

Evaluating our impact – reflections from the Consultancy Practice

Denise Fellows

One of the most important things we do in the way we work with our clients is to reflect regularly during projects whether we are achieving the impact that we planned at the beginning. It is three years since we launched the Consultancy and Training Development business in Cass's Centre for Charity Effectiveness and as we move into the next phase, we have been reflecting on whether we are having the impact we planned at the start.

Well, during that time we have rewritten our plans a few times and we have, through trying different activities, begun to understand what makes us special, what our strengths are and how we can work with others to help make charities more effective. We have been very busy and we have become more focused. For me it has been about working out what we do in the context of relationships: starting with our team, our wider colleagues in Cass Business School, our work with clients, our partnerships and increasingly how we can reach out to a wider audience.

Getting the right people on the bus

One of my favourite books is Jim Collin's 'Good to Great' I often quote from the chapter about getting the right people on the bus. First sort out who you need (and who you don't need) and then decide what you are going to do.

We have built up a strong core team of consultants who have been involved in developing the vision of the work we do, in the way we work and in how we develop ourselves. It has been important in getting the right people involved to get the blend of practice and academic thinking. We teach about knowledge, skills and behaviours in our management and leadership development programmes and we have built the profile of the knowledge skills and behaviours we expect of ourselves. Our consultants must have expertise not only in knowledge areas such as strategy, change, governance and leadership but also skills in the processes of delivering consultancy, listening and understanding the real issues being faced by our clients (often not the one presented) and having the consultancy tools to help develop solutions. And then there are our values and the behaviours that demonstrate we are living out the values. For example, life-long learning is demonstrated in commitment to bi-weekly conference calls where we share experiences and peer review how projects are progressing using our evaluation 'Carousel' model.

When we are working with organisations the success of the work we do is largely down to how good our consultants are and we want them to have the knowledge, skills and behaviours to deliver the best.

Cass Business School

We are part of the faculty of management within Cass and this has an impact both in what we do and the way we do it. Cass has a strong brand as one of the leading business schools in the world. Some of the criteria used to assess business school rankings, such as starting salaries for graduates, may seem at odds with MScs in Voluntary Sector Management. However, Cass recognises the importance of being ahead of the curve in having a world-class centre of expertise in charity, social enterprise and philanthropy and has designated CCE as its Corporate Social Responsibility project. This allows us to offer our part-time post-graduate programmes to students from the Voluntary Sector at almost 50% of other post-graduate courses within the school and similarly to keep our consultancy rates at a level which is affordable to our voluntary sector clients.

It is important that all the work we do complements the Cass brand for high quality. This is particularly true in our training and development work where we are focused on workshops and events, such as master classes, which draw on our specialist expertise.

Most of all we ensure that our clients benefit from up to date thinking from research both in the Voluntary Sector and in best management practice from the private and public sector.

Working with our clients

Our clients of course have been a huge influence on the way that we have developed and we have been listening to what they both need and expect from us. This knowledge has helped us to focus our services on the things that we can do really well including:

- Working with boards – strategy development, governance training and reviews, trustee recruitment and development, support networks for chairs
- Working with organisations – organisational reviews and design, change programmes
- Working with the top teams in leadership and management development programmes, talent management, diversity and equality
- Working with individuals through mentoring, coaching, action learning sets

We are also working with a number of funders providing services (training, coaching, organisational reviews and operational support) for their grantees to help build sustainable organisations that are better able to make use of the grants given.

Working with partners

Perhaps the part we most underestimated in our original plans was how we would build partnerships with other organisations and work with them to build capacity within the sector.

Amongst the many the most notable are:

- Worshipful Company of Management Consultants, joint founders with Cass of the Centre for Charity Effectiveness and who deliver pro bono consultancy and mentoring to clients who cannot afford fees
- Acevo for whom we provide the New Chief Executive and Next Generation Chief Executive programmes and have produced publications including ‘Chief Executives First 100 days
- NCVO with whom we have run joint short courses and we have written a number of workbooks including, “Tools for Tomorrow – strategy guide”, “Sceniaro planning” and “Getting Ready for Enterprise”
- BTEG for whom we are delivering peer-peer learning groups for Chairs

So, what next?

The announcement of the successful application to the Big Lottery Fund for plans for the development of the not-for-profit e-learning network will have a big impact on our ability to reach more organisations. That is really exciting for us because we count the number of organisations and people that we impact through consultancy, events (seminars, workshops, short courses) and newsletters, and as one of our key measures of success. Over the last 3 years we have impacted tens, hundreds and thousands, by 2010 we want to be impacting tens of thousands and we need a new way of working and the power of the internet to achieve that.

So watch this space, thank you for your support over the last 3 years and expect great things to come.