

Personal reflection 2008: Life as an Independent Consultant

Key notes of the story

By the end of 2007, I have been working in the Cambodia development sector (mostly in capacity development field) over 11 years in three different organizations. In November 2007, I have made a big decision for career path, i.e. becoming self employed as "Independent Consultant" for organization development and facilitation of learning. I was hoping that I will have a break to spend times with my kids and have the freedom to work with fewer headaches caused by (senior) managerial functions and responsibilities for many years. 2008 was the first year of my life as an Independent Consultant.



Looking back into that year, I have a very different job from whatever I had in the past with a lot of anxieties, challenges, but also a lot of learning. My friends and colleagues, who used to know me have contacted me for some pieces of work, or referred me to other organizations for capacity development work. I have responded to a range of requests ever since. I have more flexibilities in managing my working times and schedules, for example, taking holidays on Monday or Tuesday and working on Saturday and Sunday instead. I could not meet colleagues on a day-to-day basis (like a full time job), so sometimes I feel lonely sitting in my own office doing the data analysis and reporting. For most consultancy work, I need to be able to understand or have insights into the clients' organizations in a very short period of time so that I can process the next step. This has forced me to do a lot of reading and researching, which implies a great learning experience in return.

Key words of the year

2008, when I refer to the all the work I have undertaken, there are two words that come often to my mind: **learning** and **leadership**. I have observed that so many people said they have been trained, but little changes were made within their organizations. Times constraints were mentioned by most participants as obstacles for learning. On the other hand, participants (or the organizations) seemed to own the approach, for example they phoned or e-mail me requesting a certain service such as training and workshop instead of discussing about their problems or issues before coming to the intervention parts. While some participants wish to explore and analyze in depth to discover something, many others were motivated by certificate and logistic such as handouts. Learning skills (skills to help participants to learn effectively) were also a challenge for NGO participants. Often, participants were struggled to implement their learning at their workplace to make a change as they were stuck and blocked by senior leadership. Some organizations, in which the top leaders (particularly the directors) support the learning implementation, those organizations were able to make change and move forward, but others that leaders did not make the space for their staff to implement initiative and learning, were not able make positive change within their organizations. Some leaders said: why we need to change as we already well funded?

As result, we observed that talent staff have seek employment in other organizations while they faced such leadership issue because they felt they have no power to influence their boss to change, and thus they were unhappy, and so their last reaction was to quit the organization.



The clients

2008 was also interesting for me to work with two participants' groups of lawyers and staff from legal organizations in a long-term Capacity development program (with a series of courses and follow up) sponsored by a donor. The lawyers are so good in challenging, interpreting and debating issues. It was a challenge for me to help lawyers to understand management and organization development, but I was happy to see perception change towards management after working with them over a period of several months¹. Many of them, who were not so friendly to me before, became my good friends and good relationships were built amongst us.

A long-term capacity development project called ICCO Partners Project (IPP)² implemented by VBNK, came to a good closure with a publication documented useful lessons. Initially, I led to implement this project, and after I left, I supported its final stage of the project on consultancy basis. 2008, I was able to work with a volunteering organization, and it was interesting to work with young graduate students, who serve as volunteers on how they enthusiastically serve communities and learn from their activities. However, in Cambodia, volunteering was not yet valued by the society and youths gave their last choice to volunteering work. And, I also have worked with organizations that work to support livelihood, democracy development, child health, land and natural resources protection etc.



The Achievements and some Challenges

My track record 2008 indicated that I have the opportunities to work directly with 505 people (their stakeholders not included), 38 of whom have gone through a training program, which took more than 3 weeks over a period of 5 months, but were counted once. I have worked with people from 37 different organizations, two of which were network organizations with many members

¹ This might remain the challenge if we only provide a one off learning event.

² The project last over 3 years and focused on developing organizational capacity of 18 organizations, who are partners of ICCO. ICCO is a Dutch donor.

from different organizations. The total consultancy days were **194**. Types of the services that I provided were facilitation of organizational development processes, reflection and coaching, organizational and program impact evaluation, and management training.

While some organizations gave me sufficient times to undertake Capacity development activities, some others wanted to get their requests done quickly in a quick fix mode. One NGO gave me 15 days to facilitate a strategic planning process, but one other gave me only 2 days to do it. An international organization requested me to conduct a project evaluation in 9 consecutive days (including weekend and lunch times), and my brain was stop working in the last day.



2008, many people said that I was a busy person. First, I would say it is obviously true as I have on-going work to do, but I wish to make some small correction. Actually, friends and colleagues, who gave me longer notice and plan the activities far in advance ahead, always entered an agreement with me for work, otherwise, responses cannot be made as I have to commit to services agreed, which required me to book sufficient times to ensure proper preparation and contact times so that service quality can be ensured. I strongly believe that I cannot provide high quality service without sufficient preparation times.

My own arrangement and learning

2008, to support my consultancy work, I have built my own working office at home under two mango trees. The office is small, but very professional, i.e. it is equipped with all necessary equipments and materials, and I don't need to pay any rental cost. I was also able to further develop my capacity to manage my own website - this can be also seen as a great achievement for me as I am not an IT person. The purpose of the website is not just to announce the services, but to share insights, experiences, and good practices regarding learning and Capacity development in the Cambodian development sector. 2008, I was also to network with many people working in the Cambodia's development sector. The network has shared me many development stories, resources or useful links to resources.

Conclusions

I have achieved more than expected in the year 2008. It was a successful year as my Independent Consultant life. Doing consistent quality work will help to maintain service requests. It is not true to have more times for personal leisure unless you decide not to take many requests because you already in good financial health. As consultant, we seem having different ways for our own learning. Network is very important for both learning and working. Thanks to all of friends, who always keep in touch and share useful learning with me.

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