Building MEL capacity

Challenges and opportunities

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Building MEL Capacity

1. Presentation and discussion- focusing on:

   • The purpose and motivations for building MEL capacity

   • Challenges

   • Different approaches

2. Quick break
3. Hands-on activity – developing guidance

Who am I?

Genevieve Laurier – Acting Head of Impact and Evaluation, The Social Innovation Partnership

The Social Innovation Partnership
We believe in challenging the status quo and unlocking the power of human creativity to address social challenges.

Organisational background in building MEL capacity – ran Project Oracle
Past clients include Trust for London, Big Lottery Fund, Nesta, the Cabinet Office, the Greater London Authority

1. Building MEL capacity – what is the point?

Draw and discuss

Take 5-10 minutes to create a visual illustration of:
- your own goals for MEL support
- why you think it is important

We'll then discuss as a group

1. Building MEL capacity – what is the point?

Common motivations

1. Ensure good evidence is produced
   - Worry that grantees will not be able to deliver otherwise
   - Ambition to build the evidence base for an issue – enable a more rigorous approach than could have happened otherwise
   - Desire to make MEL as easy as possible for grantees
2. Create a funding legacy - leave organisation with:
   - Long-term capacity
   - Different practices / ways of working
   - Evidence they can take to other funders – help them become more sustainable / resilient / independent
3. Help grantees to work more efficiently
4. Change grantee attitudes towards MEL
5. Enable grantees to become more effective - help them to learn so they can improve

2. Challenges

Most common challenges I encounter:

1. Grantees don't want to engage → more time consuming to deliver with limited results
2. It's unclear what grantees really need → support is a poor fit
3. Competing priorities → awkward, not all met well
   1. Between the journey and the destination
   2. Between funders and grantees
4. Mismatch between the methods and the aims → doesn't really work

2.1 Grantees don't want to engage

- Who this support is being provided for / to:
    - Does this fit with their role?
    - Do they have capacity to benefit?
    - Is the time required to take part accounted for?
- How support is structured
    - Is it optional or mandatory?
    - Who is setting priorities? Does the organisation get a say? Does it fit with their goals?
    - Who will own what comes out? Will this make them look bad?
- How support is communicated
    - When do they find out? Does it come as a surprise?
    - Do they understand why it's being offered? (is it seen as a criticism?)
    - Are they clear on the intended value?

2.2 It's unclear what grantees really need

Things that make diagnosis difficult:

- Don't know what you don't know
- Low levels of MEL practice often associated with low levels of understanding about own MEL
- Optimism bias - tendency to assume systems are working well
- Temptation to exaggerate skills and systems to impress

Questions this raises:

- How can we diagnose most effectively?
- Is there scope to delay
- How can we manage grantees' (understandable) worry about perception if it turns out things aren't as good as they thought / said?

2.3. Competing priorities

1. Between the journey and the destination
- Is it about building capacity or generating great evidence? → There is often a trade-off

1. Between funders and grantees
- Whose goals and priorities is this serving?
- Is there a line of communication between all parties?

2.4 Mismatch between the methods and the aims

Common scenarios:
- Light touch support with very ambitious goals
- Short-term support and resource intended to lead to long-term impact
- Support focused on only proving or improving but expectation that grantees will learn to do both well
- Support intended to be helpful but structured in a way that is difficult for grantees to access or hard to keep up with day to day

Contributing factors:
- Limited resource – spreading things thinly – doing a little for a lot
- Overestimating baseline capability
- Too little communication between parties – assuming rather than asking

2.5 Challenges discussion

How do these challenges compare with your own experience?

3. Ways of building MEL capacity

Capacity building scattergories

1. In one minute, list as many ways of building MEL capacity as you can think of – one per post-it
2. Compare and group notes in tables – prizes for unique ideas!
3. Collate ideas as a group

Hands-on activity – developing guidance

How this will work

1. Working in groups
2. Each group will start with a flipchart with one kind of MEL support on it
3. You will be given an initial question to answer about that kind of MEL support in your group on your flipchart
4. Every 5-10 minutes, we will rotate the kinds of MEL support around and you will be given a new question
5. Gallery walk at the end

Thanks