

PROGRAM PLANNING IN FAITH-BASED DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

There is a growing demand for scientific efficiency of faith-based development programs, resulting in the need for well-defined program goals. This study explored the presence of a systematic program planning process, based on the Lifelong Education Program Planning (LEPP) Model by Peter Cookson, which can help faith-based organizations formulate program goals. The influence of organizational structure on the systematic program planning process was also explored. Qualitative telephone interviews were used to interview representatives from six faith-based development organizations.

Results from this study indicate that systematic program planning does occur in faith-based development organizations. The LEPP Model effectively models the program planning process, but not all quadrants are used at all times. Furthermore, the organizational structure greatly influences the program planning process. Recommendations were made to develop a common terminology for the program planning process to increase effective communication.

Introduction

Religious-related organizations make up the largest sector, 67 percent, of the nonprofit world. According to a two-year study by Independent Sector, a nonprofit coalition of over 800 corporate, foundation and voluntary organizations that studies philanthropy, nearly a third of religious congregations were founded before 1900 ("Religious organizations", 1994). Together, these findings indicate that religion-oriented organizations make up the largest sector of the nonprofit world, and have been involved in charitable activities for quite some time. Faith-based organizations are already providing development services to many populations, and can be a powerful force to work with in achieving development in the future. As a matter of fact, federal and state governments are turning to religious nonprofit organizations to deliver social services and lead community development into the new millennium (Farnsley, 2001). However, there is a need for faith-based organizations' programs to become more business like in operation. Governmental agencies require more quantitative evidence of project impact than just the anecdotal evidence that people's hearts were changed (Hacala, 2001). Project planners and implementers will need to develop goals and guidelines for their projects.

The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent systematic program planning occurs in faith-based development organizations. The study was concerned with specific aspects of systematic program planning, based on the Lifelong Education Program Planning (LEPP) Model (see Figure 1) developed by Peter Cookson (Rothwell, 1997), and how those aspects are currently accomplished in faith-based development organizations. The LEPP Model consists of four quadrants that include aspects of the program planning process. Each quadrant contains four sub-components and all are divided by bi-directional arrows. This signifies that there is no specific beginning or ending point in the program planning process.

There were three major research themes examined in this study: whether or not faith-based development organizations engage in systematic program planning, if the systematic program planning that occurs is a result of the organizational structure of the program planner's personal perspective and which area of the Lifelong Education Program Planning Model is strongest in most faith-based organizations.

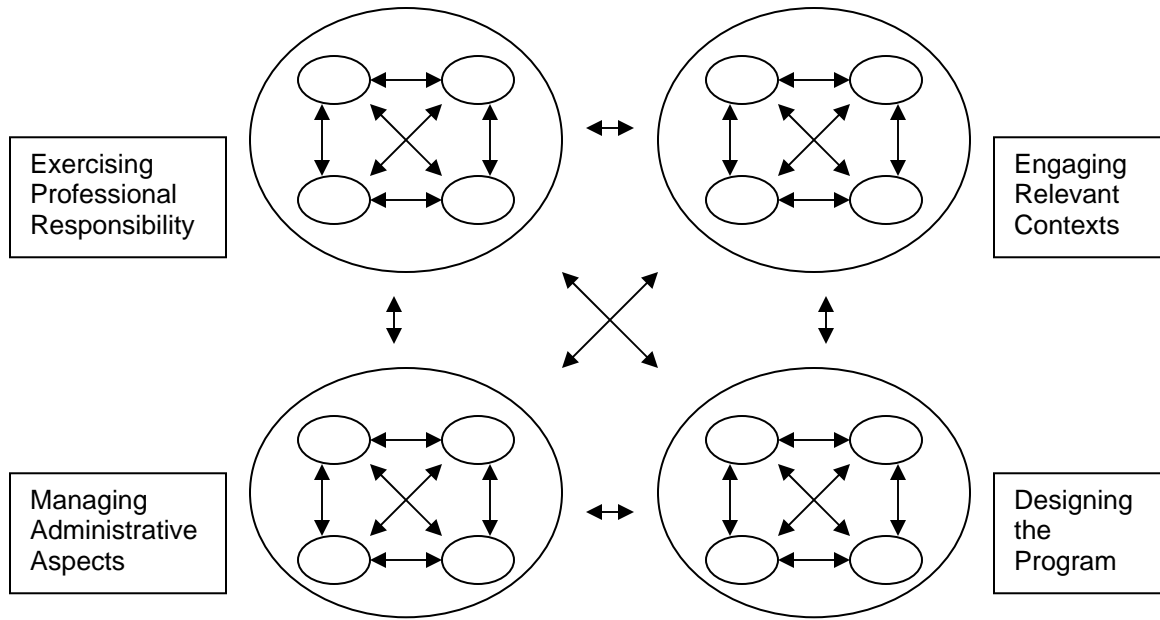


Figure 1. The Lifelong Education Program Planning Model

Literature Review

Faith-based organizations have been involved in philanthropy, in one form or another, for centuries. In the medieval ages, Saint Augustine proposed that all human relationships be founded on charity (Breidenthal, 1998). The practice of “reciprocity”, or looking after those in one’s own caste, kin, family or tribe, is very similar to philanthropy, and dates back to pre-literate tribes in Africa and North America (Feierman, 1998).

The growth of faith-based organizations in the United States began with the first New England colonies and continued through the next two hundred years. It was at this time when Andrew Carnegie described the modern concept of “scientific philanthropy”. His ideas were to calculate the value of philanthropic investments in terms of their measurable effectiveness. This concept resurfaced in the 1960’s when there was a proliferation of government contracts with nonprofit organizations. According to Hall (1990), this joint work between the government and nonprofit organizations increased the demand for greater efficiency and the elimination of duplication.

The 1980’s, 1990’s and the first two years of the 21st century have seen continued expansion of faith-based organizations. Federal and state governments are turning more often to religious nonprofit organizations to deliver social services and lead community development into the new millennium (Farnsley, 2001). “Scientific philanthropy” has resurfaced in that there is a need for those organizations’ programs to become more business like in operation.

Methodology

This study followed a survey research design, and was qualitative in nature. Interviews were conducted and analyzed thematically with respect to the research themes. Due to the wide geographic separation of the population and time constraints, data were collected through a telephone interview and were then qualitatively analyzed.

The target population for this study included faith-based development organizations within the United States that have at least one formal, ongoing development activity in a developing country. A listing of humanitarian Christian organizations was obtained from the Open Directory Project, a

comprehensive and searchable directory of the World Wide Web. A sample of six faith-based development organizations was selected by convenience sampling methods.

Interviewees were first asked to describe a development project they had implemented that could be used for the basis of discussion. They were then asked to reflect on the project and to describe the first step taken in planning that project. Follow-up questions asked included the following: How did you decide to take that step? Describe influences besides your own that may have impacted your decision to take that step? How did you carry out that step? What would you do differently if you were to repeat that step? This protocol was followed for as many subsequent steps as necessary within the development process described by the interviewee. When the interviewee finished describing all steps that were taken, the interviewee was asked to make any other comments related to program planning and his/her involvement in it that had not been mentioned. Finally, the interviewee was asked how he/she would characterize their approach to program planning. Interviewees were given a list of twelve words and asked to choose all that they considered to be descriptive of their program planning style. The list of words, in alphabetical order, was: casual, conventional, evaluative, fundamental, intentional, linear, organized, participatory, practical, standardized, systematic, and unintentional.

Recorded interviews were transcribed into a word processing document by the researcher. Analysis of data was conducted in three phases. First, the researcher coded the names of interviewees to protect interviewee confidentiality. Second, the researcher read each interview to identify possible themes for discussion. Once a theme was identified, the researcher coded that theme with a specific color. Each interviewee comment relating to an identified theme was highlighted with the coded color. This process was repeated three times, identifying three themes. Third, all comments pertaining to each theme were then compiled on a separate sheet. Comments for each theme were examined for similarities and differences and possible groupings.

Results

Interviewee Descriptions

Following is a brief description of each interviewee who participated in the research study. Interviewee names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the interviewees and their organizations.

Adam – Adam is responsible for program planning, monitoring, evaluation and budgeting. He has previously worked in Honduras for five years. Adam has been with his current organization for four years, and is 41 years of age.

Ben – Ben works in a consulting capacity for several faith-based development organizations, as well as heading his own organization. He is involved in training practitioners and pastors in development principles and practices. He travels and works extensively overseas in many different countries. Ben has been with his current organization for eleven years, and is 51 years of age.

Chad – Chad oversees programs worldwide and sets the program direction for the organization. He worked in the Republic of Georgia for two years with his current organization and for five years, mainly in the former Soviet Union, with other agencies. Chad has been with his current organization for three and a half years and is 34 years of age.

David – David currently serves as the Executive Director of an organization that partners with non-governmental organizations to contract development workers in host organizations. He has worked in Korea, Chad, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Cameroon. David has been with his current organization for 36 years, and is 61 years of age.

Frank – Frank works in the areas of evaluation of programs, review of planning objectives of all programs and coordination with organizational partners. He has worked in Belize for ten years, Honduras, Mexico, and Kenya for three years each, and Costa Rica for one year. Frank has been with his current organization for a total of 25 years, and is 51 years of age.

Greg – Greg serves as the Director of Human Resource Development for his current organization. He works with projects in the field of education as well. Greg has been with his current organization for eight years.

Discussion of Themes

Vision – Vision played a very important role in the program planning process according to all the interviewees. Two sub-themes emerged: organizational-centered vision referring to the organization's vision when planning a project, and learner-centered vision referring to the community's vision.

Organizational-centered vision: Vision was frequently cited in reference to the faith-based development organization as a whole, and how the organization progressed with program planning. Four interviewees mentioned, in similar fashion, that the mission statement and the vision of their organization guided the program planning process from start to finish. These interviewees made it clear that without a concrete, agreed upon, vision any program that was planned would be without focus and less productive than it should be. This was stated explicitly by one interviewee when he said, "...if you don't put principles and values at the center [of the program], no matter how successful your program is in the short run, in the long run it's going to really be a failure in terms of bringing about any social change" (Adam).

Learner-centered vision: This tended to be derived from the organizational vision, but applied specifically to a particular project with a defined set of learners. It could include the goal of the project, how long each segment of the project should last, even what different steps were being planned in the project. One interviewee described this as, "We basically laid out a vision of the project, what we were doing, what their responsibility would be, and then asked them if they would be willing to volunteer their service to do the role we had explained to them" (David). Other interviewees described having multiple, and often heated, dialogue sessions with the people in the communities where the project was to be implemented. One interviewee describes this process as "vision casting" (Ben), the purpose of which was to help the local community understand the total picture of the project. Another mentions that, "...we had a lot of debates about vision and values with the Director of the [local] organization" (Frank).

Participatory Planning – Participatory planning also emerged as a theme in all the interviews. All the interviewees described participatory planning techniques that were used in their respective projects. However, these techniques varied between organizations. Three different sub-themes of participatory planning techniques emerged: the gradual transfer of power technique, the abrupt shift of power technique and the complete immersion technique.

Gradual transfer of power: This technique was described as the process of slowly turning over control of a development project to the community where it was to be implemented. One organization worked to turn power over to the local people by hiring local people into the project. The interviewee noted that, "...we started to take on a little bit more of [their] face. That's one thing that happened in this transitioning from having [our] image to having a more...partnership image" (Frank). The other interviewee that described participatory planning techniques of this type said, "It was always a self-evolving process...as a matter of fact, [the local organization] is a completely independent organization now, which is the way that we work. We go in, become part of the process, then bit-by-bit it becomes independent and they are on their own" (Adam).

Abrupt shift of power: This technique was similar to the gradual transfer of power technique, except the faith-based organization remained involved to a certain point at which time power was

turned over to the local community and the organization remained available for consultation. One interviewee states, "So we would go in and do a PRA, and...a whole list of things comes out like identifying needs, strengths and resources within the community...At the end of that, three or four people are elected from the community and those people are the board...we then work with them directly to identify their agricultural needs. So they would design the project themselves; they would write the proposal, they would do the budgeting" (Chad). However, his organization was still available for consultation. He notes, "...we helped them in the technical assistance side and the planning side" (Chad).

Complete immersion: This technique was similar to the other two techniques in that the development organization still determined a need in a specific community and worked with the community members to arrive at a development project. However, in this technique, the organization worked collaboratively with the community members throughout the entire process. One interviewee described this spirit of collaboration as, "...I was starting with something from a people that wanted something, but they didn't know what they wanted it to look like. So we could sit down and work on it together" (David). He then went on to describe the formation of an advisory council, another term for a community board, and working with the council to determine where the project would go.

Planning Process Structure – The structure of the organizations' program planning processes was a third theme. Two distinct sub-themes emerged: evolving structure and formal structure.

Evolving structure: Interviewees that described their programs as "evolving" all used similar terminology when discussing their planning processes. Each was able to identify a starting point for the project they reflected on during the interview, but those starting points were abstract. For example, "When I arrived, [the project] was an idea...They didn't know what they wanted, but they wanted to help" (David). Another interviewee described the same idea when he said, "Generally, especially when we're getting into new areas we actually don't go in with a plan...we slowly build up processes, which may or may not be projects" (Adam).

Formal structure: The interviewees who discussed a more formal structure for their organizations' planning process used a different set of terms than the first group. Instead of words like idea, develop, etc., they more frequently used terms such as log frame, timeline and management. One interviewee mentioned that his organization has, "...a whole department that does planning...we have five people who are engaged full time" (Greg).

All interviewees mentioned, however, that no planning process was set in stone. One interviewee, who described his organization's planning process as structured said, "While there was really structure attached to what I was doing, many things happened casually and unintentionally...we had to have structure to go forward, but that structure had to allow you to capitalize on unintentional things that were good" (Greg).

Conclusions/Recommendations

Those involved in the program planning process do perceive that systematic program planning takes place within faith-based development organizations. All organizations interviewed for this study were involved in systematic program planning; however, each interviewee used different words and terms to describe the planning process within their specific organization. For example, those from organizations with an evolving program structure described a process based approach and those from organizations with a formal program structure described an outcomes based approach. The researcher recommends the promotion and use of common terminology between different faith-based development organizations and within different departments of those organizations. It need not be exhaustive with respect to all the steps involved in program planning, but should be extensive enough to allow discussion of common principles across organizations. This will also allow those who participate in program planning to become aware of their activities.

The systematic program planning that occurred in the organizations participating in the study was influenced greatly by the organizational structure as opposed to the planner's perspective. Interviewees all described the program planning process in terms of their organization and its goals, not their personal preferences. Even though the planners had the opportunity to use personal discretion, decisions still consistently were made with the broad umbrella of the organization-wide goals for the project in mind.

Faith-based development organizations use different quadrants of the LEPP Model at different times in the program planning process. The quadrants used most often depend on the particular participatory planning technique being used by the faith-based development organization. The number of quadrants used in the planning process varies primarily according to the participatory planning techniques chosen for a particular program. These organizations lie along a continuum according to their participatory planning techniques. Obviously, the division of participatory planning techniques along this continuum is not a rigid delineation; it functions as a general framework. The researcher recommends that program planners strive for an understanding of the different participatory planning techniques and the impact those techniques have on the entire planning process.

Another recommendation is to determine the levels of systematic program planning that occur in different types of faith-based development organizations. Interviewees for this study represented both denominational and non-governmental faith-based development organizations. Future political action on the subject of faith-based organizations could have an impact on the operation and program planning of all types of faith-based organizations. An assessment of the current program planning activities may help to determine what kind of effect may take place in the future.

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