

From Confidence to Competence: Getting to Effective Tool Use

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Training is one of the mainstays of tool propagation among development and humanitarian workers. Training is provided—from an informal briefing to a multi-day ToT—and afterwards, the trainee is expected to put the concepts to use. In the course of the Reflective Case Studies we have seen that, with DNH, the transition from training to use is not so simple. Other steps are involved in order to develop competent Do No Harm users.

Confidence

Effective Do No Harm work requires a certain degree of confidence from the user. Taking DNH seriously requires users to reconsider and, possibly, challenge program elements that we or others (including organizational superiors) do not wish to give up. Confidence on the part of the user, in concert with other resources—mental, human and organizational—allows DNHers to become competent.

What are the elements of Confidence?

Many people reported that they attended more than one training or had more than one exposure to DNH before they felt able to use the concepts in their work. Based on experience, we did not take this to mean that they were unable to understand the concepts as explained by their trainers, rather that they were unsure how to apply the tool in real-life scenarios. It seems that regardless of the amount of training, a certain level of sure-footedness is required before a practitioner is willing to put that training into action.

1. Internalization

Many practitioners were reluctant to put the DNH tools and concepts to use until they felt they fully understood how to incorporate them into their day-to-day work. For most people, this meant that they attended multiple training events, beginning with brief exposure trainings and advancing to Trainings of Trainers in order to develop their understanding of DNH. Many people, in various contexts said things like, “After my third workshop, I felt like I understood DNH,” or, “The concepts weren’t entirely clear after one workshop.” While repeated DNH workshops do give people the confidence to put the tools into action, CDA has seen no evidence that training alone makes for competent DNH users. Training, in concert with other forms of support and experience using tools over time allows users to develop competence, but on its own, training does not create experts. There are many stories of practitioners who received no formal exposure to DNH in a workshop setting, yet still go on to incorporate DNH tools and thinking in their work.

In some contexts practitioners were able to understand and use DNH concepts after a remarkably limited introduction. In the organization KCCC in Kampala, Uganda, a small group of staff members attended a Do No Harm workshop. Following any workshop, the KCCC staff who attended are required to introduce the materials to their colleagues at a brief morning meeting. From this 15 minute introduction, KCCC staff across all departments adopted a simple DNH tool and adapted the concepts to their work.

Other organizations have overcome the challenge of internalizing the DNH concepts by redesigning the DNH training package. In Cambodia, Church World Service provides a six-day DNH workshop to all new staff. The workshop is divided into three days of classroom time—comprising the agenda of a three-day DNH training laid out the trainers’ manual—and three days in the field, immediately after the workshop to perform a DNH assessment of a CWS project. Some trainers work with practitioners on an ongoing basis, to ensure that DNH is internalized. In India, a group of aid workers from throughout Tamil Nadu were trained by Cornerstone Trust. The group meets regularly to review their DNH analyses, share stories from their villages, ask questions and refresh their training.

In many places, people find touchstones for DNH in their daily lives, which helps them understand and reinforce their training. In Afghanistan, practitioners noted that an expression from the Koran, “do no harm and accept no harm,” could help to embed DNH into Islamic culture. After the Rwandan genocide, DNH provided a language for talking about the causes of the genocide, even though it was illegal to discuss issues of tribal identity.

2. Positive Feedback

As with any new skill, positive reinforcement for DNH use is important to provide new users with the confidence that they are indeed using the tools and concepts correctly. In many case study visits, case writers were asked by interviewees if they were, “using DNH right,” or, “understanding [resource transfers or implicit ethical messages] correctly.” Often, practitioners want this reinforcement on their DNH use directly from CDA, but occasionally, they seek the feedback of their trainer or their superiors.

Many people have concerns about the limitations of Do No Harm. In many visits, practitioners have said that they want to use DNH in a certain way, but they were unsure of how to do it, or if it was a good idea. One practitioner said, “I want to use DNH in my work with the government, but I don’t know if it will work.” Positive feedback, thought-provoking questions and constructive criticisms reinforce newly learned behaviors and empower new practitioners to use and adapt the skills they have recently acquired.

3. Expectations and Setting the Bar

When adopting a new skill or tool, people rise to the expectations set for them by their organizations. A good example of this is the brief introduction to DNH provided by the small group of KCCC staff who attended a formal workshop. These people knew that they would be required to effectively convey what they had learned to the entire KCCC staff when they returned from the workshop. In Mindanao, Philippines, the Davao Ministerial Interfaith group makes the completion of a DNH workshop a requirement for membership. All new members go through a workshop, and all members of DMI have at least a basic understanding of conflict sensitivity.

Donors’ expectations of their implementing partners provide a substantial motivation for learning and using new tools. But, those expectations, without support and feedback, can lead to a “ticking box effect,” where organizations use DNH language in their reports, but do not apply it in their programming. In Sri Lanka, people said “the framework is used by some, not in the process of creating a program, but for ensuring the buzzwords are used in the proposals.”

One way organizations build confidence among staff while guarding against lackadaisical tool use is to designate groups of people to work together. In groups, ideas can be proposed and tested against the collective expertise of all members of the group, and no individual member bears responsibility for bad ideas or faulty analyses. This method also allows the newer users to benefit from the experience of

those that have been applying a tool for a longer period of time. Group members use one another as guideposts of what level of tool use or understanding is necessary.

For CARE Nepal, the DNH implications of their programming are discussed at staff meetings. For one project team, it prompted monthly meetings rather than 6-month reviews, so they could deal with problems that may arise in a more timely fashion. While Local Capacities for Peace in the Horn of Africa was active in Kenya, DNH practitioners would meet regularly to share experiences and problem-solve with one another. After LCPP closed, many people said this was the service they missed most from the organization. In Afghanistan, the Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU) started a network, which was known to be a base for DNH. The network supported all of its members in using the approach and training others.

4. Credentials

Some organizations have formalized DNH training more than others. To be recognized as a certified DNH trainer within World Vision, for example, staff must participate in a two-week intensive Training of Trainers course. Without this certification, staff cannot provide DNH trainings to other World Vision staff. People often request DNH diplomas or other formal recognition for course completion. Formally certifying a trainee's "know-how" can be a boon to their confidence in actually implementing their new skills. A formal certificate also gives an individual some freedom, within some organizations, to propose challenges to programming options that come down the chain of command.

5. Support

Evidence from the Reflective Case Studies has shown that in general practitioners who have received more support—from their organizations, from champions or from their donors—have used DNH more often and to greater effect than those without support.

This support has taken many forms. From donors, the support comes in the form of funding, tool introduction or even active interest and "checking in." In Kenya, EED established Local Capacities for Peace in the Horn of Africa, an organization whose sole purpose was instilling DNH capacity in EED's Kenya partner organizations.

From organizations, support can mean ensuring a DNH expert can provide coaching or backstopping, establishing a department to be responsible for spreading and boosting DNH or simply encouraging staff to use tools effectively. As mentioned above, Church World Service Cambodia gives new trainees in DNH the opportunity to immediately perform an assessment of one of their projects using DNH. In the course of this assessment, the trainees are accompanied by their trainer to guide them or answer questions as they come up. Additionally, CWSC has in-house DNH training and assessment capacity in their Phnom Penh Headquarters. Those trainers are available to assist other CWSC staff in applying DNH.

In many organizations, the role of support falls to an individual DNH champion (the role of the champion will be explored further in another Issue paper). Champions motivate staff to take up or expand their use of a tool and they act as a resource and reference person.

Each of these types of support is important for sustained DNH use. In several cases, where donor interests changed, or funding for DNH fell away, the cases show a marked decrease in DNH use among their partner organizations. In one location, a donor ended funding for specific DNH efforts and momentum for DNH among their partners dropped off. Organizational interests and motivations shift

as well. Many organizations place a heavy emphasis on “mainstreaming” a tool and at a certain point the pressure to learn and utilize it levels off or declines. At this point, staff interest and motivation to use the tool also drops off. In Cambodia, an organization developed a 3 year pilot project to assign DNH mainstreaming to one department. After the pilot phase the department responsible was closed and the trainers were reassigned. DNH use in this organization fell off heavily, and some of the trainers today even admit to not having the support from management to apply DNH in their work.

Champion support can be precarious as well. If all the organizational capacity for any tool is held in one person, turnover can mean a complete loss of capacity and interest. In Rwanda, the head of one organization was a powerful proponent and motivator for DNH among his staff. He was reassigned. Following his reassignment, staff stopped using DNH and the organizational capacity was completely diminished.

Several of the Reflective case studies tell of organizations that hired trainers to introduce DNH to their staff, then provided no support or mandate for DNH. In these cases, DNH did not survive on an institutional level. Individually, many people did remember key DNH concepts, but there was little evidence that they put those concepts to use.

A Confident DNH User:

1. Feels that they understand how the DNH frameworks function
2. Feels supported and makes use of the support or coaching resources available
3. Looks for opportunities to use DNH

Competence

Despite trainers’ best efforts, there is no evidence in the Reflective Case Studies that training alone creates competent DNH users. Formal or informal training is necessary for understanding, and other external supports are necessary to build the confidence of the user. But confidence is only half of the equation of effective tool use. Confidence without understanding can be quite dangerous and counterproductive. But before any practitioner becomes competent, they must first be able to test the skills they have learned in real world scenarios. Competence does not come without practice and experience and time.

1. Experience

In the course of the Reflective Case study series, the DNH project interviewed hundreds of DNH users. Those with the most experience applying the tool were the most creative and had the most intuitive understanding of the concepts. In many cases, these individuals had been through multiple training workshops, but in every case, they had an opportunity to apply the skills in their work for a sustained period of time. In Kenya, staff of a DNH pilot project were among the first in the country to apply DNH at every stage of a project cycle. Though they had moved on to other organizations, and in some cases were no longer doing field work, were still advocates for DNH and still found ways to apply it to their organizations’ programs.

In some organizations, experience is generated through routine or habit. A common refrain at KCCC meetings is, “are you going to do harm today?” Staff are either always asking the question, or always being asked, and in this way, they are consistently reminded by their colleagues to think about the conflict elements of their programming decisions. Many staff noted that after a colleague said, “are you

doing harm today?” they reflected on their program, and determined that, yes, the activities they had planned may increase dividers.

2. Willingness to Experiment

For some people, the varied experiences they attain with DNH are a result of the habit of using the tool. Because using DNH becomes like second nature to experienced practitioners, they apply it in different contexts and for different purposes without thinking. Use of DNH becomes such second nature, that it never occurs to them to say, “DNH is not a tool for...” or “We cannot apply DNH in this situation.” This attitude towards tool use led to some of the most creative applications of DNH we discovered in the course of writing the reflective case studies.

In India, one organization refused to accept that DNH could not be applied to peacebuilding. They turned the concepts of connectors and dividers on their ears. They realized that in some places, groups in conflict were negatively affected by the same things, such as lack of access to social services, water or land. They brought the groups together to eliminate these “negative connectors” and continued to work with them to ensure ongoing communication. They are not always successful; sometimes the cooperation between groups ends when the problem is solved. But they keep looking for new issues around which to create peace.

Other practitioners experiment with the DNH framework itself. We have seen many people take from DNH what works for them and leave the rest. We have seen other people change the language of the framework so that it makes more sense in their context.

3. Open-Mindedness

Good analysis does not only come from aid practitioners. Good analysis includes the perspectives of those outside the organization: local leaders, community members, shop owners. Open ears and open minds are invaluable in understanding and reacting to ever-changing contexts.

In Kenya, one practitioner used DNH with several tribes of pastoralists in conflict. Over many months of meeting with community leaders, a complex understanding of the context and the driving forces of the context came into focus. Solutions and next steps were proposed by the groups and eventually, the groups were able to resolve their conflict. This practitioner’s DNH work was not financially supported by her organization, but she saw space for the tool to be useful, and put it to use.

In Indonesia, an organization was building a water point in a village. Aid workers had lengthy consultations with the local leaders and men in the community. The men proposed a location for the water point. The aid workers then asked to speak to the women. At first, the men said this was not necessary, but eventually allowed the women to be included in the consultation. The women, responsible for fetching and carrying most water, proposed an alternate location, where the water point was eventually constructed.

4. Problem-Oriented Approach to Conflict

A carpenter does not look into her toolbox to determine how to proceed before building a cabinet. She first designs the cabinet and then selects the best tools to address each element of the design. If she does not have the correct tools at the outset, she obtains them before finishing the project.

The number of tools available to aid workers continues to grow. Many people report being overwhelmed by all the tools they are expected to learn and use in their work. This feeling of being

bogged down by too much information, and “overtooled,” has led many to use only those tools their donors require them to report against. Others approach the problem from a solution perspective: “If I have a hammer, everything I see is a nail.” They apply the tools they know, or that they know best, to all situations, even if another tool would work better.

Competent tool users know that no tool can do everything. As one practitioner in Kenya said to us, “If I have to drive in a nail, why would I use a fork?” Competent DNH users understand that conflict sensitivity, while a good basis for a program, sometimes does not go far enough. DNH works well in concert with other tools, rather than in opposition to them. But in order to understand precisely which tools or methodologies will be necessary, competent tool users begin with a strong analysis to understand the facets of the problem and react to them with the most potent solutions. Competent tool users know they need not use every tool available at all times. They also know that they can combine them, or select elements of one or more that will work in any given scenario. Very competent tool users know that sometimes they do not have the answer; the solution to a problem lies outside their expertise. In these cases, they seek assistance from their colleagues, their headquarters or their donors.

Many people, in different contexts, use DNH in community consultation. They found that in working with communities, DNH alone was insufficient. Independently, in Kenya, India, Philippines and many other places, practitioners formally and informally combined DNH with participatory methodologies to improve their effectiveness in community-based work. Some practitioners did this intuitively, and others created new tools out of these combinations and designed their own training and implementation guidance.

A Competent DNH User

1. Moves more quickly through the DNH Framework
2. Always looks for options
3. Adapts DNH to suit their needs
4. Incorporates DNH into their programming without thinking