

Impact or Bust

5

“I fell in love with the impact chain the first time I saw it,” recalls Sarah Lewis, a past chapter president and overseas volunteer. “The impact chain helps you look at everything - the root causes of poverty, chapter management, personal development. I can always use the impact chain to examine problems. It touches so many different aspects of what it means to try to create positive change in the world. Above all, impact is an eternal challenge.”

To be impact-focused, we’ve learned to question ourselves at all levels: questioning our very existence as an organization, questioning whether we are doing the right things, whether we are doing the right things the right way, and what that means for all of us, both as EWB members and as individuals.

Everyone in EWB wants impact, from the Board on down. They want to rigorously assess how they are doing on the ultimate goal: to reduce poverty in villages.



CIDA
CIDA’s Organizational
Assessment of Engineers
Without Borders, 2008¹

“Why on earth do we need another organization?”

One man asked one question, and unwittingly played a pivotal role in EWB’s history. That one question came out of nowhere at George, right when everyone else around him was lavishing EWB with praise and encouragement. That one question sideswiped all of his plans and enthusiasm.

As EWB was getting started, George went to his first Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) conference. There were a thousand people there – representing almost every organization in Canada that worked in development. At this stage, those of us starting EWB were still driven by our abilities and interests – primarily technical – rather than in trying to understand and incorporate Dorothy’s interests.

“We were the new kids on the block,” George remembers. “Everyone was interested in what we were doing and wanted to meet us. It was our first big event – we felt like we were breaking onto the Canadian development scene.”

George wandered around the rooms during breaks, meeting as many people as possible and handing out his contact information. He’d pulled an all-nighter to put together an EWB brochure – a brown and green(!) three-pager describing how fantastic EWB was going to be – and he handed it out to anyone who would take one. George talked to people from CIDA, people working in food aid, health care, education, and volunteer sending – the whole range of development activities in which Canadians were engaged. As he looked at all the booths, brochures, and descriptions of other organizations, he was feeling pretty good: EWB was getting off the ground. He was determined that EWB would come back to these conferences every year as a bigger and better organization.

His enthusiasm was infectious. “Engineers! Working in development! We can build things! Make roads! Design light bulbs! Install generators! A national organization that will have chapters at every engineering

school in Canada! A whole profession just waiting to be engaged!” Person after person listened to his spiel and felt just a little bit more energized. “Engineers,” they thought. “Yeah, that’s great!”

But the most important conversation George had during that conference was very different in tone. He got a chance to talk to a man, now in his sixties, who had a long development career behind him and a wealth of experience to share. George was eager to tell him about EWB, hoping for some valuable encouragement and advice.

George launched into his speech – great idea, hundreds of university students, the engineering profession, a young organization getting started, we really care about solving the problem of poverty – and the man just looked at him. The man just looked, and didn’t start encouraging George, or saying it was a great idea.

“I didn’t know why he wasn’t responding,” George says. “I thought, “Well, he’s old, maybe he’s having trouble hearing.” He started again, louder this time, with a smile from ear to ear, and still the man said nothing.

Finally George began to slow down, running out of things to say, and wondering what on earth the man was thinking. He replayed in his head what he had said – had he said something to offend the man? Had he said something stupid? Had he accidentally hit the man with one of his more exuberant hand gestures?

Finally, the man spoke.

“Why?” he said.

“Why on earth do we need another organization?”

There it was. One simple question.

I felt like I had been punched in the gut.

George Roter

“That was one of the most important moments for this organization,” George says. “I had spent days being told by everyone I met how great we were and what a good idea we had and I was on cloud

nine. I was flying! And then with this one conversation – I came crashing back down to the ground. Suddenly everything was called into question. Our whole purpose. Our whole existence. Everything we planned to do. Could we do anything differently or better than what was already being done in development? Could we do it differently or better enough to justify a whole new organization?”

It would be pointless for us to try if we could not do any better. We needed to find new ways to be more effective, more efficient, and more relevant to serving Dorothy’s interests. We would be able to justify our existence only if we were creating significant positive change at a meaningful scale. Only if we were using our organization to fill a need, and undertake something different from what other groups were already doing.

If we were serious about creating change, we would have to be willing to continuously question everything we did. We might have to put our own interests aside in order to do the best thing for Dorothy. To sacrifice the good warm feeling of installing a hand pump, and instead analyze what the root causes of water and sanitation problems were.

A relentless – even exhausting – focus on impact is integral to EWB now, but it wasn’t always. Parker recalls the moment the man asked that question and George brought it back to EWB. “It was the spark that became the impact fire.”

“The more questions I have, the better off I am”

Our willingness to truly question our activities and their results was tested many times during our first few years. One of the most significant tests happened when Paul Slomp, one of EWB’s volunteers, came back from working on his project and told us, “EWB should not be sending people overseas.”

For years at EWB, Paul’s reputation preceded him – everyone had heard about the tall blond Dutch guy who had brought his fun-loving spirit and rousing camp songs to the U of A chapter, completed a placement in Guatemala, spent seven months in Ghana and then three years in Zambia, and then worked as one of the first Junior Fellow Support Staff in 2007.

People often tell the story of Paul having his own farm in a village in Zambia, so that he could better understand the challenges of a maize farmer. Or the story of how he biked 20km on a bumpy dirt road to and from work, so that he could live in a village to learn the local language and understand the culture. Or the story of how he came back to the EWB office after six months in Ghana and split half a roasted chicken with Russ Groves . . . and ate all the bones, as his Ghanaian family would have done.

Here is a story that gets told a little less often:

When Paul came back to Canada in 2002 after his first, brief EWB placement in Guatemala, George was eager to see him. It was a valuable chance to hear from one of EWB’s entrepreneurial chapter leaders about what was and wasn’t working in our overseas program.

George had a stopover in Edmonton on a cross-country flight, and seized the opportunity to meet with Paul. They met up at a coffee shop outside the University of Alberta with huge smiles and bear hugs. The meeting started well, and then – from George’s perspective – took a sudden turn:

“Welcome back!”

“Good to see you!”

“What did you learn? I can’t wait to hear about it!”

“What have you been up to? How are things in Toronto?”

And then, two minutes in, Paul decided to pull no punches: “George, I don’t think we should send people overseas anymore.”

For once, George was at a loss for words, and the two of them sat in silence, with Paul’s sentence hanging between them.

Finally, George spoke: “Um, Paul, sending people overseas is kind of a big part of what we do.”

There we had it. EWB’s long tradition of learning from and listening to every single overseas volunteer was bringing us something tough to hear. It was the test of whether we would be able to reconsider what we were doing, how we were doing it, and if it was leading to the change we hoped to create.

On paper, the idea for Paul’s project had seemed simple: a group of indigenous people didn’t have water infrastructure and a partner organization wanted to provide it. Unfortunately, the reality was more complicated. The remoteness of the community, the language barrier, the political context, and the lack of project definition made it nearly impossible for Paul to positively contribute to development outcomes. What had looked like a simple engineering problem from Canada – piping water into villages – turned out to be impossible with the short-term, one-off approach we had tried.

We give credit to Paul for the courage and responsibility to question what EWB was doing, to openly discuss his experience, and to use it to help improve our work. His story was one of the factors that began moving EWB towards a coherent, long-term, nationally coordinated overseas program, a program better designed to ensure positive impact.

Paul illustrated how anyone in this organization, when informed by field realities, has the obligation to use their experience to question and evaluate our activities in terms of the impact we are having. This

can mean questioning the CEOs, questioning EWB's programming, questioning overseas placements, questioning chapter activities. We continuously examine everything we undertake in light of the impact we are trying to achieve, and the evidence we have so far about whether or not we are achieving it.

Questioning our impact every hour

When the impact chain was introduced to the general EWB membership, chapter members grabbed on to the concept of working backwards from impact – the desired change – to understand the inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes that would lead to that impact. Sarah Lewis remembers, “It was a really big thing for me and our chapter. We used it so much in the way we thought about planning our activities, always coming back to what we wanted to accomplish.”

For some chapters, this meant evaluating how much time to spend on fundraising versus outreach, and what the impact trade-offs would be. For other chapters, it involved weighing potential Junior Fellows’ skill sets in terms of their strengths as a development worker and their strengths as a change-maker in Canada. Which strengths would be most important for the intended impact of the Junior Fellow program and the current chapter situation?

Lindsay Mitchell, a chapter president at McGill University in 2005, remembers debating how to balance the impacts of fundraising versus outreach. Chapter members believed that fundraising to support Junior Fellows would lead to impact overseas and impact back at the chapter when the Junior Fellows returned. However, time spent fundraising would have to be balanced against time that could have been spent doing outreach, which would also lead to impact by changing Canadians’ perceptions of Africa. Lindsay remembers that the discussion resulted in changes to their fundraising approach: they began to run numerous small events that guaranteed donations and had low input costs. Meanwhile, they prioritized the outreach events that didn’t require significant funds. And when it came to the time individual volunteers had available for participating in either fundraising or outreach, Lindsay came up with her own solution – rather than miss fundraising in order to do outreach, or miss outreach in order to do fundraising, she missed her statistics class so that she could do both.

When she was involved with the Calgary Professional chapter, though, the impact analysis led to different decisions. Chapter members realized that trying to do outreach and fundraising without an upfront investment in materials and presentations was preventing their ability to have impact within engineering workplaces. In order to have impact, they needed professionally prepared fundraising and communication materials, proposals for how EWB could be involved in the workplace, and analyses of potential EWB-corporate partnerships. In this case, the impact analysis led the chapter to conclude that an investment in fundraising and materials was necessary before they would be able to do outreach and create impact.

In every situation and in every chapter, the decisions are different, but the commonality is that across EWB, we are all analyzing what we do in terms of the impact it will achieve.

Russ Groves thinks about what makes EWB special to him, and says:

It's the ability to ask the hard questions and to turn away from the feel good factors. It might be that we are just cold-hearted jerks, but the ability to look at anything - even a sunset - and ask ourselves what ends it is achieving... that ability is unique.

Russ Groves



¹ Mitchell, R. (2008, August). Organizational assesment. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Retrieved February 15, 2009, from <http://www.ewb.ca/mainsite/pages/howeare/accountable/CIDA.pdf>.