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A Few Thoughts on Monitoring & Evaluation

The role of performance measurement in well-run organizations.

Good, hard data is essential to determining what programs are truly successful and should be expanded, and also expose the weaknesses in a project that “everyone loves” – except that it really isn’t getting the job done. Measurement reduces your reliance on ‘gut feeling’ or emotion, and gives a clinical and formal approach for the board and senior staff to move forward. Too often we keep initiatives (that may be expensive, that may not be productive) because ‘we have always done it’ or because it is someone’s pet project. Founders may have this myopia too.

How to prepare for performance measurement: Clarifying your organization’s goals and key activities.

My professor in the Regis University Master of Nonprofit Management (MNM) program called this the challenge of “creating a culture of evaluation.” Part of this refers to getting past the fear that individuals have about having their work measured and counted—even though it is appropriate. Some people don’t like to be held accountable. Some are under-performers and fear being ‘found out’ by evaluation.

Meanwhile, some leaders in our sector categorically reject the idea of measuring intangible value (i.e., something like *building confidence* and *a sense of purpose* with at-risk teens) with “...mere numbers.”

Will employee performance evaluations (and, compensation) be linked to long-term results? If so, you have to assure everyone that the data-gathering will be fair and transparent. Will the data gathering and analysis be unbiased, or, are there “silos” of competing factions or departments within your nonprofit that don’t trust each other and don’t want the process colored by office politics?

Another preparation barrier is, regrettably, money. Often in its founding phase, a nonprofit dreams of affording the staff person to “run” the program. The capacity to measure the program’s long-term effectiveness isn’t usually on the radar at the beginning because you’re focused on getting the services delivered. Then, as the organization grows and matures, measurement rises to awareness--but there may not be a system in place to meet that need.

Finally, does your board fully embrace the culture of measurement—enough to dedicate money and time to it, to base future decisions on it, and to shift strategies if/when peoples’ pet projects or expectations don’t deliver?

How to distinguish between outcomes measures and performance measures.

It’s easy and tempting to get caught up in tallying the number of workshops held, or the number of brochures handed out at a trade show, and so on.

Identifying outcomes and performance measures that are appropriate for your organization. As simple or obvious as it sounds, you must remember to define success on how well your mission is achieved.

Designing a detailed measurement plan.

- Appropriate emphasis—research and evaluation cannot ‘become’ the program.
- Deep enough to be meaningful.
- Independent of any competing interests of board/staff.

See it through: not just “what” but the “so what?”

Stored and useful in the future.

Using performance data to improve your organization’s effectiveness.

- Overall, it supports a climate of transparency and trust.
- Gives purpose and meaning to various program roles, including that of volunteers.
- You can build relationships with the media and funders because your work proves it worth and withstands rigorous review.
- To be clinically honest about what isn’t working.
- To be rational about the “mission vs. money” dilemma..