

# Participatory development approaches need participatory management!



by **ASHLEY RAESIDE**

## Introduction

Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) is a radically different way to help rural villages become and stay safe from the dangers of their own shit. CLTS requires field staff to become both provocative and participatory facilitators of complex individual and collective behaviour change processes. They are no longer simply disseminating leaflets and health messages prepared by experts in the capital city. For field staff to develop into skilful CLTS facilitators, they will require different training and ongoing support from their local managers than they have traditionally been provided with. The directive management style that has historically dominated must evolve into a more conducive coaching management style. But will these local managers come to recognise this need to work differently with their field staff? Can they independently develop the attitudes and skills required to be more participatory and strategic managers?

This article seeks to engage people who provide technical support to field-level

managers of CLTS programmes, for example:

- Sanitation specialists and programme officers from donor agencies;
- Mid and upper-level managers of CLTS-implementing NGOs;
- Consultants procured by the donor, government or NGO to support field managers; and
- Regional or central ministry staff from water or public health departments.

Since March 2009, I have been one such technical support provider for District Assembly CLTS Management Teams in Malawi. I am a Canadian staff volunteer for Engineers Without Borders Canada (EWB). In Malawi, EWB staff act like consultant partners to staff throughout the water and sanitation sector (see Box 1). Here I share some of my own trial and error learning about effective ways to help field-level CLTS managers develop strong CLTS facilitation teams. If you work with field-level CLTS managers, I hope this article helps you think ‘outside the box’ from how you would usually provide

**Box 1: EWB's role with partners in Malawi**

In Malawi, EWB staff partner with people from the bottom to the top of the water and sanitation sector to:

- create stronger learning and coordination linkages between stakeholders who tend to work in isolation;
- innovate feasible solutions to deal with challenges of programme capacity or staff motivation; and
- facilitate leadership development among key leaders throughout the water and sanitation sector.

For example, EWB facilitated a national CLTS learning workshop which achieved active and enthusiastic participation from village health promoters up to the National Director of Sanitation and from both government and NGOs implementing CLTS. The workshop was so conducive to learning that UNICEF and other high-level attendees commented that any future gatherings for water and sanitation should draw staff from all levels and foster participation by everyone (typically not achieved at sector gatherings).

support to them. My belief is that by developing a more flexible and relevant style of technical support, we can do our part to help field-level managers develop and run programmes that enable effective CLTS facilitation in the community.

**Malawi CLTS context**

*I don't believe that the success of CLTS hinges just on the attitude and skill of the facilitator. The relationships and communication between me and my fellow CLTS managers in Mzimba and the relationships between us and our own managers need to improve for us to be successful with CLTS.*

Chrispin Dambula, Water Officer,  
Mzimba District.

In July 2008, UNICEF Malawi introduced health, water and community development officers from 12 District Assemblies to CLTS (Figure 1). This was done through a hands-on national training led by CLTS pioneer, Kamal Kar. Shortly afterwards, UNICEF made funding available to the 12 districts for CLTS implementation as part of their overall water and sanitation programmes. Almost all district officers were strongly influenced by their experience at the national CLTS training and returned to their districts with momentum to train their field staff and initiate CLTS programming.

*After the first CLTS training with the practical experience of triggering I was*

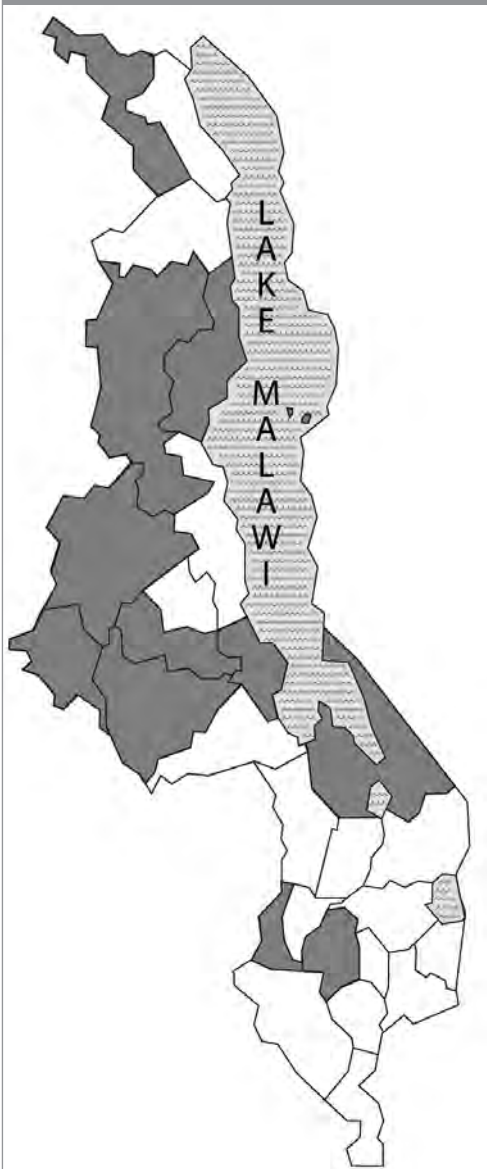
*convinced that the approach would help Dowa District on sanitation behaviours... Beyond being convinced I was anxious to get started and see many villages become triggered in Dowa.*

Joseph Lwesya, Environmental Health Officer, Dowa District.

However, human resource shortages at district-level mean that there is too much work for too few staff, so although the district officers had become inspired by the potential of CLTS at the national training, they had many other management responsibilities competing for their time and attention after returning the district. Most were only able to devote a small amount of their time to developing sound strategies for CLTS training and implementation, and to reflecting on and adapting their approach. Additional human resource shortages and an excessively heavy administrative burden at central-level meant that there was extremely limited technical support available to district officers from national ministries or UNICEF.

*CLTS relies a lot on good facilitation skills, effective follow-up and overall technical support. A single hands-on, two-week training for both the district and national level can hardly be expected to have produced many CLTS experts. Credit should go to the districts for trying their best to implement CLTS, gaining valuable lessons as they go. Technical support is one issue we would like to focus our efforts on*

**Figure 1: A map of the 12 CLTS-implementing districts in Malawi (dark grey): Blantyre, Chitipa, Dowa, Kasungu, Likoma Island, Lilongwe, Mangochi, Mchinji, Mwanza, Mzimba, Nkhata Bay and Salima**



Source: EWB

*in 2010 because there is a clear need for it at all levels of CLTS implementation.*

Chimwemwe Nyimba, Sanitation Specialist, UNICEF Malawi.

With only a five-day training experience, the district officers worked mostly independently in 2008 to design and manage training and programme support in each of their own districts. Under these conditions, quality considerations (such as strengthening CLTS facilitation and ensuring timely and effective follow-up to triggered villages) were initially a low priority. Yet, it is critical for managers to understand and respond to such quality considerations if CLTS is to succeed.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of their constraints, the 12 districts still managed to make reasonable progress with CLTS in their first year. They triggered at least 147 villages collectively from July 2008 to July 2009. In over 30% of these villages open defecation was completely eliminated. Such early achievements in Malawi should be considered very encouraging. It is extremely challenging to integrate a new and unconventional approach like CLTS into existing programmes, especially in an environment already stretched thin when it comes to basic resources.

### Finding my niche

Before working in international development, I was an ecologist. So as I could not escape my natural tendency to view CLTS in Malawi as a system of people and interactions, similar to how one might study the interconnectivity of life in an ecosystem (see Figure 2).

If the principle goal of CLTS is to influence rural communities to stop open defecation, then the most significant interaction in Malawi must take place between the field staff who facilitate CLTS and the villages they work with. If we assume that the system is interconnected and that each stakeholder's behaviour is influenced by those it interacts with, we must also consider the upstream influences on CLTS facilitator behaviour. To this end,

<sup>1</sup> For background information on the CLTS triggering process, please refer to the overview and also Tips for trainers, this issue.

**Figure 2: A simplified representation of the CLTS connections in Malawi explored in this article**



I wondered if the management practices of a typical district officer were appropriate for building the abilities and attitudes that field staff need to engage effectively with the community for CLTS. My hypothesis follows this line of thinking. I predicted that if these managers receive better support on their work, then they will be more willing and able to focus on positively affecting the facilitation by field staff.

When I began visiting district CLTS managers in March 2009 I quickly understood from them that they believed much more impact was possible with CLTS than they had accomplished so far. At the time, I expressed to them that I wanted to find a way to help them fulfill their personal and their team's potential for transforming sanitation behaviours. But I had to start by confessing. I wasn't arriving with any ready-made solutions. I told them I expected to learn a lot from them about the practicalities of CLTS implementation. And that in the process, I had faith that we would discover together a few key ways I could help them strengthen programme design and field staff skills for facilitating CLTS. I pitched my 'technical support' hypothesis to the districts without a lot of specificity, and without a prior relationship. Luckily they were willing to experiment with me, and agreed to try collaborating on their CLTS programmes.

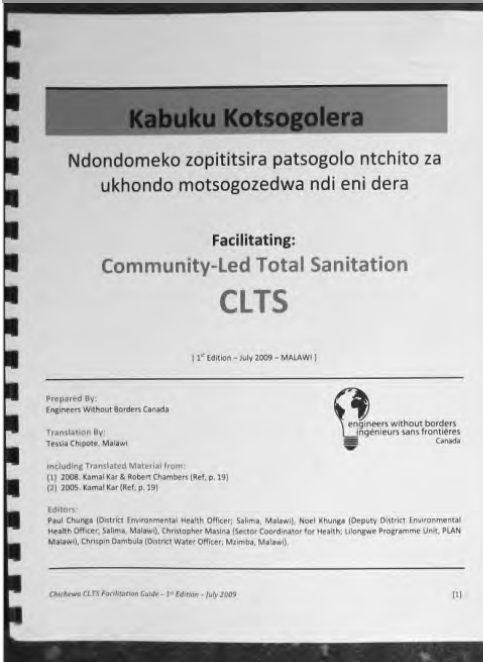
### How I provided technical support to district CLTS leaders

The CLTS management practices differ from one district to another but broadly I was aiming to help district officers improve their strategic planning, outcomes analysis, programme adaptation, leadership approach, and interpersonal relations. For this process, I chose to be a friendly process facilitator, coach and thought partner to district CLTS managers, instead of an imposing external expert.

With 12 districts since March 2009, I have visited a couple of districts monthly, a couple of districts bi-monthly, most districts quarterly, and there are a couple I have visited only once. The 'demand' for my support varied between districts. Perhaps ironically, it is some of the strongest district leaders who quickly visualised how I could help them with their work and asked me to return to work with them again and again.

*Ashley is my partner in thought indeed. I knew since the very first time we met in Mchinji... We have developed different management tools together, with her support and initiative... Ashley is like a learning bridge between me and my colleagues in all 12 districts which are implementing CLTS. By February 2010 we have triggered over 300 villages and at least 125 have been declared open defeca-*

CLTS resources co-created with district CLTS managers



Left: CLTS Guide for Facilitators (in Malawi's local language, ChiChewa). Right: Issue 2 of the SHiTS Newsletter from August 2009 (Sharing Highlights in Total Sanitation).

tion free. Ashley has greatly contributed to the success of Mchinji's CLTS programme. Thomas Mchipha, Environmental Health Officer, Mchinji District.

Although some districts became extremely active rolling out CLTS in 2008 and 2009, others did not initially implement CLTS very intensely. Since I pitched my CLTS support role practically, 'Let me join you on-the-job, to help with planning and reflection for CLTS activities,' those districts who were not conducting CLTS activities may not have seen a need to receive support from me until they began in earnest. Perhaps another reason why demand for support was low in some districts is because they are not used to receiving the type of assistance I offered them. It might have been hard to imagine, in the context of their go-go-go implementing style, how slowing down to work with a 'thought partner' could actually help them. This is especially because district

officers are used to a different style of interaction with donors and central government supervisors in Lilongwe. They are often summoned to the capital or informed of short-notice visits, which are often carefully orchestrated to demonstrate impact and hide weakness.

Once I realised that some districts were more interested than others in on-the-job visits, I began testing out other ideas that could benefit all district leaders, even if I couldn't yet provide them with much in-person assistance. I began preparing a CLTS Facilitator's Guide that I had translated for field staff into ChiChewa (a common local language in Malawi). I also began producing a regular newsletter, SHiTS. (Sharing Highlights in Total Sanitation) to highlight good practices different district leaders had come up with (see Figure 3). The newsletter was also a forum to discuss common challenges I discovered in a few districts, for the benefit of all districts.

## Six principles of effective technical support

By thinking back on why my support has worked (that is, when it has worked!), I've been able to extract **six key principles** that I think make my support more relevant, effective and appreciated by most field-level CLTS managers. Overall what I've learnt about providing support to districts is that the **how** of the support is just as important as the **what**.

### Principle 1: Make it most convenient for the CLTS manager you're supporting

Provide support on a regular basis and according to the schedule of each field-level CLTS manager. Consider asking: 'Are you sure the day we scheduled is convenient for you?'

Address the needs of each manager on a case-by-case basis. Don't use a one-size-fits-all process or set of expectations for a group of leaders with diverse capabilities and challenges. If you support more than a few field-level managers, consider keeping brief notes on their progress and challenges. I find that doing this really helps me remember and focus on the unique needs of each district during our limited time together.

For example, I try to visit the districts at least once per quarter, and call or email them one or two times per month to keep informed and provide support in between visits. I also try to schedule my visits with each district when there is already a CLTS-related activity planned to minimise interference with their other programmes.

### Principle 2: Maximise the chance for unexpected learning to occur between you and the manager

Work on-the-job as much as possible with field-level CLTS managers, and discourage them from preparing specially orchestrated visits for your visit. An interactive real-life dynamic increases the odds that you will learn unexpected things from one another. The most valuable learning can occur when you don't plan for it – but create conditions

for it to happen.

For example, as much as possible, I try to go out in the field with district officers during triggering, follow-up or verification activities. Field work can provide a perfect opportunity to see how the manager interacts with their field staff. This can help me identify pertinent issues to explore with them back in the office, for example:

**Me:** 'What did you think of the field staff facilitation today at the CLTS triggering?'

**Manager:** 'It wasn't very great. The facilitator asked a lot of leading yes/no questions to the community about whether open defecation should stop.'

**Me:** 'I noticed that also. Why do you think the field staff haven't adopted the non-judgemental attitude and questioning style of CLTS facilitation?'

**Manager:** 'Actually, it's been a long time since we did the training, and these field staff haven't had a lot of experience triggering until now. Maybe they didn't get the point at training, or maybe they've forgotten what they learnt.'

**Me:** 'Can you think of any way we could help them improve their knowledge and performance?'

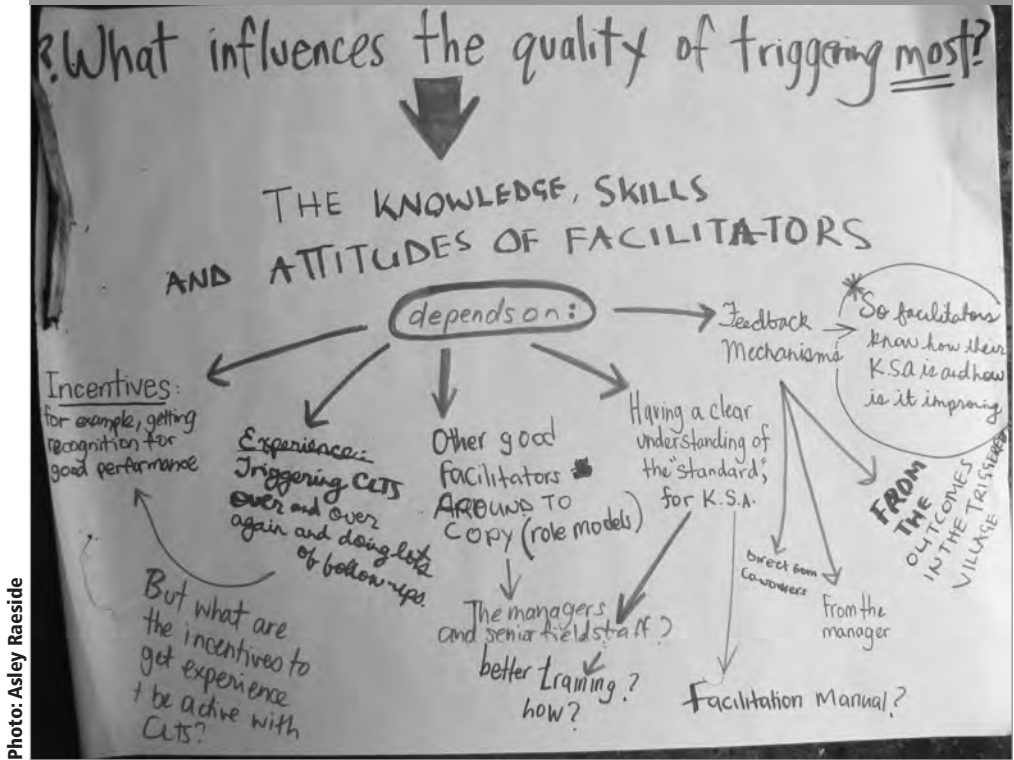
**Manager:** 'Maybe we can provide them with a written summary of the CLTS concepts, and the overall triggering process. And, maybe I will go out in the field with some teams to do some facilitation role-modeling.'

I have found that there is a demand at district-level for these kind of context-based reflective conversations.

*I think that senior managers could really help us if they spent more time with us in the field, during actual CLTS triggerings. This exposure could really help them understand and appreciate our challenges. As a field-level CLTS manager, I would also like to receive more proactive help during the planning stages of CLTS. This way, some mistakes or challenges could be avoided altogether.*

Chrispin Dambula, Water Officer,  
Mzimba District.

Figure 4: A district brainstorm on flipchart paper: 'what influences the quality of triggering most?'



Principle 3: Facilitate self-assessment for the manager – be a coach, not a lecturer

As much as possible, I try to help the CLTS managers improve their self-awareness and understanding by asking open-ended questions. These enable them to discover a better course of action for themselves. This 'coaching' approach is the best way to help them strengthen their knowledge, skills and confidence. It differs greatly from the conventional style of telling a field-level manager what they should do and how they should do it.

For example, I facilitate conversations with CLTS managers to help them analyse their own management practice, sometimes one-on-one and sometimes with all the officers involved in a district's CLTS management. As they share observations of CLTS facilitator behaviour, we link these things back to how well the village has responded or not to CLTS. I ask questions

that help the managers bring out their knowledge of field staff facilitation behaviours, and questions that help them creatively explore options for improving facilitation by adapting their own actions or the programme's design. This analysis is more likely to succeed in an informal setting, and when we use flipcharts to map out everyone's ideas visually (Figure 4). Sometimes we even invite field staff to join us in our analyses. But the process is always conducted with district staff contributing their knowledge and opinions, and with me trying to listen carefully to help facilitate the discovery process. I don't always succeed at 'asking versus telling', because sometimes I get my own ideas and I become impatient and excited to share them. But, I do my best to self-regulate, encourage others to speak up, and refrain from dominating the conversation space.

#### Principle 4: Diffuse and connect learning to and from the managers

Do your best to widely diffuse relevant good practices and lessons learnt by one CLTS manager to others you work with. Whenever possible, cut out the middle man (you!) and connect the managers directly to discuss their CLTS programme model, management practice and experiences.

For example, I write and circulate the monthly SHITS newsletter with stories and pictures that illustrate good practices the districts have discovered with CLTS. I've observed that district managers are eager to hear about the experiences of their fellow 11 management teams, who have similar roles and objectives with CLTS. I've also been able to encourage district CLTS leaders from Kasungu, Mzimba, Blantyre and Mwanza to write articles for the newsletter that directly relay their insights. I think it has been a useful and empowering experience for them, but I really should ask them to confirm!

#### Principle 5: Minimise power differentials between yourself and the manager

Minimise as much as possible, the perception that you are more powerful or higher in the hierarchy than the manager you support. This can be challenging and takes time. By building trust and a strong relationship with the field-level CLTS manager they will feel freer to communicate openly and honestly with you. Principle 5 is particularly important to heed when you are also the stakeholder responsible for:

- releasing funding; and/or
- evaluating the manager's performance.

It is very difficult to help a manager address their personal or programme weaknesses if they do not admit them to you for fear of reproach.

This one is all about attitude. I try my best not to make the CLTS manager feel like they have to prove him/herself to me. In Malawi's CLTS system I am nobody's boss, and I make sure not to act that way. I clearly express to district leaders that I

think CLTS is difficult, and that I wish to help them address the inevitable challenges of implementation as we learn about them together. I also try to be open about my own weaknesses and mistakes. Lastly, I make it clear that I don't visit to evaluate them to gather incriminating information for their Ministry or the donor. This has really helped me build fruitful working relationships with most district officers.

#### Principle 6: Be positive!

In all your interactions, try to reinforce effective practices and decisions the managers have chosen by giving them feedback on their personal strengths, and praising them for their good performance. We get excited about CLTS because it can be so effective for fostering amazing change in rural communities. But sometimes we forget that CLTS is not an easy approach for a district officer to manage and build field staff capacity around. So, it is important to recognise accomplishments and progress that the CLTS manager leads. Being positive also proves goodwill, which helps in developing the trusting relationships. These are needed to facilitate improvements in weaker areas of management or programme performance. When visiting a district, also try to be aware of the morale of the CLTS manager and their team. Whenever it seems to be an issue do your best to explore it with them.

If you would like to better understand the **what** and **how** of your own style of technical support, consider doing the self-assessment exercise in Box 2.

#### Conclusion

The principles described above are central to the practice of management coaching in the private sector, likely because employers have begun to recognise their power for enhancing staff motivation and productivity (de Smet *et al.*, 2009). However, participatory management techniques are rarely given a chance to earn development organisations more of the 'profits' we are aiming



**Box 2: Quickly self-assess your own approach to providing technical support for CLTS**

The objectives of this article were to help those who provide support to field-level CLTS managers *explore* more participatory methods, *analyse* their personal approach, and *innovate* their approach to more regularly capitalise on opportunities to strengthen the CLTS leaders' skills to manage their facilitation teams and their programme as a whole. Please take a few minutes to reflect on your own practice using this exercise:

**During your last visit to a field-level CLTS manager, did you ...**

**YES or NO**

1. Ask if the proposed visit suited their schedule, or if an alternate date should be chosen?
2. Go out in the field to see CLTS in action? (For example: triggering, ODF verification, etc.)
3. Spend more time listening than speaking when discussing their CLTS programme?
4. Ask questions more often than you told the manager what you thought they should do?
5. Provide them with unconditional praise for some aspect of the programme's performance?
6. Assess the morale of the manager and their team?
7. Sit down with the manager and invite them to share a challenge for you to explore together?
8. Learn something new?
9. Seek their feedback on the relevance and utility of the support you provide them?

If you answered **yes** to **between 1 and 3** of the above questions:

You occasionally provide participatory and relevant technical support to your field-level CLTS managers. However, there remains considerable opportunity for improvement. The quality of your support could benefit from making a deliberate and regular effort to:

- learn more about the implementer's context and experiences;
- build stronger relationships with your field-level CLTS managers, and;
- recognise how you are able to help them address their programme needs.

Don't let your other priorities prevent you from providing field-level CLTS managers with the support they need from you. Re-read the **six principles of effective support** and try to apply them more frequently in your work. If you're feeling brave enough, consider asking the CLTS managers you work with for their feedback, to know better what you should focus on.

If you answered **yes** to **between 4 and 8** of the above questions:

You are doing a good job of providing participatory and relevant technical assistance to your field-level CLTS managers. Re-read the **six principles of effective support** and look for ideas that you have not yet incorporated into your practice. Definitely consider having an explicit conversation with the managers you support to seek their feedback on which elements of your support are **more** and **less** helpful. Ask for specific suggestions for how you can strengthen your support, and do your best to encourage them to be open and honest with you. Integrate their feedback into your approach, and be sure to thank them for sharing their opinion with you. Keep going down the path you're already on by continually seeking new ways to adapt your practice. You are on your way from providing good to great support!

If you answered **yes** to **all 9** of the above questions:

Your methods of support are exceptionally participatory and likely very relevant to the field-level CLTS managers you support. Congratulations! You are very well positioned to be a role model for providing flexible and innovative technical support within your organisation. Continue to seek opportunities to coach and provide feedback to your colleagues to boost your collective effectiveness for strengthening relationships and supporting those who manage CLTS on the ground.

for. In the international development sector, projects are usually designed at the top of the hierarchy, and the role of field-level managers and staff is to simply execute. Executing CLTS is not the least bit simple. Support practices upstream of the community must become more participatory at every level to interactively address the challenges of adopting this new approach. Despite being unconventional, participa-

tory methods of support are critically relevant in our sector, and CLTS successes in particular will not be replicated at scale without them.

Although I've just written a **how-to** article about participatory technical support, I haven't offered you an expert ready-made solution. I think that overall the best lesson I learnt this year is not too arrive with my head too full of plans and

assumptions. It's the way I've chosen to interact with CLTS managers that has caused me to succeed or fail at supporting them. The best way I can be helpful is to simply ask 'How can I help you?' The best way for me to understand possible solutions to implementation challenges is to spend more time with the people experiencing those challenges. As with CLTS, the best way to change management behaviours is to help the managers drive the

change process themselves.

Managers must shift their priority from reporting success upwards, to creating the conditions for success below them. If technical support providers role-model participatory principles, then field-level CLTS managers will be more likely to adopt more participatory management styles. This transformation will empower their field staff to become true facilitators of a community-led change process.

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