What is Peer Assist?

A Peer Assist is a tool that supports "learning before doing" processes. It is a transfer of tacit knowledge from one group of peers to another, allowing valuable lessons from past projects to inform future projects. The team seeking knowledge and insights from others are called "Host Team," while the group of peers who have had similar experiences and share their knowledge and insights is called "Resource Team."

Benefits of a Peer Assist for the Host Team
• Target an adaptive results **challenge** they are currently facing in their project
• Gain new perspectives from people outside the team based on their knowledge and insights
• Promote collective learning and develop networks with peers
• Identify possible new approaches, action items, and new lines of inquiry

Benefits of a Peer Assist for the Resource Team
• Share knowledge and insights about adaptive challenges with peers, based on past experience and lessons
• Promote collective learning and develop networks with peers

Peer Assist: Conditions for Success

Peer Assist is not a typical meeting, but a session that is specifically structured for learning. To make it a success, the Host Team needs to keep the following in mind.

Be in a problem-solving mode
• You are facing a problem that others have faced in the past, and you can learn from their experiences.
• Focus on an adaptive results challenge for which there is more than one solution.

Look beyond your department and sectoral colleagues for inputs
• Expand the perspectives by reaching outside your familiar networks – seek inputs from the "unusual suspects" – go beyond your department and sectoral colleagues.

Limit the size of the group and break it up as needed
• Encourage everyone's participation by limiting the size of the group (no more than 15-18) while keeping the group diverse in experience and skills. As necessary, break it up so that everyone provides inputs.

Promote collective learning and develop networks with peers
• While the Peer Assist is driven by the Host Team's needs, Resource Team participants also benefit from the participatory learning experience and developing a network of peers.

Identify new approaches and action items, and new lines of inquiry
• Seeking perspectives from outside the team can sometimes lead to breakthroughs in the way you understand and address challenges in your project.

Balance telling and listening

• The Host Team must help the Resource Team participants clearly understand the context of the challenges, spend time explaining past efforts to address them, and absorb the Resource Team's recommendations without interrupting or defending past efforts and decisions.

Prioritize and commit to action

• While taking note of all the ideas and recommendations that came out of the session, identify, and note a few action items for follow up.

Preparing Materials for Peer Assist

Depending on the purpose and needs of your session, the host team may use:

• Flipchart pads and stands
• Writing pads and pens

Role of Facilitator

Before the session

- Learn about the challenges that the Host Team has, and if necessary help them clarify and prioritize the issues
- Clarify the respective roles that you and the Host Team will play during and after the session
- Ensure that the meeting space is set up in a manner conducive to dialogue

During the Session

- Welcome participants.
- Review process: Familiarize all participants with the respective roles of the Host Team, Resource Team, and Facilitator.
- Clarify up-front the key challenges and questions. To keep the session focused and outcome-based, ensure that participants have a clear understanding of the challenges that the Host Team is looking to solve.
- Manage Timing: Encourage participants to stay on the agenda. Keep Host Team's context-presentations short. Ensure that the process and flow of the session is managed in such a way that the objectives of the Peer Assist can be achieved.
- Traffic control: Ensure that everyone on the Resource Team has a chance to contribute either verbally or by putting down ideas/comments in writing/post it notes. Ensure that any disagreement is focused on the issue rather than the person, and encourage people to consider alternative ways of thinking and taking action.
- Have Host and Resource Teams summarize what they learned: In addition to having the Host Team summarizing what they learned, invite Resource Team participants to reflect and share what they have learned from the session.
- Conclude the session.