

When Help Creates More Work

How a social impact team changed a cycle of rescue and exhaustion

SECTOR

Social impact

ORGANISATION

National education nonprofit working through regional field teams

PARTICIPANTS

Fourteen programme, operations and regional leaders

BUSINESS PRIORITY

Improve field-team ownership while reducing overload at the centre

CARDS USED

The Martyr, The Accomplice, The Pawn and The Rebel

OUTCOME

The team replaced silent rescue with clearer support requests, earlier escalation and shared responsibility for delivery

01 Business context

The organisation had expanded its school programme into three new districts within eighteen months. Regional teams were recruiting facilitators, coordinating with schools and meeting detailed reporting requirements from funders.

When a field team struggled, colleagues at the central office stepped in. They rewrote reports, contacted school leaders, filled staffing gaps and prepared presentations for regional reviews.

The support protected deadlines and kept programmes running. It also increased exhaustion at the centre. Regional managers felt closely monitored and became cautious about reporting early difficulties. Central leaders felt responsible for every gap and increasingly doubtful about the field teams' ability to manage independently.

A two-day planning meeting included a Mirror Deck session on the roles surrounding support and responsibility.

02 How Mirror Deck was used

Participants formed mixed groups of central and regional leaders. Each group selected cards for a recent situation in which support had become difficult.

They mapped the sequence from the first sign of delay to the point at which someone stepped in. For every role, they asked what it contributed, what it protected, what it cost and who relied on it.

The method kept the discussion connected to specific work: a delayed report, an unfilled facilitator position and a school relationship that had begun to weaken.

Participants used recent examples and named the point at which support shifted from useful guidance to taking responsibility for another person's work.

03 The Martyr

Several central leaders chose The Martyr.

They carried additional work because the programme mattered and because missed commitments could affect children, schools and funder confidence. Their willingness to stretch had helped the organisation through rapid expansion.

The card also captured the resentment that followed. Leaders described working late to repair a report and then presenting it as the regional team's work. The deadline was met, while the effort required to meet it remained largely invisible.

The group saw how praise for commitment could reinforce the role. People who rescued the work were seen as dependable. Asking them to continue became easier than addressing the conditions that made rescue necessary.

04 The Pawn and The Rebel

Regional managers placed The Pawn beside The Martyr. They described receiving detailed instructions, revised templates and frequent requests for updates. The support reduced their room to decide how work should be organised locally.

One regional lead selected The Rebel. When central processes felt too slow, she created her own tracking system and negotiated directly with a funder representative. Her initiative solved an immediate reporting problem and created a second process that colleagues struggled to follow.

The two cards showed different responses to limited authority. The Pawn waited and complied. The Rebel created room by moving outside the agreed process. Both responses increased the centre's concern about consistency.

05 The Accomplice

The programme director added The Accomplice.

She recognised that central leaders often discussed regional capability among themselves while avoiding direct conversations with the manager concerned. They corrected the work, protected the relationship and continued the same allocation of responsibility.

Regional teams also participated in the pattern. A manager might wait until a deadline was close before asking for help, knowing that the central team would act quickly to protect delivery.

The card gave both groups a way to discuss how silence and helpfulness sustained the cycle.

06 Actions agreed

The team defined three levels of support. Advice meant that ownership stayed with the regional manager. Joint work required an agreed division of responsibility. Transfer of ownership required a clear decision by the programme director and a review after the deadline.

Regional teams agreed to raise delivery risks when they first became visible and state the support they required. Central leaders agreed to respond with questions and options before taking over the work.

The monthly programme review would include one example of effective support and one example where rescue had displaced ownership.

07 What the session achieved

The session gave the organisation a more accurate account of overload. Pressure at the centre came from rapid growth and from a repeated arrangement in which care, urgency and limited authority reinforced one another.

Mirror Deck allowed central and regional leaders to recognise their contribution to the cycle. The discussion preserved the value of support while making its boundaries clearer.

The team left with a useful test:

“Is this support building the person’s capacity to carry the work, or transferring the work to the person most likely to rescue it?”