Champions for Social Good Podcast

Social Impact & Impact Investing: A Conversation with Zecki Dossal, Senior Vice President at Gerson Lehram Group (GLG) Part Two

Jamie Serino: Hello and welcome to the Champions for Social Good Podcast, the podcast for people dedicated to social impact. This is part two of my interview with Andrew Wolk, founder and CEO of Root Cause. If you haven't listened to it yet, you can find part one of this interview on the same page as part two. Enjoy and thanks for listening.

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 then 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 then 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 then 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 part two of 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.