

Sustaining Development through Effective Leadership: Lessons from El Salvador

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In the heart of El Salvador, a remarkable force of local organizations is working to enact positive change and drive progress within their communities. USAID/El Salvador (USAID/ES) and the Partnerships Incubator worked with 12 organizations in El Salvador to co-create technical service (TA) packages for each of them. These organizations, representing a spectrum of focus areas, years of operation, funding levels, and technical expertise, are a testament to the robust landscape of community-driven initiatives that exist across the country.

Effective leadership can transform communities—it carries forward vision, executes common goals, and inspires others. In the case of development programs, a strong and effective chief of party or project director is critical to ensuring a community realizes sustainability by empowering their team to implement strategies and innovate beyond the duration of their direction in their organization. These individuals also have a profound responsibility to be [empathetic leaders](#), particularly in the development space when work can be psychologically challenging.

Through the TA provided in El Salvador, the Incubator worked with many organizational leaders to assess their leadership practices and receive executive coaching. Many of these leaders described how a strong interest or passion initially led them to stimulate change in their communities, from founding organizations to taking on leadership roles. Once activities took shape and program implementation began, however, they struggled to pause and evaluate their leadership styles and impact. In the flurry of day-to-day work, leaders do not have much room to take stock of how each decision can affect the organization years from now. Their primary focus is on serving their community and fulfilling an immediate need, but the longer-term needs of the organization may be left behind.

“Organizations are often dedicated to all the work we do externally, and we neglect a bit of the internal part, and it is very important to be able to take this space [for technical assistance] so that our work, our goals, our objectives have the impact that we expect,” says Wendy Morales Gálvez, Executive Director of Azul Originario, a nonprofit organization implementing programs in the areas of governance and democracy, education, and livelihood.

Though it requires intentionality, assessing one's leadership can help organizations identify how to make necessary adjustments, enhance existing skills, and leverage the strengths of their staff to build a strong foundation for the future.

Why Leadership Development Is Important

USAID transforms communities through its programs and promotes paths to self-reliance and resilience. The Agency's goal by the end of the decade—as outlined by Administrator Samantha Power's speech on [“A New Vision for Global Development”](#) at Georgetown University on November 4, 2021—is 50 percent of Agency programming will need to place local communities in the lead to either co-design a project, set priorities, drive implementation, or evaluate the impact of USAID programs. Through these paths to self-reliance and localization, communities and their leaders can elevate their voices and lay the foundation for sustainability.

One central factor in this effort toward development transformation is identifying impactful leaders within local organizations. Leaders are responsible for cultivating a culture of excellence that can take organizations from good to great. Effective leadership can influence the direction of an organization for generations, guide strategic planning, navigate organizational challenges, attract talented and loyal staff, promote transparency and communication, develop and maintain stakeholder relationships, embrace a culture of innovation, and set a tone of integrity.

When given the room to evaluate their role and impact and refine those skills, leaders can provide clarity to a development organization's vision by setting a roadmap that aligns with their country's development goals and allocates resources and staff toward

their most critical issues. [Leaders.com](#) explains that organizational leaders require constant adaptation to meet the changing needs of their companies and how training can help them be more effective and inspirational.

Beyond establishing a strong organizational workflow, collaboration is a key pillar of a remarkable leader. When effective leaders make a conscious effort to foster collaboration among stakeholders, such as government entities, donor agencies, the private sector, and nongovernmental organizations, they can amplify their impact and prevent duplicated efforts.

Moreover, everyone benefits when leaders take the time to hone their skills, as was identified through the Incubator’s interviews with these organizations. Effective training makes them more likely to engage and inspire their team members. In the article “[Why Leadership Training Matters](#)” by Forbes, good managers can influence up to 70 percent of a team’s engagement. Engaged staff members tend to be more productive, more likely to seek growth opportunities from within, open to sharing innovative ideas to reach common goals, aligned with organizational values, and better at resolving conflicts.

Building leaders’ skills is critically important, but this shouldn’t happen in a vacuum. Leadership development should also be accompanied by enhancements to the internal governance frameworks that leaders rely on, such as a project’s or organization’s human resources, finance, and procurement manuals.

“Transitioning people within the team to different positions takes time...if you were colleagues on the same level and now one of them ascends as director, it's not always an easy transition for everybody,” says Andrea Schildknecht de Méndez, Deputy Chief of Party of Fundación Gloria Kriete, a local organization supporting the most vulnerable Salvadorans through education and training programs. “But now that we have the manuals and everything is written down, it's much easier to be clear about what the responsibilities of each person are.”

Developing Skills for Development Leaders

The reality of the development landscape is that many local organizations may have limited resources to strengthen their leadership through one-on-one executive coaching or training sessions, which can be expensive. Even when resources are limited, there are steps organizations can take to help leaders develop critical skills.

Strengthening leadership is a marathon, not a sprint; it is an ongoing journey and does not need to require substantial resources. Below are a few recommendations for local partners and smaller organizations seeking to make big changes:

1. **Peer-to-peer learning.** The local organizations in El Salvador identified that developing a community of practice with other local organizations helped reduce the burden of facing obstacles alone. In the blog “[Unlocking the Power of Local Peer-to-Peer Networking](#),” these organizations shared that working together helped them to understand their strengths and learn from their weaknesses through an unbiased third-party partner. Leaders can collaborate with other organizational leaders to provide guidance, share insights, and offer advice.
2. **Monitoring, evaluating, and learning (MEL).** As the “[Capturing Organizational Successes with MEL](#)” blog discusses, documenting clear objectives and MEL plans can help leaders make data-driven decisions. This creates greater accountability and transparency in

- leaders, positioning them to strive for positive results and create trust with their team members.
3. **Online resources.** Take advantage of [WorkwithUSAID.org](https://workwithusa.org), a one-stop shop that provides organizations with a robust and carefully curated [Resource Library](#), [Events](#) calendar, [News & Insights](#) blog, and [Pre-Engagement Assessment](#). This free online resource is globally accessible. It offers leaders downloadable resources and networking opportunities to learn how to become more effective in their roles and develop the skills donors seek.
 4. **Solicit anonymous feedback.** It may not always be easy for staff and stakeholders to share unfiltered opinions and recommendations about their leaders. Create an anonymous stream of feedback that provides a safe space for those closest to leaders to express their thoughts. By simply sharing an anonymous online survey on a quarterly or annual basis, leaders can evaluate common positive themes about their impact and explore areas for improvement.
 5. **Stimulate a learning culture.** Leaders are responsible for creating the organizational culture, so foster one of lifelong learning. Team members should be encouraged to share knowledge, mentor one another, and pitch ideas to improve processes and programs. Leaders should always be proactive about learning from their staff and working alongside them to ensure continuous growth and effectiveness.

“I've been able to obtain feedback from the team and also have gained awareness on how we can improve in the delivery of messages, especially in our growth moment, where a lot of people might be experiencing workload and [a heavier] workload,” says Karla Segovia, Executive Director of [FUSAL](#), a Salvadoran organization dedicated to providing social programs focused on health, education, and community building.

In the ever-evolving landscape of international development, local leadership will have the greatest impact on the sustainability of programs and community resilience. Effective leadership is a commitment to continuous growth to reach a steady goal.

A ripple effect happens when an organization invests in leadership development, from defining a clear path toward a common goal to setting expectations for employees to influencing the decisions of potential donors. “Thanks to the coaching support I've had, I've learned more about my leadership style and also about how my leadership impacts others,” says Segovia. As your organization embraces its leaders, be encouraged to know that even the smallest investment can shape them as individuals and your organization as a changemaker.

Learn how to strengthen the leadership in your organization by visiting [WorkwithUSAID.org](https://workwithusa.org)'s [Resource Library](#).

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