



Can Outsiders Help Build State Capability? Lessons from Ted Lasso

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July 2026

Abstract

Many states possess substantial capacity but experience gaps between potential and performance. This paper argues that the gaps reflect differences in state capability, defined as the empowered ability of state agents to transform capacity into performance. Drawing on nearly two decades of experience with Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA), the paper examines how state capabilities develop and what role outsiders can play in supporting their development. PDIA combines action learning, through which insiders build capability by working on real problems, and action research, through which outsiders learn about capability by accompanying these processes. Thus, capabilities emerge through repeated cycles of action, reflection, experimentation, and adaptation. The paper also uses episodes from the television series *Ted Lasso* as a metaphor for this process, illustrating how a coach from the outside contributes not by providing solutions but by creating conditions in which individuals and teams learn, adapt, and discover their own capabilities in and across multiple moments. The findings challenge conventional approaches to external assistance. Capability is not built through products, plans, or technical advice alone, but through the relationships, experiences, and learning processes that enable state agents to transform capacity into performance.



Introduction

Implementation gaps have long concerned international development scholars and practitioners. For many years these gaps were understood primarily as capacity gaps. States were seen to underperform because they lacked skilled personnel, knowledge, resources, and effective institutions. The response was therefore to build capacity through training, financing, organizational reform, and institutional strengthening.

These efforts often increased the capacity or potential available to states. Yet many governments continued to struggle to deliver expected results. States increasingly appeared as though they should be able to implement policies and programs without consistently doing so. This can be understood as a form of isomorphic mimicry, where organizations adopt forms associated with performance without achieving the underlying performance those forms are intended to produce (Andrews, 2013).

Recent research points to state capability as the factor that closes the gap between capacity and results (Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock, 2017; Kattel et al., 2025; Morgan, 2006). Drawing on this research, we define state capability as the empowered ability of state agents to transform capacity into performance. Literature consistently lists key capabilities, including learning, adaptation, problem solving, coalition building, and experimentation. Literature also suggests that these capabilities can be built through processes like Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) in protected 'sandbox' (or experimentation) spaces.

These ideas are influencing development practice. Many governments, development agencies, and consulting firms now seek to support capability development through externally designed adaptive management, problem-driven approaches, innovation and incubation spaces, and learning-oriented interventions.

Yet important questions remain. Do we understand capability well enough to build it deliberately? Can external actors really help build state capability in a deliberative and programmed manner? If so, how? And, if not, how should external actors see their role?

These questions matter, because capability-building interventions are themselves vulnerable to isomorphic mimicry. Workshops, reform teams, innovation labs, adaptive processes, and learning platforms may become products that reproduce the appearance of capability building without generating the underlying abilities they promise to foster. This risk is particularly acute

when capability-building initiatives are implemented through conventional consulting and contract arrangements that have for many years characterized external engagements in international development—where rigid contracts promise predetermined outputs and short-term performance targets, largely driven by outside experts.

Our experience with PDIA suggests that building state capability requires a different model of external engagement. The capabilities that matter emerge through action, reflection, experimentation, and learning by inside agents, rather than the transfer of expert knowledge or creation of space by outsiders. This happens over time, in the many moments of policy and implementation work, as actors confront problems, experience setbacks, negotiate their own limits and potential, test ideas, and learn from experience. These capabilities can only be cultivated and understood through active and thick engagement in those moments.

This work requires that external actors wade into the weeds of uncertain and often chaotic policy work as participant coaches rather than observing those toiling in the weeds from outside. The task is not simply to assess performance, introduce processes, or transfer solutions according to a set contract. It is to participate in the sense-making of work, alongside local actors, as problems are defined, actions are attempted, setbacks occur, and learning emerges. This closely resembles traditions of action research and action learning, where outsiders participate in ongoing processes of learning and change while learning alongside those responsible for doing the work.

The paper proposes this approach as the way outsiders can help build state capability. It does so by first reviewing the literature on state capability to explain why such work is needed. It then discusses the way ideas on state capability are being introduced into external development arrangements, raising concerns of isomorphic mimicry. It then discusses our experience with PDIA as a method to build state capability, explaining how we came to see PDIA less as a product to use in working with states and more as an example of action research and action learning through which we could participate in new learning and capability building while learning about capability itself as well as capability building. We use an illustration drawn from the popular television series *Ted Lasso* to describe this action research/learning approach—and particularly how an outsider who does not arrive as the expert can participate in the work itself, support learning and experimentation, and help foster capability development from within. The

conclusion combines our thoughts on how outsiders can help build state capability, noting also the challenges these thoughts have for conventional ways of doing international development.

From Capacity to Capability

Implementation gaps fester in most governments: consider promised education outcomes that aren't delivered, or levels of social protection that are budgeted for but never provided, or infrastructure projects that are announced but never completed.

These gaps have long been understood as a reflection of capacity weaknesses, where governments were thought to underperform because they lacked skilled personnel, adequate resources, and effective institutions. The response was therefore to build capacity through training, financing, organizational reform, and institutional strengthening.

These interventions often increased the potential available to states, but this improved potential frequently failed to produce performance as expected and/or needed. Governments often came to possess the forms they associated with effective states without consistently demonstrating the performance of these states. This pattern reflects what has been termed isomorphic mimicry: organizations adopt the appearance of success without achieving the underlying success those forms are intended to support.

Similar gaps between capacity and performance have been identified in other literature, where scholars have shown that capacity or potential does not guarantee effective outcomes. Sen (1985, 1999), for example, argued that income or material resources do not automatically produce well-being; what matters is whether individuals have the capability to convert those resources into valued ways of living. The argument, essentially, was that two individuals with the same income may experience very different levels of well-being because they have different realized abilities to use and deploy those resources. Similarly, Teece and colleagues (Teece, Pisano and Shuen, 1997; Teece 2007) demonstrated that firms with comparable assets—like capital, technology, or skilled labor—do not necessarily achieve the same levels of competitiveness. What distinguishes successful firms from the others is their ability to integrate, reconfigure, and deploy their assets more effectively in response to changing environments. In both cases, the concept of 'capability' was used to explain how capacity is translated into outcomes by shaping how resources are used, adapted, and combined in practice.

Such thinking has increasingly informed explanations of the implementation gap—and how to close it. Morgan (2006, 7), for instance, distinguished between capacity as “latent” potential and performance as “the application/use of capacity,” which he implies happens because of state capabilities—the collective abilities that make capacity operational. Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2017, 12) similarly argue that many development failures reflect weaknesses in implementation capability and that “the real determinant of performance is ... capability for implementation.” Kattel and colleagues (2025, 11) argue similarly that dynamic capabilities are needed in governments “to solve both everyday problems and emerging challenges,” closing the gap between existing capacities and the changing performance demands governments face.

Taken together, this work points to capability as the factor that closes the gap between state capacity and state performance. Capacity creates potential; capability determines whether that potential is translated into performance. We therefore define state capability as the empowered ability of state agents to transform capacity into performance.

The literature has become increasingly specific about which capabilities appear to matter in this transformation process. Morgan (2006) identifies the practical and empowered abilities to act, generate results, relate, adapt, and maintain coherence. Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock (2017) similarly emphasize problem solving, experimentation, learning, and adaptation. Kattel et al. (2025) identify dynamic capabilities that allow governments to sense emerging challenges, adjust priorities, build coalitions, experiment, and reconfigure delivery.

The literature also offers suggestions on how such capabilities develop (or can be built). Learning occupies a particularly important role, with capabilities frequently described as emerging through repeated cycles of action, reflection, experimentation, feedback, and adaptation. PDIA has emerged as one of various approaches that facilitates such process (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2017) alongside adaptive management methods, innovation and human centered design mechanisms, and others.

The literature also describes environments in which these processes seem to occur, including reform teams, innovation units, delivery laboratories, experimental spaces, policy sandboxes, mission teams, and other protected mechanisms. Kattel et al. (2025), for example, note the importance of creating spaces for experimentation and from which learning can spread. PDIA studies similarly emphasize authorized teams as key venues of capability building (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2017), and adaptive management approaches emphasize building

learning spaces, flexible teams, peer networks, and cooperative mechanisms that provide room for experimentation, reflection, and adaptation (Ramalingam et al., 2014; Valters et al., 2016).

Capability Building in Development

Overall, this literature presents a remarkably coherent story. Governments require capabilities that enable learning, adaptation, collaboration, and experimentation. These capabilities emerge through iterative processes of action and reflection and often develop within protected environments that permit experimentation and learning. Not surprisingly, this thinking has increasingly been operationalized in development practice. The language of capability now appears widely across development assistance, while the processes and spaces associated with capability development increasingly appear as products and services offered by donor agencies, consulting firms, implementing organizations, and international NGOs.

Learning, adaptation, experimentation, collaboration, and iteration now feature prominently across development guidance. USAID promoted collaborating, learning, and adapting throughout the program cycle, while the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation describe adaptive management as "learning by doing" in conditions of uncertainty and complexity (OECD, 2023; Prieto Martin et al., 2020). Oxfam, RTI, ITAD, and other organizations similarly emphasize continual learning, adaptation, reflection, and adjustment during implementation (Green, 2016; 2017; ITAD, 2020; RTI International, 2021).

These ideas increasingly appear in practical management products as well. Programs employ iterative planning, flexible theories of change, adaptation logs, reflection exercises, embedded learning systems, and regular review cycles. Contribution Analysis for Adaptive Management, for instance, offer policy learning processes while the BEAM Exchange describes adaptive programming as a key product offering (Goeldner Byrne et al., 2016; Punton et al., 2018). The World Bank's MELAYANI program similarly offers problem construction workshops as a major technical assistance process deliverable (World Bank, 2020).

The spaces associated with capability development have become increasingly visible as well. Innovation labs, reform teams, delivery units, policy sandboxes, learning platforms, communities of practice, and cross-functional teams now feature prominently across development work. The World Bank's Global Partnership for Social Accountability convenes local, team-based iterative problem-solving mechanisms, for instance (Fox et al., 2016), and

various incubator programs provide spaces where public servants can obtain tailored support, coaching, and structured problem-solving processes to design, test, and implement locally led reforms.

Capability building has therefore become a recognizable feature of contemporary technical assistance. Bilateral and multilateral agencies support adaptive programs and learning initiatives, consulting firms offer adaptive management services, and development organizations increasingly seek to create the processes and spaces through which capabilities are expected to emerge. The key question is whether these increasingly standardized external arrangements generate the empowered abilities they seek to create.

Beware of Isomorphic Mimicry

The operationalization of capability building activities should be celebrated, but it also creates a risk. Although the literature identifies the capabilities governments require, the processes through which they develop, and the spaces in which they emerge, there remains considerable uncertainty about what these capabilities consist of and if, how, and when they can be reliably cultivated. 'Learning' is increasingly identified as a key capability, for instance, but important questions remain: Learning about what? Through what experiences? Requiring what underlying abilities? 'Adaptation' presents similar challenges: What exactly constitutes adaptive capability, and what elements enable public servants to adapt effectively?

A lack of answers to important questions fosters a risk of isomorphic mimicry in capability building work. This risk centers on the likelihood that external actors will produce forms of capability building work (like processes and spaces) without yielding gains in capability (like local learning and adaptation). Think about how easy it is for external actors to design, contract and deliver incubators, learning platforms, innovation labs, and problem-solving workshops. But how do we know that these products will improve the abilities of local state agents to solve problems, build coalitions, learn, or adapt by themselves? And importantly do external agents know how to get from form to function?

This risk is heightened by the traditional architecture of development assistance, which tends to begin with outside actors clarifying objectives, deliverables, and timelines. Such arrangements force these actors to over-specify their work and place themselves at the center of delivery, creating incentives to structure complexity and uncertainty out of program designs and to take control of implementation. This is particularly problematic if we accept that the details of

capability building are often not known in advance and that capability concerns the ability of state agents to transform capacity into performance. Pre-defined, outsider-driven processes designed in this way may remove precisely the space in which capability develops.

These observations raise an important question: if capability cannot be fully specified in advance, what role can outsiders play in supporting its development?

PDIA to Build State Capability

For nearly two decades, the Building State Capability (BSC) program has confronted this question directly, working as an external actor supporting state capability building efforts. Much of this work has centered on crafting and disseminating the PDIA process. The evolution of this work reflects our own attempts to understand what capability is, how it develops, and what role outsiders can play in supporting it.

Early engagements resembled many other forms of external assistance. They involved defined interventions, bounded time periods, and specified deliverables. Workshops were organized to construct problems, analyze causes, identify entry points, and generate implementation strategies. Reports were produced, analyses completed, and action plans developed.

These interventions differed from many conventional approaches. They emphasized locally defined problems, high levels of participation, and questioning rather than answering. Outsiders facilitated conversations rather than supplying solutions. Nevertheless, these were still externally led, short-term engagements focused on defined products that helped us report success to our funders: Workshops were held, participants attended, satisfaction was high, problems had been identified, causes analyzed, and implementation strategies developed.

What remained unclear, however, was whether capability had grown in the places where we worked. We were, in many senses, in the isomorphic mimicry risk zone (certain that we delivered the forms associated with capability building but not that we were helping to build capability).

An early Mozambique engagement provides an example (Andrews, McNaught and Samji, 2018). We sought to help government officials understand why major public financial management reforms were producing weaker implementation results than expected, particularly outside central agencies and among frontline users of new systems. Working as external advisers, we conducted analysis, identified implementation gaps, prepared reports, and convened workshops

where officials discussed problems and possible reforms. The workshops revealed important differences between central reform designers and frontline implementers and generated new questions and relationships. Yet they also exposed a limitation: while participants learned about the problems, it remained unclear whether they had become more capable of solving them.

We recognized that such engagements provided few opportunities to observe whether people had become more able to transform capacity into performance. We could document activities and outputs, but we knew little about the underlying abilities that allowed people to solve problems, navigate institutions, mobilize resources, or work collectively.

These concerns led to a different type of engagement. Rather than conducting workshops and departing, we began working as coaches with local teams over extended periods of time to address locally defined problems. The purpose was partly practical and partly analytical: to support problem solving while also learning more about how capability develops.

An example came from work with a 2012 justice reform team in Mozambique that followed the engagement on public finance (Andrews, 2014). The team was attempting to understand why managers within the justice sector lacked the information needed to manage the sector effectively. Our prior approach would have involved a workshop, problem analysis, and the production of an implementation plan. Instead, the team worked over many months, meeting regularly, experimenting, reflecting, and adapting.

The work proceeded week by week. Team members learned about the problem itself, but also about the political constraints surrounding information, the institutional barriers to cooperation, the limits of their own authority, and the difficulties of maintaining motivation and commitment. Small actions generated new information, which informed subsequent actions. At the end of the engagement, the visible product was modest: an Excel spreadsheet that allowed managers to monitor information across the justice sector. From a conventional perspective, this outcome appeared limited, and donors regarded the process as slow and the final product insignificant.

For the team, however, a lot was achieved and gained. Participants had learned how to navigate their institutional environment, obtain authority for action, access previously unused resources, prioritize their time, build relationships, understand political constraints, and develop new knowledge about both what needed to be done and how to do it. These lessons emerged through numerous small moments during the work itself. A conversation with an authorizer. A failed attempt to obtain information. A successful meeting. A new relationship. A realization

about the causes of resistance. These moments became important because coaches could observe them, reflect on them with teams, and help teams build upon them.

At the same time, we learned as coaches and researchers. By walking alongside teams, it became possible to observe how groups of state agents gradually increased their ability to transform capacity into performance. Capability became visible not as an abstract concept but as something that developed through repeated cycles of action, reflection, experimentation, and adaptation. Being a part of this process helped us learn what the process involved. And it was frustrating: highly unpredictable, punctuated with failures and opportunities, and difficult to explain to funders because neither the pathway nor the products could be specified in advance.

Yet the process led to demonstrable growth in state capability, and in our learning about such. We subsequently pursued similar engagements in Albania, Sri Lanka, Honduras, and dozens of other countries. Across these settings, the same lesson recurred: capability developed through continuous work on real problems, supported by reflection, experimentation, and relationships.

The Power of Action Research and Learning

It gradually became apparent that these engagements resembled two established traditions:

- **Action learning** focused on how practitioners develop their own abilities by working on real problems, taking action, reflecting on experience, and adjusting future behavior (Pedler, 1997; Revans, 1982).
- **Action research** focused on how outsiders learn about social and organizational processes by participating in efforts to change them. Researchers do not remain detached observers but become participant learners, generating knowledge through engagement (Argyris, Putnam and Smith, 1985; Lewin, 1946; Reason and Bradbury 2008).

PDIA increasingly appeared to combine these traditions. Teams learned by acting on real problems. Coaches and researchers learned by accompanying them. The insiders we worked with developed their own capabilities while we as outsiders learned about state capability.

Such learning can be illustrated through one period of work with a team seeking to prepare a new kind of environmentally sustainable and community-oriented tourism project in Sri Lanka, where weekly observations and reports documented how the team's understanding, relationships, and ways of working evolved over time. Rather than one transformative

breakthrough, capability emerged through a series of learning moments, each revealing a different aspect of adaptive governance.

One learning moment concerned how the team organized itself. Earlier in the process, meetings relied heavily on the team leader to set direction, assign responsibilities, and maintain momentum. During this period, however, the team introduced weekly agendas, reviewed actions from previous meetings, allocated responsibilities explicitly, and monitored progress against agreed deadlines. Members began taking responsibility for reporting on their own work rather than waiting to be asked. One week the team leader was delayed by another commitment. Instead of waiting, members started the meeting themselves, worked systematically through the agenda, updated one another on progress, debated priorities, and agreed on next steps. The learning highlighted a shift from leader-dependent meetings to a self-organizing team. The change can be summarized as follows:

Aspect	<i>Before: Leader-Dependent Meetings</i>	<i>After: Self-Organizing Team</i>
Meeting structure	Meetings relied on the leader to set direction and drive the discussion.	Weekly agendas guided meetings; the team followed a shared structure.
Task allocation	Leader assigned responsibilities to members during the meeting.	Responsibilities were allocated explicitly and agreed by the team.
Follow-up on actions	Follow-up depended largely on the leader prompting and checking progress.	Actions from previous meetings were reviewed systematically each week.
Progress tracking	Progress was monitored informally and mainly by the leader.	Progress was monitored against agreed deadlines visible to the whole team.
Member participation	Members tended to wait to be asked before reporting on their work.	Members proactively reported on their own work without needing to be prompted.
Response to leader's absence	Meetings stalled or were at risk of delay if the leader was unavailable or late.	When the leader was delayed, the team started the meeting themselves and worked through the agenda.
Decision-making and priorities	The leader played a central role in setting priorities and agreeing next steps.	Team members debated priorities together and collectively agreed on next steps.
Underlying learning	Dependence on a single individual limited the team's ability to organize its work effectively.	Establishing shared routines enabled the team to organize collective work independently of any one person.

Another learning moment involved moving from individual projects to systems thinking. Initially the team's discussions revolved around separate initiatives: fishing villages, agricultural development, handicrafts, infrastructure, marketing, surveys, and environmental management. Gradually members recognized that none of these activities would succeed independently. Agriculture had to connect with hotel supply chains. Handicrafts had to become part of the tourism experience. Infrastructure, investment promotion, environmental management, and community development all depended upon one another. This insight changed the team's work. Rather than producing isolated concept papers, members decided to prepare one comprehensive development document combining maps, infrastructure plans, investor profiles, concept papers, sustainability objectives, and implementation strategies into a coherent vision for the region. The learning highlighted a shift from managing separate initiatives to adopting an integrated systems perspective. The change can be summarized as follows:

Aspect	<i>Before: Focus on Individual Projects</i>	<i>After: Integrated Systems Thinking</i>
Focus of discussion	Separate initiatives (fishing villages, agriculture, handicrafts, infrastructure, marketing, surveys, environment).	How initiatives connect and depend on one another within a broader regional development system.
View of success	Each project seen as able to succeed largely on its own.	Recognition that no activity would succeed in isolation; each needed to be linked to others.
Agriculture	Treated as a stand-alone development initiative.	Explicitly connected to hotel and tourism supply chains.
Handicrafts	Considered as a separate livelihood or cultural activity.	Positioned as an integral part of the tourism experience.
Infrastructure & environment	Planned as technical or sector-specific components.	Understood as foundational and mutually dependent with investment promotion, community development, and environmental management.
Type of outputs produced	Isolated concept papers for individual projects.	One comprehensive development document integrating maps, infrastructure plans, investor profiles, concept papers, and sustainability goals.
Nature of the development plan	Collection of parallel initiatives.	Coherent regional vision combining multiple complementary interventions and implementation strategies.
Underlying capability	Stronger management of separate projects.	Ability to think across systems and integrate multiple, interdependent interventions into a unified strategy.

A third learning moment involved understanding how institutions function. As cabinet approval continued to be delayed, members increasingly encountered obstacles that had not featured in

their original diagnosis. Marketing materials could not be printed because procurement required authorization. Investor proposals could not be advanced. Small expenditures for mapping could not be approved. Land transfers depended upon decisions elsewhere in government. Rather than viewing these as isolated frustrations, the team gradually developed a richer understanding of the institutional system within which reform occurred. They learned which decisions required political authorization, which could proceed independently, which agencies controlled different parts of implementation, and where continued progress remained possible despite formal delays. The learning highlighted a shift from technical planning to institutional navigation. The change can be summarized as follows:

Aspect	<i>Before: Limited View of Institutions</i>	<i>After: Deeper Understanding of How Institutions Function</i>
Initial focus	Emphasis on technical tasks and project design (marketing, investor proposals, mapping).	Emphasis on understanding institutional processes, authorizations, and constraints.
View of delays	Cabinet delays and related obstacles seen mainly as frustrating bottlenecks.	Delays seen as signals of how the institutional system actually operates.
Typical obstacles encountered	Marketing materials blocked by procurement rules; investor proposals unable to advance; small mapping expenditures not approved; land transfers stalled.	Each obstacle interpreted in terms of which approvals, agencies, or decisions were involved.
Interpretation of obstacles	Treated as isolated, ad hoc problems or administrative hurdles.	Recognized as interconnected features of a broader institutional system.
Understanding of authorization	Limited clarity on which activities depended on cabinet or political approval.	Clearer map of which decisions required political authorization and which could proceed.
Understanding of agency roles	Incomplete picture of which agencies controlled which parts of implementation.	More precise understanding of agency mandates and decision points across government.
Strategy for making progress	Focus on planned technical activities; progress stalled when formal approvals were delayed.	Focus on what could still move forward institutionally, even amid formal delays.
Underlying capability developed	Stronger technical implementation plans, but vulnerable to institutional blockage.	Ability to navigate institutions: reading constraints, identifying entry points, and sequencing action.
Underlying learning	Assumed that good technical design would be sufficient for implementation.	Recognized that institutional navigation is as critical as technical solutions.

A fourth learning moment concerned understanding investment from the perspective of investors rather than government. Early discussions had centered on what government hoped to develop. As work progressed, members began asking different questions: What information

would investors require before making decisions? How should investment opportunities be presented? What uncertainties discouraged investment? They classified investors according to their stage of engagement, distinguished between existing investors, firms with active proposals, and strategic targets, and recognized that different groups required different forms of engagement. They also realized that investors needed confidence in land ownership, infrastructure, environmental sustainability, and government commitment before committing resources. The learning was not simply how to promote investment. It was how to understand the problem through the eyes of those whose behavior the reform sought to influence. The learning highlighted a shift from a government-centered view of investment to an investor-centered understanding. The change can be summarized as follows:

Aspect	<i>Before: Government-Centered View</i>	<i>After: Investor-Centered Understanding</i>
Starting point for discussion	Focus on what government hoped to develop.	Focus on what information and conditions investors need to make decisions.
Key questions	"What projects do we want to promote?"	"What information do investors require? How should we present opportunities? What deters investment?"
View of investors	Treated largely as a single, generic group.	Investors classified by stage of engagement (existing, active proposals, strategic targets).
Engagement approach	One-size-fits-all promotion and communication.	Different forms of engagement tailored to different investor groups.
Perception of investment barriers	Limited attention to investor uncertainties and risks.	Explicit focus on uncertainties (e.g., land, infrastructure, sustainability, government commitment).
Conditions for investor confidence	Implicit or assumed rather than clearly articulated.	Clear recognition that investors need confidence in land ownership, infrastructure, environment, and state commitment.
Understanding of the "problem"	Seen as a challenge of promoting government projects to the private sector.	Seen as understanding the situation through investors' eyes and shaping reforms around their incentives.
Underlying learning	Better ideas about how to promote investment projects.	Ability to see the reform challenge from the perspective of those whose behavior must change (investors).

A fifth learning moment centered on political judgement and sequencing. The team spent considerable time debating whether local communities should be engaged before receiving cabinet approval. Some members believed early engagement would build awareness and local support. Others worried that discussing projects before authorization would create expectations

government might be unable to fulfil, damaging trust if implementation stalled. The discussion repeatedly drew on members' previous experiences working with communities rather than formal guidance or technical rules. Eventually the team agreed that awareness could be created without making commitments that depended upon political approval. The learning went beyond community consultation procedures and focused on developing political judgement and a nuanced sense of sequencing. The shift can be summarized as follows:

Aspect	<i>Before: Binary Question About Community Engagement</i>	<i>After: Nuanced Judgement About Sequencing and Expectations</i>
Core dilemma	"Should we engage local communities before cabinet approval?"	"How can we raise awareness now without making promises that depend on cabinet approval?"
Argument for early engagement	Early engagement seen to build awareness and local support.	Awareness-building retained but carefully separated from making binding commitments.
Argument against early engagement	Concern that early discussions would raise expectations government might not fulfil.	Risk of disappointment managed by avoiding commitments prior to political authorization.
Basis for reasoning	Heavy reliance on members past experiences with communities.	Collective use of experience to craft a context-sensitive approach, not just "for/against."
Role of formal rules/guidance	Limited reference to formal guidance or technical procedures.	Recognition that formal rules are insufficient; political judgement is also required.
Outcome of the debate	Prolonged disagreement over whether engagement was "right" or "wrong."	Agreement to engage in ways that inform communities without promising delivery.
View of timing (sequencing)	Timing treated as secondary to the decision to consult or not.	Clear understanding that when actions occur can be as important as what actions occur.
Underlying learning	Narrow focus on community consultation as a procedural step.	Development of political judgement about sequencing and managing expectations over time.

A sixth learning moment concerned adaptation under constraint. Repeated delays inevitably affected motivation. The notes record growing frustration, declining optimism, and concern that the work might never progress. Yet the team's response was not to abandon the initiative. Instead, members redirected their efforts towards activities still within their control. They refined concept papers, assembled investor profiles, integrated infrastructure proposals, developed implementation plans, and prepared a comprehensive document that could immediately be presented once political approval arrived. Members also sought lower-cost alternatives where resources were unavailable and continued coordinating across agencies even

when implementation had stalled. The learning was that capability does not emerge when constraints disappear. It develops through finding ways to continue making progress despite those constraints. The shift can be summarized as follows:

Aspect	<i>Before: Reaction to Delays and Constraints</i>	<i>After: Adaptation and Continued Progress Under Constraint</i>
Emotional climate	Growing frustration, declining optimism, concern that progress might never occur.	Frustration acknowledged, but channeled into constructive, controllable actions.
Initial response to delays	Risk of stalling as cabinet and political approvals were repeatedly postponed.	Decision not to abandon the initiative despite ongoing delays.
Focus of effort	Attention drawn to what could not be done due to lack of approvals and resources.	Effort redirected toward activities that remained within the team's control.
Activities undertaken	Planned implementation hampered; forward motion largely dependent on formal approval.	Concept papers refined, investor profiles assembled, infrastructure proposals integrated, implementation plans developed.
Use of time during delays	Delays seen mainly as lost time and a source of demotivation.	Delays used to prepare a comprehensive document ready for immediate use once approval arrived.
Response to resource constraints	Resource limitations perceived primarily as obstacles.	Lower-cost alternatives identified where resources were unavailable.
Cross-agency work	Coordination at risk of slowing as implementation stalled.	Continued coordination across agencies maintained, even in the absence of active rollout.
Understanding of capability	Implicit assumption that capability would matter "later," once constraints eased.	Recognition that capability is built by acting under constraint, not by waiting for them to disappear.
Underlying learning	Tendency to see constraints mainly as reasons for inaction or delay.	Learning that effective adaptation means finding ways to keep making progress despite constraints.

Finally, one learning moment concerned the team's own identity. Across the weekly reports there is a gradual but noticeable shift in how members spoke about the work. Early discussions focused on completing assigned tasks. Later discussions focused on achieving a shared vision for the region, overcoming obstacles together, and adapting collectively when circumstances changed. Responsibility became more widely shared, debate became more substantive, members increasingly drew upon their own experience to inform decisions, and the work itself became something the team collectively owned rather than something directed from above. By the end of this period the external constraints remained largely unchanged. Cabinet approval was still pending. Resources were still scarce. Yet the team itself had become different. It had developed new ways of organizing, analyzing, collaborating, sequencing, adapting, and

navigating complex institutional environments. Those changes constituted capability growth even before the broader reform had produced its intended results. The learning concerned the evolution of the team's own identity and sense of capability. The shift can be summarized as follows:

Aspect	<i>Before: Task-Focused Group</i>	<i>After: Self-Identifying, Capability-Building Team</i>
Way of talking about the work	Emphasis on completing assigned tasks and meeting immediate requirements.	Emphasis on achieving a shared vision for the region and the broader purpose of the work.
Sense of ownership	Work seen largely as something directed from above.	Work seen as something the team collectively owns and shapes.
Responsibility	Responsibility more concentrated and individually framed.	Responsibility widely shared across members for both progress and problem-solving.
Nature of discussion	Discussions focused on task completion and reporting.	Discussions focused on overcoming obstacles together and adapting when circumstances changed.
Quality of debate	Debate more limited and procedural.	Debate became more substantive, with members engaging more deeply on priorities and choices.
Use of members' experience	Members' prior experience used less systematically in decision-making.	Members increasingly drew on their own experience to inform analysis and decisions.
Response to constraints	External constraints (cabinet approval, scarce resources) viewed mainly as barriers.	Constraints acknowledged, but the team focused on how they could organize, adapt, and move forward.
Team identity	Loose collection of individuals performing allocated tasks.	Cohesive team with a shared identity and collective commitment to the work.
Capability development	Capability understood mainly as delivering outputs once conditions allowed.	Recognition that new capabilities (organizing, analyzing, collaborating, sequencing, adapting, navigating institutions) had already developed.
Underlying learning	Focus on formal reform results as the primary indicator of progress.	Understanding that capability growth within the team precedes and enables broader reform results.

Several moments in this period proved particularly important for action learning. Team members discovered that their own organizations were poorly connected. They realized that many relevant actors lay outside the organizations as well. They also learned how to prioritize to address time pressures that were emerging. Perhaps most importantly, they learned that they had to repeatedly adapt activities, expand consultations, and revise their understanding of the problem. Such lessons were building new capability, with members learning how to engage stakeholders, navigate institutions, mobilize relationships, manage time, and gather and

interpret evidence. Put simply, they became better able to act through the moment-by-moment learning.

At the same time, we as coaches and researchers learned about capability and capability building. We observed that progress depended less on technical knowledge than on motivation, authorization, relationships, institutional navigation, and practical know-how. Small moments—a successful meeting, a difficult conversation, a missed deadline, a new relationship, a revised plan—often generated more learning than formal workshops or presentations.

This period therefore illustrates the merging of action learning and action research. The insiders developed capabilities through action, while outsiders learned about capability by accompanying them. Capability became visible not as an abstract concept but as a collection of abilities that emerged gradually through repeated cycles of action, reflection, adaptation, and learning.

What became increasingly visible in these moments were not simply examples of “capability” in the abstract, but recurring elements that appeared to underpin the ability of teams to transform capacity into performance. Progress repeatedly depended on practical know-how, motivation, authorization, relationships, institutional navigation, resource access, and the ability to prioritize and manage time. These elements did not emerge all at once. They appeared unevenly, often through small moments of success, failure, reflection, and adaptation. Understanding these moments became important not only for helping teams learn, but also for helping us understand what state capability entails.

Ted Lasso as a Metaphor for PDIA

A metaphor might help to capture how PDIA works in practice. We use the popular television series *Ted Lasso*. It follows Ted Lasso, an American college football coach who is unexpectedly hired to manage a professional football (soccer) club in England. Lasso possesses neither deep technical knowledge of soccer nor familiarity with the institutional and cultural context in which he must work. He enters an organization with considerable potential, however: talented players, experienced administrators, a wealthy owner, and a successful history. Yet the club performs well below its potential.

The series is fundamentally about how an outsider helps a group of insiders transform potential into performance. Lasso does not provide technical solutions. He does not become the

substantive expert. Instead, he works with players, coaches, managers, and owners to help them recognize and mobilize capabilities that already exist within the organization.

The value of the Ted Lasso metaphor is not that it provides a wonderful story about coaching. Its value is that it shows why the details matter. Capability does not appear in summary form. It appears in small moments: a conversation, a reversal in a relationship, a failed exercise, a new idea, a moment of vulnerability, a partial success. These are the moments that a PDIA coach, researcher, or facilitator must be close enough to see.

The episodes *Sunflowers* and *The Strings That Bind Us* are useful because they show two connected periods in a capability-building process. *Sunflowers* is the period of disruption, exploration, and emergence. *The Strings That Bind Us* is the period of testing, adaptation, and collective learning. The first episode ends with an idea. The second asks what happens when people try to implement it.

Sunflowers: Exploration, Relationship, and Emergence

The *Sunflowers* episode begins with a visible performance failure. AFC Richmond has lost its star player, Zava. His departure exposes a deeper dependency: the team had organized itself around individual brilliance rather than collective capability. The problem becomes sharper when Richmond travels to Amsterdam and loses 5–0 to Ajax in a friendly match. The defeat is not just a bad result. It reveals confusion, low confidence, and an absence of a shared way forward.

This is the first period, where the problem becomes undeniable.

As the outsider, Ted does not respond with a technical answer. He does not call another training session, deliver a speech about tactics, or impose a new system. Instead, he gives the players and staff the night off in Amsterdam, with no curfew. On the surface this looks like release or distraction. In PDIA terms, it is something else: it opens space for exploration when existing routines are not producing learning. The episode then breaks into smaller moments, each of which reveals a different kind of learning:

- The assistant coach Roy Kent and precocious player Jamie Tartt provide one moment. Roy begins as the senior, hardened, expert figure. Jamie is younger, lighter, and apparently less serious. But in Amsterdam the relationship reverses. Jamie knows the city. Jamie leads. Jamie buys bicycles. Roy then admits that he cannot ride one. Jamie

teaches him. This matters because the learning is not about cycling. It is about roles. The expert becomes learner. The younger player becomes teacher. A relationship previously structured by hierarchy and rivalry becomes one of trust, vulnerability, patience, and support. Capability grows because the relationship changes.

- A player called Colin and Trent, the club's resident journalist, provide a different kind of moment. Colin goes to a gay bar and is followed by Trent. Colin panics, but Trent tells him that he has known Colin is gay for months and shares his own experience of coming out. Colin says he wants to be able to be open about his boyfriend without fear. This is not a tactical issue. But it is a capability issue. Colin's ability to participate fully in the team is constrained by concealment. The interaction with Trent creates recognition and safety. A hidden constraint becomes visible. The work of capability building often depends on exactly this kind of moment: something private, relational, and easily missed becomes relevant to collective performance.
- Club administrator Higgins and kit-boy Will have another learning moment. Higgins takes Will to a jazz club to honor Chet Baker. Will discovers the music. He also sees Higgins perform with skill and confidence. The relationship shifts. Will sees Higgins differently. Higgins is no longer just an administrator; he is a person with depth, history, and competence outside his formal role. This is a small moment, but it expands the social knowledge of the organization. People become more than their job titles.
- The players' own evening also matters. They debate what to do. Some want to see a show. Others want to travel to Groningen for a private party. The debate is long, angry, and inconclusive. They do not arrive at a sophisticated plan. They end up having a pillow fight in the hotel. This could look trivial, but it is another learning moment. The group does not resolve the disagreement through formal decision rules. It releases tension through play. The team begins to reconnect as a group.
- Ted's own journey is equally important. He is not the expert standing outside the process. He is also lost. He wanders alone. He visits the Van Gogh Museum, where the sunflower paintings connect him to Kansas. Later, in an American-style restaurant, he watches an old Chicago Bulls game. The barbecue sauce evokes home. The basketball footage evokes Tex Winter's triangle offense. From this mixture of memory, place, emotion, and analogy, Ted begins to imagine a new football strategy.

This is crucial to PDIA. Ted's idea does not emerge in a planning workshop. It emerges from wandering, noticing, remembering, connecting, and reflecting. Ted's insight is not purely technical. It is adaptive. He sees something in one domain—basketball movement, spacing, and shared responsibility—and imagines how it might apply in another.

By the next morning, Richmond has not solved its problem. The team has not learned how to play without Zava. There has been no successful implementation. But the team is different. Roy and Jamie are different. Colin and Trent are different. Higgins and Will are different. Ted is different. The bus leaves with the club singing "Three Little Birds," suggesting not victory but renewed collective spirit.

In this inconclusive but hopeful end, *Sunflowers* provides a powerful metaphor for PDIA. It shows that the early work of capability building is often exploratory. People must get close enough to the problem, to one another, and to themselves to discover new possibilities. The coach does not deliver capability. The coach creates conditions in which learning moments can occur.

The Strings That Bind Us: Testing, Failing, and Building Collective Capability

Sunflowers ends with Ted showing Beard his new football tactic. Beard recognizes it as Total Football, a system developed in Amsterdam in the 1970s. This matters. Ted's idea is not entirely new. It already exists elsewhere. But that does not make it immediately usable by Richmond.

This is the implementation challenge. An idea can be known and still not be actionable. It must be translated into the relationships, routines, understandings, and practices of a specific team. That is the work of the episode *The Strings That Bind Us*.

The first part of the episode begins with Ted asking Beard and Roy to explain Total Football to the players. The system requires fluidity. Players must move across positions, read one another, support one another, and act as a collective rather than as fixed individuals occupying fixed roles. This is exactly the kind of idea that sounds attractive in concept but is hard in practice; especially since it differed from what the players knew.

The first learning moment is confusion. The players do not simply hear the idea and adopt it. They struggle. They are asked to swap positions in training. Jamie is the only player left in his usual position. Everyone else is displaced. The exercise reveals how little players understand

about one another's roles. It also reveals how uncomfortable they are when moved out of familiar positions.

This is classic PDIA implementation. The first action seldom solves the problem. It more commonly exposes the next layer of the problem. Which may look like failure. It certainly evokes frustration. Evoking this frustration, Trent Crimm, the journalist, is unconvinced as he observes the team practicing. His skepticism matters because it marks the uncertainty of the process and common outside criticism it must encounter. There is no guarantee that this will work and those looking from the outside often criticize. Ted remains optimistic, however, but optimism is not the same as control. The team is experimenting.

The next part is Roy's string exercise. To teach interdependence, Roy ties the players together with strings attached to their bodies. The exercise is absurd, uncomfortable, and crude. But it makes an abstract idea physical. Players cannot move without affecting others. They feel interdependence rather than merely hear about it. Movement becomes relational. Position becomes collective. One person's action pulls on everyone else.

This is one of the clearest PDIA moments in the episode. A coach translates an idea into a concrete exercise. The exercise is imperfect. It is not elegant. But it produces experience. It helps the players learn through doing.

The following part involves testing under pressure. Richmond plays Arsenal. In the first half, the experiment appears to fail. Arsenal leads 3–0. Pundits are confused. The tactics look naive. The team appears to be paying the price for trying something unfamiliar.

This is a critical moment because many reform processes die here. The first test disappoints. External observers doubt the work. The new approach looks worse than the old one. The temptation is to abandon the experiment and return to familiar routines.

But the locker room produces another learning moment. Jamie suggests that the team should stop playing to him and start playing through him. This is a major shift. Jamie had once been the individual star, the player who wanted the game organized around him. Now he recognizes that his value lies in enabling the collective. The focal point becomes a conduit.

This is not just tactical learning. It is identity change. Jamie's role changes from destination to connector. The team's relationship to talent changes. Individual ability is no longer rejected, but it is reorganized in service of collective performance.

In the second half, Richmond scores through a Total Football move. They still lose 3–1. On the scoreboard, this is failure. In capability terms, it is progress. The team has demonstrated that the new way of working is possible. A small success inside a larger loss becomes evidence. It creates confidence, legitimacy, and direction for the next iteration.

This is exactly why PDIA pays attention to small wins, progress, and partial results. The question is not only whether the final problem has been solved. It is whether the team has learned something that makes future action more capable.

The episode then extends the same logic beyond the pitch. Another player, Sam Obisanyo, has criticized a government minister's anti-refugee position and is attacked publicly. His restaurant is vandalized. He breaks down emotionally in the locker room. His father, Ola, arrives and comforts him. Later, Sam does not want Ola to see the damaged restaurant, but Ola insists.

When they arrive, they find that the team has cleaned and repaired it. Nobody has ordered them to do this. The team acts collectively because the relationships and commitments built through the process now extend beyond formal performance. They support Sam because he is part of them.

This is another capability moment. The group has developed the ability to mobilize itself around a problem. It sees a need, acts without waiting for instruction, and uses its collective energy to repair damage. Capability has moved from tactic to relationship, from field to organization.

Sam's decision to keep the broken mirrors also matters. He says everything does not have to be perfect. This is a lesson about adaptation. The damage is not erased. It is incorporated into the story of the place. The organization does not return to an imagined perfect state. It carries the evidence of struggle forward.

Trent Crimm's final observation ties the episode together. He notes that Ted's coaching over several seasons has taught the players to trust and support one another. This is the deeper capability beneath Total Football. The tactic can only work because the team has developed relational foundations: trust, awareness, humility, support, and shared responsibility.

This is the central lesson for PDIA as well. PDIA—like Total Football—is not the capability. It is the vehicle through which capability is tested and expressed. The real capability lies in the team's ability to learn, adapt, trust, communicate, redistribute roles, and act collectively under pressure.

What the Two Episodes Demonstrate

Together, the two episodes show why capability building must be studied in the weeds. A summary would say that Ted gave the team a night off, had an idea, introduced Total Football, and the team began to improve. But that summary misses the change mechanism, which is revealed in the details of many moments.

It is in Jamie teaching Roy to ride a bicycle. It is in Colin being seen by Trent. It is in Higgins revealing another side of himself to Will. It is in the players failing to agree and ending up in a pillow fight. It is in Ted getting lost before finding an idea. It is in players being forced out of position. It is in Roy's crude string exercise. It is in Jamie saying the team should play through him. It is in Richmond scoring one goal while still losing the match. It is in the team repairing Sam's restaurant without being asked to.

These moments matter because they show capability emerging. They show knowledge becoming actionable, relationships becoming resources, motivation being renewed, authority becoming distributed, and people learning how to use potential that was already present but under-realized.

This is why PDIA—and other approaches aimed at capability building—cannot be understood only or primarily as a series of products of workshops or even as a process map. The activities and process map matters, but the work happens inside the moments. Coaches and researchers must be close enough to see these moments, interpret them, and support the next step. They must notice when a relationship shifts, when a constraint becomes visible, when a small success creates confidence, when a failed experiment reveals a new problem, and when ownership moves from the coach to the team.

This is also why capability building cannot be fully productized. The visible activities may include workshops, exercises, meetings, and reflection sessions. But the deeper work lies in the relational and experiential learning that occurs through action. It is not predictable. It is not linear. It is not delivered by the outsider. It is discovered and built by insiders, with outsiders present as curious coaches, faithful companions, empathetic observers, and humble learners.

Capability Building and the Role of Outsiders

The experiences described above offer both an encouraging lesson and a warning for those involved in state capability building. The encouraging lesson is that outsiders can contribute to

capability building. The experiences of PDIA, action research, and action learning suggest that external actors can help create the conditions in which individuals and teams learn, adapt, and become more capable. Coaches, facilitators, researchers, and advisers can support these processes, helping teams identify problems, reflect on experience, experiment with new approaches, and recognize emerging capabilities.

At the same time, these experiences suggest that the role of outsiders differs substantially from the role often assumed in international development practice. The conventional model of external assistance frequently emphasizes expertise, technical advice, predetermined solutions, objective analysis, and measurable deliverables. Outsiders are expected to provide answers, transfer knowledge, specify interventions, and remain sufficiently detached to preserve neutrality and objectivity. Success is often judged through products: reports, workshops, action plans, training programs, and completed contracts.

The experiences described here suggest that capability building rarely occurs through these products themselves. Workshops, diagnostic exercises, reflection sessions, and planning processes can create opportunities for learning, but they are not where capabilities are built. The action is not in the products. The action is in the moments.

Capabilities emerge when teams confront problems, experience failure, build relationships, discover resources, negotiate authority, develop confidence, learn new ways of working, and reflect on their experiences. These moments are often small, relational, and difficult to predict. They may involve a conversation, a failed experiment, a new relationship, an unexpected insight, or a modest success that changes how people understand themselves and one another. Because these moments cannot be fully anticipated, capability building cannot be completely specified in advance. It cannot be entirely contracted, productized, or delivered through predetermined activities. The most important learning often occurs outside workshops, between meetings, and during the practical work of solving problems.

This changes the role of outsiders.

The outsider becomes less expert and more relational. Less directive and more supportive. Less concerned with providing answers and more concerned with helping groups ask questions. Less focused on delivering products and more focused on accompanying teams as they work. This does not imply that technical knowledge is unimportant. Nor does it suggest that outsiders have no expertise to contribute. Rather, it suggests that expertise alone is insufficient. Capability

develops through action, reflection, and relationships, and outsiders contribute most effectively when they participate in these processes rather than standing apart from them.

This also challenges conventional ideas of distance and objectivity. Understanding capability requires getting sufficiently close to observe how people work, where they struggle, how relationships change, and why progress occurs. The relevant evidence is often found in the moments themselves: moments of frustration, uncertainty, experimentation, adaptation, and success.

The lessons of PDIA therefore point toward a different model of external engagement. Outsiders remain important, but not primarily as providers of solutions. They act as coaches, facilitators, companions, participant observers, and co-learners. Their role is to help create spaces in which people can discover, develop, and deploy their own capabilities. This is ultimately because capability itself is relational, contextual, and experiential. It concerns how individuals and groups mobilize knowledge, authority, motivation, relationships, institutions, resources, and time in order to transform capacity into performance. Capability is therefore built where these elements are exercised: in the work itself, in the relationships surrounding that work, and in the moments through which people learn how to act together more effectively.

This returns us to the implementation gap that motivated this paper. Capacity creates potential, but potential does not automatically become performance. State agents transform capacity into performance when they develop the capabilities needed to mobilize knowledge, relationships, authority, resources, motivation, and time in pursuit of shared problems. Outsiders can help build these capabilities, but not primarily through the transfer of expertise or the delivery of predetermined products. They help most when they participate in the work itself, supporting learning while learning alongside those doing the work. In this sense, capability building is both action learning for insiders and action research for outsiders.

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