

Please, Tell Us What You're Trying to Accomplish!

By Seth A. Barad

Simply stated, your strategy is the result of your answers to two questions:

- a. What do you want to accomplish?
- b. How do you intend to accomplish it?

I want to focus this column on helping nonprofit and foundation executives get clearer in answering the first question: **What do you want to accomplish?**

More than thirteen years ago, colleagues at The Bridgespan Group published an article that urged nonprofits to clarify their intended impact as the first step in setting strategy. In the article, **Zeroing In on Impact** (SSIR Fall 2004), Susan Colby, Nan Stone and Paul Carttar emphasized the need for nonprofits to state clearly what they are trying to accomplish.

This task, clarifying a nonprofit's intended impact, is still extremely challenging for many organizations. Yet, sharing clearly and precisely what you want to accomplish is "Job #1" in articulating an organization's strategy.

In the 2004 article, the authors listed five questions to help this process:

- Who are our beneficiaries?
- What benefits do our programs create?
- How do we define success?
- What won't we do?
- What would make us obsolete?

I have found that those five questions can be distilled into one seminal question:

What will be different for whom and in what way as a result of our work over the next X years?

I refer to this as the seminal question because if an organization has not taken the time to answer this, very clearly and precisely, it is likely that they are somewhat adrift in their path to success. Employees, partners, board members, and funders, may not really understand exactly what change their work or support is intended produce.

Answering this one question can be easy for some organizations, but more often than not, those of us advising nonprofit leaders and foundation CEOs, find that our clients do not have a single guiding statement that is crystal clear about what success will look like in the future. – or at least not one as precise as I am recommending.

Here are four tips that could help guide the process of clarifying your impact:

1. **Push really hard to be precise.** Break it down into the component parts.
 - a. **The beneficiary.** If, for example, you work at a nonprofit focused on college readiness, who is the beneficiary?: Is it specifically boys or girls or LGBTQ youth? Is it specifically foster kids? Is it kids who have been underperforming in school? Is it kids with learning disabilities? Is it inner city youth of color? Is it middle school kids or high school kids? Think of all the ways you can be specific about which kids you are trying to get ready for college. Regardless of your field, be as specific as you can about who or what will be better off.
 - b. **The geography.** Is it the whole U.S.? Is it outside the U.S.? Is it one county or even one neighborhood? Think of the specificity that adding geography can bring to your statement. (*Note: in the 2004 article, Colby et. al. focused on the Harlem Children's Zone, perhaps one of the very best examples ever of clearly defining a geography based on specific New York City blocks*).
 - c. **The benefit.** Be very clear about **how** the beneficiaries are better off and in what way. Is it having the high school requirements to consider college? Is it actually being admitted to college? Do you care if it's two-year or four-year readiness? Is it really even "readiness?" Maybe it is the college graduation rate that you're shooting for, not just college readiness. Maybe it is the quality of life or work or type of jobs that the student will have in a few years. Be as specific about what you hope will be better as a result of your work.
 - d. **The timeframe.** Timeframes are useful to set expectations over 3 or 5 or 10 years. In can sometimes help to start with the timeframe, as in: "By 2020, ...". However, some changes require a longer timeframe or even a generational shift. In that case, you may wish to say: "Over the next 20 years..." or "The next generation of..."

If you are precise on these four dimensions, you might produce a statement that reads like this:

In the next five years, over one thousand previously homeless people in L.A. County will be employed in businesses that provide sufficient training and peer support to help those individuals achieve a living wage.

Could it be even clearer? Sure. But consider that when reading this, any stakeholder will know the who?, where?, what?, and when? of what you are trying to accomplish.

2. **Differentiate the means from the end.** Very often, in this process people focus on what they “do” (their work) rather than what that work is intended to change (their impact). I often flag this as one of the common pitfalls in this work for two reasons:
- a. The “doing” is fairly easy for organizations to articulate. “We train,” “we feed,” “we provide,” “we assist,” are all accurate descriptions of what the organization *does* for its beneficiaries. But that is not the end result that they seek. The work is the “means” to achieve the “end” impact. (One clue: If people are overly focused on the “doing,” ask the question: “To what end?”)
 - b. An example: Suppose you work for an organization that is training hospice workers. You might think that their impact statement would sound like: “By 2020, we will have recruited and trained 1,000 new hospice workers.” But is recruiting and training people the result they seek? More likely, they want to see “more people face the end of life with dignity and comfort.” More hospice workers are the means to that end. More dignity and comfort for more people at the end of their lives is the impact the organization seeks. (One clue: If the statement has lots of verbs, it may be too focused on the work, or the “doing” rather than the results of that work).
3. **Focus on language that reflects change.** Driving change is why nonprofits or foundations exist. As a result of your work, what will change? How will people or places be healthier, safer, less wasteful of resources, or better off financially?
- a. Be specific about the nature of the change as well as the degree of change. A nonprofit doing workforce development might say: “in the next five years, in the city of San Francisco, over 3,000 people will have achieved an average wage gain of \$3-4 per hour.”
 - b. Some times, an organization can’t quote a figure, but they can describe the change directionally. For example:
 - i. “By 2020, the drop out rate for Latino boys in San Rafael High School will be reduced.”
 - ii. “Over the next five years, more young women in San Mateo County will enter college intending to major in STEM fields.”
 - c. Be sure it’s the actual change you seek. An organization might aspire to “end homelessness in our city.” Sound good? After all, we all wish for zero homelessness. But, perhaps the organization is really working to reduce the length of time that people are homeless. Make sure that you tease out the true change that you seek, not just an easy headline.

Here’s the contrast: Imagine the enormous range of activities that would be required to truly “end homelessness.” But, if the goal is to get people off the streets, get them the help they need, and help them on a path forward, sooner, (i.e. that the duration of their homelessness is reduced), then imagine how much more focused the work can be.

4. **Avoid “The Jargon Trap”.** In **Zeroing In On Impact**, the authors took great pains to explain the difference between a mission statement (a broad description of the field you are in and what you care about) and an impact statement (a detailed statement in which the precise beneficiary or beneficiaries and all other aspects of the statement are spelled out in much greater specificity than most mission statements).

What I have been advocating here is the imperative to produce a statement that does the latter.

However, in real life, there is little consistency of language. There is no universal lexicon that assures that we all use Mission and Impact the same way or that clearly distinguishes “outcomes” from “impact” or “vision” from “goals.” Nonprofit executives are asked by funders, board members, consultants, evaluators, and others to produce a wide range of things: Mission Statements, Vision, Impact, Goals, Outcomes, Accomplishments, Objectives and more.

I call this the “jargon trap” because time is often wasted on labels – time that could be spent actually drafting the language that answers more clearly that seminal question:

What will be different for whom and in what way as a result of our work over the next X years?

I think of this as an “impact statement,” but I am delighted when I see a precise statement regardless of its label.

So please, produce an “impact statement,” or a list of your “expected outcomes,” or a description of your “vision” for the future.

Whatever you call it, if you’ve pushed hard for **precision**, if you’ve focused on **the end not the means**, and if you’ve described **what will change** as a result of your work, then you’ve clarified what you’re trying to accomplish.

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