan implementation progress, participants reassessed and finalized their supply chain strengthening plans and goals.

Five of the six participating states demonstrated improvements as a result of their participation in the program.

- Bihar developed a supply chain training for district-level pharmacists and initiated roll-out with a training-of-trainers curriculum.
- Haryana implemented standard operating procedures in two pilot districts by training staff to follow new inventory control procedures using logistics management information forms.
- Himachal Pradesh established a procurement working group to improve supply chain coordination at the state level.
- Jharkhand is conducting a forecast of fast-moving commodities using a data-driven methodology.
- Maharashtra is reviewing the essential drug list to improve procurement practices.

The Way Forward

The Lead Lab asked supply chain executives to be "change agents" for organizational improvements to the public health supply chain in India. The process raised government—especially high-level policymakers'—awareness that supply chain management is essential for meeting health goals and that developing a strong and sustainable supply chain workforce must be a priority. The seminars created a forum for networking and relationship-building that will advance the supply chain leadership agenda. As one participant said, "It was great having an opportunity to interact with supply chain personnel from other states. I look forward to sharing more during the monthly phone calls."

This way of thinking is essential in the increasingly connected and complex global supply chain context. As individuals and leaders implement solutions to supply chain challenges, supply chains will be more efficient and effective, which will improve commodity availability and ultimately, public health.

The authors' views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

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