

Case Study: Internal Evaluations

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In 2013 David Kim and I were in the midst of discussing areas of development and capacity building for the research team at Youthprise. We were in a period of significant transition at that time. Our team, which had started as five youth researchers, had lost three people, leaving David and me. While discussing possible additions and strategies for strengthening the research team, we became aware of an organizational commitment to hire more Youth Innovators. While Innovators at Youthprise do not carry the authority to make hires, we were becoming aware of an increasing divide between the needs of young people in the organization and the decisions that were made.

This led us to start asking questions about the decision-making apparatus in our organization and in the youth engagement field proper. We thought that doing some form of survey or standardized evaluation would be a good fit. But when we examined the data Youthprise already had on its own youth engagement structure, we determined that another survey might just add to the noise already present in youth engagement evaluation.

We opted to conduct a series of interviews with staff members to gain their personal views on the decision making structure of the organization. Interviews, we felt, would provide a more contextual understanding of what was happening in the organization. It's important to note that the distinction between interviews and organizational surveys is application and not merit based. Much of the large-scale data gathering that Youthprise supports and publishes, namely the Baseline Study on OST Gaps, relies on surveys and statistical representations to find gaps and build large, systemic solutions. For a staff as small (or flexible) as Youthprise, we concluded that in order

to find small solutions for small, internal issues, we would have to scale down and invest as much time as possible into learning how staff members felt about decision-making in the office.

We had about six questions altogether, spread over two interviews for (mostly) all staff members. Each interview lasted about a half hour and touched on many topics. While we had the central "need to know" questions that we asked every participant, we tried to approach each engagement as a conversation that would shed light on their wants, needs and gifts as individuals as opposed to dispensers of data. As a result, while we got an improved understanding of how information flows around the office and, thus, how decisions are made, we also had a more holistic understanding of our office as a series of individuals.

After evaluating the data, we brought it back to the rest of the organization during an all-staff retreat. In small groups the entire staff was able to review our findings and provide commentary, questions and commitments to improve in some key areas that stood out in the study. While we would have to conduct another study to measure any actual improvements, my experiences over the past six months show that as a whole the flow of information between all groups and working areas is much better. In contrast with six months ago, no staff member has much of an excuse for ignorance. This was a direct result of the conversation we had about the study. It also made plain some issues that may not have come to light during regular staff conversations. To put it plainly, it worked for us.

Included below is a series of steps for how you can do the same thing in your organization, no matter what the issue is.

Conducting an Youth-led Internal Evaluation

Internal evaluations are a simple and cost-effective way of monitoring the state of the workplace and engaging individual staff members in honest conversations. They can also be fun and a great way of building relationships with your co-workers, if you do them right that is . . .

1. Asking Questions

- Ask your broad, guiding question: Are we progressing in our work plans?
- To begin making interview questions, go back to the guiding question and ask some of your own. Think about what you need to know before you can answer your guiding question.
- Be specific and keep each interview focused on one topic from multiple angles.

2. Project Planning

- Make scheduling interviews a priority.
- Remain flexible; in a busy organization people may be available at odd hours for varying amounts of time. The key is to catch participants when they are comfortable, not when they're rushing to meet deadlines or on their way out the door.
- Give yourself at least a week to analyze your data. Use your analysis time to look at the responses, find new leads, formulate new questions and do scheduling.

3. Conducting Interviews

- Make sure to take plenty of notes. Having a partner present to take notes during your interview, or, a voice recorder, if the participant is okay with being recorded, can greatly improve the quality of your data gathering.
- If a participant "gets on a soap box" or just won't stop talking about one question, feel free to stop them and move on. You have a job to do, they'll understand.
- The same goes for you. What you hear in an interview is confidential.

4. Evaluation

- Type up your notes and save them in an easy-to-find file.
- When you start organizing your data, try tagging responses according to similar themes, words or other factors.
- Look for similar or different participant attributes across tags, tags that might correlate with each other or even something as simple as the number of responses under one tag.
- How you present your data is up to you. Be as creative as you want to be; your organization may appreciate a more fun and inclusive process of hearing your data.