SHARED MEASUREMENT AND VALUES IN WORKING TOGETHER

Dear Social Service Practitioners,

As part of working on the ground, gatherings such as town halls, engagement sessions and partnership networks are convened in order to learn from the community and to engage community partners to help individuals and families. How productive and useful these sessions are depends on the planning and execution of such efforts. Not unlike the good management of projects, they begin with understanding the issues and problems that need to be solved or the purpose that requires the bringing together of individuals, organisations and groups. Research by Kania and Kramer (2011)[1] reveal that there are typically some conditions that lead to successful collective impact. Below lists 7 steps, including some of the conditions* listed by Kania and Kramer (2011), that can guide the structuring, convening and following up of any such efforts.

1. What is the purpose or issue at hand ?

Issues and problems are part and parcel of living in communities. How challenges are framed or discussed can hint of the strengths and opportunities that these issues offer in terms of creating positive change. It is helpful to start where there are common themes in complaints, feedback and even compliments. One common theme in the social sector is that of groups working in silos, fragmented or duplication of services and inefficient processes. While such a theme offers the opportunity for streamlining and collaboration, it requires a deeper understanding of the specific issues that are embedded in the theme. It is through distilling the issues that it becomes clear that there could be a variety of sub-themes with various efforts that could subtly be working at cross purposes. One example is streamlining which may offer efficiency but may also take away constituents who are served by several groups. Other examples include segmentation that can result in a shift or loss of identity for organisations. So, the sub-themes can be disparate while the overarching theme may be "building collaboration." In the words of some, the devil in collaboration is in the details. So perhaps, the first good question to ask with any effort in wanting to bring people together is why we are bringing people together, for what purpose and why it is necessary to do so.

Spending time to distil the numerous issues will enable planning to focus on specific problems. This could result in better outcomes than when taking a collective approach. Some issues, for example, may not lend themselves to a collective approach and are better addressed by identifying and entrusting it to the expert authority. The complexity of an issue may or may not be a good criteria for collective effort. It all depends on the specific case or situation. A complex case or situation may be better dealt with by an authority that has access to the knowhow, operational experience and resources.

In some instances, a complex situation may require a community to provide inputs and insights at the right phases but may be better led by an authority in resolving it. Situations that lend themselves to active community involvement may be the ones where the community needs to collectively determine its importance and therefore the amount of resources to invest into dealing with it. Examples of such situations include littering and safety in the local community.

* The 5 conditions listed by Kania and Kramer include 1) Common Agenda, 2) Shared Measurement System, 3) Mutually Reinforcing Activities, 4) Continuous Communication, 5) Backbone Support Organisations

2. Agreeing on a common goal

When the issue to be addressed is one that is better resolved, solved or prevented by a community effort, it is useful to determine how the problem can be framed. It is critical to ensure a proper understanding of the issue and its importance. Awareness of an issue is only the beginning. People may know that it exists but not understand its implications. The next step is to explain the issue clearly to those it affects by letting them know how it works, where it is encountered, and what the significance of it is. If provided with good information, those who come together to work on the issue will be better able to commit towards a goal. It is useful to set aside time for the various groups to come to a common goal and to have it written out for clarity.

3. Developing a Strategy

A strategy is a way of describing how the goal is going to be achieved. In Community Tool Box,[2] Jenette Nagy and Stephen Fawcett share that a strategy 'is less specific than an action plan (which tells the who-what- when); instead, it tries to broadly answer the question, "How do we get there from here?"' They elaborate that a good strategy will consider the barriers and resources present (manpower, people dynamics, money, power, materials, etc) and there can be different strategies taken to achieving common goals. These include providing information, improving support, removing hindrances or duplications and pooling of resources (N. Jenette & F. Stephen).

Developing strategies helps to spell out what needs to be done in order to achieve outcomes. Strategies leverage on the available resources and opportunities, respond to hindrances and allow resources to be used more efficiently (N. Jenette & F. Stephen).

To organise community partners to help devise strategies, it is useful to make gatherings productive with good facilitation and closure on how to bring contributions and ideas forward. A productive gathering is dependent on the appropriate individuals converging on a possible solution derived from their discussions, viewpoints and contributions. These individuals may include change agents and anyone who is in a position to help contribute to forming the solution. Determining who should be at the table to create positive change is an important consideration. While the temptation is to be highly inclusive, the gatherings can sometimes become too large to be productive. Thus, the composition of the gathering is an important consideration. Furthermore, having members own the solution that comes out of such gatherings plays an important part in nudging improvements.

4. Committing to a shared measurement

One of the challenges of community groups working on improving coordination on the ground is coming to a clear shared measurement of what it is that all involved understand and will commit to. What does good coordination look like when the processes or systems are put in place? It may be difficult to agree and commit to a shared measurement but it is worth aiming for it as it will accelerate the process of achieving the goal.

Having a shared measurement means that each partner will track the progress made in the same way instead of focusing on organisational measures. The shared measure will hopefully be a more holistic one which will incorporate a common understanding that people do not make decisions solely based on data but also on values.

5. Mutually Reinforcing Activities

When there is a common goal that is supported by a clear strategy and a commitment to a shared measurement, there is a clear direction and each partner can then carry out mutually reinforcing activities. This focuses resources on activities that contribute to the outcome.

In some instances, the mutually reinforcing activities on the ground may mean re-defining roles and responsibilities, re-directing energy and influencing and re-evaluating contribution. These are not easy shifts and adjustments to make but they are necessary for collaboration and developing partnership.

6. Keeping open channels for communication

Strategies often lack follow up or underachieve because of unclear leadership and communication. It is therefore useful to structure channels for communication and ensure consistent and continuous communication. There is also often change in membership in the groups so it is important that new members are clear of the common goal and brought up to date on the progress of the mutually reinforcing activities. Attention to such changes and communication will avoid the frustration of people attending gatherings year in and year out without a sense of progress as these issues are being discussed without a clear direction, a commitment to act and a way forward.

7. Role of coordination

With rising expectations for matters to be better coordinated, there is a premium on the role of coordination. However, coordination is an equally misunderstood role with descriptors such as clearing house for referrals to pooling of resources to tracking of action and progress. Just as it is important to agree on a common goal, it is equally necessary to agree on the role of coordination and to make it known to the various partners.

Coordination, when well-structured and consistently carried out, often contributes significantly to the success of collaboration. It is the oil that lubricates the system. Coordination is a consistent activity and highly skilled coordination synchronises the contributions of partners to achieve improvement. Coordination is the backbone infrastructure that serves as a skilled and dedicated resource to support ongoing efforts.

How Social Service Professionals Help

Community engagement sessions that are organised to address social issues often involve people from a range of expertise and organisations. What makes the resources work well together and more efficiently is often determined by the commitment to facilitation, coordination, and shared measurement. Social service professionals, with our understanding of social issues, training in building partnerships and community work, are well placed to play the role of facilitator and strategist to bring together various partners. These efforts are important in resolving the individual cases that cut across agencies.

As we build on doing well in facilitating such community engagements, we will not lose sight of the fact that "large-scale social change comes from better cross-sector coordination rather than from the isolated intervention of individual organizations." (Kania & Kramer, 2011)

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References:

1 Kania, J. & Kramer, M. (Winter 2011). Collective Impact. Retrieved from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

2 Nagy, Jenette, & Fawcett, S. B. Developing a Strategic Plan and Organizational Structure. In Community Toolbox (Chapter 8, Section 4). Retrieved from http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/structure/strategic-planning/develop-strategies/main

Further Reading:

"Trying Hard is Not Good Enough: How to Produce Measurable Improvements for Customers and Communities" by Mark Friedman (Chapters 2 and 4)