Results Measurement on Your Own Terms

Results Measurement Can Be Both Effective and Sane

Vanity Metrics and Dysfunction

Duty-bound by some sense that they will be found wanting if they don't do so, each year, countless nonprofits and other social good organizations tally reams of numbers. These are typically numbers of those "reached," whether through access to lifesaving medicines, after-school programs, rehabilitation programs, housing…. the list is as varied as the types of nonprofits out there.

It may seem like a necessary and informative exercise – and certainly, for the ever-present imperative of attracting new funding (or keeping existing funding), measuring these outputs is important. But many such metrics have been called out for what they are – vanity metrics. It is not that tracking the number of activities completed or individuals "reached" isn't important, it is that at best, such numbers are a poor indicator of what change is really happening. At worst they create and communicate a false sense of accomplishment that can thwart innovation and problem-solving.

A Saner Course

It doesn't have to be this way. Yes, your organization may feel hemmed in by donor requirements on reporting and results measurements, but you can set a saner course. It starts with accepting that the primary reason for social good organizations to gather data is in order to understand the kind of changes they are contributing to, and to adapt their work accordingly. Secondarily, it is important to share these results with donors and other supporters as a means of being accountable to them for their support. Not least of all, it is also important to share these results with focus communities and populations.

Equipped with this mindset, you can then use developments in the philanthropy and evaluation and results measurement space to your advantage. Such developments include:

- **Racial Reckoning in Evaluation** – As with so many other disciplines, a racial reckoning is shedding light on ways in which the practice of evaluation privileges certain viewpoints, analytic and epistemic lenses, and people groups. Whose opinions count, who sets metrics and how change is measured are all being reassessed, as this reckoning unfolds. Consider for example, the Equitable Evaluation Initiative which has created an Equitable Evaluation Framework to uproot inequity and embed equity within evaluation practice.

- **Trust-based Evaluation** – An initiative of the Trust-based Philanthropy Project, a growing trust-based evaluation movement is being organized around this question:

    What if we reimagined evaluation as an opportunity for funders to learn and evolve as stewards, rather than taking on the narrow–and virtually impossible–task of proving that limited grants

- **(In)appropriate Application of Impact Evaluation**
  There is growing recognition that impact evaluation – though necessary for providing rigorous evidence on the comparative good of interventions – is costly, difficult to administer, and often unnecessary. Alternatives to evaluation can be pursued in some cases; for example, where there is already evidence about the viability of a given approach, or where it is cost-prohibitive or otherwise impossible to do impact evaluation well.[1][2]

Setting the Terms of a More Effective (and Saner) Course

Armed with the above knowledge, as a social good organization, you can negotiate ongoing or upcoming requirements with funders, fundraising departments and relationship managers through the following tips:

- **Shift your focus towards [Measuring What Matters](#)** —An important step for the organization is to determine what's important to measure. For this purpose, Measuring What Matters, a consultation paper created by Candid, the Global Fund for Community Foundations, and Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace, can be an invaluable guide. The extensive consultation process yielded the conclusion that grassroots organizations consistently favor local assets, capacities and trust as social goods that are important to appraise. Several existing methods lend themselves well to assessing these values. Just a few examples are [Ripple Effect Mapping](#), [Outcome Harvesting](#), and [Creative Monitoring and Evaluation](#). In addition, many [innovative tools and technologies for MEL](#) exist for data gathering and sensemaking.
- **Extend an invitation to funders** — Draw them into a learning conversation and journey with the premise that social change is complex to execute and understand, and that funders have a valuable perspective that can increase understanding. Leverage the Trust-based Philanthropy Project's admonition that funders can and should learn alongside their grantees.
- **Create a compelling case –** Explain how doing less of what doesn't matter to the organization (because it doesn't lead to the kinds of insights that drive effective programming) frees up time and energy to go after more valuable results measurement.
- **Demonstrate how you are measuring innovation –** This can help organizations innovate more effectively and set themselves apart. Use our curated list of [measurement tools for innovation](#) as a resource.

Need help undertaking any of the above? Contact us at info@ignitedword.com

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[1] Mary Kay Gugerty & Dean Karlan, "Measuring Impact Isn't for Everyone," Stanford Social Innovation Review, April 2, 2014, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/measuring_impact_isnt_for_everyone

[2] Mary Kay Gugerty & Dean Karlan, "Ten Reasons Not to Measure Impact – and What to Do Instead," Stanford Social Innovation Review, Summer 2018, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/ten_reasons_not_to_measure_impact_and_what_to_do_instead