NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT

Measuring Leadership Development

To avoid measuring and funding leadership development is to deprive the social sector of one of its greatest performance improvement tools.

By Matthew Forti | 2 | Nov. 21, 2011

It is hard to argue with the premise that leadership matters. Whether in plain view or behind the scenes, good leaders are at the heart of successful organizations, coalitions, and movements. Yet funders and direct service organizations alike devote so few resources to leadership development. One key reason: It’s unpopular to spend on activities that don’t produce results you can readily measure and attribute, particularly in this era of ultra-constrained resources. Ask yourself this: would you spend an extra $4000 to upgrade software for 20 of your program staff, or would you send their supervisor to a leadership training course?

Earlier this year, we conducted a third-party assessment of the nation’s largest philanthropic leadership program—Neighborhood Builders, operated by Bank of America. Now in its eighth year, Neighborhood Builders selects “high performing” community-based nonprofits, and provides them with a meaningful unrestricted grant ($200,000) and multiple three-day sessions of leadership training for the executive director and an emerging leader. It also fosters relationships within a network that has grown to 1,200 nonprofit leaders. The bank invests in this program as part of a broader commitment to strengthen communities where it does business.

Our research found that the program is having a strong, positive impact on participating leaders and organizations, and through them, the individuals and communities they serve. For instance, Chinese American Service League, a Chicago-based social services organization, attributes its
ability to grow through the downturn in large part to the fundraising knowledge it gained at the training, the financial management advice it received from a peer organization it met at the training, and fundraising and accounting software it purchased with the unrestricted grant.

Here are some important take-aways from this assessment that others running or funding leadership development measurement programs might find valuable:

1. Develop a detailed theory of change. It isn’t worth spending a dime on measurement until you’ve carefully defined which leaders you intend to target, what specific training and other programming they need, what they will gain, how those gains will be applied, and what should ultimately result. Ask yourself: Do you want to be accountable for long-term outcomes? At what levels (the leader, the organization, the community, etc.)? Over what time period? Should every participant receive the same set of services and benefit in the same way? For Neighborhood Builders, detailing the theory of change clarified the intermediate outcomes it sought (improvements in aspirations, leadership knowledge and skills, peer relationships, and stature with other funders) and the longer-term outcomes for improved leadership and organizational performance.

2. Measure with mixed methods. Start with basic data tracking, leader by leader, along the theory of change: characteristics of the leaders, the amount and type of programming they access, their assessment of whether the programming was delivered as intended, etc. Then make sure to gather intermediate and longer-term outcome data after sufficient time has elapsed. While questionnaires and surveys will tell you whether outcomes were achieved, qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and document review are often necessary to determine whether the outcomes resulted from the program, particularly in the absence of a comparison group. Indeed, for Neighborhood Builders, we relied on in-depth interviews using common qualitative evaluation techniques such as most significant change and alternative explanation elimination to assess the program’s influence on outcomes.

3. Continuously measure to improve impact. High-performing nonprofits use measurement to enable innovation and improvement. By gathering and analyzing your data leader by leader, you should be able to determine which types of leaders benefit the most, what programming most drives outcomes, etc.; and then adjust your approaches to achieve greater impact. Our assessment of Neighborhood Builders identified nearly a dozen potential programmatic improvements, including how to better select leaders and which follow-up services (such as ongoing peer networks and skills-based employee volunteerism) to add or strengthen. These improvements can be piloted, measured, and then adopted at scale if they work.

4. Build rigor over time. Leadership programs don’t need to build a full-scale measurement system
right from the start. The best programs are intentional about whether and how to improve the rigor of their measurement over time, based partly on what they want to do with the results. Do they want to improve at their current size? Attract more resources to scale it? Inform the field? By engaging evaluators early, these programs can understand their options and implement changes now to prepare for the future. In the case of Neighborhood Builders, those options include building a comparison group, validating self-reported data, and measuring the program’s return on investment.

Measuring the results of leadership development is a lot harder than, say, understanding the impact of a tutoring program on student test scores. Yet, to avoid measuring and funding leadership development is to deprive the social sector of one of its greatest performance improvement tools.

What experiences can you share about measuring leadership development in your organizations?

Matthew Forti is the Performance Measurement Capability Area manager at the Bridgespan Group, an advisory firm to mission-driven leaders and organizations. Matt has supported several leading organizations in the design and implementation of performance measurement systems that promote continuous learning and improvement, the primary focus of his blog, Measuring to Improve. Matt is also the founding board chair of One Acre Fund, a nonprofit that assists over 50,000 smallholder farming families in East Africa to triple their crop yields.

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