Why is it hard to know you are making a difference?

This practice briefing is for people who work in public services looking for effective ways of demonstrating their impact.

OVERVIEW

Organisations that deliver change through educating, empowering, supporting or inspiring people face a real challenge when it comes to measurement of the difference they make. Simple output or outcome measures mask the complexity of the work they do, often create perverse incentives (like a focus on targets rather than on the work) and take simple reductionist approaches that are not suited to the initiatives being assessed.
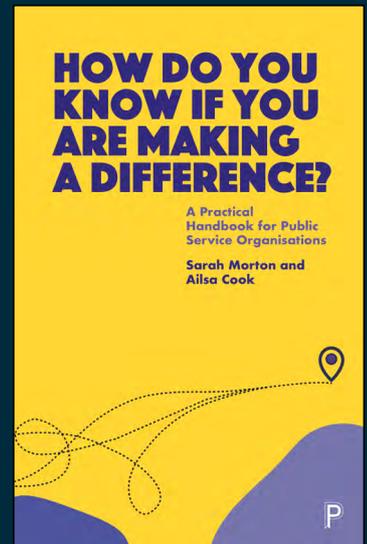
So it is hard, but not impossible, to know whether any project, programme, organisation or initiative is achieving and supporting its intended aim. However, there are complexity-informed approaches that can bring to light the importance of this kind of work, and help organisations learn, improve and be able to tell a more powerful impact story.

Ailsa Cook and Sarah Morton have worked with over 150 organisations facing these challenges across public services. They draw on this extensive experience alongside their backgrounds in public service teaching, research and knowledge mobilisation and their work using contribution analysis, knowledge-to-action and practitioner research.

CONTEXT

There is a growing understanding that public services need to deliver in another way in order to make a difference to families and communities. Delivering work with people, recognising that they are the experts in their own lives, being complexity-informed, doing more with less money, along with greater coordination and partnership are important and widely recognised ways to achieve change.

This multifaceted landscape of interlocking services makes it harder for any one of these to demonstrate their impact. To be effective in this complex environment, organisations need adequate tools and approaches that can help them with this difficult but important task.

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FINDINGS

- Organisations are under more pressure than ever to take on the challenging task of understanding and reporting on the difference they are making.

- Dominant approaches that rely on simple measures of outcome can't capture or reflect the complexity of this kind of work, nor help understand the specific contribution of any initiative.

- Understanding and diagnosing the data culture of any organisation is an important first step in this process.

- Data cultures that embrace qualitative and quantitative data and spend time thinking about and collecting different kinds of feedback and evidence that can help understand the change process are the most effective.

- Cycles of planning, data collection, reflection and learning are the most streamlined way to understand change. Doing this well creates the building blocks for a powerful impact story and makes impact evaluation smoother and more embedded in organisational culture.

- People need spaces for 'sensemaking' where they can collectively consider what data is telling them, and work to reach a common understanding of their work. Data doesn't speak for itself; it needs to be analysed, interrogated and reflected upon. Collective sensemaking around data and feedback can be as important as the data itself.

- Taking time to understand and work well with the complex context for any initiative means that people can respond well when things are changing, and adapt to their environment.

Together these approaches can equip organisations to know what difference they make and to tell a powerful impact story.

BENEFITS

Organisations that take the time and dedicate resource to understanding their contribution can achieve real gains:

- Getting funding – by showing funders how their work makes a difference.

- Sustaining and scaling up initiatives – by understanding how initiatives make a difference and how they might work in a new setting.

- Making better decisions – by knowing where to invest and where not to invest, with real-time data on progress to understand where action is needed.

- Responding to multiple demands for data – through streamlined data systems and a strong understanding of what data is important.

- Confident staff – by giving people an awareness that their work is meaningful. Being able to see the difference it makes gives staff a sense of purpose.

- More influence – by being able to illustrate not only whether an initiative makes a difference but also how it makes that difference. This can be shared for learning and to demonstrate to policy makers and funders the effectiveness of the work.

- Becoming a learning organisation – by creating opportunities for reflection and sharing learning, including about what has and hasn't worked, bringing critical thinking to the work being done.

- Becoming an outcome-focused organisation – by understanding what success looks like. Setting out a vision for change becomes a virtuous habit, spreading to other areas of work.

- Making the best contribution possible – by enabling organisations to influence outcomes with the resources the organisation has available.

In times when budgets are tight it is even more important to develop the organisational competency to understand and know when an approach or initiative is making a difference. It can help organisations be more efficient, more effective and more attractive to funders.

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