

Measuring Impact in Nonprofit to Dramatically Improve Effectiveness

Challenge

In 2007, Chantal Carr established Hope Arising, a nonprofit dedicated to delivering clean water to rural villagers in poverty-stricken Ethiopia. Several years later, Carr collaborated with The Forever Young Institute, an organization that partners with Arbinger to help nonprofit groups improve their development, implementation, strategic planning, accountability, and overall results.

As she experienced Arbinger's training and the application of Arbinger's tools, Carr grew introspective. One tool emphasized the critical importance of measuring impact in nonprofit work. It identified steps for deeply understanding the needs of those you seek to serve, adjusting your efforts to meet those needs, and measuring the impact of the changes to ensure they are aligned with the needs originally identified. This process helps to guarantee that helpful intentions are actually realized.

Hope Arising was confident that clean water was a resource the Ethiopian villagers truly needed. The organization worked diligently to provide consistent, sustainable, and abundant access to water in areas where it was previously unobtainable. After encountering Arbinger's tools, however, Carr realized that Hope Arising was not yet measuring the impact of its humanitarian efforts. While Hope Arising had gathered anecdotes about how much their efforts were appreciated, Carr realized a sobering truth: they did not truly know whether they were meeting the needs of the Ethiopian people.

With this discovery, the Hope Arising team began to systematically assess what was happening on the ground. This endeavor uncovered significant issues. The buckets used by villagers to collect clean water from Hope Arising's trucks were often contaminated. By the time the water was actually being used by families in the village, it was no longer sanitary. Another problem the organization discovered was that the water they delivered sometimes did not make it back to the villages at all: local thugs would steal water from the villagers to use for their own livestock. Measuring impact in nonprofit aid efforts revealed a painful situation. Despite earnest efforts by Hope Arising to deliver plentiful clean water to villages across rural Ethiopia, the villagers themselves were not actually getting clean water. Their previous measurement of success—gallons of clean water delivered to villages—was shown to be incomplete. To truly succeed at their mission to help the people of Ethiopia, they needed to find a new way to evaluate their efforts.

Solution

This finding clearly could have spread discouragement and frustration in the organization. Surprisingly, however, the Hope Arising team felt energized and hopeful. They were eager to find a way forward and better achieve their mission. Utilizing the Arbinger process, they began creating a new method for measuring the impact of their efforts. "Given what we now know," one team member asked, "what kind of metric would show us our impact and not just our output?"

In response, another team member asked a very interesting question: "What impact do the people want? What are they hoping clean water will do for them?" She added, "If we had answers to these kinds of questions, maybe we could figure out what we should be measuring."

With these questions in mind, the team started talking to

villagers across the region. In dwelling after dwelling, they heard the same thing: “We need clean water because we need our kids to be able to go to school. When our kids are sick from dirty water, they miss school. And if kids can’t go to school, the traveling schoolteachers don’t get paid. So they move on to other villages. But if our kids don’t get educated, they’ll never escape this poverty.”

Results

This was a revelation to the Hope Arising team in two ways. First of all, they had found a better way of measuring impact in nonprofit endeavors: number of days children are in school. Measuring this would show them their impact on what mattered most to the recipients of their services, allowing better alignment of intentions and outcomes. By contacting local governments, they were able to access data about school attendance. The second revelation was this: Hope Arising wasn’t actually in the water-delivery business; they were in the helping-kids-get-to-school business. By going deeper to uncover the real needs they were trying to meet in Ethiopia, the organization was able to expand its vision. They began to explore and innovate many additional ways they could help in addition to ensuring the delivery of clean water.

“The Arbinger tools provided the perfect solution to keep our mission on track and incorporate professional skills while retaining the humanity of our mission,” says Carr. “Our implementation of Arbinger principles has shaped our whole culture. This culture has enabled us to be flexible in our program. We have learned that you do what the people need, not what your program’s ideal is in your mind.”

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transformed our results.

Chantal Carr – Cofounder and Board Member