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### When the Client Comes First

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# WHEN THE CLIENT COMES FIRST

The new buzz phrase is Client Outcome Management. Ang Bee Lian is especially enthusiastic about a management technique where the focus is on clients.

When donors, government and other funders provide support, they want assurances that the daily living conditions and lives of the beneficiaries are actually improved. The one question that is often asked is: What is the outcome of the help or service rendered? The science of determining outcomes, or outcome management, has its roots in social science evaluation research. Besides being used as a tool to evaluate the achievement of client outcomes, it is also a valuable management tool.

Let's take the case of social services for older persons. The traditional approach focuses primarily on the process, specifically the resources that are available to the older person, which are called inputs. By contrast, the outcome approach to management is client-centric and focuses on the (older) person receiving the service. This approach measures the improvements seen in the daily living conditions and the welfare of the recipient.

The outcome management framework is particularly helpful for voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) in assessing the effectiveness and impact of their services towards their clients. These benefits may include knowledge-base, attitude, behaviour, condition or status. At the same time, VWOs are prompted to think about the processes that they use, or need to use, to achieve these end-goals.

In other words, outcome management goes beyond what an organisation does, and focuses on what and how they accomplish certain predetermined goals for clients. In the case of an organisation

whose goal is to place persons with disability into employment, an example of an outcome measurement may be the number of employable skills acquired and the success rate in gaining employment.

Outcome-based methods have been adopted in the United States, Australia, Hong Kong and other countries.

### A Case Study Of Outcome Management

In 2001, the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) embarked on the first phase of measuring outcomes of their various programmes with the Programme Evaluation System, an outcome-based management tool. The system required VWOs to identify trend information – including basic output and initial outcome data – for the services that they provided.

In 2003, the next phase saw VWOs being trained by the NCSS to determine outcome measures as they related to the client's condition. These took the form of achieving individualised client goals or preventing deterioration of conditions.

NCSS' exercise raised many interesting points. For starters, the process of deriving and determining outcome measures proved to be a very meaningful one as it involved a deep review of the various programmes and services that were offered, what the goals were, and whether (and how) these goals were achieved.

Of course, such an exercise requires the setting of a standard. When the standard is set too low, the



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outcomes will be biased towards achieving success quite quickly and may not provide the impetus for improving the standard of service. One may then legitimately ask whether a particular programme should aim to have all clients achieve a minimum standard or have the majority achieve a higher standard of success.

Much of the work in developing outcome management theory was undertaken by the Rensselaerville Institute, a US-based non-profit education centre that is renowned for its work in the area with government agencies, foundations and non-profit organisations in more than 500 projects worldwide. When it undertook its own self-assessment, the NCSS study team worked with the Institute and, in particular, understudied its Vice-President, Elliot Pagliaccio (the man who spearheaded the outcome funding approach in state and local governments and non-profit organisations around the world).

### Uses Of Outcome Information

As a management tool, outcome information can be utilised in four main areas:

- Resource allocation – management can make informed decisions on the allocation of scarce resources.
- Monitoring and progress reporting – management, board members as well as current and potential donors are kept abreast on how funds are being used to achieve the best results for clients.
- Service improvement – programme reviews can be triggered, while helping to detect areas that need improvements such as methods of intervention, service procedures and policies.
- Staff/ volunteer motivation – communicate programme results to staff and volunteers to recognise their efforts and motivate them.

### Case Study Insights

As a result of the Council's exercise in outcome management, two key lessons emerged – which have bearing for VWOs thinking of adopting this management approach.

First, the adoption of an outcome management approach needs to be embraced at all levels of the organisation, from leadership and supervisors to programme staff. All the different levels of personnel need to be engaged.

Secondly, the level of capability and mental preparedness on the part of VWOs will be an important consideration in the successful implementation of outcome management. Decision makers need to be trained and engaged in dialogue to ensure the process is implemented smoothly.

### Training And Implementation

Acknowledging the importance of training, the NCSS will continue to offer training to social service practitioners to professionalise the sector. It will also facilitate review and learning sessions to encourage the sharing of effective practices. VWOs that have successfully implemented outcome management could, in turn, develop centres of specialisation in service areas and mentor their peers.

For a VWO, adopting an outcomes-based approach has many advantages. When it is able to articulate the outcomes its clients are able to achieve, it will help attract, and retain funding and donations to support its programmes. The VWO is also better able to account for its activities to funders and donors if it can show how the lives of its clients are being impacted.

As more VWOs adopt the outcome management approach, having a clearer vision of their goals will lead to better services and a more efficient use of resources. This can only benefit the sector as a whole. And when clients are helped in a meaningful and tangible way, staff and volunteers will feel fulfilled and motivated.

It is a win-win situation for all. And all this is achieved because we are looking at a problem from the other perspective. □



**Ang Bee Lian** is the CEO of the National Council of Social Service. A trained social worker with 30 years' social service sector experience in the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, she was awarded the Outstanding Social Worker Award in 2000 and the Public Administration Medal (Silver) in 2002.