

Evidence and Impact **Essay Collection**

**Anxiety and Accountability
– Impact Leadership in the
Youth Sector
- Jenny North**

Anxiety and Accountability – Impact Leadership in the Youth Sector



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Jenny joined Impetus-PEF from Relate, where she served as Head of Public Policy for six years. Prior to this she held policy positions with Maternity Alliance and New Policy Institute. Her experience also includes working at the Home Office as a Crime and Policing Analyst. Jenny holds a degree in Philosophy and Theology from Oxford University.

It's tough at the top - whatever sector you're in. But in the social sector, including the youth sector, there are some distinct challenges for leaders.

The CEO needs to manage their senior team, but also their Board, on which they don't actually sit. It's a truism that a charity CEO has to be the Chief Fundraising Officer but these days they're often expected to be a 'thought-leader' too, usually at the same time as pursuing an 'ambitious growth agenda' signed off by the Board just before the last CEO left. All this, and they're also responsible for motivating staff or volunteers who are working with young people facing huge challenges.

This is what you'll see in the recruitment ads for new CEOs. What you'll rarely see in the job descriptions is an unambiguous accountability for the impact of the services they provide to young people – and the continuous improvement of this impact, year on year. Neither will you see Chief Execs charged with embedding a culture of accountability for outcomes throughout the organisation, from Board to frontline. The CEO of a youth organisation is driven on all sides to be anxious about fundraising, about staff morale and retention, about survival – but about its impact?

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When the sector talks about impact it asks 'Do you measure impact? How good are you at measuring it?' They don't ask 'Do you make impact? How do you know? How are you improving?'. The implicit assumption is of course you do – and if you just get better at counting the right things you'll be able to prove it. But for a leader of an organisation serving young people their primary business should not be measuring impact, but making it: consistently delivering life-changing, enduring outcomes to young people, who are often facing multiple challenges. However hard fundraising in the youth sector is, making impact for young people is harder.

At Impetus-PEF we believe that the lack of support and challenge for leaders on actually making impact lets down young people and weakens the sector. We devote our time and resources towards providing this support and challenge. We find CEOs who are already anxious about their performance on impact, and who suspect that they are not making as much difference as they could for the young people they serve. Some of them have already delved deeper – they are aware that they don't know who they help and who they fail, what exactly success looks like for the lucky ones, and which variables make the difference between the two groups.

Facing up to these things is difficult – at both organisation and sector levels. 'We don't know if we're making any difference' doesn't feel like an inspiring message for staff (although we'll come back to that). It definitely doesn't seem like an easy thing to say to the Board who can fire you, and it's a downright dangerous message for funders. So when the scary thought that their last glossy Impact Report doesn't say anything meaningful about what they do crosses the overworked CEO's mind, and is followed by the thought that they don't know how to talk to their colleagues about the impact of their services, there's usually only one course of action – push it back under the carpet.

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The process needs to start with an internal honest appraisal of how they are currently doing. The team, from Board to frontline, can examine what type of young people they serve, what actually gets delivered to them, and what happens to them during the programme, at its end, and afterwards.

We've supported many charities through this process and they are frequently surprised by what they find. One discovered that only half of the young people enrolled matched the type of young people they believed – and told funders – they served. Another found that over a quarter dropped out during the programme, but did not show up in the outcomes data. The fact that the programme had failed these young people was not visible – and as a result was never reflected on, and never acted upon. Yet another found that while most young people got six weeks of support, a significant minority got much more. But no rationale could be found for who got a little and who got a lot – nor any simple way to seeing if this made any difference to outcomes.

This 'rolling up the carpets' empowers staff at all levels to share what they know but couldn't say, particularly those working at the frontline. One example came from an organisation working with young people in London: despite high caseloads for frontline staff, their success rates on classroom behaviour and educational progress looked great. But when staff were given a safe space, and the time, to talk to management they told them that around half the young people they enrolled didn't really need their help, and would get those great outcomes anyway, or with only minimal help.

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Management were shocked – and responded by tightening their enrolment criteria, and halving the frontline caseloads.

This information, and the performance anxiety it inevitably induces in an organisation of dedicated people, can be used by a leader to engage the whole organisation in making a series of crucial decisions:

Who will the organisation serve and who won't they serve? Or, to which young people will the organisation be accountable?

Who doesn't really need their help – as rewarding as they might be to work with?
And who is the organisation not fit to help – as hard as they might be to turn away?

What outcomes will the organisation commit to achieving for these young people?

Building a young person's self-confidence, or 'employability skills', or improving their behaviour at school are valuable, but are they enough to feel confident that you've had a significant effect on a young person facing significant challenges? If you've decided to serve young people from low-income backgrounds with a history of struggling at school then committing to GCSE success might represent a meaningful change, and improved future prospects. But if you're serving a group where poor mental health is their greatest challenge, then improvement on a reliable, validated scale, sustained over time, may be the right outcome for which to hold the organisation accountable. Finally, once an organisation know the long-term outcome it commits to achieving, what are the short-term outcomes, the markers of progress, which will tell them if a young person is on track?

What programme will be delivered?

Once an organisation has decided whom it serves, and to what end, the services offered must be critically examined. Is it credible that the programme currently delivered can get these young people to that outcome? How long must the intervention last, and how often must there be contact between a young person and their youth worker? What qualifications or experiences must

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that youth worker have? What's the content of the sessions and where are they delivered? The evidence base can be useful here – positively evaluated programmes can provide pointers on content, duration, and intensity. However, taking elements of a programme that has worked elsewhere for a similar group of young people is no guarantee of success. The codified programme is simply an organisation's best hypothesis of how it will make impact for individual young people. It will have to flex – both in real time to support individuals' progress, and as the organisation takes data and improves the programme in response to it. But from now on when a frontline worker delivers something different, they'll record it – so the leader and organisation can know about, and can learn from it.

How will continuous learning and improvement inform frontline delivery, and the design of the programme?

This is how you turn a decent hypothesis for making impact into a programme which can actually deliver outcomes for individuals. We describe it as performance management – not a top-down process to drive compliance, but a reciprocal relationship between the frontline and their managers to ensure no young person disappears from the programme or fails to make progress. It is based on the decisions above and tracks whether

- the organisation is enrolling the young people it committed to



- the organisation is delivering the programme it codified everywhere it operates
- young people are completing the programme
- young people are making progress during the programme (the short-term outcomes)
- young people are sustaining that outcome past the end of the programme (the long-term outcomes)

Frontline staff record the data for their 'caseload' of young people in real time, or as close to it as possible. They can see the progress of the young people for whom they're accountable at any point.

The tracking allows the creation of real-time feedback loops: it makes visible individual young people's progress towards outcomes, and allows reflection and discussion about what to do differently if they're off course. This is where frontline staff need their colleagues and managers to provide the support, challenge and resource that allows them to meet a young person's needs.

The journeys of individual young people add up to powerful information about how well the programme is serving those it wants to help. Changes to the programme can be made when leadership can see high levels of drop out at certain points, or a repeated failure to get young people to a certain short-term outcome.

Changes may also be made to the decision about who to serve – one charity found that it was enrolling some young people that they had agreed were 'too hard to help'. However, their progress throughout the programme was no worse than the other young people enrolled. As a result they widened their eligibility criteria.

A leader who takes accountability seriously doesn't want to fail any of the young people they serve. Performance management makes it possible to see failures before they happen – and when you can see this, you can take action to prevent failure.

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The performance management described above is possible because of the earlier conversations and decisions – about which young people they will serve, about what outcomes can be achieved for them, and what good progress towards these outcomes look like. A hypothesis cannot be tested – and a better one emerge – if it is never decided upon. A leader cannot be held accountable, or hold others accountable, if they never decide, and share, what they are to be accountable for. No organisation can credibly claim to be good at achieving all outcomes for all young people – they must put a stake in the ground declaring what they will try to be good at.

At the beginning of this essay, I said that raising sceptical messages to staff about the impact of the organisation can feel very risky to a leader. What should they do with the anxiety they provoke? The answer is to channel it into taking all staff – from most senior to most junior – through the process above. It will be a challenging and often emotional process, but ultimately a motivating one. Reaching organisational clarity and alignment on who you serve, how, and why, allows all staff to

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understand how their role supports this mission, and to challenge when they don't believe a role or activity is doing this.

Making these decisions is the first challenge for an impact-focussed leader. Turning this blueprint into reality is the second challenge, and one which takes much longer to complete, and with fewer quick wins.

It means winding down activities which are no longer part of the programme, integrating IT systems which can enable performance management, getting staff buy-in so they use it routinely, and changing job descriptions and schedules to build in the tactical and strategic performance management. These things all come with financial and time costs, and require relentless focus and attention from the CEO.

As already described, impact is far from the only thing a youth sector CEO has to worry about – or be held accountable for. A well-funded organisation which – at best – probably makes some impact for some of the young people it serves, some of the time has a great deal of work to do to improve. But at least it has the opportunity to do it. An organisation with all the tools for impact, but not the funding to deliver it, can't do anything at all. Any youth sector leader must drive a focus on sustainability.

But the overriding accountability, and the relentless focus, of a leader is to make their organisation as good as it can be. This may seem blindingly obvious, but this is not a focus that is currently recognised or rewarded. What is celebrated is fundraising success, expansion in locations or the numbers of 'lives touched', high-profile moments with politicians and celebrities, and emotive case studies.

Any individual organisation can decide to make a change to their own practice. But this challenging process is even more difficult in an external environment which doesn't recognise or support diligent focus on improving services,

and slowly building robust evidence.

Funders of all stripes, including policymakers and commissioners, are accountable for funding those things most proven to, or most likely to, create impact for those who need it – and they must be better held to account on this.

We should all be anxious about those young people born into poverty in the UK today, particularly those facing the additional challenges which can derail a life full of promise. And we should be dissatisfied with our attempts to change things for them. Leading an organisation that delivers services to young people isn't the only way to make a change. But those who take on that role must be supported – and challenged – to build accountability for outcomes for every young person into the DNA of their organisation. Only this can answer the anxious question: 'Are we making any difference?'

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About the Centre for Youth Impact

The Centre for Youth Impact is a community of organisations committed to working together to progress thinking and practice around evidence and impact measurement in work with young people.

We offer:

- A 'route in' to information, support and discussion in relation to evidence and impact
- Local and national events where you can collaborate with others, learn and build momentum
- Resources to support meaningful impact measurement
- An inclusive platform to promote debate and ideas

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