

Raising the bar

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Front and Centre Magazine
July/August 2003
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As the former chair of United Way Lower Mainland and a board member with the Vancouver Foundation, Patrice Pratt knew a lot about Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network (PLAN), a nonprofit charity created 14 years ago by families in British Columbia to secure the future of their loved ones with disabilities.

But while Pratt's daughter had a rare disability called William's Syndrome, Pratt didn't personally feel she needed PLAN, which establishes a relationship network for the disabled person that is designed to endure after his or her loved ones die. Pratt had advocated on her daughter's behalf for a long time, skilfully manoeuvring through the school systems to the point where the 21-year-old recently graduated from high school. "I always said I could do it myself," Pratt relates.

Now Pratt has changed her mind. An externally reviewed social audit conducted by PLAN, believed to be the first of its kind undertaken by a nonprofit charity, helped cement Pratt's decision that she could no longer go it alone. When the results of the landmark self-assessment were released this year, Pratt, in her public capacity with the Vancouver Foundation, which helped fund PLAN's audit, called the report "the gold standard for nonprofit accountability in the country." In her capacity as a private citizen and the parent of a child with a disability, Pratt was so impressed with PLAN's inventory of itself that she decided to join the organization.

"PLAN was unbelievably brave and courageous to do an audit," says Pratt. "Nonprofits are generally hanging on by their fingernails. Funding is scarce and nonprofits are trying to keep their heads above water. They tend to make sweeping statements about all the good they are doing. PLAN could certainly have done the same. Instead, they had the courage and conviction to turn inward and ask the tough questions."

The process of turning inward and asking the tough questions began a few years ago when Vickie Cammack, co-founder of PLAN, learned that Great Britain's Institute for Social and Ethical Accountability had developed a tool to measure an organization's performance from three perspectives: economic, social, and environmental.

The tool, referred to as "triple bottom line reporting," had been used by such enterprises as The Body Shop, Ben & Jerry's and Shell. "PLAN had been looking long and hard for a suitable evaluation tool," says Cammack, who has a daughter with a disability. "We wanted to know if we were adhering to our core values. PLAN is really driven by the covenant we have with our lifetime members. They expect us to be there for their loved ones after they die. We don't take that commitment lightly."

Cammack proceeded to take a week-long course on social auditing in Nova Scotia to better understand the process. There, she learned that a social audit essentially creates a conversation between an organization and its constituents, and that it is a dialogue designed to measure what is important to an organization and its stake-

holders. She also learned that the only external verifier of social audits in Canada accredited by the Institute for Social and Ethical Accountability lived right in her own backyard in Vancouver. Susan Todd, an independent consultant specializing in social auditing, was brought into the process.

Todd suggested that PLAN convene a steering committee comprising stakeholders in the organization in order to drive the auditing exercise. Stakeholders included staff, individuals with disabilities, parents, and facilitators, the workers who assemble the personal networks PLAN believes are essential to ending the loneliness and isolation that people with disabilities face. Todd then attended steering committee meetings to make certain that the process was fair and inclusive and that the principles of transparency and accountability were followed.

“My job was to hold them to the standard and to keep reminding them of it,” she explains. “I didn’t have to throw my weight around very much because PLAN took the process to heart and wanted to do the best job it could.”

But the best of intentions couldn’t prevent the unease and frustration that sometimes crop up when an organization carefully examines itself in the mirror.

“It was difficult time,” Cammack recalls. “There was no road map, first of all, and secondly, any evaluative process makes people a bit anxious. Many traditional evaluations tend to bust up relationships rather than strengthen them. It can be a very damaging process. Some of our members asked, ‘What the heck are we doing here? Will it really be valid?’”

Joan Lawrence certainly asked herself questions. A lifetime member of PLAN, a past-president of the organization, and the mother of a 41-year-old son with a disability, Lawrence sat on the steering committee from the start. The process was arduous and confusing at first. “We didn’t have a clue what we were doing,” Lawrence admits, “but we had Susan Todd to keep us on the right track.”

The steering committee’s most challenging job was to formulate precisely the elements PLAN wanted to measure. It was a tricky proposition.

According to Cammack, the challenge inherent in any evaluation process is not only to identify issues and problems, but also to identify factors that contribute to an organization’s success so that these aspects can be safeguarded. “Of course we wanted to address whatever issues we had,” she says, “but we weren’t doing this audit because we were having problems as an organization. What we are doing at PLAN works. It’s being replicated around the world. I was concerned that the audit would be framed around issues and not touch on what makes us unique.”

After considerable deliberation, the steering committee identified four goals for PLAN’s audit: to strengthen relationships across the organization; to assess how the organization was living its core values; to determine how effectively it was serving its members; and to explore how it had been impacted by growth and change. The committee also identified nine key elements as being integral to the spirit of the organization. These nine elements then represented the foundation of the organization’s accountability framework (see sidebar, “Key Elements”).

“The indicators that PLAN used,” says Susan Todd, “were specifically developed for them and have meaning for their stakeholders. They weren’t pulled out of a book, and they didn’t drop down from the sky.”

With the accountability framework finally established, the assessment began. Stakeholders were polled in the summer of 2002, mostly through surveys administered and tabulated by an independent research firm. Responses came from lifetime members (51 of 89), people with disabilities (25 of 84), staff (10 of 12), and facilitators (30 of 50). The responses were then analyzed, and the final results of the audit were released last March to a rousing reception.

“Someone sent a copy to Bill and Melinda Gates,” chuckles Cammack, referring to the philanthropic founder of Microsoft and his wife, who were sent the audit by PLAN’s affiliate in Seattle. Although the Gates’ have yet to comment, positive feedback did come quickly from other granting agencies - agencies often challenged to know if an applicant for money actually does what it says it does.

According to Cammack, these funders felt they understood PLAN much better after reading the audit.

Richard Steckel, an internationally recognized consultant on nonprofit enterprise, was also impressed with the audit. “I know of no other nonprofit organization that has taken the principles of triple bottom line reporting and applied it to themselves,” says Steckel, Colorado-based author of *Making Money While Making a Difference*. “And they did it in the most thoughtful, intelligent, and self-critical way,” he notes. “They said, ‘We want to find out how we can be better. We want to find the deficiencies in our organization, and we have the guts to have someone look at us and suggest a new path to improve performance.’”

Indeed, the ability to learn from the process is a big reason to undertake an says Todd, “organizations might not do it. The payback is really the internal learning experience. It’s the ‘Ah-ha’ that happens when you actually sit in a room with a group of clients or employees and hear first-hand from them what matters. That produces learning.”

Certainly, PLAN has learned a great deal. According to Cammack, the audit has already strengthened the organization in a number of ways.

“I think there’s a mutual trust that’s built through all the consultation and surveying [of stakeholders],” she says. In addition, says Cammack, because the audit is a communication tool, the group is now able to be more articulate about its accomplishments. “Having those numbers to back up our stories is great,” she says. “We thrive on stories.”

The audit has also helped PLAN develop a strategic plan, a clear sense of direction for the future, and targets for improvement. Not surprisingly, PLAN has already committed to conducting another audit in 2004.

Susan Todd thinks that PLAN has started a trend that will extend to other nonprofits. “It’s not going to end with PLAN. This kind of audit is incredibly valuable for all different kinds of organizations,” she says. “It’s human nature to want to know if you are succeeding, particularly for mission-driven organizations. It’s important to know they are living their values and making a difference, and that the people who support them believe they are making a difference.”

There’s no doubt Patrice Pratt believes PLAN is making a difference. “I’ve got confidence that PLAN has created a document that will serve them well over time,” says the Vancouver Foundation board member. “Even when there’s a negative, they’ve turned it into a positive. It continues to blow me away.”

The audit has also made her realize that the organization really does fit into her life. “As much as I can advocate and be assertive on behalf of my daughter,” says Pratt now, “it doesn’t take the place of the professionals at PLAN who can put things into place. No matter what you do, you won’t be around forever. This is bigger than me. This is bigger than getting my daughter through high school. PLAN is bigger, and yes, I need it.”

The audit steering committee identified the following nine “Key Elements” as the life force of PLAN.

1. Relationships are at the heart of everything we do.
2. Peace of mind for families.
3. Commitment to family firection, leadership and accountability.
4. Leadership and advocacy.

5. A focus on contribution and citizenship.
6. Self-sufficiency with an entrepreneurial spirit
7. Dedicated and passionate people.
8. Comfort with ambiguity.
9. A contagious vision and a commitment to sharing our stories.

Analyzing the findings.

Analysis of the data gathered by PLAN shows that relationships are thriving. There is room for improvement, however, particularly around the issue of communication between families and facilitators. Here are some of the key findings from the audit.

1. 83 per cent of lifetime members believe PLAN will continue to meet their relative's needs in the future.
2. 90 per cent of lifetime members had confidence in PLAN's financial stability.
3. 86 per cent of families feel more hopeful about the future.
4. 79 per cent of families feel less isolated.
5. 67 per cent of families have peace of mind with their network.
6. 90 per cent of families believe independence from government funding makes PLAN effective and accountable.

Self-sufficiency

In line with the sixth element of its accountability audit ("Self-sufficiency with an entrepreneurial spirit") PLAN makes money from the sale of two books, one written by co-founder Vickie Cammack and the other written by her husband and co-founder Al Etmanski. They are entitled *Safe and Secure – Six Steps to Creating a Personal Future Plan for People with Disabilities* and *A Good Life – For You and Your Relative with a Disability*. In 2002, nearly 1500 copies of these publications were sold.

There's strategy behind the sale of the books. The families that formed PLAN initially, says Cammack, had a "great deal of mistrust" in government funding. "All through their lifetime they'd see funding come and go when governments changed," she notes. "They could not have peace of mind if their relative's future was dependent on it."

PLAN purposely strives to be independent of government funding so it can advocate more effectively for families and remove the anxiety families feel about the long-term viability of government funding. "We are really more interested in increasing revenue coming from families and supporters," says Cammack. "That might sound hard-hearted, but that's not the case. It's about families owning the organization.