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Creating and Measuring Real Outcomes

<u>*JARGON FREE TITLE:*</u>

Reaching for Your Organization's Highest Potential

by Hildy Gottlieb
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- ✦ Provider Organizations (Click here)
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- ✦ Nonprofit Resource Centers (Click here)

The phone rings. Someone wants to know, "What do you charge to do a strategic plan?" or "What do you charge to do a workshop?"

Instead of responding with a price, we instead have questions of our own.

> *What is driving you to do this plan / this workshop?*
> *What outcomes are you hoping this work will accomplish?*
> *What do you want it to look like when we're done?*
> *What will have changed?*

Almost without fail, the person does not know. No one has asked them directly about their intended outcomes before.

When we think of "outcomes," we think of grant applications asking how we will measure them. We think of Funders requesting that we distinguish between "real outcomes" and "outputs." We think of the time spent in classes and discussion, trying to figure out how to do what we have been asked to do - measure those outcomes.

After all the emphasis placed on outcomes in all these years, most organizations begrudgingly fill in what they hope will pass as an acceptable answer on their grant application, without ever really understanding how that measurement will provide any practical information to anyone.

> The purpose behind measuring program outcomes was supposed to have been improvement in the conditions in our communities. But somehow, with all this measuring, our communities have not changed. **How can that be?**

Measuring the Outcomes of the Measurement Movement   (Unscientifically - No Rubric Required)

It was about 10 years ago that Funders started asking a pertinent question: *Why do we keep funding programs that aren't changing the conditions in our communities?*

All these years later, the most visible result of that question has unfortunately **not** been huge change in our communities. It has instead simply been a huge change in the sector's emphasis on measurement. What went wrong?

In our own observations about both the sector and humanity overall, we have often noted that we get what we aim for. And in our opinion, that has been the main downfall of the measurement movement. While it has not accomplished what it hoped to accomplish, the movement has, in fact, accomplished precisely what it has aimed for.

And that is because what the movement aimed us at was measuring.

The motivations of those who encouraged the sector to begin measuring outcomes was indeed that we create more significant change in our communities. These folks rightly noted that we achieve best what we measure best.

The problem, however, is that before we measure, we need to aim. Then we can measure whether or not we approached what we aimed at.

And so, without teaching the sector how to aim for creating significant change - significant outcomes - before encouraging them to measure their results, all we could measure was what we were already doing.

The effect of the movement, therefore, has been that the Community Benefit Sector is now measuring like crazy. While we are arguing over whether we are measuring the right thing or the wrong thing (short-term quantitative change vs. long term qualitative change), we are still doing our best to do what we were asked to do. We are measuring.

The Potential Behind the Jargon

If you ask most organizations about measuring their results, they are likely to feed back some of the jargon the sector has begun to embrace - words like **outcomes** and **outputs** and **rubrics** and **logic models**.

It is the rare organization that understands the incredible potential and possibilities behind all the jargon. It is the rare organization that sees that it isn't about the act of measuring, but about creating something worth measuring!

So what will it take for that to happen? It won't take more emphasis on measurement, as doing more of something that already isn't working is not a likely route to success.

What it will take is that we all step outside our comfort zones, into the land of what is possible. And when I say "all," I mean not just those who provide service in our communities, but those who fund those services, and those who teach those Service Providers - Funders and Nonprofit Resource Centers.

For this sector to achieve real, visible, significant outcomes, we are **all** going to have to aim at creating such results. That means we will **all** have to change the way we see the work we do.

Once we have taken aim at what we really want to accomplish, then and only then should we begin to talk about how we might measure **that**.

From "What We Do" to "Why We Do It"

Community organizations are used to providing programs. That is, in large part, what we as a sector do. We see a need, and we create a program to meet that need. Whether it is feeding hungry people, creating a musical performance, keeping a riparian area clean - this sector is all about "what we do."

The power of accomplishing significant outcomes is not about **what we do.** It is about **why we do what we do.**

Outcomes are about creating a better future. Outcomes are about the conditions you want to create both for individuals in your community, and for your community as a whole.

> Outcomes are about these questions:
>
> *How will life be better?*
> *For whom?*
> *And for how long?*

So now, jargon free, see if you can answer the following questions.
> • What future do you want to create for your community? What positive conditions do you want to see in your community?
> • What future would you like to create for the individuals you serve? What positive conditions would you like to create in their lives?
> • What would success look like if you had a crystal ball and could look deep into the future - for the individuals you serve, and for the community as a whole?

Those are the outcomes your programs will ideally be aiming for.
> Outcomes are the difference your program will make in someone's life, or in the life of your community - the future you want your program to create in the lives of the people who walk through your door, and the lives of everyone in your community.

Outcomes are about these questions:
> How will life be better? For whom? And for how long?

Steps for Creating Outcomes

JARGON FREE VERSION:
Steps for Reaching for Your Organization's Highest Potential

Part of the problem with reaching for outcomes is knowing where to start. Because, to date, we have considered outcomes as something to discuss when seeking a grant, we typically think we should begin the quest for more significant outcomes with our existing programs - simply identify and measure those outcomes. As noted above, however, and as you will see in the steps below, it's not as simple as that.

For that reason, and because you already have something at stake with your current programs, you will find it easier to consider this approach with new programs, rather than re-looking at your existing programs.

By focusing on new programs, you will be starting with no assumptions except the most important one - that you have the potential for creating a significant, long term difference. Once you get used to thinking in this way, we encourage you to revisit your existing programs, using the same thought-process.

The following steps will begin aiming your new effort at creating significant improvement - **first** in the lives of the people who walk through your doors, and **then**, in your community as a whole.

1) Creating the Future

As you set out to create your program, ask the questions noted above:
> • What future would you like to create for the individuals you serve?
> • What positive conditions would you like to create in their lives?
> • What would you like their future to be like?

(From there, if you are ready, begin asking those same questions about your community as a whole.)

Note that these are not problem-solving questions. That is because creating significant outcomes is not about simply eliminating one or more particular negative conditions from a person's life; we want to create a great future for him/her. Eliminating a problem tends to focus narrowly. The more positive you can keep the context of your program, the more positive a force for change you will become.

2) Factors Beyond Your Mission

As you consider creating that positive future, an interesting discussion usually ensues. It goes something like this:
> If we are to create that future, we can't just look at our mission, but other related work as well. But that isn't our job! Our job is X - there are other organizations who do Y and Z! This is just too big - we can't possibly

accomplish all this!

There are other variations on this theme, but you get the gist - that creating a positive future often means moving beyond the narrow confines of your mission, into the related missions of other organizations. Perhaps creating the future will move your thinking from substance abuse to parenting to education to homelessness and beyond. Or perhaps creating the future will move you from music to education to counseling to the environment.

We have been told so often to stick closely to "what we do," that many organizations intentionally avoid expanding their thinking; they intentionally avoid addressing all of what it would take to actually accomplish their mission!

So for this step, we encourage you (no - we order you!) to let your mind wander beyond your immediate mission, out towards all the other factors that will influence the likelihood of your being able to create the future you have envisioned.

Write down *all* those other variables and issues. What factors would need to be considered, outside the immediate scope of your mission, for that future to be possible? (The example below may give you some ideas.) You will see in Step 3 that this is not a futile exercise, but a critical one, and a practical one at that.

3) Who Else Can Help Us Accomplish This Future?

As you begin looking at all the factors that will contribute to your success, now is the time to consider all the other organizations and individuals in your community, who also have a stake in creating that future.

Your list will include the organizations and individuals who are doing some of the related work you noted in Step 2 above, as well as those who may not already be doing that work, but who are passionate about creating such change. As you compile this list, don't forget to include those individuals who walk through your doors every day - your clients, patrons, program participants.

To help jump-start your thinking for this step, you may want to use the Life List generator on page 25 of FriendRaising (if you do not already own FriendRaising, click here for more information).

4) Working Together

Bring together all those individuals, and before starting to craft the program, clarify together what the desired results will look like. The following questions may help:

- How can we clearly define the difference we want to make in people's lives?
- Whose lives do we want to impact?
- For how long?

5) Indicators of Success

From the answers to the questions in Step 4, discuss how you might identify whether or not the program is accomplishing the difference you want to make. With the group you have gathered, ask the following types of questions:

- How might we measure benchmarks along the way, to see if we are getting close to changing the conditions we want to change?
- What indicators might we look for along the way? What might we measure to see if we are making a difference?
- How long would we need to measure those indicators?

Again, we urge you to keep those indicators positive, rather than focusing on the negative (for example, the difference between noting the graduation rate vs. the drop-out rate). Generating positive indicators will help focus the context of your program on the creation of positive outcomes for both individuals and your community.

By building measurement directly into the root of your program, you will be able to monitor whether the program is accomplishing what you wanted to accomplish, or

whether you may need to make adjustments. It is therefore important to note at what intervals and how you will measure. And then be sure to do that monitoring!

6) Craft Your Program

Now that you are clear in your understanding of why you will be doing what you are doing, and you know what results you will want to be able to measure, you will be ready to craft your program - ready to focus on the thing you already know how to do so well.

The Results

You can see where the approach of "aiming at outcomes" is a very different approach from providing a service in response to a narrowly-defined need. This approach - aiming at creating a whole positive condition for that individual - that is what Funders and others have been trying to get at with the measurement movement. They just started from the wrong place; they started with teaching us how to measure, rather than *first* teaching us how to aim.

Unless we first aim our programs at creating significant change, we can measure all day long without ever being able measure such change. And the reason is simple: Without building our programs to accomplish significant improvement in the quality of life in our communities, there will be no significant change to measure.

Therefore, as you seek to create real results with your new programs, you will find that there are all sorts of benefits from this approach, and truly, making a grant application more appealing to Funders is the lowest on that list of benefits.

> Without building our programs to accomplish significant improvement in the quality of life in our communities, there will be no significant change to measure

First, you will be aiming at accomplishing something significant - and to repeat just one more time, we are more likely to accomplish something if we aim at it. While these are indeed long-term results - results that might not fully unfold over the next 2 years or 5 years, but perhaps over 10 years or maybe even 20 or 30 years - you will finally be taking steps towards accomplishing those big picture goals we all have for our communities. These are the goals that will make a great difference to the future of the places we love. They will not exclude today's issues, but provide a larger context for those issues.

Second, you will *want* to measure, because if the goal is those outcomes, you will want to know if you need to make adjustments along the way - you will want to be sure you can accomplish those incredible goals. And beyond just your own organization, you will likely have partners in this effort, and they will ALL want to know together if it is working or if it needs to be adjusted.

Which leads to one of the biggest perks of all: This approach to building programs breaks us out of the habit of thinking that we have to do it all ourselves, and then feeling overwhelmed because we can only do so much.

Instead, focusing on outcomes makes us want to reach beyond our walls, to link arms with those who also care about what we care about. (While this article is not about collaboration, you can see where these are natural collaborations, built from the inside out, rather than the common refrain, "The Funder wants to see a collaboration - who can we partner with?")

And finally, when we create programs in this way, building indicators and measurement right into the planning, the question of "How to measure?" begins to make more sense than it ever did before.

Practical Examples

Because it is always helpful to see how theory becomes practice, the following are provided as practical examples of what is possible. Below you will find 3 examples, for three of the most active participants in the Community-Benefit Sector:

⇨ SEE Below to view examples for **Provider Organizations**

⇨ CLICK here to skip to examples for **Funders**

⇨ CLICK here to skip to examples for **Nonprofit Resource Centers**

✚ **Provider Organizations**   Back to INDEX ▲

   Practical Examples for Creating and Measuring Real Outcomes:

Art for Kids

The mission at Art for Kids is to provide "at-risk" kids with productive and creative outlets for their energies, to reinforce their potential, rather than their risk.*****

Step 1: *The Future We Want to Create*

Focusing for now solely on the young people who walk through our doors, these might be our responses:
- We want young people to choose positive outlets - sports, art, academics - for their energy and curiosity
- We want young people to graduate high school
- We want young people to be excited about their future
- We want to create a lifelong passion for the arts
- And etc.

Step 2: *Factors Beyond Our Mission, that will Affect Those Outcomes*

External factors will be many when it comes to teaching art to "at-risk" kids. These might include any number of factors in our labeling a child "at risk" in the first place.
- Poverty (and subsets of hunger, homelessness, etc.)
- Child abuse / neglect
- Substance abuse (either by the parents / guardians, or of the young person him/herself)
- Lack of an attentive parent / caring adult
- And etc.

Step 3: *Who Else Can Help Us Accomplish This Future?*

From the list in Step 2, it is easy to come up with names of other organizations and individuals in town who can help. What is harder to remember to do is to involve young people themselves, as well as their parents. So don't forget to engage kids who have succeeded, kids who are having a hard time, kids who have *not* succeeded, kids who have gone through your programs - and their parents.

Step 4: *Working Together*

If you want to see energy soar in a room, bring all those people together, and have a skilled facilitator ask the questions we noted above, about building the future. We recommend a skilled facilitator because this cannot become a gripe session, and cannot focus on the problems you want to solve, but instead must focus on the positive future you wish to create. Problem-solving will NARROW your focus, and outcomes are not about narrow - they are about the whole human being. If you can keep your eye on that prize - a positive future for that individual, rather than simply the elimination of a problem - you will have created the context for not only a great program, but a great life!

Step 5: *Indicators of Success*

What positive indicators might we measure to see if we are making a difference? Some of the following might be indicators (and you will likely think of others):

- High school graduation rates of participants
- The rate of participants who go on to college, or art school, or to become professional artists
- Rate of kids who participate in art shows around town / other creative outlets
- Rate of kids who return to volunteer to teach others in the program
- Rate of kids who volunteer in other programs (organizations, churches)
- Rate of participants who come from referrals from other participants

Again, it is important to note that these indicators are all positive indicators. We don't want to simply eliminate one or more particular negative conditions from this person's life - we want to create a great future for him/her.

You will also note that these indicators are not only measurable at the end of the effort, however far into the future that is. They are also indicators you can use to measure the trends along the way, to know if the project is doing what you anticipated it would do while en route to that successful future. (And if not, you will have time to re-assess, and make adjustments.)

Step 6: *Craft the Program*

You can already see that the program that will come out of this effort will be incredible.

- It will have no problem getting funded, and it will address the many many issues that face young people today.
- It will aim at creating a positive impact on both those young people and the community overall.
- It will be open to addressing other issues that arise that may not have been considered from the beginning.
- And it will easily be able to answer the question any Funder may have, because the program will have been crafted with those questions at its core.

✦ Funders

Practical Examples for Creating and Measuring Real Outcomes:

As we noted above, for our communities to achieve significant outcomes, it will require not just Provider organizations, but EVERYONE to take a step outside his/her comfort zone - stepping outside "the way we've always done it." And that means it will take some changes in the way Funders perceive their own work as well.

One of our favorite activities is convening the Funders in a community, engaging them to consider the following question:

What will it take to create an incredible future for the community you serve?

During these invigorating conversations, the same issues surface repeatedly. And it is both interesting and disheartening to see how many of those conversations begin with those Funders blaming Provider organizations for not accomplishing enough.

As we work to shift the conversation from blame to possibility, here are some questions we encourage the Funders we work with to consider:

1) Consider the outcomes you want to see from your own funding, and then plan your grant efforts around those outcomes.
What change do you want to see for the dollars you are investing? Can you re-create your grant program to aim at that change?

> *Example:* A health-care Funder who realized, after years of funding clinics and other "health-related" programs, that what they were really funding was "sick-care." They re-worked their grant process to fund only those programs that were aiming at creating more lasting community health.

2) Consider who you can work with, and what other resources you can leverage, to create those outcomes.
Just as you might tell a Provider, it doesn't necessarily take more money to create more significant outcomes; it takes identifying the array of resources you have to work with, that have been heretofore ignored. How might you convene the organizations in your region in an ongoing learning community to change entrenched conditions? Are there speakers you can bring in to address issues of particular interest in your community - speakers who might do an advocacy workshop about those issues? Are there initiatives you could embark upon if you collaborated with other Funders who also want the same outcomes?

> *Example:* A progressive Funder who cared passionately about equity issues, created a grant process related to "diversity," and then convened grantees in an ongoing learning community, to encourage them to share the wisdom they all gained, thus extending that learning even farther. Another proactive Funder, hoping to create significant change among the hospitals in their community, offered funding and other benefits to assist in a hospital-related project, but *only if all the hospitals in the community worked together on that initiative.* If even one failed to engage with the effort, the funding would disappear. Talk about peer pressure!

3) Consider researching (or funding research for) evaluation and measurement approaches that can begin to evaluate the long term / transformational change you want to see.
How can you use the steps noted above for Providers, to begin determining the indicators you would want to see? What other tools are available for measuring those results?

There are a number of existing evaluation tools, and more being developed all the time, that are beginning to address the evaluation of long term, transformational change.

If you do not know the answer when a grantee asks, "How can we measure change?" and you cannot (for whatever reason) gain that knowledge, then consider dropping the question entirely, as it is frustrating both your grantees and yourselves, and providing little benefit to the community.

But if you do not want to stop asking the question, and you indeed want to see better measurement of more effective programs, then learn all you can about some of the remarkable work being done in this area. You will find it overwhelmingly appreciated by your grantees, and you will be taking a huge step towards enhancing their ability to create significant change in their communities.

> *Example:* A leadership program wanted to measure whether the program was having the transformational effect it wished to have on its participants. By working with a major foundation and a group of forward-thinking evaluators, a methodology was developed that

not only took into consideration the spectrum of change that might occur (short term, ongoing learning, true transformation), but the extent of the impact of that transformation (Was it just a change for that individual, or did that change ripple to others - his/her employer, family, etc.?)

Funders have, in many cases, become accustomed to thinking that their only job is to provide money - that their hands are tied when it comes to creating more significant outcomes, and that all they can do is try to force the hands of those who do that on-the-ground work. The more Funders see that their greatest potential lies not in their dollars, but in the combination of dollars and wisdom and other resources they have, all leveraged together, the more Funders will be able to more proactively create the change they want to see in their communities.

We have been encouraged by the number of Funders who have contacted us, asking how they can focus their own work more on longer-term outcomes, and we look forward to reporting more about those efforts as time goes on.

Nonprofit Resource Centers

Practical Examples for Creating and Measuring Real Outcomes:

There are few communities in North America who do not have some form of Nonprofit Resource Center - an organization dedicated to enhancing the resources / improving the management of the organizations in their community / region. Typically, Nonprofit Resource Centers put on workshops, offer consulting, and provide other services to strengthen the organizations in their region.

If we were asked, "Of all aspects of the sector, where do you find the most frustration about outcomes?" we would likely say we find it in the leaders of Nonprofit Resource Centers. Time and again we hear stories of workshop after workshop about measuring outcomes, to virtually no effect. When it comes to creating significant outcomes, truly there is no one at wits end like the community's teachers - the Nonprofit Resource Centers.

As we work to share the possibilities we see for creating more significant outcomes in the communities we care about, here are some questions we encourage the leaders of Nonprofit Resource Centers to consider:

1) Consider your own outcomes first, then re-create your programs to focus on those outcomes.
As we work with Resource Center leaders around the country, those leaders are quick to tell us what success would look like for them.

- They want the organizations in their communities to be more sustainable, less worried about money.
- They want them to begin working more closely together, collaborating in a more genuine way.
- They want boards to be energized.
- And in the bigger picture, they want to create a culture of philanthropy and service in their community.

When we ask if they are accomplishing these things, however, we hear of their frustrations. Their programs have not been crafted to attain those outcomes; they have instead been crafted to respond to the needs voiced by the organizations in their community. And as we have noted above, there is a big difference in what can be accomplished when one is aiming for great outcomes, rather than responding to perceived need.

Our recommendation to Resource Center leaders is therefore that they

consider using similar steps to those noted above, determining first what they want success to look like, and then working backwards to determine how their programs can create that success.

The day-to-day pulls us down so quickly, that it is as important for the leaders of Resource Centers as it is for anyone else to keep your eye on that bigger prize - the change you want to create - and have a plan for how you might accomplish and measure that. You may be surprised that creating the plan alone is energizing!

2) Consider rethinking the workshop model of service delivery.
As you consider the outcomes you wish to achieve, don't be surprised if you end up scrapping the workshop model. We have been encouraged by the number of Resource Center leaders who realize that one-day workshops have limited effectiveness, and who are seeking a different way. We are further encouraged by those who are anxious to talk with us about approaches that cost the same or even less, while creating more long-term impact for those who participate.

In our experience, there are 2 reasons most Resource Centers continue to do one-day workshops:
- They believe that is all they can afford, or
- They simply do not know other approaches.

Workshops are not the only way to provide education to busy professionals, and they are not the most affordable. And obviously, they are not the most effective, or we wouldn't see such frustration on the part of Resource Center leaders! As we continue to work with Resource Center leaders to develop and implement more effective models for delivering their educational programs, we will continue to write about them, to share their learning with others in the field.

3) Consider alternatives to the Membership Model.
By definition, the membership business model is an exclusive one, providing service primarily for members, rather than for the whole community. As you consider the outcomes you want to achieve, and the best approaches for achieving those outcomes, we hope you will consider re-thinking the Membership Model.

We do know that Resource Centers are hard to fund. But truth be told, every organization we have ever worked with feels it is the hardest type of organization to fund - whether their work is that of a Nonprofit Resource Center, a recovery organization, or an arts group. Finding sustainable models does not have to conflict with providing the very highest level of outcomes to the widest variety of organizations.

Again, we hope the steps above help with your thinking in this process (especially Step 3 above - noting all the resources you can bring to bear). You may also want to consider the articles linked here as a way of re-thinking the funding of your Resource Center.
http://www.help4nonprofits.com/H4NP.htm#Fundraising

4) Consider changing your mission statement.
While it seems a simple thing, words are powerful. Instead of stating only what you do, consider stating why you do it. "Our mission is to create an incredible future for our community, by strengthening the organizations that work to make that change possible."

We appreciate that the job of Executive Director of a Nonprofit Resource Center is often one of the most tiring and frustrating jobs there is. We are encouraged by the number of Resource Centers that have expressed interest in moving to the next level of creating more significant outcomes themselves. And because Nonprofit Resource Centers are all about

learning to do things well, we look forward to these paragraphs being the first to eventually be deleted from this article, due to their no longer being applicable!

Conclusion:

Reaching for outcomes does not have to be a jargon-laden path sought only by those who need to fill in the line on a grant application. Reaching for outcomes is reaching for our highest potential - our greatest possibilities for creating amazing places to live, not just for those we serve today, but for their children, and their children's children.

We are creating the future, right now. We hope you will aim high.

LEARN MORE!

* Our work with Rick Miller and Kids at Hope has forced us to see that "at risk" is a horrible way to describe anyone, and especially a child. Kids at Hope has turned the definition on its ear, and has made significant outcomes possible for many many children. Hope and positive approaches are powerful tools, and we encourage you to check out Kids at Hope (www.KidsAtHope.org)

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