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The Stronger Roots Program

Case Study:
The School of Public Life

| Nadace OSF

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The School of Public Life: Measuring impact, getting to know the social base and mapping donor journeys

The School of Public Life embarked upon a research journey with a variety of objectives. They wanted to understand their impact, to collect data on who was attending their training sessions, and to find out who their donors were and what they found important regarding the organization's communications. For these different objectives, they tried different research methods.

The School of Public Life is a community education and knowledge center, where they aim to make the knowledge and skills for grassroots organizing available to all. They offer support to movements and civil society organizations to help operate more effectively, and strive to build a diverse community where critical thinking, democratic participation and solidarity are valued. They organize

free training courses and programs for adults, offer consultations for strategic planning for organizations, and promote participatory research.

Each year, the School of Public Life team comes together to plan their next period, based on the core aims and mission of the organization. At one such planning session, they started talking about how they felt they didn't know if their activities were really getting them closer to their goals. They decided that they wanted to find out what their impact really was, so they were going to do impact measurement research. They also wanted to know more about their participants, and in particular, their donors.

WHAT WE'VE BEEN RESEARCHING - HAVE WE DONE IT RIGHT?

As they had previously done some simple research connected to their trainings, they had a lot of previous application and evaluation forms. They thought they could measure their impact on these first. To start with, they sought professional help: they asked around among their friends, and after a recommendation, they contacted two young researchers. When the researchers were presented with the existing questionnaires, they encountered some difficulties. The existing data was incomplete, the questions were not standardized and many of the questions, for example open-ended questions, could not be analyzed.

After feedback from the researchers, the method of collecting data before and after training sessions was restructured. They continued to collect and analyze basic statistical data on an ongoing basis. The short questionnaire to collect this data is now consistently sent to all participants, together with the evaluation sheet sent after the training sessions, so that data is received regularly. This gives them a picture of who is participating in the training - but it does not tell them anything about the impact of the training.

- Look for data that is relevant to you and that you can work with, e.g., basic statistics and demographics to find out who your typical followers are. Collect these on a regular, ongoing basis. Ask for everything you can analyze in a spreadsheet! For what you can't, get expert help!

To measure the impact, the researchers proposed a completely different method, not based on historical data, but on newly recorded questionnaires, using the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA) methodology.

The organization accepted the researchers' proposal and entrusted the technical work to them. The cooperation worked well, because, although the organization's staff did not always understand the methodology, they found it reassuring when the researchers explained it to them and dispelled their doubts. It was also important that the organization did not interfere with the details of the researchers' work, only on matters within their own competence. For example, the questionnaire was only shown to the entire staff of the organization once, when completed, and corrections were made by the staff after a feedback round, as participants would probably not complete such a long questionnaire. For the School of Public Life, it was

also of high importance to be clear and simple, and thanks to their background in social psychology, the researchers were competent in making the questionnaire understandable and easy to fill out for a wide range of people.

- **Recognize the limits of your competence: seek collaboration with researchers and experts for complex tasks outside your organization's expertise. If you can find partners with whom you can build a relationship of trust with, trust their work.**

The research participants were contacted by the organization, but the questionnaires themselves were not administered by them, but were left entirely in the hands of the researchers. If the researchers indicated that not enough responses were received, the responsible staff member of the organization put extra effort into collecting responses. As a real impact measurement requires a lot of information, and therefore a long questionnaire, the organization also motivated those who completed the questionnaire by a raffle with different prizes. They could win items related to the School of Public Life (book, canvas bag, etc.), which was also a great way to build an extra connection with the participants, who were very happy to win and further spread the word about the organization.

The research was conducted over a school year, during which a questionnaire was sent to all training applicants. When they were asked to complete it, they deliberately did not use the word impact measurement: they felt it was a term more relevant to the organization, and could be alienating to the participants. Instead, they said they would ask about feelings and needs related to the training. However, when the survey was completed, the results were sent to all respondents so they could see what they had contributed to, what the outcomes were that they were part of.

- **Keep in mind that asking your supporters, your target group, members of your social base, is not just a goal-oriented action, but another opportunity for deeper connections.**

The research yielded several results. Overall, it was found that there were very positive effects: training gave participants more knowledge and reinforced attitudes related to organizing that are otherwise rare and difficult to develop. In addition, it turned out that the participants really liked the training courses and the trainers, the atmosphere and the diversity of the participants. This was a very strong internal reinforcement and motivation for the staff to continue their work. The research also gave useful feedback on the content

of the training and brought forth concrete changes in the content of the activities. Amongst other things, it was found that many people became discouraged during trainings by better understanding the social difficulties, and felt less hopeful about solving a particular social problem. This kind of loss of motivation runs counter to the School of Public Life's aim of motivating community action, so these sections were reviewed. It was also found that there is a need to address the privileges that participants have, the backgrounds from which they come from, and to help them reflect on these in a conscious way. This is now also emphasized when designing the training.

The organization believes that it can build on the results of this research for years to come. In addition, the questions included in the questionnaire are general enough to be taken up again at a later stage, and if necessary, the researchers can help repeat the research, without the need to develop a new methodology.

RESEARCH ON A SPECIFIC GROUP: DONORS

A less complex mini survey was also carried out, which did not target all participants, but the regular donors. As there are only a few of them at the moment, they were simply contacted by email, and in the end five people were happy to take the time

to help the School of Public Life by sharing their personal experiences. They were interviewed in person by one of the organization's staff, without the need for researchers or complex methodologies. She asked questions such as: how they had gone from being a supporter to donating and then to donating regularly, what attracted them, how could the organization motivate them to continue, and what they expected from the organization as donors.

Based on the interviews, they were able to draw a donor pathway that showed how someone can get to the point of becoming a regular donor to the School of Public Life, and what are the most important steps to do so. The results of the interviews have since been used in several areas of their communications. They learnt that donors like to hear about the inner workings of the organization, so they decided to look for ways to include supporters more as part of their inner circle. As a result, they launched a quarterly supporter newsletter. And when they redesigned their website, it was very useful for the copywriting to see what their supporters and donors found attractive about the School of Public Life and how they put it into words. In planning their subsequent campaigns, they also considered what supporters said and what issues they were interested in.

- It's worth not just asking for data, but also talking to the group that is relevant to you, e.g. your most engaged supporters. Even without experts, such conversations can give you very useful insights, information, and a deeper understanding of the people you want to get to know and how to motivate them.

This case study was written as a part of the Stronger Roots Program.

The Stronger Roots Program aims to increase the resilience of civil society organizations and their networks, strengthen their social capital and embed them in the communities and societies in which they operate. It is implemented by Open Society Fund Prague, the NIOK Foundation, Open Society Foundation Bratislava and Glopolis.

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