

Designing a Programme to Support Nonprofits Identifying, Understanding and Reporting on their Effectiveness and Results

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In this paper, we look at

1. Unpacking what a focus on Effectiveness Results and Outcomes might mean for non-profits,
2. How long term change and learning really takes place for non-profits and their leaders, and
3. How we might put this together to develop a practical programme of support for non-profits on Effectiveness, Results and Outcomes.

1. Focusing on Effectiveness, Results and Outcomes

Both the *Ministry of Social Development* and *Community Research* have an interest in supporting non-profits to be able to identify, understand, and (in some ways) report on effectiveness, results or outcomes.

Non-profits are, by nature interested in changing things for the better – at an individual, family/whanau, hapu/community, and/or societal level. We want to make a difference. This implies *an in-built interest in our effectiveness, results or outcomes*. Are we actually making a difference? Are we achieving what we set out to do? Can we do things better or more effectively? If we take our eyes off our ultimate purpose, we risk focusing on tasks, activities, and just ‘keeping busy’.

There is also a power in focusing on our ultimate purpose – it is energizing and motivating, as we are ‘meaning-seeking’ creatures (Gratton, 2000, & Wheatley, 2001). This is explicitly recognised by Appreciative Inquiry and many other specific techniques, but is also implicit in the key role accorded in most modern facilitation, planning and strategising methods of ‘beginning with the end in mind’ (Covey, 1989).

Early in his book on *Results Based Accountability*, Friedman (2005), asks “what would we do differently if outcomes really mattered?” Among the powerful consequences of having clear, agreed and measurable results he suggests we might: *assess whether things are likely to get better or worse if we keep doing what we are doing; dig into what was causing conditions to get better or worse; think about partners who might help us do better; and think about what works to do better* (pp.6-7).

Friedman (2005) suggests that the main reason this isn’t happening more often is ‘a culture of defeatism’ in the face of the big and complicated problems non-profits tackle. However, there are also some other systemic reasons for taking care in how we focus on effectiveness, results or outcomes (especially when they are linked to measuring, reporting, and funding):

- the most important ultimate outcomes are often difficult, if not impossible, to reliably measure
- measurement (let alone reporting or funding) of anything less than the ultimate outcomes can distort behaviour and be counter-productive
- the most important outcomes usually take a long time to achieve
- the most important outcomes are usually the result of multiple actions from multiple sources, so that 'attribution' (proof of who caused what) is usually difficult, if not impossible
- we are often not be able to predict all the important outcomes, nor what may lead to them (this includes negative as well as positive consequences of our activities), and
- the higher the stakes and the resulting 'fear of failure', the greater the risk-aversion, and the more difficult it is for learning and innovation.

Some Implications

Even when it can be difficult to design reliable measures, the process of an organisation working on identifying and obtaining *a collective understanding of 'what success looks like'* can be a valuable exercise in its own right.

While anything can be 'measured', it is not always useful. We need to be careful what we measure, as whatever we pay attention to, we almost inevitably do more of. Often we need to navigate a pragmatic path between what is impossible to measure, and what is just convenient to measure (*its usually better to roughly measure the right thing, than precisely measure the wrong thing!*) All measurement needs to be treated with a grain of salt.

We need to keep a pragmatic balance between *the demands of the short-term and the value of focusing on the long-term*.

Any centrally determined Outcomes handed down to the rest of an organisation *risks a return to a 'command and control' approach*, which ultimately undermines personal and organisational learning (for reasons discussed below).

There is a risk that a narrow focus on Outcomes can lead to a *simplistic 'checklist' approach*. While there are important strengths in an *Audit Review* approach (checking progress against pre-determined objectives), evaluation also recognizes the value of an *Open Inquiry* approach as well (Wadsworth 1997).

Real learning requires candor and humility – an ability to learn from mistakes as well as (perhaps even more so than from) achievements. This, in turn requires a *culture that doesn't promote blame and a fear of failure*. (This is one of the reasons that it is now widely argued that evaluation for learning needs to be separated as far as possible from both internal and external accountability requirements – see Attachment 2.)

Too much emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness in achieving Outcomes (in a narrow sense) can *undermine responsiveness, innovation, creativity and resilience* (which all need space to explore, test and develop as you go).

2. How do Nonprofits and their Leaders Learn?

EvaluLead (Grove, Kibel & Haas, 2005), developed with support of W K Kellogg Foundation and US Agency for International Aid, provides a useful framework not only for evaluating capacity development of non-profits and those who lead them, but also (using a 'retro-fitting' approach) offers useful insights into conceptualizing and designing more effective, and especially more sustainable, capacity development. It is based on an extensive review of the literature of "theories and accompanying instruments for assessing changes in individual and group leadership characteristics linked to programme activity. (p2). It has also been field tested across a wide range of organisations in the US (p3).

It assumes a 'complex, open systems' approach, where both predictability and unpredictability will cooperate, rather than a 'simple, closed system' of linear 'cause and effect' (p4).

It is based around a 3x3 grid – three types of results across three domains. One dimension reflects a concern that the impact should not just be felt by the **individual** participants, but also their **organisations**, and ultimately the **communities** they serve. (The framework refers to these as three 'inter-penetrating domains'.) The other dimension focuses attention on three fundamentally different, yet inter-related forms of change or 'result types':

- **Episodic** changes are typically well-defined, time-bound results; an intervention is made and predictable results ideally follow (eg, information or technical skills acquired, etc)
- **Developmental** changes occur across time, and usually include forward progress, stalls and setbacks, at different paces and varied rhythms; results are open-ended, less controllable or predictable – often subject to external influences and internal willingness (eg sustained change in behavior, a new organisational strategy guides operations, etc)
- **Transformative** changes represent fundamental shifts in values and perspectives that see the emergence of fundamental shifts in behavior or performance; regenerative moments or radical redirections of effort (eg, substantial shifts in viewpoint, vision or paradigm, and fundamental reforms of what is done or how it is done).

Episodic changes *address deficits*; developmental changes *support growth*, and transformative changes *set new directions*. In an open-systems approach these three 'result types' are seen as concurrent (unlike linear, closed system approaches).

Similarly, because learning is occurring at all times, and there are feedback loops between the three domains of individuals, their organisations and their communities, change can also be occurring at multiple levels at the same time.

	Individual	Organisational	Community
Episodic			
Developmental			
Transformative			

There is increasing awareness of keeping an eye on community impact or results. This is ultimately the reason for change and development. However, much of the discussion about capacity building is still focusing on episodic, rather than developmental or transformative change. While developmental and transformative change may be difficult to achieve, they are ultimately more sustainable – in that they have a lasting, rather than a one-off effect.

Some Implications

If we want to get beyond the individual domain, we need to make it easier for the individual to apply learnings at an organisational level or even community level:

- This could include focusing learning around ‘live’ problem-solving, real world/work place application
- Ensuring understanding/support/endorsement from their organisation, not just the individual
- Ensuring peer or back-up support/sounding boards, for when organisational or community barriers appear
- Teams of people learning together, from the same organization and/or same community to make collaboration for organization-wide or community wide changes natural
- ??Other ideas

If we want to go beyond episodic impacts, we need to move beyond technical skills and knowledge, into the realm of change management, attitudes and insights:

- People will need to see a bigger picture, and be able to link that to what they are aiming to achieve and the values that are important to them
- Build on and reaffirm what people already know; push them to their leading edge
- Confidence, commitment and enthusiasm can be as important as particular skills or knowledge
- People will need time and space to reflect and apply; multiple and reinforcing opportunities (including from other sources)
- We need to consider organizational and community ‘politics’, the human dimensions, resistance, etc
- ??Other ideas

Publication of *resource material* (no matter how accessible), and *one-off training* alone (no matter how well designed) are unlikely to take us much beyond episodic results. So while useful for technical skill acquisition, these need to be part of a broader system, if we are seeking developmental or transformative results. These have **longer time frames** and require **multiple and reinforcing initiatives** at different levels. The process is more **iterative and multi-pronged**, and less predictable and controllable, however, it is likely to involve:

- in addition to technical skills/knowledge acquisition from *accessible training and toolkits*,
- development of *reflective disciplines* in both individuals and organisations (See also the concept of ‘learning organisations’, including culture of learning and learning systems - *The Learning NGO*, Britton

1998 and *Organisational Learning in NGOs: Creating the Motive, Means and Opportunity*, Britton 2009), and

- access to *mentors, peer-supports, communities of practice/learning communities*, etc, etc. (See also the concept of ‘developmental evaluation’ and accompaniment of a ‘critical friend’ – *Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use*, Patton 2010).

Support for Learning Organisations

In effect we are trying to encourage and support the development of Learning Organisations. Britton (2009) writes about the importance for organisational learning of facilitating:

- *motive* (understand learning and why it is important, learning seen as an integral part of who the organization is and how it operates specific projects or activities, contributions of all staff valued, promote a ‘no blame’ culture/expect some things not to work, and learning attracts internal recognition)
- *means* (tools and methods for learning and for using their learning in practice are readily accessible, invest in training, coaching and action-learning, all supported by appropriate ICT) and
- *opportunity* (don’t overload and over-programme every last minute, build reflection and learning into realistic job statements, break-down organisational silos & open up opportunities for peer and cross-organisational communication, provide space for networking beyond the organisation).

If any one of motive, means or opportunity is missing, the development of a Learning Organisation will be undermined.

Wheatley (2001) observes that: first its natural for people to create and share knowledge because we are constantly looking for meaning in what we do; second, everybody in an organisation – not just a selected few – is likely to a source of useful knowledge; and third, we will choose whether we share or withhold information, and we are more willing to share if we feel committed to the organisation, value our colleagues, respect our leaders, and are given encouragement to participate and don’t fear negative repercussions.

Britton (1998) also identified **8 key functions of a Learning NGO:**

1. Creating a supportive culture
2. Gathering internal experience
3. Accessing external experience
4. Communication systems
5. Mechanisms for drawing conclusions
6. Developing an organisational memory
7. Integrating learning into strategy and policy
8. Applying the learning.

This will also involve understanding the (internal and external) **barriers** to organisational learning (Britton, 1998) – some we can do something about, others which individual non-profits can only work out how to minimize or cope with.

The various **mechanics** of a Learning NGO, in practice, is well illustrated by the regular cycles of multi-level activities in the CDRA case study (Wadsworth, 2004, and Soal, 2001):

- Daily reflection
- Regular 'snap' evaluations
- Weekly debrief
- Monthly reflection/problem solving
- Annual stock-take
- Comprehensive 3-10 year reviews)

3. A Programme of Support for Non-Profits on Outcomes

The above analysis suggests that any programme to support non-profits identifying, understanding and reporting on their Effectiveness, Results and Outcomes should ensure the non-profits:

- know why and how it can be useful for them, in the broader context of organisational learning and evaluation
- understand the methods and have the tools available (at sufficient depth not only to use them, but also to appreciate the risks and avoid the traps inherent in different approaches)
- can construct the space and supportive culture not only to implement the specific tools, but also to put learnings to use, and even share with others
- can be in control of their own reflection and learning, and be empowered to determine what they share, in what ways, with whom (outside of their organisation).

Most of all it is crucial not to be so focused on any particular method or tool, that one loses the whole point of it being a means to the end of greater understanding and learning that can be put to use to improve what the organisation achieves.

- Skills in identifying, understanding and reporting Outcomes are acquired through a combination of theory ('learning from others'), reflection and practical application.
- These skills are acquired continuously, throughout leaders' careers and organizational lifecycles. But support is often needed immediately before a new programme of work begins, particularly to choose methodologies, agree intended outcomes and to help set baseline data.

Identifying intended outcomes can be a significant process requiring time, resources, and a whole-of-organisation approach to identify and agree the organisation's specific effects and effectiveness, often across multiple strands of work, and to agree the organisation's specific, measurable activities, as well as identifying realistic intended outcomes.

Possible supports for this process include:

- Targeted training, which is local and accessible to the groups whom it seeks to engage, and targeted at their needs (eg non-Profit, Maori, Pasifika, etc)
- Time, resources and guidance for a reflective 'whole-of-organisation' process
- A 'go to' person who is available to advise, mentor and/or support, eg for the design phase, but also when obstacles appear
- Collaboration with other groups to learn, encourage, compare, as well as to determine collective impacts

Organisations need to gain an overview of the full range of possible data collection, analysis and reporting methodologies, each with their diverse paradigms, sufficient to select a suitable methodology for the particular programme or organization, in its specific context.

- Possible supports for this process include:
 - Targeted training, which is local and accessible to the groups whom it seeks to engage, and targeted at their needs (eg non-Profit, Maori, Pasifika, etc)
 - A 'go to' person who is available to advise, mentor and/or support at milestone points, and throughout the programme of work
 - Peer support - providing a forum to problem-solve, provide mutual support and encouragement, etc
 - Accessible resources in a form that can be directly made use of, eg a searchable on-line, one-stop storehouse of resources (some of which will need to be bespoke for the Aotearoa New Zealand context, where they don't already exist or are difficult to access or apply for a lay person)
 - Grants for mentors, and/or training, and/or resources, and/or peer review which organisations can spend as they see fit

Organisations need to review implementation. Possible supports for this process include:

- Targeted (refresher or Stage 2) training, which is local and accessible to the groups whom it seeks to engage, and targeted at their needs (eg non-Profit, Maori, Pasifika, etc)
- Time, resources and guidance for a reflective 'whole-of-organisation' process
- A 'go to' person who is available to advise, mentor and support at milestone points, and throughout the programme of work
- Peer support - providing a forum to problem-solve, provide mutual support and encouragement, etc.
- Accessible resources in a form that can be directly made use of, eg a searchable on-line, one-stop storehouse of resources
- Grants for mentors, and/or training, and/or resources, and/or peer review which organisations can spend as they see fit
- Opportunities to review and critique other organisations' approaches to identifying and reporting outcomes (eg an on-line, one-stop storehouse of case studies and examples)

Next Steps

The next steps in determining *Community Research's* contribution involves

- Understanding what *Community Research* can offer – our current and potential resources, expertise, experience, reputation and connections, etc
- Understanding who else is doing what, or is adequately available elsewhere, and
- Thus determining where it may be most useful for us to focus.

The following framework may offer a starting point for considering those questions. In each we could consider: what is already happening, or others could do; and then what *Community Research* is particularly well-suited to contribute, directly for non-profits and their staff, and indirectly for others assisting non-profits.

Traning, Toolkits, Shared Experiences:

Overview of evaluation concepts and practice

Elements of a Learning Organisation

How to engage a mentor or consultant

Identifying Outcomes

Outcomes for Maori in mainstream services

Indicators for 'hard to measure' Outcomes

Other specific evaluation tools

How to make the most of the data you already have

Specific Research Techniques (sampling, survey design, focus groups etc)

Accessible resources

Outcomes banks, indicator banks

'What Works' research

Community Research 'Code of Practice' more user-friendly

Develop and or support 'Peer Learning Communities' in specific geographic or interest areas

Accessible links to expert advisors

Attachment 1: Thinking about Content: What do we Want to be Learnt?

Attachment 2: A Note on Learning and Accountability

Available from Community Research's offices