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Monthy Progress Notes

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Abstract

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Comments
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By Olivier Serrat

Rationale

Feedback is a circular causal process whereby some portion of a system's output is returned to the input to control the dynamic behavior of the system. In organizations, feedback is the process of sharing observations, concerns, and suggestions to improve performance. In work that seeks to address the increasingly complex challenges of development, often with limited resources, feedback is essential to maximize development impact.[1] Examples of feedback include audits, performance appraisals, monitoring and evaluation, shareholders' meetings, surveys, and 360-degree assessments.
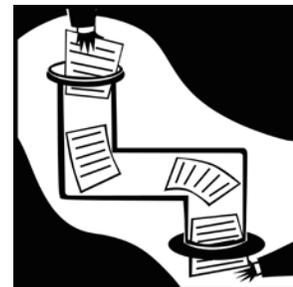
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Figure: The Feedback Mechanism
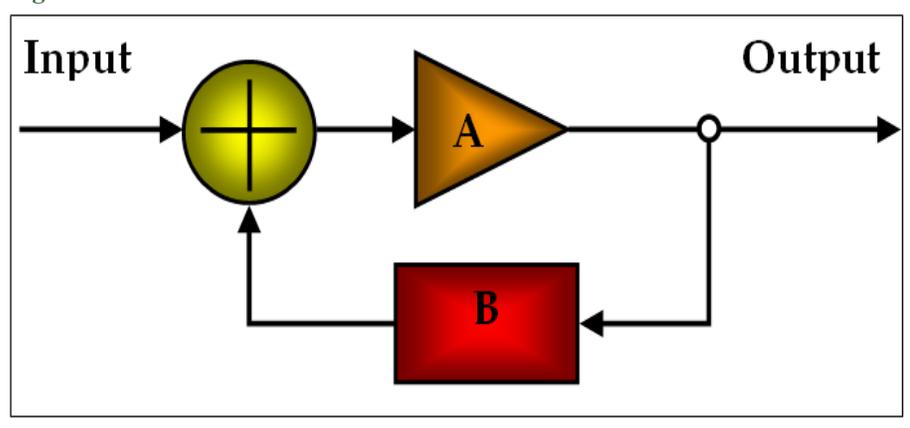
Source: Author

Monitoring and Evaluation

The essential first steps of feedback are the processes of monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring[2] provides senior management with information about current and emerging problems and data to assess if objectives are being met and remain valid. Monitoring

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[1]   Typically, feedback mechanisms on development activities seek to (i) improve future policies, strategies, programs, and projects, including their design, implementation, and results, through feedback of lessons learned; (ii) provide a basis for accountability, including the provision of information to the public; and (iii) facilitate the updating or reformulation of current project design to increase the implementability and sustainability of the project.

[2]   The primary questions of monitoring are: (i) Are the right inputs being supplied or delivered at the right time? (ii) Are the planned inputs producing the planned outputs? (iii) Are the outputs leading to the achievement of the desired outcome? (iv) Is the policy environment consistent with the design assumptions? (v) Are the project or program's objectives still valid?

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reports should be based on a set of simple indicators that can be collected and processed in time for senior management to take the necessary actions. Evaluation,[3] in the context of project implementation, is an ongoing activity used to reassess components necessary to meet objectives in the light of experience as implementation proceeds. Evaluation draws on information supplied through monitoring, as well as special studies to reconsider and adjust project components as required through such mechanisms as reformulation. As a tool, evaluation can be applied at different points in the project cycle to elicit information for project identification and, subsequently, project design; for ongoing management (monitoring and reviews); or for future development activities (post-evaluation studies). Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be timely, accessible, simple, ongoing, and systematic. They should also offer a variety of approaches and promote follow-up.

The Challenge

The challenge of feedback is to develop ways for the results of monitoring and evaluation to be disseminated and returned through the system to relevant individuals and groups. Thus, feedback mechanisms require information dissemination strategies and formal mechanisms that ensure integration of findings into the project cycle. Institutionalization of the feedback loop facilitates this process. This involves establishing a variety of formal and less formal means that can be used to ensure that findings are considered during project or program implementation and in the development of new projects or programs. Typically, these include linkages to

- senior management,
- policy development,
- program management,
- agency procedures, and
- training.

Common Constraints

Constraints on feedback mechanisms are many. They include

- poor appreciation of the benefits from feedback, and thus poor cooperation in its conduct;
- insufficient clarity and precision in performance indicators;
- shortages of personnel with skills in performance evaluation and confidence in its effectiveness;
- overemphasis on official or regulatory procedural aspects, which often means that more attention is given to accomplishing a necessary task than to looking beyond immediate requirements to the needs of current and future projects and programs;
- inadequate financial resources;
- the poor quality of information generated;
- the absence of well-established management information systems; and
- lack of a truthful environment in certain political cultures.

Monthly Progress Notes

Monthly progress notes on project administration should be considered an essential feedback mechanism. They document accomplishments as well as the problems or bottlenecks encountered during project or program preparation and implementation, and assess alternate means of replicating or dealing with them, respectively. They are also a means of establishing accountability for various actions at various stages of the project cycle, and assessing the budgetary implications of improving development effectiveness. Yet, the submission of monthly progress notes on activities and accomplishments is too infrequently provided in the scope of projects and programs.

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[3] The primary questions of evaluation are: (i) Were the commitments honored from all sides? Did the planned activities actually occur? (ii) What should have been planned (rather than what was actually planned) to reach the project's objectives more effectively and efficiently? (iii) What could have been achieved with the same resources and in the same time if the project or program had been managed more effectively and efficiently?

Template

The text and tables below provide guidance on the preparation by consultants of monthly progress notes in the form of a recommended format and a description of the contents required. Naturally, flexibility in the interpretation and use of the instructions should be exercised as they are intended to introduce approximate conformance in the more obvious components of reporting. The monthly progress notes, completed at the end of each month or partial month, should be submitted by consultants to their direct supervisor(s), e.g., the project implementation office head, department director, and project director, and entered into the central files of executing and implementing agencies. Consultants may wish to copy other personnel as well.

The monthly progress notes should serve the function of monitoring and evaluation and purport to inform others in the interest of coordination. They should be concise statements of work accomplished or shortcomings during the preceding month. They should consist of a few pages of text followed by attachments including (i) details of daily work output in a calendar format, and (ii) a summary of output against terms of reference. Other attachments may be added to clarify aspects of activities.

Needless to say, the body text of the monthly progress note should vary depending on the amount of information that needs to be reported. It may consist of a few paragraphs that summarize the work output or may include separate sections that provide additional information on activities undertaken. In either case the note should contain a section that summarizes the actions taken during the month on the previous month's recommendations. Any other information should be shown as additional attachments.

Text: Monthly Progress Note

[Month] [Year]

To: [Primary recipients—LIST]

From: [Name], [Position]

Copy: [Secondary Recipients—LIST]

Introduction

The opening paragraph should describe the period covered by the note, and indicate whether the consultant was present on the project full or part time. It should also reference any attachments to the progress note that are used to provide additional details on the consultant's work. There are generally two: the first attachment provides a calendar review of activities for the month; the second provides a brief synopsis of activities against the consultant's terms of reference. Other attachments, added as necessary, should be referenced here.

General

This should be a brief summary list of the major categories of work over the past month. Further details on these topics should be provided in later sections.

Actions Taken in Response to the Recommendations of the Previous Monthly Progress Note

Recommendations from the previous Monthly Progress Note should be presented in italics, followed by a summary of actions taken over the past month to address the recommendations.

[Summary of First Recommendation in italics.]

[Summary of actions taken]

[Summary of Second Recommendation, etc.]

[Summary of actions taken against second recommendation, etc.]

[Activity Category 1]

These sections (as many as needed) should address in some detail individual categories of activity as identified in the section labeled "General," above. A description of the activities and their importance can be described in one or more paragraphs here. Examples of categories include "Purchasing," "Work Planning," "Project Coordination," and "Meetings and Reports".

Recommendation: Any recommendations for future redirection of activity can be provided here.

[Activity Category 2—N]
This paragraph addresses in the same fashion the second category. Additional sections should be added as needed (up to "N").

Recommendation: This paragraph provides any relevant recommendations for the second category.

[Overarching Category]

For most consultants there may be one category that overarches all others, and is the primary focus of the consultant's work. If so, activities under this category can be described here and used to sum up and integrate all the consultant's activities for the month.

Recommendation: General, overarching recommendations may be offered here.

Signed:

[The note should be signed, at least in hard copy]

_____

[Name], [Title]

Source: Author

Table 1: Schedule of Daily Activities—[Month, Year]

						[Month] [Year]	
Sun	*Mon*	*Tue*	*Wed*	*Thu*	*Fri*	*Sat*
A form such as this can be used to show daily activities. It should be filled out each day of the month.	Type in the day's activities, e.g., "Met with PIO Head. Prepared monthly progress note," etc.	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

Source: Author

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Table 2: Terms of Reference and Monthly Summary of Activities—[Month, Year]

Item	Terms of Reference	Summary of Monthly Activities
1.	[List items in terms of reference here.]	[Describe activities undertaken during the month against items in the consultant's terms of reference]
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		

[Note: Variations on the style and layout of this table are acceptable.]

Source: Author

Further Reading
ADB. 1995. *Project Quality: An Agenda for Action*. Manila.

For further information
Contact Olivier Serrat, Head of the Knowledge Management Center, Regional and Sustainable Development Department, Asian Development Bank (oserrat@adb.org).

Knowledge Solutions

Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.