
Common Barriers to Effectiveness in the Independent Sector

*Remarks made at the
1992 Independent Sector
Annual Meeting*



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October 27, 1992
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One of the things that makes this organization, Independent Sector, interesting is the way it elevates “mission” and “mission effectiveness.” Independent Sector has taken on evaluation, wishing to elevate it as well, and has properly decided that evaluation is an important activity only as it supports the accomplishment of mission.

What we've learned through the Evaluation Roundtables held around the country and reported on here yesterday, is that evaluation as a field has fallen short on its promise to be helpful to organizations in the pursuit of greater effectiveness with respect to mission. Instead, evaluation is identified with the themes of bean-counting and time-wasting. Participants at these roundtables have called, in effect, for a “new paradigm,” a new way to think about and act on evaluation that actually serves us in improving upon the mission-focused work of foundations and other nonprofit organizations.

My charge today is, first, to present common barriers to effectiveness in the independent sector - not an organization or program at a time, but sector wide; and not Independent Sector the organization, but the whole gamut of independent institutions and groups that we think about when we say foundations and voluntary groups. And second, I'll relate some “evaluation implications” to each of these barriers, because our purpose, after all, is to invent a form of evaluation that helps us

knock down, chip away, or circumvent these barriers to effectiveness, and inform us of our collective progress.

Dominance of the ✌️ “deficits” model over the ✌️ “assets” model

I call the first barrier, “Dominance of the deficits model over the assets model.” It’s a barrier that stems from limited vision - a perspective problem or world-view problem. It stems from seeing the “glass half-empty rather than half-full,” as John McKnight of Northwestern University likes to put it. The distinction is what differentiates the deficits model from the assets model.

The deficits model holds that distressed people and communities are “needy”; they’re a collection of problems, pathologies, and handicaps; they need doctoring, rehabilitation, and fixing of the kind that professionalized services are intended to provide.

The assets model holds that even the most distressed person or community has strengths, abilities, and capacities; with investment, their strengths, abilities, and capacities can increase. This view is only barely allowed to exist in the independent sector, where organizations are made to compete for funds on the basis of “needs” rather than on the basis of “can-do.”

I’m suggesting that the deficits model - seeing the glass as half-empty - is a barrier to effectiveness in the independent sector. Yes, people have both deficits and assets - the glass is both half-full and half-empty - but investment in the deficits model *exclusively* keeps growth and development from happening, and encourages continual dependence by people and communities on charitable contributions, a dependence that maintains them in “needy” condition. If “needs” are the indicator that directs funding, we can be sure we’ll be facing more needs in the future.

For the sector to become more effective, we must learn to change our perspective so that we can see the part of the glass that’s half-full.

The list of opportunities for funding changes radically when created with this different world-view. Rather than assessing needs that lead to more service delivery, one should assess assets that lead to more investment. With an assets world-view we could see people and communities as having assets worth further investment, and invest in their growth and development.

Evaluation implications: Evaluation conducted under the assets model would have to be different than evaluation conducted under the deficits model. Evaluation as a field has to change; its best move would be to recognize that many evaluation practices are themselves barriers to sectoral effectiveness. Evaluation as a field needs to listen to the observations made in IS' series of Evaluation Roundtables reported on yesterday, observations that strongly mandate and foretell a paradigm shift in the way evaluation is done.

For starters, instead of concerning itself with counting units of service or with management credentialing issues, evaluators could ask, "What is being built with the funds provided? What can this group do now better than it could before? What's needed to maintain the gains, and build even further on them? What's been learned here that other people could stand to learn? How can we get valuable information about lessons learned into hands that can use it?"

The dysfunctional distinction between ✌️ grantmaker👉 and ✌️ grantseeker👉

The second barrier to effectiveness within the sector also stems from limited vision. It's the barrier created by honoring far too much one of the differences between "the two kinds" of organizations in the independent sector, "funders and nonprofits," or more starkly, "grantmakers and grantseekers," and that's money.

Battle lines have been drawn, and "Us versus Them" thinking prevails, fueled by suspicion on both sides; mercifully this happens less and less within this particular organization than outside it, largely because of its insistence on invoking higher purposes, such as "mission," that can include the two under one roof.

Granted there are differences - grantmakers typically have much more money than grantseekers, but saying that tends to stop the conversation dead in its tracks, as if there's nothing else to say about them. My point is that focusing exclusively on the money differential is dysfunctional; it obscures the similarities between both types of organizations.

For example, while the rhetoric equates nonprofit with grantseeking, most nonprofits - certainly the ones with a budget large enough to come to this meeting - also give grants. Often these grants are in the form of funds, but if not funds than grants of assistance, support, recognition, legitimacy, and access - the basic requirements of change-making and capacity building.

At the same time, while we call foundations "grantmakers," many also seek grants, often as gifts to endowment or to programs. Any foundation playing a leadership role in its community also seeks legitimacy, access, support, and recognition - the same "gifts" the nonprofits allegedly seek.

In other words, both nonprofits and foundations are grantmakers and grantseekers; both have important resources to invest in creating greater effectiveness.

This is not to make light of the differences (especially the power differential that comes with more money), but to encourage us to take advantage of the similarities. If these similarities were seen, more natural partnerships could emerge. Using the assets model allows us to overcome our limited visions and find common ground that encourages investment from both quarters.

The Us versus Them distinction is distracting and demeaning. I don't know a single nonprofit staffer who would say, "I work for a grantseeking organization;" it's a term invented by those with power about those without power. Worse, it keeps nonprofits in a deficits mode as forever needy, and allows foundations to put on airs of self-sufficiency, whereas in fact most are financially needy at their own scale of operation, and all are quite useless without nonprofit partners to translate their money into action. Foundations have money, and nonprofits have the stuff needed for implementation - horsepower, on the ground and ready.

We need new language to describe the assets of all parts - maybe there's more than two - of the independent sector. I could suggest that we speak of "financial partners"

and “managing partners.” While perhaps too corporate in tone, it at least suggests a side-by-side relationship, encourages collaboration, and recognizes the unique and valued resources of all partners.

Evaluation implications: If we could shed our Us versus Them predilection, evaluation could focus less on compliance. Evaluation-as-compliance asks, “Did you do what you said you were going to do?” and is more appropriate in the public sector or in private endeavors governed by contract.

A more collaborative and less adversarial approach to our work could also encourage a norm of evaluation that focuses less on guinea-pig scientism, where the prototypic question is, “We’re funding you as an experiment; prove that your program worked.” This is technically impossible, too costly to try, and politically as well as scientifically contentious.

Evaluation in a more collaborative mode could instead focus more on what we’re learning about how to solve problems. We could ask, “What worked and what didn’t?” and “How could we work together better?”

However, even for these questions to yield candid and worthwhile answers, foundations will have to establish a climate of cooperation (literally, “cooperation”) with their grantees. It means they will have to dismantle the climate of competition for funds among “needy, supplicant” nonprofits that many have created.

Overcoming the Us versus Them world-view would also allow foundations to do something constructive with the evaluations they conduct. For example, they could use them as opportunities for widespread learning in the sub-sector concerned with a particular issue (like neighborhood revitalization or higher education) - rather than hold them closely and privately as an aid to their own internal decision-making.

By sharing evaluations, whether in the form of written reports or oral information swaps, other independent sector organizations can be allowed to learn something from those efforts that came before, and to build successively stronger efforts. This change alone would put evaluation in the service of mission, rather than in the service of administration. I like the idea of a “learning organization,” and would

extend it to include a “learning sector.” This is entirely consistent with the call for a new paradigm coming from the Evaluation Roundtables.

Non-inclusiveness - particularly racism

The first two barriers I’ve named arise from limited world-views unique to the independent and public sectors, in both their institutional and voluntary forms. But the third barrier I’ll cite is more universal, and this is the issue of racism. I’ve been advised to frame this barrier as non-inclusiveness in all its forms, to include sexism, ageism, homophobia, able-bodiedism, look-ism, and all other -isms. I recognize that all these are pernicious, and the price we pay for not being inclusive in all ways is astronomical and not calculable. Still, of all the secular problems we face in this country - poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, violence, ignorance - I think the sorry state of race relations and the way they compound these problems could be the most shameful blot on the promise of American democratic ideals.

By implication, then, racism could well be the greatest barrier to effectiveness in the independent sector. Racism runs deep in society - and it pains me to say this out loud, because saying it is so impolite - but because we Europeans benefit from racism, racism probably runs deep in the way decisions are made within the sector, whether we intend it or not, and whether we abhor it or not; it is unwise to think the independent sector was somehow made immune.

I believe that until racism is addressed satisfactorily in the way we operate our institutions, in the programs we design and sponsor, in the way we invest our financial and human resources, and in our choices of partners, the independent sector cannot lay a real claim to effectiveness with respect to its collective mission. ***Evaluation implication:*** There used to be an expression, “If you’re not a part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” If one accepts this, the implication for evaluation is clear: evaluations of independent sector programs should address the question, “How is this effort a part of the solution?”

I humbly suggest that this question be added to all pre-grant and post-grant evaluations, regardless of the theme of the grant. I don't mean to suggest that all grants must address racism (and/or the other -isms) directly, but that all grants should have some elements that help us make progress in reducing the barrier of racism, and encouraging greater inclusiveness.

Postscript

As I reviewed all three barriers, I began to see them as interrelated. First, seeing “the needy” as broken-down and needing charitable handouts but maintaining their neediness, and second, creating distance between foundations and other forms of nonprofit on the basis of financial assets, and third, maintaining exclusive arenas of privilege based on apparent but specious differences of people - are each variations on a theme: our dysfunctional views of “the other” and “the less fortunate.” It would take more time and greater effort to trace the way these barriers interlock - but it could yield a terrific assault on their limiting effects.

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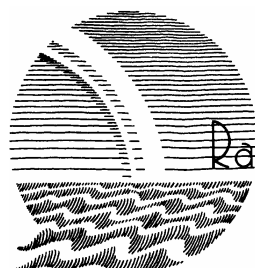
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- **Growth Factors in the Development of Community Foundation: A Study Guide for Technical Assistance;** by Steven E. Mayer; *53 pages (1988); #082 – \$15.00*
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