Results-Based Accountability
Evaluating program outcomes in a social services organisation in New Zealand

In times of financial constraint, social services organisations reliant on external funding from government, community and philanthropic sources are under increasing pressure to demonstrate to their stakeholders the difference they are making to their clients' lives. This can present a challenge for organisations, encouraging them to move beyond traditional methods of financial accountability. From collecting data on the level and extent of their services, they need to explore new accountability tools that best demonstrate client outcomes to stakeholders.

This article presents a case study of a two-year evaluation that explored the challenges for Presbyterian Support Northern, a large New Zealand social services organisation at the forefront of the sector, as they attempted to improve the quality of measurement and evaluation of organisational and service performance through the adoption of Results-Based Accountability, a client outcomes-focused approach.

The evaluation aimed to investigate the impact of Results-Based Accountability on the organisation's culture and performance, using a participatory action research mixed methods approach. Data from interviews and focus groups were used to look at changes in culture.

Senior management of Presbyterian Support Northern are committed to Results-Based Accountability and steady progress has been made in embedding it into the organisational culture. An ongoing challenge for the organisation is to help staff, in particular those on the front-line, to understand the dimension related to making a difference in client outcomes.

Implications for evaluation practice are based on the lessons learnt by the organisation in implementing Results-Based Accountability.
Introduction

Under the present constrained fiscal climate, non-government organisations (NGOs) in social human services in Western countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, have been expected to meet the increasing demands from government agencies and other funders for outcome measurement. Traditionally, NGOs had only to account for outputs and expenditures; the move to demonstrating that their programs are making a measurable difference in the lives of their clients has been challenging for many of them.

The search for a system enabling organisations to demonstrate the difference they are making for their clients has led some governments and other funders of social programs and organisations to adopt Results-Based Accountability (RBA). Schindl (1997) provides an early analysis of RBA as a management tool that can facilitate collaboration among human services/social services agencies, as a method for decentralising services, and as an innovative regulatory process. As the term implies, expected results/goals are clearly articulated, and data are regularly collected and reported to assess whether results have been achieved. RBA can be developed and used at different levels, for example nationally and regionally, and at community, agency or program levels—each with level contributing to achieving the results. Components of RBA systems include: a strategic planning process; goals and indicators (measures of progress); benchmarks or targets; and mechanisms for regular public reporting. In addition, reports should provide contextual information to enable correct interpretation of data.

Friedman (2005) promotes the use of RBA for public and private sector agencies and communities. He describes RBA, also known in Australia and the United Kingdom as Outcomes-Based Accountability (OBA), as a framework that provides a step-by-step method to turn data into action. It starts with the ends and works backwards step-by-step to the means. For communities, the ends are aspects of wellbeing for the community, such as children being safe, for programs and services, the ends are clients being better off when the service works as it should.

RBA has two types of accountability: population accountability and performance accountability. Friedman (2005) uses the terms ‘results’ and ‘outcomes’ interchangeably. Population results/outcome involves wellbeing for families, children and communities in a geographical area where a group of partners, such as central government, local government agencies and organisations, take responsibility. For example, a population result/outcome could be ‘all residents of the Auckland Region are safe’ and indicators (measures of how well the desired population result is being achieved) could be the violent crime rate and proportion of residents who feel safe. Performance accountability focuses on how an individual agency, organisation, program or system achieves results/outcomes. For example, a private social housing provider can show how effectively it has been in assisting its clients into housing and retaining their tenancies. A key feature of Friedman’s RBA approach is linking population and performance accountabilities together, so that one can see how client outcomes, delivered by agencies, organisations, programs and services contribute to the quality of life results for the whole population. For example, a social housing provider contributes to ‘all people in New Zealand are housed appropriately’, a quality of life measure for a population. Friedman argues that no single agency, program or system can be expected to achieve a wellbeing result on its own. This notion fits well with ‘whole of government policies’ (Lec 2007) and government super ministries (combining a number of previously independent ministries into one large ministry for efficiency and effectiveness) created by the New Zealand Government to encourage cross-agency and cross-sector cooperation in achieving the government’s social and fiscal goals.

Friedman (2005) contends that a program works well when it is a change agent, providing services that lead to changes in the wellbeing of clients. RBA focuses more on how well a particular service performed and if anyone is better off as a result of the service, rather than on traditionally reported results such as how many clients were served or how many dollars were spent. The first purpose of performance accountability is to improve performance. The second purpose is to demonstrate to funders, for example, that the program is working.

Friedman’s (2005) Results-Based Accountability framework has been widely adopted internationally. By 2005, at an OECD World Forum on ‘Statistics, Knowledge and Policy’, Friedman noted that RBA has been successfully implemented in countries across the globe including Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Moldova, Chile, Norway, the United Kingdom, Ireland and the USA. He argues that RBA can provide OECD countries with a common way of working across geographic boundaries, across service systems and across cultures to make a difference in the lives of their citizens. Where data has been seen as the domain of specialists, RBA shows that data is something ‘everyone can understand’ (Friedman 2005a, p. 3). Friedman suggests that there is a large and growing international community of RBA/UIA practitioners, over 30,000 and that increasing resources and organisational support are available for RBA. In addition to support for practitioners, Friedman has also encouraged funders to use RBA principles in contracting (Friedman 2005a).

As in many other countries, New Zealand Government ministries and their agencies funding social service organisations require providers to demonstrate progress towards achieving outcomes for.
their clients. Government agencies indicate that there are a number of outcome-based methods that could be used by organisations for example, outcomes logic models, and “Easy Outcomes” (Daignan 2012), RBA and others. Friedman has visited New Zealand on a number of occasions over the past decade and has significantly influenced New Zealand Government ministries’ choice of method. The Ministry of Social Development aimed to have all its contract expectations with providers expressed in terms of client outcomes by 2010 (MSD 2012). They favour the RBA model because it is easy to use, providing a clear language for assessing outcomes, indicators and performance measures. The RBA approach also encourages cooperation by challenging organisations to think about: who they can work with and how together they can achieve outcomes for clients. In late 2012, the Ministry of Social Development developed a comprehensive implementation guide to Friedman’s RBA framework (Ryan & Shee 2012).

**Presbyterian Support Northern: A case study of the implementation of RBA**

We present here a case study of how Friedman’s RBA framework has been implemented by Presbyterian Support Northern (PSN), a large New Zealand social services organisation that is committed to placing clients at the centre of evaluating and improving service quality and outcomes. PSN, a Christian-based organisation founded in the 1880s, enacts its vision of social transformation through: (1) home support services for the elderly, supporting people with disabilities to live independently; and supporting people with injuries and long-term impairments to regain function or successfully manage their lives; (2) social work, counselling and educational programs for at-risk children, young people and their families; (3) budget services for those in financial hardship; and (4) community initiatives, particularly through working with others, such as Presbyterian Parishes, Presbyterian Schools and other NGOs. PSN provides services in the upper North Island, with its headquarters in Auckland.

**Background to the implementation of RBA**

Dr Rod Watts became the Chief Executive of PSN in 2006. He noted at that time the organisation had a lack of mechanisms to determine how and to what extent services were helping the clients, even though at the time the organisation service culture was described as client centred. Evaluation of services primarily consisted of monitoring and supporting the use of practice guidelines, ad hoc client surveys and a quality audit framework to help manage risk, respond to complaints and meet contract requirements. Apart from quite detailed financial information, there was limited capability to measure service performance, particularly from a client perspective.

Options for a service performance measurement framework suited to the not-for-profit sector and providing a good fit for the organisation's values and culture were explored. After a Stacey Barr workshop (Barr 2007), the organisation adopted a Result Mapping Model in 2006. This four-tier cascade results model linked: (1) vision and mission statement results (inner core); (2) divisional results; (3) process results; and (4) stakeholder results/outcomes (outer core); and could be applied right across the organisation. The model met with a positive response by the majority of staff, who supported the clear intent to get better at knowing “how we are going” by improving the usefulness of information from clients about experience of the services provided and gains from the services. The organisation found the model complex to use, so when the more simplified RBA system was introduced to them by the Chief Executive as a client-focused performance measurement framework for the future, the PSN Board, in particular, welcomed this change.

The Chief Executive, during a visit to the Ministry of Social Development in Wellington in 2008, learned that it was looking at implementing Friedman’s RBA outcomes model for contracting with service providers. Having already adopted a results-mapping model, PSN was well positioned to transition to RBA and engaged an independent research company to help out. The Chief Executive considers this to have been one of the most critical decisions in achieving the progress PSN has made over the past five years. The research company established a RBA evaluation methodology in conjunction with PSN’s clients, and their independence and expertise gave PSN the confidence to implement RBA. The Chief Executive realised that even though they were unlikely to get RBA entirely right at first, beginning to implement the six-monthly client surveys, based on a sampling approach, would not only provide a much better means of service evaluation and improvement, but would bring a number of other benefits, such as better reporting to funders on client outcomes.

**Evaluation aims**

In 2010 PSN commissioned Impact Research NZ to evaluate its use of the RBA system and its impact on organisational culture and performance. The two-year time frame of the evaluation provided a unique research opportunity to track the shifts in culture and performance over time as a result of organisational commitments to RBA.

The evaluator had two overarching objectives, namely:

- To determine what changes have occurred for the organisational culture of PSN as a result of RBA
- To determine what changes have occurred for the organisation and service performance of PSN as a result of RBA
Methodology
We utilised a mixed-methods approach (Greene 2007, Remenberger, Rao & Woolcock 2010) to data collection. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through a review of relevant literature and reports, interviews and focus groups that provided snapshots of organisational change and rich detail on the reflections and experiences of staff. PSN communications (e.g., intranet, newsletters and messaging) were also considered as a key data source for tracking changes in the way that RBA and organisational culture and performance are articulated. We drew on the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Byrdon-Miller, Greenwood & Maguire 2003) to inform the research approach and ensure that meaningful engagements with staff were developed and maintained throughout. Rather than imposing a research plan and process, PAR invites participants to help define the goals and processes for the evaluation. We also asked participants to articulate how they understood RBA, how they viewed organisational culture and performance, and how they understood the links between RBA and organisational change. Staff participation throughout the evaluation not only helped to gain shared commitment for the evaluation, but also provided opportunities for an action/reflection cycle aimed at developing deeper organisational understanding of the impact of RBA. Periodic feedback between the researchers, stakeholders and participants enabled emerging ideas to be explored and incorporated into the research rather than simply contained within a final report.

We used a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 2003, Wodak 2005) two-dimensional framework for analysing the extent to which RBA culture is enacted and inscribed at PSN. We analysed discursive practices and beliefs embedded in written material produced by PSN, including various types of communication used by PSN when referring to RBA (i.e., the PSN intranet, CEO Updates, newsletter Northern Notes, aimed at donors, volunteers and other supporters of PSN, and contract reports). We also carried out textual analysis of interviews and focus group transcripts.

The analysis of RBA-related communication within PSN emphasised perspective, that is, how what is being said may be interpreted differently by those who say it and those who are hearing it. We compared PSN’s RBA-related communiques and staff impressions of RBA’s function within PSN by conducting interviews and focus groups with the PSN Leadership Team, Services Managers and front-line staff. Thematic analysis of transcripts of these interviews and focus groups allowed us to compare the intended message with the received message.

We examined how RBA-related data is shared by PSN. The sharing of data took many forms, including feedback of RBA reports to front-line staff, internal communications regarding RBA, and communications with external bodies. We explored the degree to which RBA has been adopted by PSN, how successfully it has been utilised and how effective it has been at enabling outcome-driven change for PSN’s services.

Phases of the evaluation
The evaluation was conducted over a two-year period, concluding in July 2011, which gave sufficient time for the impact of changes through the implementation of RBA to become evident. We undertook two sets of data collection approximately 12 months apart. The research design consisted of four bread phases:

- **Phase 1**: Consultation and development (August – December 2010)
- **Phase 2**: Initial data collection and interim report (July 2011)
- **Phase 3**: Subsequent data collection (2012)
- **Phase 4**: Final analysis and report preparation (July 2012)

**Phase 1: Initial consultation workshops**
The workshop with senior staff clarified understanding of the project parameters, desired results and overall approach (means as well as ends). Information from this workshop was recorded and provided some baseline qualitative data around how senior staff understood the likely impact of RBA on organisational performance and culture. This initial workshop set the tone for the collaborative working relationship and agreed evaluation plan. Further consultation took place with managers of particular services through workshops and presentations, allowing for discussions to fine-tune the research design, including the best way to involve service staff in the project.

**Phases 2 and 3: Data collection and analysis**
We reviewed current literature on RBA, as well as PSN reports generated by the RBA processes and information about the PSN evaluation systems in place prior to the introduction of RBA.

Thematic analysis of responses to open-ended staff survey questions, key stakeholder and staff interviews and focus groups were the main data sources for the interim report on Phase 1 and subsequent data collection in Phase 3.

In Phase 2, 10 interviews were conducted with key senior staff to explore the impact of RBA on each service and more broadly for PSN. In addition, nine focus groups of four to seven people were conducted with a cross-section of staff from different services to explore how they were experiencing the implementation of RBA.

In Phase 3, 14 interviews were conducted with key senior staff and a focus group with the PSN Board. Questions covered the following topics: changes to
RBA instruments and processes over the year, before and after differences for clients, changes to services or practice, how RBA has informed their work, their views on how well RBA works in their service, improvements they would like, and how they saw the future of RBA at PSN in their particular service.

In Phase 3, nine focus groups of four to seven participants were conducted with a cross-section of staff from different services. Focus group discussions covered the following topics: team use of RBA; PSN's use of RBA; data collection and the client survey; how RBA is used, changes to RBA over the last year; the way RBA results have informed the service and the way staff work with clients; and how staff can encourage greater staff engagement with RBA.

Findings

Phase 2 interim report

The PSN Board, Chief Executive and senior management team all agreed that PSN's commitment to outcome evaluation represents a major strategic direction for the organisation. To date, a significant investment has been made in the conceptualisation, development and implementation of RBA systems. In the New Zealand social services sector, PSN is seen as being at the forefront of the development of RBA. The Chief Executive and senior management provide a crucial leadership role in implementing RBA in the organisation. The Chief Executive promotes RBA internally to staff members through newsletters and visits to regions. In addition, he uses the results of RBA to communicate with funders about the difference RBA is making to the lives of its clients.

Phase 2 of the evaluation showed that some service managers and front-line workers lacked information and understanding of RBA processes and were sceptical of the overall approach; however, they did comply with RBA survey requirements. These are features of a partially "enacted" culture but not an internalised or embedded one. The evaluation also revealed that the philosophy and purpose of RBA was not well understood by the majority of the organisation's staff. RBA information had been cascaded via the service managers to service managers to front-line workers. While this approach aimed to encourage organisational understanding and staff acceptance, we found variation and, in some cases, lack of staff knowledge about RBA. The operation of RBA had become mere a matter of compliance than informed action for some staff.

Not all service managers demonstrated a clear understanding of the benefits of RBA or understood how questionnaires were designed, or how they should interpret and use results. Several service managers simply did not believe in the RBA surveys and consequently did not use the results to improve their services in areas where client outcomes were lower than expected.

Phase 3 findings

Examining PSN's internal communication provided insight into the development of employees' knowledge, understanding, use of, and engagement with RBA. Ongoing communication primarily focused on RBA as helping PSN to meet funder requirements and as a credible and robust tool. There has been little communication focusing on RBA as representing a real shift in measuring client outcomes. As a result of reviewing PSN's communications, we suggested more opportunity to share with staff information about RBA purposes, processes and results.

We found that the greater the number of RBA survey rounds Service Managers and front-line staff had been involved in, the more confident they were to critique the RBA implementation processes, identify process improvements and articulate the benefits of RBA. Generally, service managers demonstrated a greater understanding of RBA and saw more relevance of it to their work and outcomes for clients than front-line staff. Overall, there had been a shift in staff understanding of RBA processes and outcomes from the interim report to the final report, with more service managers and front-line staff speaking positively about the benefits of RBA to the organisation and to its clients.

We found competing discourses, depending on an employee's position in PSN, with senior Auckland managers being the most positive about its implementation and its organisational and client benefits, compared with the regions where there were mixed responses to the implementation and perceived benefits. For example, a senior manager stated: 'It is [RBA] a really valuable tool ... because of its validity, we are proud of it.' Another senior manager stated: 'I think it enhances our profile and reputation out there.' Senior managers believe RBA helps the organisation to effectively monitor and plan, with one stating that 'the opportunity to monitor [service client response] trends and to respond to them has been one of the key differences between now and before RBA'.

While many service managers and staff agreed with these sentiments, there were some dissenting voices. For example, one service manager stated: 'It would be more engaged with RBA if it wasn't such a deficit focus on getting things better and better all the time, instead of saying that's good.' Another service manager stated that 'It [RBA] not even on our agenda at management meetings to know whether service or practice has changed as a result of RBA'.

There were also competing discourses on the use of RBA. A year after the interim report more service managers reported using RBA results to enhance their practice and service. One manager stated: 'We get our results twice a year ... we use them to formulate an action plan to improve service to clients ... we use the results to motivate our staff ... they enjoy the feedback, so we find it a great way to celebrate success as well.'
However, another service manager said, ‘I think that the managers have got much bigger things to be concerned about than the results of RBA’. Front-line staff typically reported reading RBA reports in team meetings and discussing how to improve services. This represented a shift in practice since the interim report. Some staff, however, believed that discussions they had participated in on the RBA report findings had not resulted in the desired service or system improvements as they had suggested.

The evaluation answered operational issues to be expected when introducing a new system into a large organisation. Issues raised by staff were mostly around wording of client survey questions, scheduling of surveys, increase in staff workload associated with survey administration, help with interpreting the data in reports and with turning results into action plans. Continuing to be responsive to staff concerns will help the organisation to improve greater staff acceptance for RBA.

Evidence from the evaluation established that changes have occurred within the organisation as a result of RBA. We see signs of RBA becoming more internalised and embedded in the culture of the organisation; for example, sites have begun to celebrate successful RBA results by having a morning tea and have used this occasion as an opportunity to motivate their staff to achieve even better results for their clients. Since the interim report we note that more PSN services use RBA results to develop and implement action plans to improve their practices and client services. A number of these services have looked at methods for increasing their RBA survey rates of return; for example, some Family Works’ Service Centres used university Social Work students to hand deliver and collect surveys and this increased their rate of return.

One of the most significant changes for the organisation since implementing RBA has been in how it reports to funders on client outcomes. RBA outcomes have been used to enhance the credibility and reputation of PSN with their donor community, to attract more funding, and in the wider social services sector. The Chief Executive has been invited on numerous occasions to share PSN’s experience in implementing RBA with many groups in the social services sector in New Zealand, enabling others to learn from their experience and, potentially, to become involved in the RBA framework.

PSN’s use of RBA has demonstrated its desire to achieve positive outcomes for its clients as well as its ability to adapt well to a changing competitive funding environment. The evaluation showed that PSN had progressed to the point where the organisation was well placed to continue with its plans to de-centralise more RBA management to the service manager level and to encourage further change and innovation in the organisation.

Lessons learnt by PSN

Following on from the completion of the RBA evaluation report by the independent evaluators, the Chief Executive wrote a paper for the organisation on ‘Results-Based Accountability at PSN’. This provides summary information and an explanation of Results-Based Accountability at PSN including the framework and tools that are in place to encourage feedback from clients remains central to the evaluation of service quality and outcomes. It outlines PSN’s journey with RBA, presents a summary of results so far, evaluates its implementation, and highlights improvements underway and further developments planned.

The Chief Executive has found Impact Research NZ’s evaluation helpful. It has confirmed the lessons learnt by PSN in implementation. He stated that:

‘The importance of a continued focus on RBA application that required informed accessible senior staff members, with adequate provision made regarding staff workload, had been a key lesson.

The importance of continued communication with staff, that takes account of turnover and fluctuations in engagement with the RBA process, has been another lesson.’

Responsibility for continued use of RBA has been incorporated into the role profile of a senior member of staff, who chairs the newly established organisation-wide RBA Steering Group. A recent six-month pause by the organisation has allowed time to review developments since the initial implementation and reflections on how to ensure the maximum benefit from client feedback.

PSN prioritises ongoing engagement with Māori as part of their commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi (1840), which is a foundation agreement between Māori and the Crown in New Zealand. As part of this commitment, PSN aims to strengthen its current use of RBA to evaluate the difference the organisation is making for the significant numbers of Māori clients and stakeholders.

Conclusion

Our methodology allowed us to explore the ways in which RBA has been a change agent for service improvement and for demonstrating desired client outcomes at PSN. We have examined whether RBA has been successfully enacted and inculcated throughout the organisation, in terms of staff believing in and valuing the RBA concept and its associated practices designed to improve service performance and outcomes for clients. From the interim report to the final report we found more staff engagement with RBA processes, and more accounts of them acting on RBA reports to improve client outcomes. Inculcation is evidenced by how well staff understand and support the philosophy and purpose of RBA in PSN, and although progress has been made we see this as still a work in progress.
especially with front-line staff. PHN’s commitment to continuous improvement of its RBA processes should lead to achieving better outcomes for its clients.

Achieving better results in government social service provision is essential for New Zealand’s social and economic wellbeing and by adopting RBA, government ministries appear more readily able to link population and performance accountability. RBA brings a focus on how client outcomes delivered by agencies, organisations, programs and service systems contribute to quality of life results for the whole population of New Zealand. RBA was favoured by some ministries over other types of outcome reporting because it was seen as easy to use, providing a clear and common language for assessing outcomes, indicators and performance measures. From our evaluation it is clear that organisations such as PSW may require significant investment to implement RBA and ongoing organisational commitment once implemented.

Government ministries such as Ministry of Social Development actively encourage the development of RBA with social service providers by contracting for outcomes. The Ministry has developed RBA guidelines and resources in consultation with the social services providers to support sector-wide RBA development; however, the cost of implementing and sustaining RBA is currently borne by the social service provider. There are competing demands and priorities on the limited funding that social service providers receive; therefore, it may be that some organisations will struggle to find the funding to implement and sustain RBA.

Note

1 Family Works provides counselling and social work services and family-directed programs for children, young people, parents/caregivers and families in centres across New Zealand.

References


Friedman, M 2003, ‘Trying hard is not good enough: how to produce measurable improvements for customers and communities’, Trafford, Victoria, BC, Canada.


