Counseling at a Food Bank

Sarah Robertson provides counseling services at food banks in Canada. As a counselor for the Catholic Family Services, she helps individuals who are having financial problems and cannot afford to pay for food.[1]

Sarah helps them understand their situation and plots a path for improvement. Sometimes the citizens need a job, or their spouse needs a job, or perhaps a better job. Maybe there is a serious medical problem that is preventing employment that requires care through the provincial health system. Although the government provides healthcare, citizens still have to pay some fees. Also, a medical problem takes time away from work. A family member may have an addiction and needs help to overcome the addiction. Perhaps a spouse is headed for incarceration or is currently incarcerated. Perhaps the family needs legal assistance. Any of these situations can mean disaster for a low to middle-income family. Sarah provides essential counseling for these unfortunate citizens of the province, with the aim of resolving their "presenting issue."

Sarah was somewhat surprised when a representative of the provincial government, who funds her particular program, visited her and asked about results. When she asked for clarification on the kind of results desired, she was asked very directly, "Could you show the ROI of the counseling?" She was surprised and responded, "What's ROI?"

The government representative explained, "It is return on investment. We are investing in this counseling program and we want to know how your program is actually adding value to the provincial government. Is it reducing cost? Is it avoiding cost? Is it adding tax revenue? If so, can you tell us how much and let's compare it to the cost of your counseling to see if it is a good investment for us." She responded that she had no idea but would find out.

The government representative continued, "We know this is a valuable and needed service. However, because we are having a budget shortfall related to a reduction in oil prices, we must cut some budgets. We are trying to understand which ones to reduce. Although we would like to fund every program, we cannot. We want to fund the programs that represent a good investment for the province. If you can show data to support this, it would help us justify continuing to fund your program."

Sarah was shocked and somewhat dismayed by the request. She quickly found some information on ROI. Luckily, she found an ROI certification near her in another province in Canada, enrolled, and began to develop her skills to show the ROI for her process.

Sarah was depressed. She had almost no data about this program except for the data she provided to the government indicating how many people were counseled, the type of counseling provided, and the number of counseling sessions conducted. Of course, she provided an invoice for her services. Beyond that, she had no data, but she was optimistic. Perhaps she could find some way to do this.

About a month after the government visit, Sarah attended the ROI certification and began to understand the ROI process more completely, and with some discussions with her colleagues, she began to reach some conclusions. First, she needed to send the government the reaction data that she had collected. In an existing data collection process, she asked the participants detailed information about "Why are you involved in these sessions? Are the counseling sessions helpful? Are the sessions useful? Is the information important to your survival? Is this something that you will use?" This is valuable information that begins to show the value of this counseling from the participant's perspective.

Sarah also realized that she needed to have learning measures. Participants must learn two major points as they take part in the counseling sessions. First, they must understand clearly how they got into the present situation (i.e., what caused them to need to come to the food bank for food?). Second, they must know what to do to improve the situation and ultimately find a path to independence. She can easily capture this data at the end of the first two sessions (e.g., session 1, what got them into the process; session 2, develop a plan to address the issues).

Sarah also began to realize that she needed follow-up information on actions. As part of the process, she always develops an action plan with each person. The plan is based on the participants' situation, detailing what they must do to overcome their problem. In every case, there were specific actions that they must take, advice they should seek, other agencies they must visit, or employers they should interview. The important point is that an action plan is in place. With some improvements and adjustments, she could easily use this information for application data. She thought the government would view this as important data.

Action was not enough; Sarah needed the impact data. In every case, there is a potential positive impact coming from the counseling as individuals are securing jobs (or a better job), being released from jail (or prevented from going to jail), getting their child off an addiction, correcting a medical problem, or resolving a legal issue. Whatever the situation, there is a consequence with a major impact on the person and on the government system. Sarah thought that if there was an impact, it could be caused by many other factors. For example, if someone gets a job and she has helped with some tips, advice, coaching, contacts, and appointments, there could be other factors that caused that person to get the job. However, part of the cause of job success goes to this program and that is the important point. What she learned during the ROI certification program is that there is always a way to isolate the effects of the program on the impact data. She felt comfortable that she could do this credibly with some help. She also felt comfortable that all the data were available directly from the individual, system, or some agency. This would be extremely valuable information for the government, particularly if she isolated the effects of her counseling on the impact data.

Recognizing that this is not what the government had asked for, she moved to the next level, ROI, which means that impact data must be converted to money. After some discussion and questioning, she realized that for almost every consequence there was either a cost prevented, or money added. For example, if someone gets a job, that person now has a reduction or elimination of unemployment benefits, which is a cost avoidance. That individual will also now pay taxes, and so the taxes are revenue for the province. If a person is prevented from going to jail (or they get out of jail earlier), those days of incarceration can be attributed to this program and represent a standard cost that is available from the province. When someone has a medical problem, the provincial government pays for almost all of it. If it is corrected, a cost is avoided. If addiction is stopped, a cost is avoided. In almost every one of the outcomes, there is some cost avoided to the provincial government. She felt comfortable that these values were available and could be obtained with minimal effort.

Obviously, the fees the government is paying for counseling represent the cost to the government, but she quickly realized that is not all of the cost. It is also the cost of the counseling room, because after all, the government is furnishing the facility. All the costs, indirect and direct, would need to be included, which she says should be not that difficult. Then the benefit-cost ratio and the standard ROI calculation could be developed, which was the data that the government requested.

Sarah was a little concerned because she said the benefit of the counseling, in her mind, is not just the money, but the impact the program has on the lives of these families. If the counseling works, they regain their self-esteem and dignity, family relationships are improved, quality of life is enhanced, and they feel good about their government helping them in a time of need— "these kinds of measures you cannot convert to money," she said. "And they are important intangibles." The key is to connect them to this program, which is easily accomplished.

Sarah concluded that she could have a complete set of data, measuring reaction, learning, application, impact, ROI, and the intangibles. This would provide the government the data it needed.

Unfortunately, before Sarah Robertson could complete her study, she received notice from the provincial government that her program had been cancelled. She explained to the representative that she was working on an ROI study that should be completed in a month. The representative explained, "It's too late . . . The decision has been made. It was a difficult decision . . . But we have to cut budgets. We just don't have the revenue, and we don't have any data about the success of this program."

Sarah was upset and angry. "How could the government be so cruel?" she asked. "Is everything about money?" She planned to challenge the decision but felt that it would probably be a waste of time.

On top of this frustration was the reality that she must find another job. As a contract employee, she must replace this lost contract with another one, and in this environment, it would be difficult. In addition, she worried about the people who come to the food bank. "Will someone be there to help them? Probably not," she concluded.

This sad, but true, story reveals several issues about the value for money question. This is sad because the counseling program is probably driving some important impacts, according to Sarah. If she had some impressive impact data, the value for money request would probably not have surfaced.

There are lessons for both the funder and the recipient. Funders need to push the evaluation value chain to a higher level, probably to the impact level instead of the number of people served and the costs, which are input. The recipients of funds should be proactive and push the evaluation to a level that the client needs. This is usually the impact level.

Reference:

1. This is an actual case. The name of the individual and the location have been disguised at the request of the parties involved. For more information on this case, please contact ROI Institute.

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