Engagement Action Research - Project Overview

The Context

Effective engagement lays the foundation for effective programmes for funders, beneficiary organisations and ultimately for participants.

Engagement is currently a very hot topic in the community sector – everyone says they do it, but what one organisation means by engagement is very different from another, and approaches and standards on engagement vary enormously.

We believe effective engagement can be demonstrated by the following:

- The programme or course runs at, or very close to, full capacity.
- Participants are genuinely representative of the target group.
- Participants are committed to the programme goals and clear on what is required of them.

In practice, many programmes do not meet this standard. The consequences of ineffective engagement include significantly increased unit costs and higher drop-out rates.

As far as we are aware there has been no research on this issue. The costs of this lack of research include:

- No assessment of how much this issue costs funders. For example a project that says it will work with 24 beneficiaries, with 21 starting and 16 finishing, would not be uncommon. Yet this equates to a 50% increase in unit cost.
- Insufficient pressure on the community sector to improve their skills and practice in engagement, or support for this to happen
- No general understanding of what proportion of programme funds ought to be ring-fenced for engagement, in the same way that they are for monitoring and evaluation
- No evidence to indicate to what extent performance in engagement can be impacted through training and capacity building and what the return on investment would be in terms of increased outputs.
- No risk assessment process for funders to help them predict how much engagement risk a programme carries.

The Process

This research project aims at addressing the above issues by doing the following:

1. Firstly, we will research current understanding and approach to engagement across the sector as well as establishing a baseline on the relationship between intended and actual targets and outputs. We will also, as part of this initial research, assess the approach of different funders in their application process in regard to engagement.
2. We will then provide some targeted engagement training and support to a sample of organisations who are either currently under-delivering or who could be expected to be under-delivering based on profiles of under-performing organisations or hard-to-engage client groups. We will measure the impact of the support and will assess to what extent improvement in engagement planning and delivery generates better value for funders through increased outputs.
3. We will make recommendations as to how the sector can take our findings forward, creating systems and processes to raise outcomes and contribute to making the UK funding sector a world leader in its understanding and delivery of engagement.
Key Research Questions

- How widespread, and large is the gap between intended and actual results across funded projects?
- What are the current beliefs, approaches and experiences of engagement amongst funders and community sector organisations?
- To what extent can the provision of targeted engagement training and support to organisations deliver an improvement in results? If so, what is the return on investment?

How Funding Organisations Can Support the Project

The research is being funded by the Mark Leonard Trust and the Monument Trust, though the hope is, that many more funders will be involved in the project and support the process in any or all of the following ways:

1. By giving us copies of their application forms and associated materials and encouraging members of staff to complete an online survey and also, if possible, to nominate one person to speak to a Kaizen researcher about their experience of engagement in beneficiaries’ projects and in the sector. This will be an important aspect of the benchmarking phase.
2. By supporting us to engage a wide range of organisations to take part in the research by encouraging beneficiary organisations that you fund (and others in your network) to complete our survey on attitudes to, and experience of, engagement.
3. By providing us with anonymous data from projects that have been funded and completed to allow us to build a picture across the sector regarding the contrast between intended targets and actual achieved targets.

If your organisation has conducted any research on engagement, or you know of research that might be relevant we would be very appreciative if you would share it with us. We will treat all such input as confidential unless we have permission to share it.

The project is being delivered by The Kaizen Partnership, a leading organisation in the development of engagement theory and practice. There is more information about Kaizen on their website.

“In our evaluation, what Kaizen brought to the table was a very professional and highly skilled approach to community engagement and consultation….Kaizen’s work with the PNCB Partners represents an excellent model for community engagement and consultation. Other key audiences can learn a lot from this model.”

*Initial Learning and Evaluation Report on the Poplar Neighbourhood Community Budget by Erica Pani and Professor Jane Wills, Queen Mary, University of London*

“Kaizen staff and contractors consistently give the impression that they really get where people are coming from. To get 40 or 50 people to turn up on a weekend to discuss their estate is near impossible and they managed it every time. So the methodology, although different, really works.”

*Dave Francis, Community Engagement Lead, Community Safety Partnership, London Borough of Camden*