Discussion summary

Topic: How to address in a report the issue of an individual hindering a project?

Discussion: May/June 2013

Summary: June 2013 By Yuval Ofek

Initial Question from Yuval Ofek:

I perform an evaluation using OM and developmental approach, mostly for learning purposes but also for accountability as funding is not secured for 2014-2015. The evaluation found that most boundary partners are deeply disappointed with the project, and specifically from its implementation on the ground. Going deeper into the problems, they all pointed on one individual with a major role as the coordinator of the project in the field. Aside to informing the management, I wanted to have your opinion about the appropriate way to address it in a report.

Dear OM members

This post sparked quite a few responses, and reminded us all the sensitive position of the evaluator in relation to certain boundary partners. The issue is even more valid for evaluators using OM (and other soft approaches), due to the close relation with the evaluands and the learning purposes of the evaluation process. It also reminded us that finally, projects and programmes are built on individuals, whose behaviour and attitude can make the difference between success and failure.

I hope you will benefit as much as I did from this discussion. Many thanks to all of you who shared your thoughts and experiences.

Yours,

Yuval Ofek

Summary of Responses

Dena Lomofsky: Address the problem by writing in neutral terms, talking about "difficult relationships" and try to analyse the problem according to systemic or project management issues; e.g. Lack of clearly defined roles and responsibilities, poor management functions, etc.

Rosemary Cairns: Specify the behaviours that caused the problems, rather than looking at particular people. While the behaviour is often clear to the evaluator, it may not be so clear to those who are embroiled in the situation and identifying these behaviours might bring insight to all the participants as well as spark potential conversations about how to change them. Therefore, while it is inappropriate to name specific people, being clear about the behaviours that have caused the problems in the project is important to state in the evaluation report.

Amadou Issaka: Remember that the way evaluators write about things and the language they use can cause severe damages to projects and organizations.

Louise Romain: Nonviolent Communication is a process that can deal with people who sometimes use speech or display behaviour which leads to discomfort in others. The aim is to be able to steer our way through conflicts in a peaceful, positive way. Nonviolent Communication has the potential to frame negative issues in a more positive way, helping to calm dawn tensions and anger.

Maria Laura: Sometimes these types of problems can be a blessing in disguise, because they help discover cultural and problem solving skills differences. If the "problematic individual" is making some contribution, one can use this as a starting point to talk with him or her about how "can we make things better" and "how can we increase collaboration between boundary partners". When people feel that they failed, they try less the next time, or do not even try at all. Also, trust may be destroyed at an alarming rate in these situations. The bottom line here is to find the good in any bad, and leverage it for learning.

Kerry Abbott: The evaluation report must reflect honestly what the problems are if they are to be resolved. Not everyone involved in a project is constructive, and others in the group recognize when someone is aiming to disrupt. Many people try to hijack projects for their own ends and power base and it is up to the independent assessor to identify that, or risk losing credibility in the report. The destructive behaviour is named, and the post of the person behaving that way is disclosed (or described, if it is a loose affiliation) although the individual's name is not used. Those involved with the project will know who it is. The evaluator should not assume that it is possible to convert someone who is only seeking to further his own narrow interests. Conflict avoidance tends to create more problems.

Pamela Jull: It is productive to have candid conversations with clients about findings like these and ask for their input about how it can be constructively used in the report. Personnel problems in an organization are important for the organization to address, and as evaluators we sometimes have the opportunity to speak truths that others are avoiding because our true "Client" is the program's effectiveness.

Shaukat Ali: Things become worse when team members break or stop communicating, or one feels difficult to communicate with the others. Lack of communication and communication breakdown

lead to further misunderstanding, suspicions and doubts and inappropriate decisions ruining someone careers.

Louise Mangan: Provocative "problem" personalities and their belief systems can catalyse vital interpersonal and organizational learning if honesty, enquiry and kindness are all sustained.

Sabina Chatterjee: We often get so focused on the work that needs to be done, that we forget that a crucial part of the work is the process of doing it. In many cases, if people involved in a conflict are able to tell the story of what has happened, and are encouraged to be both self-reflective and self-reflexive about what is happening, many opportunities are found to shift the situation away from conflict, to greater understanding. If we can support one another to hear stories differently (without reacting, or being defensive) it can oftentimes open a new space in which to work together.

In many ways, this may also be an opportunity to look at Outcome Mapping not just as a way we see and do our work, but also as a way we tell the story of how we work together. Anger and blame can both silence people and also force them into corners from which they have no escape. Using transformative and narrative dispute resolution techniques may help everyone involved gain new perspective - and find a much more collaborative space from which to work together.

Monica Sanchez de Ocaña: Discussing with key stakeholders beforehand how to reflect issues of this nature on an evaluation report can be a good strategy. Organisations may be very willing to admit and address issues of conflicting behaviour but may strongly resist or react negatively to them being pointed out explicitly in a report. If the commitment is towards positive change, then it may be better served to find the most appropriate way to address this issue, and addressing it in the report itself may not.

Maria Laura Ferreyra: Conflict should be exposed in order to be solved. The problem is how we do it. The way that we treat people and organizations will pave the way for their future behaviour. If we treat them as problems, they will behave as problem people. If we are emotionally detached (in order to be "objective"), they will be emotionally detached too and will not become engaged with the success of the project or program.

Now, why are we trying to evaluate a project or program? Who is really our boss? We should not engage in evaluation to make a good report, but to capture knowledge that may contribute to make better the lives of people and to increase the chance of project or program success. The aim is to foster the development of a positive climate where people will feel safe enough to engage in activities that will lead to conflict resolution. If other people are judging you, you will only worry about protecting yourself and seeing other people as rivals. If you try to build a community feeling, people will get involved with collective success.

Sure, it is very difficult to do this and many times people will try to put you to the test to see if you are honest about it. The more vulnerable they feel, the more they will push you to your limits in order to see how you behave.

Jacques Somada: No one can be completely a problem, but only partially. This implies for other boundary partners to identify what causes a person to be against a project. It is possible that this person is only against the approach used by the project and not the overall project. If she is against

the project approach, then it is possible that this position is a positive contribution and it must be analysed before drawing conclusions about the position of the person.

It is therefore important to identify very early the problem person of a project, take time to understand the reason why he (she) is a problem, and develop appropriate strategies to put him (her) in a positive constructive mood. This implies for the project manager to be very attentive to the reactions and behaviours of boundary partners at all stages of the project.

Shaukat Ali: The problem is most managers lack such approach and understandings (referring to Somada). Majority of the managers will not even give a chance to the team member to express himself/herself, especially, if the team member technically/professionally disagrees with the managers. This kind of situations should be tackled with the OM approach, i.e. we as managers should not expect ourselves to be 100% right and know everything all the time. It is ok even for a manager to be wrong sometimes as long as he/she admits it and so something about it. In short it needs a lot of leadership guts to handle such situations professionally.

Maria Laura Ferreyra: Communication is not enough: there is also a need for intercultural awareness. She states that OM training should include some sort of intercultural training too. If people are not able to appreciate the value of diversity, they will not be able to understand the value of OM, and of involving boundary partners. We suppose that people will understand-***and value-*** why they have to be involved, but they really don´t. Understanding the value of diversity means that there is not ***one*** right idea, but that most people are right part of the time and that context and opportunity determine also the adequacy of views at a given time and place. Problematic people may be providers of important missing parts of the model. Sure, it takes times and resources to "fit in" their views with the rest, but the new model will be an improvement over previous ones.

Andrews Seglah: In relation to individuals hindering a project, managers should also be prepared to learn from their subordinates. OM makes room for managers to learn and be open to new ideas from the junior members and also allow them to make a contribution to the project. Until managers are open to learn from their juniors it will also be difficult to overcome conflict and achieve a set target of objectives.