HOW TO BUILD AN IMPACT CULTURE

Improving your approach to impact usually includes developing internal systems and creating data collection tools. But building systems and tools is the easy bit. It is simply not effective to impose an impact management system on a staff team; it will collapse soon after you leave.

You need to bring staff and other key stakeholders with you – to build an impact culture.

This is about putting impact at the heart of everything you do: being an organisation that understands the benefits of evaluation and impact, collects good quality data regularly and uses findings to make plans and decisions about your work.

1

Give it time and have patience

Working on impact brings some benefits fairly quickly, but it can take a long time to really embed an impact culture.

Getting those within your organisation to focus on impact and not on activities isn't just about tools and processes. It's about changing the way people think about themselves, their purpose and their service users. This can – and usually does – take years.

Citizens Advice produced an excellent impact report. Their then head of impact and evaluation Tamsin Shuker talks about the process of developing this in a case study.

One of the most striking learning points from the case study is just how long it took Citizens Advice to get to that point; Tamsin describes a process of about eight years. Of course, Citizen's Advice is a large, multi-site organisation, and they have achieved quite a high level of sophistication, but this length of time isn't extreme or unusual.

2

Involve people

Your evaluation plans, tools and processes will be more effective if they are informed by staff, users and other key stakeholders. They are also more likely to see the point of the process and collect decent data if you bring them with you.

Some larger organisations find a receptive pilot project to work with first, to demonstrate the value of a focus on impact to stakeholders and generate learning, before rolling out to the wider organisation.

Don't get too enthusiastic too quickly – it's usually wise to collect small amounts of good data at first and then build up as you progress.

3

Build skills

Don't just assume that everyone can monitor and evaluate. There will usually be some skill-building required, which will take time and usually resources.

While many people learn to self-evaluate on the job, you can save time later on by having some support along the way, to help people collect the right data and know what to do with it.

Keep an eye out for skills gaps in other areas too, not just monitoring and evaluation. Some organisations struggle with implementing good impact practice because staff lack the skills in one-to-one interviewing or IT, for example.

Recruit champions

You need internal champions for your cause, usually both top down and bottom up. A CEO and SMT who are passionate about impact can drive the programme, and front line staff can also bang the impact drum.

Inspiring Impact, a UK-wide, ten-year collaboration (between NCVO Charities Evaluation Services and others), is training up impact champions to promote good impact practice from within the voluntary sector. 5

Be flexible

Good evaluation requires flexibility; tools and systems that are regularly reviewed and updated as projects and their data needs change.

What's needed at the beginning of your journey may not be what's needed further along the way.

The evaluation team from VSO spoke about their experiences of bringing an evaluation culture to their organisation. They reported that what was needed changed at different stages of the process. For example, initially they set up an evaluation advisory committee (EAC), which was really helpful. A year into the process however, they found that this had become a barrier, as staff had begun to see evaluation as the preserve only of the EAC, not of their own work. The next shift towards embedding evaluation involved a much wider ownership of evaluation across the organisation. 6

Integrate impact with everything you do

Being joined up in the way you build your impact culture is crucial.

First, ensure that any tools, systems and approaches you develop fit with everyday life in your organisation and are consistent with your values.

Second, many organisations make the mistake of not integrating their evaluation work with other internal initiatives, like strategic planning. This may seem obvious, but it's amazing how often people forget that impact work speaks to – and should therefore dovetail with – all aspects of organisational life, from job descriptions to staff meetings to strategic plans. 7

Focus on learning

Perhaps the most important part of building a strong impact culture is instilling the focus on learning and change.

It's about being open to finding out what works and what doesn't, and using that learning to make better decisions about how to target your resources. It's also a chance to celebrate success; staff and users often really value seeing what their organisation has achieved.

Using evaluation data to ensure that you maximise impact at the frontline, for vulnerable people, communities or the environment is the key ingredient of the best impact culture.

Further information

Read more about measuring impact and evaluation in our impact section.

Contributors