

Rise Research

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Helping Social Service Organizations Use Data to Make Decisions

Social service organizations - public and nonprofit organizations that provide services in support of community wellbeing - are often expected to use data to make decisions. Yet many such organizations lack the capacity (and sometimes the will) to do so. In a dynamic and changing world, this represents a lost opportunity. Data use can help organizations adapt their programs, operations, and strategies to changing community needs, identify emergent issues, and craft innovative solutions. In this Research Bite, we synthesize research on data use in public and nonprofit organizations to provide funders and organizational leaders with practical tools for supporting data-driven decisionmaking in social service organizations.

Research suggests that to promote the use of evidence in public and nonprofit organizations, funders and organizational leaders should incentivize activities that encourage learning as well as those that enable the collection and reporting of data.

Collecting or using data?

There is a robust literature on data use in public and nonprofit organizations. This literature finds that over the past several decades, social service organizations have increasingly used data to assess their performance, understand operations, and evaluate programs.

For many social service organizations, however, data collection and reporting is required by external stakeholders for the purposes of accountability and compliance. For example, a state agency might report the average cost of a service to a legislative body to demonstrate appropriate use of public funds. A nonprofit might report the number of individuals served to a funder to ensure that a program is effectively serving its target population.

As a result, data collection doesn't always mean data use (Bryan et al. 2021). Data collection may simply be a requirement - and can even have contradictory effects. Research suggests that within nonprofit organizations, coercive pressures to evaluate programs can have the unintended consequence of devaluing such activities when staff experience them as punitive or as taking scarce resources away from other services (Carman 2011).

The importance of organizational learning

Organizational learning is a concept that goes beyond the mere collection and reporting of data and relates to an organization's ability and willingness to use data to improve performance (Moynihan and Landuyt 2008). Learning organizations engage in "an iterative process of designing (or planning), performing, reflecting upon, and modifying human actions..." (See Umar and Hassan 2019 for a review). Data use is an integral part of learning about programs, operations, and organizational strategy. Learning is evident when organizations seek out better ways to deliver services or reflect on past mistakes and change behaviors or processes in order to improve.

What factors are associated with organizational learning?



Research shows that there are many factors associated with learning in public and nonprofit organizations, as well as larger debates about the relative importance of structural versus cultural influences on learning (see Derrick-Mills et al. 2014 for a review). Across studies, some of the most important factors include a learning culture, resources, leadership, and learning forums.

Learning culture. Organizational learning is more likely to happen when there is an internal culture that values and rewards learning activities - what researchers call a 'learning culture' or 'learning climate' (Derrick-Mills et al 2014; Mitchell and Berlan 2018). An organization with a learning culture might encourage staff to engage in data collection to assess service delivery, or it might institute shared spaces for staff to reflect on data - whether good or bad - and make organizational changes accordingly.

Resources. There is general consensus that organizations need resources to collect, analyze, and use data. Resources can help staff build analytical capacity and support technological needs. Studies show that nonprofits are more likely to engage in evaluation activities if they possess technical resources such as databases or dashboards as well as staff competencies related to evaluation knowledge and skills (Bryan et al. 2021). Similarly, in public organizations, research shows that resources and information systems are positively related to an organization's ability to collect and use data to improve performance (Moynihan and Landuyt 2008).

Leaders. Research on public organizations shows that transformational leaders - those who are respected and trusted by staff, create shared visions and goals, and foster innovation - can facilitate data use by clarifying organizational goals and establishing a learning culture within the organization (Moynihan et al 2012). Leadership is also important because leaders can direct staff time and resources towards building staff analytical capacity, model the use of data to assess performance, and reward staff for their use of data for improvement purposes (Derrick-Mills et al 2014).

Learning Forums. Learning forums are formal organizational routines in which staff members talk about data as a team and together reflect on what the data mean for action. Examples of learning forums include benchmarking practices, after-action reviews, and work groups that involve the examination and discussion of data. Learning forums are likely to be a particularly important component of organizational learning: one study found that the presence of learning forums had a large and statistically significant association with learning - surpassing even resources and technological infrastructure (Moynihan and Landuyt 2008).

Finally, it is important to note that organizational learning requires continuous effort, as staff cycle through a process that involves setting goals, collecting and analyzing data, and using data to take action.

Practical Implications

To promote data use in social service organizations, funders and organizational leaders can incentivize activities that encourage learning as well as those that enable data collection and analysis, recognizing that the ability to collect and report data does not always mean that organizations are using data to support decision making.

Specifically, funders and organizational leaders can:

- Provide resources to build analytic capacity in staff, invest in data collection/management tools, and support ongoing technical assistance;
- Model the collection and use of data to assess or change behavior across levels of an organization;
- Create space to reflect and learn from data rather than impose penalties when data show a need for improvement;
- Incentivize or reward learning behaviors in addition to reporting behaviors;
- Embed learning forums (team meetings that involve data reflection, work groups, after-action reviews) in ongoing program operations; and
- Invest in cross-organizational learning forums, such as communities of practice.

If funders want to foster organizational learning climates, they should reward nonprofits that have continuous learning processes and can demonstrate how their learning has positively influenced programs and practices.” (Bryan et al. 2021)

Works Cited

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