

Policy Manuals: important for NGO management

From Bobby Thomas Cameron, ACIC Individual Associate www.bobbycameron.net

The development and maintenance of policy manuals is important for the management of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), regardless of type or size. Indeed, the research on policy manuals is vast, and a quick Google search on the topic will produce a broad range of best practices, guidelines, and “how to’s” related to writing policies and procedures for your organization. Essentially, this research points to two key important implications related to policy manuals, that is: that policy manuals support maintaining quality operations while also help to mitigate risk (legal, financial, and other). Here is a brief overview of these two important implications.

Quality

- Policy manuals help to set the overarching mission and vision for your organization. As such, strategic policies contained within the manual can help to shape a positive culture for your organization, while also providing a standard for staff to be held accountable to. These types of policies typically focus on the subjective goals of your organization and set the tone for how the organization fulfills its mandate.
- Effective manuals will contain policies and procedures which support staff in providing a standard and consistent service to the clients and communities served. These types of policies provide a “pathway” or measurement which staff can refer to be confident that they are performing their work properly.
- Boards which govern NGOs can ensure quality within the organization it oversees by translating the decisions it makes from meeting minutes into properly authorized policy documents for the organization. In this line of thinking, the board’s collective decisions become working, operational policy documents for the organization, and also serve as a legacy to become a sort of historical memory in document form.

Risk

- It is well-noted in the literature on policy manuals that properly developed and authorized policy documents can

reduce an organization’s legal liability. Properly maintained and reviewed manuals can help to ensure that the practices and operations of an organization are aligned with current legislation and regulation. This is particularly important for NGOs as it relates to activities such as fundraising, accounting, and taxation. Often legislative documents are complex and difficult to operationalize. A policy manual can serve the purpose of “breaking down” the legislation into workable rules, procedures, and standards.

- It is important to note, however, that policies and procedures which have been approved by the organization, and which are not followed, actually increase legal risk (liability) for the organization. Indeed, legal scholars have pointed to the fact that in cases of negligence, such “unfollowed” or ignored policies indicate that the organization has set a standard which it did not achieve. Essentially, advice here is to not include any policy in the organization’s manual which is not followed.
- By having all employees read and sign policy manuals allows the organization to hold staff members accountable to specific standards. The research on policy manuals notes that all new employees should have the opportunity to read and ask questions about the organization’s policies and procedures.

The above points are only a few of the quality and risk implications related to the importance of developing and maintaining policy manuals. As we saw in a recent article in the Ottawa Citizen newspaper titled “NDP Policy Manual Removed from Party’s Website Because ‘It is Not the Platform’: NDP Advisor”, policy manuals continue to maintain importance in the political, management, and social realms. NGOs (and their Boards) can benefit greatly by developing and maintaining a well-researched policy manual.

Further reading:

Johnson, L. (2004). What shouldn’t go in your policy manual. *Medical Economics*, 81 (13), 72