Building Sustainability – Profits and Losses!

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Abstract: This paper discusses the introduction of business and management knowledge and skills into the community sector, through an examination of a university management programme targeted at community workers. The research attempts to highlight the programme’s contribution to building sustainability and address issues and tensions arising from it.

Sustainability is a term that is gaining increased usage in the community sector. This is in keeping with recent shifts in the voluntary and community sphere, towards a contract culture and the extension of marketing principles (Charities Aid Foundation, 1997). In the UK, the past twenty years has seen a reduction in State provision of welfare services and the “contracting out” of such provision. In search of sustainability and with a mission to improve quality of life in a local area, many community and voluntary groups vie to provide these essential community services. However, they are also part of a wider social movement, committed to tackling social injustice and exclusion (Waddington, 1994). Thus “profit” and “not-for-profit” values sit uneasily beside each other, creating tensions, not only in the sector, but for individual organisations also.

Northern Ireland has a thriving community and voluntary sector, with a recent report indicating that the region has approximately: 5000 voluntary and community organisations; a gross income of approximately £514m; 33,500 paid employees; 79,000 formal volunteers (NICVA, 1998). Most organisations have a “cocktail” of funders, with a substantial proportion of this, stemming initially from Europe. If the peace process continues (and we sincerely hope it does), Objective 1 status will be withdrawn from Northern Ireland in 2005 and we will see a sizeable decrease in funding to the area. Sustainability is clearly an issue therefore, for funders, government and the community/voluntary sector. Whether it has the same meaning for all is not so clear!

This roundtable paper describes a project that was set up to build sustainability in the community sector, through a two-pronged approach, of coaching and training. The Belfast European Partnership Board, an intermediary funding body, undertook consultation with community consortia funded by them, to find out how they could “maximise opportunities for growth and sustainability and to accelerate progress by supporting consortia” (BEPB, 2000). The key set of skills identified were around management of community projects and the University of Ulster designed a programme which would deliver quality training to those working in community consortia who wanted to develop management skills.

The course team consisted primarily of two staff members from the community development unit and one from the Management Institute. The course comprised of seven modules, for which students can gain university credit. On completion of six modules, students can gain a university certificate. In an attempt to facilitate the busy schedules of community workers, each module was delivered over the space of six weeks, with two full day workshops and two further small group tutorial sessions. Distance learning materials were provided to
support each module. In May 2000, eighteen students were enrolled onto the programme. In June 2000, the Board indicated that there was demand for an enhanced Diploma version of the course. Eighteen students were enrolled in September 2000 and all students have now been given the opportunity to gain a Diploma. However, due to a range of factors (for example, changing jobs, lack of time, illness, moving abroad), a number of students have been unable to complete the course. There are currently twelve students in each cohort, who are intending to complete the programme and obtain either a Certificate or Diploma.

The purpose of this research is to:

a) evaluate the programme, in terms of its aims to deliver management skills to community sector employees;
b) highlight benefits gained by individuals and organisations;
c) explore issues and tensions regarding the use of business and management culture within the community sector.

Research has been carried out through a series of questionnaires to students and focus group interviews. The next stage of the research is to explore in-depth case studies. The questionnaires and interviews carried out thus far, indicate that the course has been very successful in terms of delivering business and management skills to the community sector. Participants are also very positive in relation to the benefits that these skills and knowledge have brought to them and their organisations. There have been much wider benefits, in terms of capacity building, personal development, enhanced networking and transferable skills. All of the findings to date will be discussed more fully at the Roundtable report.

However, number of questions also arise from this research, which I would like to pose for discussion at the roundtable:

1) The issue of different ethos between the profit and not-for profit sector did not appear problematic to participants – they claimed to be able to “filter out” whatever was inappropriate. Is there a clash of values between these two sectors? Can they easily sit side by side? What enabled participants in this programme to “filter-out” inappropriate material? How did they make their decisions? Did these differ, depending on the individual?

2) Employment in the community sector is precarious, short-term and poorly paid. Those participating in training make many personal sacrifices, frequently juggling work, family and study commitments. They work long and unsociable hours and when they take time out to study, their work is still waiting for them on their return. The knowledge and skills that they gain have benefits for their organisations, as well as the whole community. How can this potential resource be best supported, in order to maximise the opportunities and benefits arising from it?

3) We all apparently want to build sustainability – but for whom? – Communities, employees, community groups or funders? Can one approach meet all these needs?