

Champions for Social Good Podcast

Accelerating Performance for Social Good with Root Cause Founder Andrew Wolk

Jamie Serino: Hello, and welcome to the Champions for Social Good Podcast, the podcast for people who are devoted to social impact. I'm Jamie Serino, Director of Marketing for the MicroEdge Division of Blackbaud. I'm here today with Andrew Wolk of Root Cause. Welcome, Andrew.

Andrew Wolk: Thanks for having me, it's really great to be here.

Jamie Serino: Yeah, thanks for joining us today. Andrew, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself and about Root Cause?

Andrew Wolk: Sure. Well, I'm really excited to be here with MicroEdge. And so first, Root Cause, I founded it back in early 2004 so we're a little bit more than 12 years old, and we are a consulting firm. But our passion really is the use of data and evidence to generate higher performance to improve outcomes, grant-making, and most importantly, people's lives. We believe we are doing that in a way that's really going to accelerate change at a much greater scale. And I founded Root Cause quite a long time ago, both from a personal and a professional perspective.

Andrew Wolk: On the personal side, my grandfather was a councilman back in Pittsburgh for quite a long time. He was a really interesting man. He actually did a lot with philanthropy to build a lot of innovations in the city of Pittsburgh, everything from the Civic Light Opera to the first smog control effort, to the first School of Public Health. And my father was a long time Wall Street executive and, to some degree, myself and Root Cause are trying to work out the angst of those two worlds, the world of sort of public service combined with the world of business and results. And so, I really looked at the social change sector and was asking myself when I founded Root Cause how can we see whether we can get more out of the resources we're spending for change, and that really was the founding vision for Root Cause.

Jamie Serino: Right. Yeah, that's great. And it's really interesting to hear the background there because I think it could take a mind like yours with a background like yours to maybe try to marry those two things. Can you tell us a little bit more about founding Root Cause and what that was like? And what was some of the initial hurdles that you had to overcome?

Andrew Wolk: Yeah, I mean, there were really two sort of really seminal moments early on in my career right before I started Root Cause. The first was I had had a business on my own that I built and sold to move into this type of work. And I was on my way back to business school in the late 90s to get what at that time was hard to get, but a degree in social entrepreneurship. But instead I was marrying at Boston University's Business School a degree in entrepreneurship and a degree in non-profit management. And before I went to school, I volunteered at the Mayor's Voluntary Action Center in New York City under Giuliani. And my job was to talk with people about where they wanted to volunteer their time.

Andrew Wolk: So people would come in and they would say, "I like animals," and I would go to a database and I would print out exactly who it was that was looking for volunteers. And at that time they were getting a line item in the budget and my job was just to see how many people I had seen. And I had just sold a business and it was pretty rigorous to get a business in the kind of shape to sell. And so, I asked my boss if I could find out what happened to the people who had come in and what sort of results there were from the matches we made. And she said, "Sure, do whatever you want." And I found out that only about 3% of the last three months of people that came in had actually begun volunteering their time.

Andrew Wolk: And that didn't even count for that 3% whether they had a good experience, whether they added any value to the organization. And what really opened my eyes up about that was not just that data but

the fact that when I went to the person who I was working with, she said that they were being counted by the number of people they saw. And that really opened my eyes up to the real lack of measurement after being put to a real test to get my business in order. So I did enter business school with that story and a little bit of a bravado in front of me of this guy who had started and built and sold a business who had discovered this great new area of work that I could go and share my intelligence with.

Andrew Wolk: And so, my second story that really got me to sort of define the moment of how we try to approach our work was I went and started really offering my services for free, meaning my thinking, to any non-profit leader that was willing to talk to me with a bit of an attitude. And really, most of everyone with the exception of one person basically told me to get the hell out of here because I really was not speaking from a point of mission and purpose, which is really what drives all of us in this work. And so, it was I think those two stories of the first being why Root Cause would be so important to try to bring this more results oriented culture, but with how you had to understand the culture of the sector in order to get people to see why this might be helpful to them. And that really became the founding way in which we really try to pride ourselves in how we partner with organizations, whether they be non-profits, foundation, corporate grant makers and so on in the way we do our work.

Jamie Serino: Okay. Could you tell us a little bit more about how you do partner with organizations and the type of work that you do, and the ways that you help them?

Andrew Wolk: Yeah. I'm gonna talk about some work that we're literally doing right now, 'cause I think it's gonna probably be most relevant to this conversation. We've had a multi-year relationship with the Kellogg Foundation, and that work has been in two parts. And the first part was working with two parts of their element teams, they call them family and economic security, which has to do with how families can seek a living wage and build a level of assets to make stable for their household. It can help the young children in their house thrive. And we also worked with their educational learning area, which is their zero to eight focus of young children. And we helped them build the foundation for a performance measurement system. So we did everything from... The two foundations of it were building theories of action for them around what would the set of strategies that lead to both short, medium and long-term outcomes for some level of an intended impact.

Andrew Wolk: And then along that, we also looked much more closely at their strategies to look at what the existing evidence base that says those strategies actually work. The first part of our work is relatively similar to what other people do, but I think we're quite proud on our methodology. The second part of our work I think is quite unique, and we're seeing more and more of in general, which is to really pay more attention to the evidence out there of what we know. So if someone believes that there's particular strategies that would work with workforce development, like partnering with corporations to do workforce training programs. Well, is there any evidence that says that works? And if there is, can we apply the grant-making in a way that either builds that evidence base or complements it in some way?

Andrew Wolk: That work in of itself has now moved because the family and economics security area was happy with it. As Kellogg is now focused on, which we strongly believe, which is building the capacity of their grantees to be able to evaluate their work much more strongly. So we are now moving into a second phase building off that theory of action and evidence-based work to allow them to use our assessment tool, and then to focus on particular areas to strengthen their capacity around measurement and evaluation. So that's one specific area of work that we're pretty proud of.

Andrew Wolk: The second one I would talk about just briefly is related to Kellogg, but a client of Kellogg's that we're just starting out, which is with a group called Justine Petersen. And in this case, we are the evaluator for them. But the evaluator not in a classic... Maybe you know the terms, sort of random controlled style, but more paying more attention to the early-stage setup of the program so that we can, in a pilot program, really set it up in a way that it can allow us to really learn from it. Justine Petersen through funding from Kellogg is going to be testing out the hypothesis that parents who are returning citizens, meaning coming out of prison or have been out of prison for a few years, can they build a more sustainable economic base for themselves through either small business development and also access to credit to build up a more strong credit for themselves. And so

the notion is whether or not that might be a different strategy than what traditionally has been workforce development, like how to build their skills to get back in the workforce.

Andrew Wolk: But this is a new area. We had actually looked at the evidence base in the first part of Kellogg, and there's not a lot of work that's been done in this area with returning citizens. Certainly micro enterprise and small business development's done with a lot of different populations, but not this one. So we're spending a lot of time with Justine Petersen really trying to set up a program so that we can look at it over the next three years to really make sure that we're looking at what's working and how it might get tweaked. Measurement becomes a critical component to make sure those precious resources are really doing the best they can for this population.

Jamie Serino: Right. Yeah, we're reading a lot more about that approach that you're taking, setting up measurement at the very beginning, taking an evidence-based approach, taking a results-based approach. Can you tell me about the shift that you've seen since founding Root Cause to today in this sector towards this approach?

Andrew Wolk: Yeah. I think that the shift has happened in three sort of stages, I would say. I think stage one started 10 to 12 years ago when I think it was The United Way, but certainly other grant makers started asking their grantees to produce logic models or theories of change to give them a better understanding of what they saw as their money would go towards what results. And so I do think that that began the conversation around measurement. With that said, I don't know that there has been over that time sort of follow-through, and I can talk about that later, but that I think was a first sort of shift in the sector. I think the second shift really came with the recession, because the recession that was back in '09, 2010 really forced everyone in all sectors to ask how they can get more out of less. There was a real question people were asking themselves around, "Am I applying my resources in the best way that I can?" And that just forces one to ask the question around measurement in a way that when you're sort of fat and everything's going okay, there's less of a real necessary reason to do that.

Andrew Wolk: And then I think the third one that has sort of spilled over is I do think there are both within the sector and within government some pretty strong advocates for this. We're only one of many. At the federal level, the Obama administration has taken a very strong leadership role around this, whether it's with Pay for Success, Race to the Top, the Social Innovation Fund. In fact, it was just an evidence-based commission formed out of Congress that just got some appointees on it to continue to talk about evidence-based decision making and resource allocation.

Andrew Wolk: And then I think there are efforts outside of that, like Results for America and America Forward, and groups like that that are really advocating for this. So, you're seeing a much stronger effort outside of government as well that I think is really helping to see this shift happen.

Jamie Serino: So in your work with your clients, you have a measurement self-assessment. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Andrew Wolk: Yeah, and I think I wanna touch on that just to build off the shift in the sector. To say that we believe right now that measurement in and of itself needs to become the norm. And it needs to be as matter of fact, as the fundraising line item, the technology line item, the programmatic line item, which we just don't see. The FTE count is higher in every other area. We saw the need when we had a larger organizational assessment tool to really refine to have one measurement of self-assessment that we thought could be very helpful for both funders and organizations as a tool that they could see where they were capacity-wise, and provide them a score of some sort, and point them in the direction of tools and aspirations for what greater capacity could look like.

Andrew Wolk: The assessment tool itself has five modules to it. The first module is all around organizational culture and commitment. The second one is around theory of change. The third is evidence informed practice. The fourth module is the actual system, the measurement system that you build, and then the third is what we

call sort of equity lens. And that one might sound, "Well, why is that not integrated in maybe the other ones?" But we do believe in and we've been doing work in both the boys and men of color and particularly with a campaign for black male achievement is a key partner of ours around the life outcomes for black men and boys and boys of color, that one really has to in measurement consider the unique populations they're serving, whether it be based on gender, or race, or geography. And so we've really pulled that out as its own module because we think it's a critical component to building measurement capacity.

Jamie Serino: And so you walk your clients through each of these modules then as a way of just self-assessment in the very beginning of your relationship with them?

Andrew Wolk: Yeah, the self-assessment actually can be done with or without us. We don't have it online yet because we're actually redoing a part of our website so that people will be able to have it up there. But yeah, when we start out an engagement, we see the assessment as the core foundation if we are working with someone to say, "Okay, well here's where you're at. And let's pick a very limited number of things that we see on here that we should work on. You can't work on everything." And we do have our perspective on the ordering. If you don't really have the organizational commitment, it's gonna be pretty hard, we believe, to move forward with this work as an example. And so, based on the different results, we try to talk through with them, "What over the next 12 months might be the right places for us to work with you on, to strengthen capacity?" And then we say, "Let's then take it again and then we can get another baseline. Did the capacity improve over time and what might we be able to work on next?"

Jamie Serino: Can you go into a little more detail about module one and maybe module two?

Andrew Wolk: Yeah, I'm more than happy to. On the organizational commitment side, there are a couple of key things that we're looking for. The first really starts with what the senior level leadership and the board is in terms of prioritizing this. We do believe it really does start there. We have a couple of questions that get at that. We also then really look to see what the motivation is around why measurement is important to an organization to get a sense of what their answer is around that. And then at the infrastructure level, are there clearly assigned roles that gets to an FTE count? We're not unless we're looking for one, two, three people, but is anyone even in charge of this? There may be a leadership commitment to it, but that doesn't translate into any person who's in charge of it.

Andrew Wolk: A couple of the other things that we look for are whether or not there is a funding dedicated to this in any particular way. And probably most importantly to us beyond all of that is how they're using the data. We try to look at that. And we do have a particular point of view on that, that while the data can certainly be helpful for reporting out, which is often why it's used, report to a funder here, tell a good story there, we see as the most important way to be using that data is for their own improvement. And particular improvement to get better results for the people that they're trying to serve. And so that whole first module is truly trying to sort of setup where their organizational commitment really lies at this point in time and then spits out, as I said, a score around that.

Jamie Serino: And do you find that you're still running into boards that are a little resistant to this or you have maybe a layer of the organization that really wants to do something around measurement and maybe the board is a little resistant? Are you still finding some organizations out there like that? And if so, how do you normally work with them?

Andrew Wolk: Yeah. I think there's two parts to that. On one hand, were not finding a significant resistance as more as a capacity issue. And capacity both on the financial resources side and the time side. So I think there is a greater thirst than ever to do this work, but there's been a little bit of a false sense of "this is really important," but yet where is the resources to do it?

Jamie Serino: Right.

Andrew Wolk: With that said, the other... Where I would say the resistance does lie is it can make you a bit naked. We are in a bit of a culture in this sector of spending less time talking about our mistakes in fear that our funding may go away. And when one takes measurement seriously at this level, leading to hopefully a greater level of transparency with the people that are resourcing you, you are opening yourself up to a different type of scrutiny that you have to feel comfortable with. So I think there's a resistance there. What there isn't a resistance to is something that can help them see whether they can better serve who they're serving, but they're saying to themselves, lack of capacity, lack of resources and not knowing what will happen, they say to themselves, "Well, I may end up serving less people by doing what I really wanna do." And I think that's a sincere and I think an honest resistance.

Jamie Serino: Can you tell us a little bit more about module two?

Andrew Wolk: Yeah. Module two is a pretty standard for those in the social change sector. That's theory of change. I think that we try to be... And so we have a model that they fill out to see to what degree they understand why they're doing what they're doing, what activities they do lead to what outcomes. I think what I would say is the most important part of it is can they truly articulate their hypothesis? So to go back to the Justine Petersen example which is the client I said that we're working with right now with parents of returning citizens, the whole hypothesis that parents of returning citizens can use entrepreneurial education to gain self-employment and stronger credit that can lead to a stronger financial stability for them is the hypothesis. And so if you set that up, the theory of change then can allow you then to talk about the different activities in financial education, access to credit, small loans, and what are those short, medium and long-term outcomes, credit score improving over the first year, income improving over two or three-year period, general assets that they have after three years, things like that. And if you set that up very solidly from the start and have your measurement system in place, you really can start to see whether or not... And you may not hit some of those outcomes but then you can ask yourself why. And so that's why the theory of change module becomes so critical.

Jamie Serino: Okay. So overall, where do you see the sector heading when it comes to using an evidence-based approach, when it comes to results-based giving measurement? Where do you see all of this heading?

Andrew Wolk: Well, I think that there's sort of two things. One, I do think that now more than ever we are seeing particularly play out in the presidential election that the kind of work that is done by government programs, non-profit programs, philanthropic institutions is more important than ever. It's pretty clear that the conversations around education in our school system, that the challenges that millions of Americans face to make ends meet economically, I think, forces us as a sector to ask what role we play in that because there is so much work happening that is gonna have to contribute in some way, shape or form to these allocating the resources from a policy and programmatic perspective.

Andrew Wolk: So at the very highest level about where I see the work going, I think there is going to be just a sincere greater reliance on this part of the country and the programs doing this work in policies to deliver results. I think the good news is that because of that more and more people are thinking about this and the role that it can play, so I think it's becoming more and more of a priority. What I do think which sort of a bit repeats myself is I think the big elephant in the room is two-fold right now, and I think one is around the funding community itself and whether the funding community can provide the necessary resources to ensure the programs that they are supporting have the capacity to measure, learn, and deliver results. And I think without that, I think we're gonna be pretty stuck, quite frankly.

Andrew Wolk: And then I think on the flip side, the other elephant in the room is do we all have the necessary mindset that I think this is gonna take to become more results-oriented and be willing to open ourselves up to truly test is what we're doing really making a difference in the lives that we're trying to improve? I do think that... I think that it is really our obligation if you just go back to that Justine Petersen example and who they're hoping to serve and improve those lives, and those people and what they've been through and now are returning from the challenges they've faced in their lives from prison. One would hope that we are doing

everything we can to provide them not only the most sound program based on the evidence that we have and are really testing whether it works or not. We really owe it to them.

Andrew Wolk: And I don't see that as any different than a patient sitting on an operating table, that there's an obligation that they're using the best set of procedures to make sure that they get the best medical attention, sending one into battle in the military or buying a product and having a certain customer expectation around that it's gonna work or not. And I really think that we owe it to the people that we are trying to support to do everything we can to make sure we're starting from a good place, and really making sure that we are looking at whether or not we are having some sort of system in place to measure and improve.

Jamie Serino: Right, right. And so, you do speak about capacity a lot and we are reading a lot more about capacity building grants. Could you just talk a little bit about that and the need to continue to move in that direction and why it's important? And also, for an organization that does want to be more results-based and measurement-focused, how do they get over that lack of capacity if there is one?

Andrew Wolk: Yeah. I do want to herald Kellogg here, but it's early days. But I think they are really taking a strong stand on being willing to provide the resources for their grantees to strengthen our capacity here. Because as I said earlier, I don't know that organizations have the time. I think what we've seen as the bottleneck here that I think the Kellogg work might help break is it's not inexpensive to do. And so a one-on-one can be, perhaps, more expensive than the sector can probably find the resources for without a pretty substantial commitment from government, quite frankly. Which I think there is some action being taken there. So I think the approach that we're taking of assessing, self-assessing large numbers of organizations and finding how we work with them in groups, I think can hopefully find ourselves with a way to strengthen capacity and measure it over time to see if it's being strengthened in a more cost effective way that I think really could be an important part of the equation there.

Jamie Serino: Okay, alright great. Andrew, thanks a lot for joining us today. It's been great speaking with you about this.

Andrew Wolk: Yeah well, I can't thank you enough. And I just want to say that what I think is most exciting is that I'm always amazed. Our sector is rich with so many amazing people doing so many amazing things, all with their head and their heart in the right place. And I just truly believe after 12 years of this work that if our energy can just begin to take some of it into this area of measurement, I'm really convinced that we can accelerate change at a much faster pace than we've seen over the last 10 or 20 years. So I'm very positive around that and really thank MicroEdge for taking their leadership and beginning to have conversations like that and move into the outcomes-oriented space with your work.

Jamie Serino: Yeah well, thank you for that. That's an inspirational thought to end on. This concludes my interview with Andrew Wolk of Root Cause. To learn more about Root Cause, please go to rootcause.org and follow them on Twitter @rootcause. Make sure to subscribe to the Champions for Social Good Podcast so you don't miss an episode. And you can keep up with the conversation between episodes by following us on Twitter @jamieserino, @microedgellc, and @blackbaud. Thank you for listening.