Outcomes - Creating a Focus on Results

The focus on program results or outcomes is a valuable component of determining program and organizational success. But measuring results is still more of an art than a science. It requires patience and persistence as you develop the metrics for measuring your nonprofit's success.

Volume, or the number of clients whom you serve, is no longer enough. As you begin to create measurements that focus on results, ask yourself questions such as: *Did we make anything better or different? Are we collecting data that demonstrates success — or do we rely on anecdotal stories? Does our database provide statistics on success or client demographics?*

The Leadership Group has created a list of some common DOs and DON'Ts for transitioning to results measurement:

- **Do** recognize that most measurement is only an approximation of whether the results have been achieved. Very few nonprofit endeavors lend themselves to concrete and accurate measurement.
- **Do** maintain a focus on *valued* results over *easily measurable* ones. Finding the right or best measurement for determining whether someone is better off may require several attempts and research. Analyze what you should be measuring above and beyond the *easy* measurements with which most funders are familiar. Enhance your data by adding *valued* results.
- **Do** invest in a flexible database. Customized software programs often seem like great options, but they can be difficult and expensive to upgrade or change. Off-the-shelf database software is more user friendly than ever and can be modified fairly easily.
- **Do** invest in training several staff as database experts and keep them involved. Losing the only staff member who knows how to use the software can be disastrous.
- **Do** budget for upgrades and changes if you ultimately decide to use a customized program that meets your current needs. This is never a one time investment in software.
- **Do** leave room for client follow up. *Valued* results are rarely achieved during the service. Real outcome measures don't easily fit a grant cycle and necessitate follow-up at reasonable intervals (sometimes it can be months, in other situations it can take years).

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- **Don't** forget to analyze the data on a regular basis, with the minimum being quarterly. After all, why bother collecting data if you don't use if for program refinement, tracking trends, or identifying data collection problems? End of year or end of grant data review is too late to fix problems or correct errors.

- **Don't** collect useless or arbitrary data you don't need. Many nonprofits just add new data elements without evaluating whether existing data is meaningful/useful. This results in staff frustration, wasted time and muddy data sets. Intake and data collection forms should not be sacred documents. An annual review of forms should be the norm. Delete data fields from old grants that are no longer required. Partial data can cause problems down the line even though it feels good to get it in the system and off your desk.

- **Don't** summarize or lump information into groupings. Each funder has its unique set of ranges (age, income and test scores are common examples). Enter the specific value and use reports to customize how it is presented. Create needed ranges on reports, not at the point of data entry.

- **Don't** confuse volume with results. The number served, attendance, and client demographics are indicators of volume, not outcomes. They are important to track, but are not sufficient. Serving more people but rarely reaching the desired result is a waste of scarce resources.

The Leadership Group specializes in creating outcome-based measurements and an internal culture that supports ongoing evaluation. We work with your board of directors, staff and funders to develop mission-based outcomes that are measurable and valued as well as your internal systems to manage data in a way that makes the best use of scarce staff time while also identifying client trends that can impact success.

To discuss how The Leadership Group can help your organization, contact us at 609.392.4872 or regina@leadershipgroup.info.

The Leadership Group's Difference

With over 15 years in the nonprofit consulting arena, The Leadership Group is uniquely positioned to provide and enhance strategic planning, strategic governance, and strategic leadership of nonprofit organizations. Our consulting services are provided by people who have years of experience in the nonprofit sector. We know what it takes to meet the everyday demands of funders and clients while also looking towards the future - maximizing opportunities and addressing challenges.

Regina Podhorin, founder and president, is a thought leader in the nonprofit field and is a sought after speaker. To learn more about The Leadership Group, visit www.leadershipgroup.info.