

Implementing Social Sustainability Solutions

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EMS 588

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Degree and Year: Masters in Sustainability Leadership, 2018
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I. Abstract

Implementing Social Sustainability solutions requires leaders to utilize a unique set of skills to engage stakeholders, connect with audiences, and drive a project to implementation and ultimately results. Taking careful consideration for the social system that currently exists leaders must map their project and harness their individual narrative to connect fragmented pieces. The power of clearly articulated purpose coupled with passion are key drivers for implementing change. Systems thinking, and empathy help a leader integrate a project within the organization confines they are trying to work. This paper examines the design, implementation, and leadership of addressing social inequity through baby boxes.

II. Sustainability Challenge and Project Introduction

What is Social Sustainability?

When people think of the word “sustainability” the environmental aspect of sustainability is often the only lens applied. Understanding the nuance of what social sustainability is gives vital context for this project. According to the Western Australia Council of Social Services (WACOSS): "Social sustainability occurs when the formal and informal processes; systems; structures; and relationships actively support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and livable communities. Socially sustainable communities are equitable, diverse, connected and democratic and provide a good quality of life." (Vallance, Perkins, & Dixon, 2011) Addressing gaps in the equity and quality of life within my own community drew me to the desire to connect new parents with resources-- both physical and educational-- that could help create a more sustainable community.

When looking at solving a social sustainability issue, examining the current “processes, systems, structures and relationships” is a critical step for adoption by the target audience. Intervening in social context requires a thoughtful approach that is delicate to the current dynamic that has been ingrained through years, perhaps decades, of repetition. Connecting with your target audience requires empathy, understanding, and research. The details of each social dynamic will vary, but the path and principles discussed in this paper should provide insight to help implement a social program with your community.

Project Baby Box My Summary

Baby Box My focuses on addressing one such social sustainability issue. My is a wealthy county north of San Francisco, and while the average household income far exceeds the national average, pockets of My seem insulated from boom the rest of the county has experienced, therefore, creating dramatic inequity. This inequity is most present in an area known as “The Canal”. The Canal is populated with recent immigrants. Language barriers,

income inequality, and a polarizing political environment prevent this community from accessing much of the services within very close proximity. Implementing a baby box program within the already existing community infrastructure allows the unique opportunity to ensure that safe sleeping solutions are accessible regardless of socioeconomic status as well as provide an opportunity for education and integration into the larger community's services. Understanding how this project was lead, researched, positioned and implemented will provide others insight into starting a similar program within their community.

III. Leading a Social Sustainability Project

Mapping the Project

Like other sustainability focused issues, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands of ways to effect change within a community. Influencing maternal health and infant care is challenging. There are systems currently in place, but the gaps in why that system is not working is unique and must be treated as such (Lehmann, 2015). Working in the very beginning to understand what change you are trying to address will keep your project focused. Early in the project a great deal of effort was made to listen to others within the community were feeling. The community benefits from wonderful engagement about environmental sustainability, but the income inequality in increasing affluent market continues to create rifts that need to be addressed. I knew what I was passionate about and spent my early days discussing challenges, needs, areas of focus that I could influence within my community. Passion for a project cannot and should not be undervalued. The road of change is a long one and requires deep reserves to draw upon when adversity arises.

One such way to memorialize your passion is drafting a Vision, Mission and Strategic Principles that will help continue to keep the project focused. These three items also build a consistent communication message for when you are influencing stakeholders, building a team, seeking funding, or reaching your target audience. This project experienced several iterations of

these items, but each change was a deliberate and mindful shift to further clarify precisely what the project was aiming to accomplish.

Vision:

To ensure that families in My County have access the resources they need to provide a safe sleeping space for their baby and guidance to help them as they grow. To engage new families from the very beginning of their child's life and offer support and solutions to help them thrive. To work in conjunction with other organizations in our community to ensure the widest possible coverage and access to resources for new families.

Mission:

Ensure that all families in My County, especially those in low income areas, have a safe sleeping space for their children. Engage with expectant families to help ease the transition to parenthood through education.

Strategic Principles:

- Make sure that all families have a safe sleeping space for baby when the mom is 36 weeks pregnant.
- Have ever new recipient of a baby box receive training on how to use the baby box, contents, and create a safe sleeping area.
- Create a network of new mothers at Canal Alliance where they can share information and seek advice from professionals.
- Have regular check-ins with families and work with the organization to introduce other programs.

Finding your passion

For me this was simple. At the start of the project I was newly pregnant and learning about the journey that was in front of me as a new mother. Frustrated by the concept that my daughter and a child born in the very same hospital who lives down the street from us are destined for two very different lives is unjust and unacceptable. The inequities of my community became remarkably evident from the time of prenatal engagement and care. However, I struggled with how to address this gigantic issue. I continued to research, listen, and gather information about what other communities had done to address maternal health, parental leave, infant mortality, early childhood education, immigrant communities, childhood obesity, and educational gaps. This information gathering was a sort of brainstorming project for which one (or many) of these possible puzzle pieces may work in the social construct I was trying to work in. At the core of this discovery was a desire to find an efficient solution that could address some of the uncovered issues. This process also leads me to currently seeing what was already existing within my community and perhaps underutilized.

Leading with Story

Keeping the end goal of connecting new parents to resources and educational opportunities drove me to the solution of baby boxes. The next most obvious hurdle for the project was answering the question on why this project matters and why I was fit to lead this to project through implementation. I needed to be able to easily answer those questions and the best way that I could do so was to embrace my own narrative. As Park Howell, professor and founder of The Business of Storytelling, reiterated constantly: our own personal story was the most compelling tool we had. So, using my personal experience as a new mother further fueled my passion and gave me a spectacular narrative to connect to my audience:

As a new mother I would wake up in the middle night to gently place my hand on my daughter's chest to feel her breathe. I wouldn't be able to sleep until I could feel her

steady inhale and exhale. In the throes of the early days of my own postpartum recovery, the overwhelming love I had for my daughter dictated this bizarre and exhausting ritual because above all else I wanted to know she was safe and thriving. I felt incredibly lucky that I had the support and resources available to be able to keep her near me in a bassinet. Not only did this simple solution provide me ease in bonding with my daughter, but also with comfort in being able to be responsive to her needs in a split second.

One of the final steps that most parents experience before leaving the hospital is the car seat check. Before families are discharged with this brand-new infant, we recognize that the safety of this child needs to extend beyond the hospital walls. But what happens after a baby arrives home? Ensuring that infants have a safe sleeping area should be treated with the same care as that very first car ride. Baby boxes can provide this safe sleep area. They have been used throughout the world as a cheap and effective way to reduce the infant mortality rate. Implementing a baby box program in our county ensures that all families have access to a safe sleeping solution and connects them to vital resources to continue to raise their family here in My.

My role in leading this project required me to understand my strengths as a leader and challenged me to position myself differently to connect with various stakeholders. For me, discussing my personal experience was the most challenging, but I found that leading with narrative over facts was one of my greatest assets. Keeping the social issue, I was looking address as the focus of my work offered a variety of different solutions. Having robust market research was critical for properly positioning my work for the greatest impact.

IV. Positioning the Project

Market research

Unpacking the layers of social complexities was the most challenging part of the project. While there were many different solutions that have been used in other communities, the project required deep consideration for the system that it was being implemented in here. Mapping the

system, understanding my target audience, and investigating solutions were critical design functions for this project. This work can only be done by spending time within the organizations and systems you are looking to integrate with. Listening, asking meaningful questions, and ultimately accepting the constraints of the existing systems will allow you to properly build a solution. I found that while my solution was not necessarily unique, the positioning of how baby boxes would work to address the social gap in my community was. Connecting the dots for stakeholders was the most critical role I fulfilled. My personal narrative was vital for displaying my passion and connecting to my audience but having the facts of issues that surrounded my topic were vital to getting key stakeholders involved.

Connecting the dots of baby boxes to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) was one hurdle. SIDS is the number one cause of infant mortality in the United States, and low-income families are three times more likely to suffer a SIDS tragedy compared to those in higher income groups. Parent education and safe sleeping conditions have been shown to dramatically reduce SIDS. Access to resources is a simple intervention that has proven to work. SIDS risk is highest in the first six months of a child's life—when parents are most exhausted and least equipped to make safe sleeping choices. Therefore, showing other cases where parents have a safe sleeping solution for their baby by providing a baby box is a meaningful and lifesaving asset.

The history of similar programs helped me highlight the long track record of baby boxes. Countries, States, and specific communities have been using this simple intervention to address infant mortality and equity for decades. Baby boxes originated in Finland in 1937 as a government intervention to reduce the countries infant mortality rate and “give all children a more equal start to life.” Every pregnant woman in Finland was given a baby box by the government at the start of her second trimester. As a result, today, Finland has one of the lowest infant mortality rates in the world. Similar programs have been rolled out in other countries and in the United States in in New Jersey, San Francisco, and at Temple University. Each of these programs has shown that baby boxes and parent education save lives. While the programs all offer a free a baby box, the first two have a government backing and the Temple program has been coordinated through the local hospital and non-profits. Regardless of how the program is

setup, reaching the target audience was key. For this program I need to ensure the best possible connection to the target audience, so I set out to find a partner with the community I was trying to reach.

Building a team.

When first considering the use of the team, I struggled with the formal feeling of the burden of a team managed project. Envisioning pointless meetings and whiteboards with timelines made this project seem needlessly rigid. I adopted a much leaner approach and considered my team the partners I utilized in various functions. This meant individuals and organizations that could help propel my project forward. Utilizing outside advisors and influencers that filled a very particular role within the scope of my project. The biggest challenge to this was managing the isolated nature of each of these relationships and weaving them together for the desired outcome. The approach required intrapersonal skills along with a clear understanding of the timelines and input needed from each person or organization. The intrapersonal skills of asking favors to otherwise busy professionals required skill. Clarifying exactly what each person or organization needed to do and keeping the ask simple enough that would encourage buy-in. Challenging these requests to utilize the “S.M.A.R.T.” framework forced me to keep things specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused, and time-bound.

Ultimately, the size and scale of a sustainability project requires outside expertise and connections beyond what any one person can possibly embody. I found that my personal leadership style worked best when running a project lean. I enjoyed being involved in all aspects of the project, but also delegated work to people with whom I had built solid and lasting relationships.

Reaching the target audience.

The target audience for this project are new, immigrant, low-income mothers. There are currently organizations in place within my community that also target this key demographic.

When researching similar healthcare-oriented programs, the themes of flexibility and adaptation to nuanced needs of the community was evident (Suter, Oelke, Adair, & Armitage, 2009).

Recognizing one of my biggest challenges was gaining trust, I sought out a partner that already had that rapport within my target audience. Therefore, the simplest easiest approach for access to my target audience was aligning with one of those organizations and utilizing their infrastructure to distribute boxes.

My role was now integrating the program within the structure of the organization and demonstrating how and why a program like this was critical to their mission. This organization currently offers similarly designed programs like transportation to prenatal care for expectant mothers and “early start” programs that target at preschool age children. However, in the research phase portion of this project it was uncovered that utilization of the transportation program was low and engagement early on in a new child’s life was challenging. The program lacked a compelling lure for expectant mothers. Therefore, baby boxes were positioned as a critical bridge item to engage with the community. Tying in to already existing infrastructure also had the benefit of the baby box initiative having ripple impact into the other ideas like prenatal care, early childhood education, and nutrition. Finding the sweet spot for a targeted impact allowed for me to point to the synergies and natural overlap that a baby box initiative could help them achieve the organization’s broader goals. Positioning the outcomes of my project as enhancing the outcomes of the organization’s mission made the adoption of a baby boxes simple. In addition, this increased efficiency of both programs made the ask for funding from a current benefactor a simple, targeted, finite request.

Supporting this integration was once again the narrative as to why this was so important to expectant and new mothers. Providing my personal story, data, training, and materials made the organization’s adoption of this new program simple. Having a clear understanding of what it would take for your partner organization to justify the resources, invest the capital (human and financial), and maintain a project gave me a clear path of the work needed to get them to adopt the program. Removing their hurdles and showing the need in the community set the project up for easy adoption.

V. Ongoing engagement

Assessing outcomes

Sustainability reporting metrics continue to evolve and in the best scenarios the feedback is integrated into decision making. Ongoing measurement of social implications of a program have both short term and long-term goals. The long-term goals of increased equity within the community is challenging to witness in the short term, so identifying leading key performance indicators to measure is critical (Adams & Frost, 2008). will be ongoing and show success of the boxes and benefits of early engagement with new parents.

The intent of this project is to address long-term inequity within the community. However, waiting to track that change and trying to isolate this project's impact is complicated. Continuing to monitor small changes, like number of boxes distributed, households engaged, or increased utilization in other program (like the prenatal healthcare transportation) are good leading indicators for impact of this program. Assessing things like "access" can be measured in the change of utilization. Ensuring that reporting outcomes are tied back to mission will continue to drive the demonstrated effectiveness of the program and guarantee funding and resources are allocated for it to continue to thrive.

Continued Leadership

The alignment of this project within an organization has ideally situated it for lasting impact beyond any individual leader. However, my continued involvement of this project will remain a constant engagement with the stakeholders that have supported this project to ensure that the program firmly takes place within the organization. Beyond that, I believe that my continued passion of telling my story and ideally other mother's stories that have been directly impacted by the program will show that this model for addressing social sustainability is feasible and when thoughtfully implemented works to achieve the desired result.

As the project has found integration with the organization, the ongoing leadership pivots into a commitment to ensure it has long-term success to reach the desired outcome. The challenge of ensuring that it is given proper resources and commitment is something that can continue to be influenced. Additionally, making sure that reporting metrics are being captured and credited back to this program are critical. My role as constant advocate will continue and one of my main objectives now are to ensure that other advocates emerge and continue to carry this program forward.

VI. Conclusion

Social Sustainability programs require passionate leadership and careful planning. The success of any program is dependent on the design and implementation and social sustainability requires extra care for the social landscape in which it is being implemented. Driving meaningful impact within a community requires patience to allow for adoption. Like all sustainability programs the goal of integrated change that produces the desired result is what we all hope to achieve. The rain does not fall all at once, it comes one drop at a time.

VIII. References

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