

Lessons Learnt

by Carter Center partner groups

At the end of any project, program or series of activities, a very useful exercise is to have a debrief on the venture. This should be done even if you are not satisfied that you were successful, as there would be lessons learnt that can equip you for the future nevertheless. In your debrief, some key questions for your group to answer would include:

1. What were our strengths in executing the program?
2. What were our weaknesses?
3. What were some of the factors that contributed to our success?
4. What were the things that caused us to fail?
5. What surprised us? How can we be better prepared next time around?
6. Was any damage done that needed corrective action on our part?
7. Whom do we need to thank? How do we build on the support they provided?

In answering these and other questions you need to be critical and forward thinking about how to build for your next venture or project. Of course, win or lose you need to reflect on your weaknesses and celebrate your good work. Take time to be proud of what you did accomplish and go on to better things in the future. This however would not be possible if you continue making the same mistakes and not learn from your experiences. In this context it is imperative that lessons learnt are documented, not only for your benefit but also for the benefit of others that may be engaged in similar activities in the future.

Given the above, the Carter Center partners have attempted to document the lessons they learnt in the execution of their activities since 2001. These lessons were captured in interviews of groups and in their own reporting on grants and other related activities. They represent the views and experiences of groups and clusters of groups from the regions in which the Carter Center worked. Since different organizations can have different experiences related to the same activity, sometimes the lessons may appear contradictory, but a conscious decision was made to capture this difference. Asterisks ** indicate where more than one group shared the same experience, and the number of asterisks shows how many groups came up with the same idea (though many more expressed agreement with these suggestions).

Advocacy

- To change policy and attitudes is not an easy task.**
- To be successful at advocacy one needs to be persistent and be prepared to advocate over a long period. *****
- Decision makers are more apt to listen to you when you represent a large conglomerate of groups rather than alone. ***
- Documentation of agenda and minutes are important for all meetings, so that they can be referred to when challenged.
- Impact of programs cannot be seen over a short period of time.**
- In advocacy projects the success is not usually in your hands, consequently you can fail despite how hard you work.***
- Benefits from advocacy projects are more widespread than benefits from service delivery.
- Advocacy projects are easier, since in service delivery projects it is often difficult to satisfy some person's expectations.
- Advocacy is by far more difficult to execute than a project in relation to service delivery, since in the former the success is ultimately not dependent on your efforts but by a decision maker taking the appropriate action.*****
- To achieve an advocacy goal is more difficult than realizing the goal of a service delivery project.***
- Impact of programs can only be assessed readily if there is base line data. If this is not available it is difficult to assess impact of programs, and even when it is available, causation is difficult to determine in some instances.
- Some civil servants especially the Police are very reluctant to give written commitment even though one does not ask for any commitment that is beyond the scope of their work/duty.***
- Advocacy takes time and can cause you to lose friends and create enmity.
- Some interventions need more time than others to see effects.

Media and Public Awareness

- Media houses can be unreliable and go back on promises ***
- If you are prepared to pay you can have media coverage for any event - the difficulty is when you require coverage as a public service. Then you have to compete with the sensational news.***
- A personal relationship with media personnel/owners helps to get coverage, it is important therefore to develop such alliances.**
- Events are most likely to be covered on TV if groups tape the event themselves and submit tape to television station rather than depending on station to attend event and do taping.*****
- Media coverage lifts the profile of groups and makes the public aware of its existence and its work.
- Most members of the public are surprisingly unaware of their rights.**
- Public is hungry for information that is of relevance to them.***
- Giving of information on issues while useful must be complemented with answering of questions and explanation of issues.

Organizational matters

- When given authority and responsibilities individuals perform far beyond what was expected or anticipated.***
- No matter how hard one tries there is always some amount of conflict in an organization.
- Conflict is not necessarily bad, it is how it is dealt with that matters.
- Always good to set ground rules at the beginning of meetings so that order and control can be maintained.
- Better to document as soon as possible after an activity so that important details are not forgotten.****
- The fact that some members are paid to manage projects can have a negative effect on volunteerism in the group since other members sometimes look forward to be paid for services that they would have done voluntarily in the past.***

Participation

- In order to have youth participate in activities it was found useful to incorporate fun or enjoyable activities into program.*
- Youth are only willing come out to activities when there is some thing being given away.
- It is difficult to get men to attend activities **
- Very difficult to get individuals 25 years and over to attend activities
- If approached men were surprisingly willing to participate in activities.
- To ensure satisfactory attendance from school children activities must be held on a school day rather than at weekend.
- When there are clashes of program in the community it affects attendance at events and activities.****
- When planning events, one must take customs, culture and other commitments into consideration if good attendance is to be achieved.**8
- To get proper attendance and turnout at events in Amerindian communities, it is imperative that the Touchau or a council member be involved in organizing.
- To have persons on time for events it is useful to schedule the start of things at least fifteen minutes earlier than intended.
- Government workers are very passionate about their weekends off and prefer to attend functions and activities when it is during their workweek.***
- Government workers and leaders were willing to participate in activities but you have to give them ample notice.

Project Management

- It is very challenging to manage more than one project at a time.***
- When executing more than one project, as far as possible the group should have different persons in charge of the different projects and have separate accounts.***
- When dealing with more than one project one can suffer at the expense of the other, unless a conscious effort is taken to apportion enough time for each.***
- Always good to have someone understudying important functionaries, especially in project execution, so that if persons designated can no longer function the project is not compromised.
- To avoid misinformation leaders need to have systems in place to inform members of what is going on especially as it relates to financial matters.
- There is the need to communicate more regularly with members as a project is being executed.
- Authority and responsibility in the group must be widely dispersed if group is to be effective and efficient.
- Executing a grant helps to keep a group focused and active.***
- It is always good to have back up speakers and a wet weather plan for activities.
- Always build into your activities a contingency plan in case of the unexpected.***

Finances

- There is reluctance on the part of many businesspersons to accept cheques for payment for goods and services.*****
- Individuals are usually unwilling to sign both a receipt and a voucher for the same money and most persons are very reluctant to sign or give a receipt for small sums like a carfare of \$40.
- It was safer to deal with cheques rather than cash.
- Accounting for donor funds serves to lift the competence level of group members.***
- It is better to account for cash spent soon after expenditure.*****
- Bank need some lead time before one can access cash from account especially if a new current account is being opened.

Information gathering/Research

- A sense of confidentiality had to be felt by some members of communities before they were prepared to divulge sensitive information when surveyed.**
- Some individuals were unwilling to fill out questionnaires unless their identity can be hidden.***
- Many individuals were prepared to air their abuse and other personal issues publicly in an effort to have help to stop it.**