



A Center of the Public Health Institute

Cultivating Strategic Planning and Evaluation

Lisa Culp, Executive Director

Women's Empowerment – Sacramento, CA

At the time Lisa participated in the ODS program, Women's Empowerment had been in existence for a little over three years. The organization had a small staff and most of its founding board members were still serving on the board. According to Lisa, "I found out that I was an accidental executive director." Lisa explained that Women's Empowerment started as a program under another nonprofit and when funding ran out for the program, Lisa said they were faced with three options – end the program, remain a program but possibly under another organization, or become their own nonprofit. They decided to form their own nonprofit and in 2004, began with a group of volunteers who were supportive of the mission and supportive of working with a highly underserved population. Lisa said that though she felt overwhelmed starting the organization, Women's Empowerment has remained relatively financially stable. She added, "We haven't had the ups and downs that other organizations have had."

Lisa described what stood out for her about her year of participation in the ODS program. "One of our priorities was doing a feasibility study about a new area of growth and the second priority was creating a strategic plan. [Our technical support provider] met with the subcommittee of the board, met with key stakeholders and conducted twenty interviews in total. She put together information for a SWOT [Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats] analysis and created a summary of the SWOT analysis. Eventually, the analysis became the foundation of our strategic plan." In addition, Lisa said her provider gave her useful resource information and helped identify a consultant to help with the strategic planning process.

Lisa found the peer component part of the ODS program to be particularly valuable. "When we met as executive directors, it gave us the opportunity to look at other innovative ideas and not reinvent the wheel. Executive directors are expected to be experts. I was reminded that I didn't have to know everything; I just needed to know who to ask." Lisa said she greatly benefitted from the diversity of organizations and executive directors who participated in the program. "We are a small nonprofit, but some of the others were large with lots of staff. Working with organizations of different sizes and capacities allowed me to think ahead. We are not there today, but we may be there in the future. It also reminded me to be flexible and nimble; responsive to our current reality. The program helped us think about where we are today and helped us plan for the future."

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The program also increased the evaluation capacity of Women's Empowerment. According to Lisa, "We implemented the logic model to evaluate current programs as well as to plan for areas of growth and expansion. It gave us checks and balances. We were doing evaluation, but we were doing it in a grassroots way. The logic model gave us a more methodical, logical way to look at things and to see if we were coming up with the same results." Lisa elaborated, "Prior to the ODS program, we had been doing more pre- and post-evaluations. The program helped us look more broadly at different areas – mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence. These were areas we were focusing on, but not measuring. We put together a comprehensive measurement tool and it helped us put into place a longitudinal evaluation process. That has been a major gift from being part of the ODS program – being able to evaluate the true benefit of our program."

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Lisa shared that they are using their logic model and feasibility data to make more informed choices about growth. “We are using the logic model to make strategic decisions. It’s not a knee-jerk reaction to go for the money.” Lisa gave an example, “We have a job readiness program, but we wanted to start doing job placement by building relationships with employers. When we did the feasibility study, we found out that we didn’t have the infrastructure to do it.” Lisa added, “You can will yourself through a whole lot, but there comes a point when it isn’t sustainable to grow in that way. The evaluation tools came at the right time to show us which direction *not* to go in, which was equally valuable. Even though it was the direction we wanted to go in, we weren’t ready. It pointed out to me personally that the case management staff ‘had too many hats for too few heads’.”

Lisa also described how the ODS program affected her as a leader. “The program made me feel more confident and competent as an executive director. The program gave me the opportunity to take a deep breath and see where we’ve been for the last three years and plan for the future. We have been fortunate to have dedicated and committed board members, but the program helped me look at board development from a broad perspective and helped me figure out how to bring people on who could help with growth.”

Lisa described another very important outcome of the ODS program. “In May, we were named Nonprofit of the Year by the Nonprofit Resource Center. One of the criteria was having a strategic plan. We would not even have been considered without a strategic plan which we did through the program.” She also remarked on what the legacy will be for her and her organization from having participated in the ODS program. “I would say the greatest value that we gained were the tools to engage in best practices, and learning not to let the perfect get in the way of the good. Evaluation tools often look daunting. We didn’t have the time and resources to use some of the tools the way they were intended. With the encouragement from folks at the Center, we gave it a try.” Lisa tried not to let not knowing how to use the tools perfectly get in the way of not using them at all. She added, “We have become much more of a learning organization on a board level and a staff level.”

Lisa enthusiastically said she would work with the Center for Civic Partnerships again and described what was most effective about their program. “They work specifically with executive directors in a small cohort. You get information from presenters and from fellow executive directors. The program gives you the opportunity to leave everything at the office and go deeper than the informational level and look strategically.” Lisa shared how she has continued her relationship with the ODS program. “They are very accessible. I finished in 2008 and I’ve called [my technical support provider] several times.” She added, “It’s not just the learning, but putting the learning into practice in very concrete ways.” Lisa shared a story about one of the concrete ways in which she continues to incorporate what she learned in the program into her everyday life. “At the spring gathering of executive directors, we identified next steps. ‘As an ED I commit to the following’ with tasks and dates and I added resources needed. There are probably thirty things that I came up with while I was there. The list is still on my bulletin board and I check on my progress all the time.”