

## Sustainability: An Overview

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Systematic effort is needed to promote the long-term sustainability of any nonprofit organization, or an innovation within it. This is true even for the most successful and well-validated efforts (including evidence-based practices). Moreover, achieving sustainability is not a one-time thing - good nonprofits and good innovations within them need regular nurturing in order to survive and thrive over time.

Principles by which sustainability can be enhanced have emerged from research on this subject, as summarized in the studies and writings cited at the end. Four such principles can help nonprofit Boards and executive staff to think about how their organizations can include attention to sustainability in both strategic planning and everyday operations:

1 - **early planning and ongoing attention** - Early in their implementation, the leaders of long-surviving innovative programs or practices plan ahead for the long run, including developing a plan for leadership transition and for long-term funding support. Most often these plans are in writing, and have the support of key stakeholders supporting the organization in which the innovation lives. And they revisit these sustainability plans periodically. Sustainable nonprofits do the same, looking periodically in their planning for sustainability at the key factors that will keep them in business - financial viability, stable leadership, re-confirmed (or consciously shifted) mission focus, etc.

2 - **continuing personal involvement by key leaders** - One of the surest signs that an innovation or a nonprofit will not survive is when its key leaders reduce their personal commitment - not necessarily leaving the organization, but getting involved in other priorities or "taking less personally" the mission of the innovation or organization. Sometimes this is nothing more than "leadership fatigue" - people get tired or burned out. In addition to good leadership transition efforts, already mentioned, a key to continued personal involvement is some kind of "refresher" - it might be a sabbatical, a special project, or some type of recognition for continued support.

3 - **adaptation** - Innovations and organizations periodically face changes in the environment in which they are operating (changes in policy, community circumstances, target populations, etc.). Sustainability thus may require some flexibility and the ability to adapt. The longer the entity has been in existence, the more likely it is that some type of adaptation will be necessary, and while there's still a legitimate need to maintain fidelity to the original mission (or to the science, in the case of an evidence-based practice), if necessary changes are resisted by key leaders, the chances for survival are reduced.

4 - **continuing funding support** - The single most common cause of an innovation's failure to survive (assuming it is worthwhile and doesn't end due to poor quality) is simple...the money runs out. Periodic re-assessments of what funding options are available and how new ones could be developed requires an investment of energy by leadership - which must not make the assumption that original funders will always be around. The same applies for organizations.

The knowledge base on sustainability needs to be integrated into implementation paradigms that guide the implementation of a program or development of a new nonprofit organization (Backer, 2005). For example, in the multiyear PROSPER Project for community-based youth substance abuse prevention in Iowa and other states, 11 of 13 PROSPER communities were

coached successfully early on to obtain funds for continuing their local program after it was no longer grant-funded (Spoth & Greenberg, 2005; Spoth et al, 2004).

Some nonprofits and innovations within them have access to internal resources for building capacity to raise funds and address other aspects of sustainability - colleagues, parent organizations or staff and Board with fundraising experience, for instance. External resources include nonprofit associations, management support organizations like Valley Nonprofit Resources with education and TA programs, and community foundations that increasingly offer training courses on fundraising for nonprofit managers. Education for funders about sustainability approaches also is available (Backer & Barbell, 2006). Consultation for promoting financial sustainability is offered by finance-focused entities such as the Nonprofit Finance Fund, The Finance Project and other capacity-building organizations serving the nonprofit sector (Langford & Flynn, 2001; Metz, 2005). All these resources can help to promote sustainability.

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