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How to Establish a Data Management Baseline within the Human Services Industry

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Abstract

Growing data management capacity can be a real challenge in the human services field. Most agencies have basic information, such as the number of clients served, number of communities supported, and number of partnerships. However, some organizations lack a cohesive way of collecting more detailed data, which leads to each program having different information or a lack of accurate information. Because there is a lack of industrywide standards when it comes to what data is important and how to collect it, KenCrest CEO and President Marian Baldini created a tool that human services organizations can use to determine their baseline and take their capacity to the next level. Baldini explains and shares the tool to chart an agency's course.

Introduction

Founded in 1905, KenCrest is a human services organization that supports more than 12,500 children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities at over 350 locations in southeastern Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Delaware. The organization also provides early childhood learning at our seven Early Learning Centers in Philadelphia, PA. KenCrest's mission is to support community development by exploring possibilities, mobilizing resources, and empowering dreams. Services provided include:

- Early Intervention in community- and home-based settings
- Early Learning services including Head Start for economically disadvantaged children with or without special needs, Early Head Start, Pre-K, before- and after-school programs, and summer programs
- Supports for adults with intellectual disabilities including community engagement, supported independence, lifesharing, group homes, and other specialized supports
- Employment Services providing career opportunities for people with disabilities.

As leaders, we work hard to help our organizations grow stronger to meet future challenges, especially the repeating challenge of adequate funding. In recent years, we have heard of possible new funding approaches like value-based payment, a method which ties economic value to achievements, are being piloted around the country. The pursuit of payment for quality became a primary focus in health and related services after the passing of the Affordable Care Act, and setting goals for value became an opportunity.[1]

As we look to how we might get ready to be held accountable to new standards, one of the best investments an organization like KenCrest can make is measurement capacity. Measurement capacity can improve decision-making and engage the entire organization in creative problem solving by being clear about what needs work.

Building measurement capacity needs to start with an agency's current measurement practices. An organization must determine what is in place and what must be established. One of the best things I found in graduate school was the use of tools, but I could not find a tool to assess measurement capacity. As a result, I created one, used it, made it public at a national conference, received feedback, and improved it. Now, I offer this tool and suggestions for use regarding the final score.

This measurement capacity tool has seven dimensions. A maximum score of 35 is possible. The tool will yield both a score and a set of opportunities. Each dimension will be defined, and then some practical wisdom will be applied to assess scoring. It is useful to do this assessment for each program, where a program is defined as a set of activities or supports for a single outcome. It is rare to find the same scores for two programs.

For each program, the user assesses each dimension. Then at the agency level, senior leaders create the big picture to determine next steps.

Category	1	2	3	4	5	Score
Data	Collects requirements only	Process measures are collected, some just for a specific project	Outputs are recorded but not reported, process measures routinely used	Process and outputs are measures and used	Outcomes are measured, and leading and lagging information are available	
Data Integrity	Data is recorded with no validation	Software drop downs or other features minimize errors	Supervisors evaluate validity of data	Internal audits are conducted manually	Data is assessed with software tools	
Data management	Collection is manual	Collection uses an off the shelf product like Microsoft Excel	Multiple software applications are used	Multiple systems are used and integrated	Data is warehoused for BI use	
Extent of data use	Data is reported at least annually	Internal dashboards or reports are used intermittently	Data is used at least monthly to support action plans	Data supports external marketing, grant apps, advocacy	Data is mined for trends, business development, performance analytics	
Research capacity	Descriptive narratives are prepared	Presentations use charts and graphs	Process improvement projects use data to quantify results	Research on evidenced based models applied to outputs and outcomes	Publication, professional presentations, or ROI	
Employee Engagement	Less than half of staff can report a metric	Some data is published and reported to staff	Task groups have been used to process or improve performance	R and R for improvement is documented	All employees have goals which are measurable and stretch performance	
Built in	Regulation compliance reporting is built in, routine and easy to access	Software is adapted before the metric is needed	Process metric management is prepared in advance of a new process	External use is planned in advance	Building evaluation "in" is routine.	

The chart above was created by Marian Baldini to measure data capacity and score an organization's current ability to obtain information important to the agency.

The Dimensions of the Scale

Data: Types of Data Being Collected

Most agencies in the human services field start with collecting only what is required by external funders or boards. We have yet to widely agree upon or expect accountability standards. A common next step is to measure something that needs to be improved, such as something related to risk, revenue, or reward. Over time, we will start to measure client progress. For example, we may count the number of clients who finish a course or complete a specific number of sessions which are correlated to success. These outputs are important on the way to success, and this data is more easily tracked. The next normal path will include routine measurement of key processes and progress. Many of us stop at this point, but the next big step will require us to wrestle with the definition of outcome. We must ask if there is a terminal place, a place where service is no longer needed, and whether there is some other valued status when we can say the client's goal is met.

Data Integrity: Checking the Accuracy and Reliability of the Data

Many organizations start by believing that the data they see is accurate, but no special process is used to verify the data. One of those age old questions is how many people do we serve. Most agencies can easily count the number who get each service. Few can get a reliable, unduplicated count for people served in a given year. As agencies started using software, it became possible to create directions with definitions and those definitions can lead to drop-down menus. Those menus make recording easier and likely more accurate. Fee-for-service billing raises up the next level of information integrity, as supervisory staff provided an extra check on data accuracy. Compliance programs take performance assessment to the next level by having someone independent of the department or area run checks for accuracy. In the most sophisticated organizations, software has been engaged to determine if there are patterns which are unlikely or even impossible. For example, software can validate that two services are not recorded for the same client at the same time.

Data Management: Methods of Collecting the Information

Data management for all agencies started with manual collection. Users of this tool should consider how their data storage has evolved. Typically different departments of an agency purchase software for some key business need, such as payroll or billing as stand-alone, department-specific tools. Agencies evolve to add more and may enter the same data into more than one system. The interfacing of data comes later as time saving and data integrity needs to grow. Long term, there will be substantial benefits from data warehousing, a way to store and retrieve data from multiple systems.

Extent of Data Use: Use of the Data, How Often, and For What Reason

Most organizations report some basic data to the public annually. Typically those numbers include the total number of clients served, number of employees, and dollars raised. As data management evolves, reports on performance become part of departmental reporting—some shared across the organization, some shared just within the department. Measures like staff turnover are fairly common, as well as average case load size. As data use grows, we start to incorporate baseline data and performance improvement data in regular staff meetings. The

nature of the data improves to the point where we recognize the value in external marketing and advocacy work. At the highest order, we have purposeful data which we should reference regularly to help with planning and predicting future needs.

Research Capacity: **Answering Action Research Questions**

We engage in social experiments every day when we run an organization, but we don't often think to collect and document related data. This dimension starts with the easiest step in our data handling, which is just descriptive—a narrative about what we do. A common next step is a graphic, chart, or visualization of some kind. Once we start to use data to describe processes, we will then use data to implement a change in a process and measure improvement. As we expand our capacity to measure, we can also look at clinical outcomes that assess trying to match or improve upon learning which was done elsewhere in the field. Since most of us are not primarily research organizations, we can contribute to the human services field and our own reputation by publishing results for internal or external audiences.

Employee Engagement: How Employees Engage with Data in Daily Work

Data comes alive when staff are engaged and use it. Most of us will start with common data about the organization known and reported by employees. The usual metrics of number of people served, number of communities supported, or number of partnerships would be commonly known information. Many agencies will publish their data in newsletters or annual reports. Once data ~~on~~ processes are developed, larger groups of staff will know details about an aspect of performance and be able to use that data in their work. As we work to build a culture of measurement, we have opportunities to recognize or reward employees for performance achieved, especially when their work improves the bottom line. The highest performance on this dimension is when all employees know their own data, and each employee can state how they are contributing to organizational results by using data.

Built In: Employing Methods to Make Measurement Part of Normal Operations

Planning for data makes it easier to obtain. Most planning starts with data needed for compliance. As we progress through our opportunities, we look for ways to capture data we need in one of our software tools. The next logical step in building data occurs when the value of data is recognized on some process. That data supports short-term decisions and becomes part of the everyday work. A great place to start is with current service referrals; simply measure the time from date of referral to start. The value of that work can inspire staff to think through the data needed for a new process in the organization, making that consideration part of normal work life. Having more data on customer service, outputs, or efficiency means an agency can build that in to their external use of data for contracting or marketing. Lastly, when we create a new service, we think through all the data we expect to use and create the methods, storage, and uses of that data from Day 1 of the program or service.

How to Interpret Scoring

Score range	Assessment	Suggestion
7-14	Great starting place	There are some good first steps underway, and it's time to create a plan to expand the vision with a multi-year initiative. Consider a measurement capacity team or champion model. This program will likely need 2-3 years to reach maturity with support
15-21	Measurement is catching on	Some solid progress has been made, and managers should now be seeing the reason to measure. It is time to recognize achievement and inspire continued achievement as the model advances.
22-28	Measurement is culture	It's time to be mindful of what is being created and how to sustain achievement over time. Consider how measurement is reflected in job descriptions, meeting agenda, and planning work.
29-35	Measurement has matured	Congrats! It is time to use data to plan long term, conduct advocacy, and influence the field!

Conclusion

Creating this data management baseline reveals an agency's opportunities. Whether taking the approach to improve at the program level or taking an agency-wide view, an organization will be able to see where it started then chart and measure its progress. When an agency is transparent in sharing these scores, some healthy internal competition for quality will be created.

References

1. Sylvia Burwell, "Setting Value Based Payment Goals-HHS Efforts to Improve US Health Care," *New England Journal of Medicine* 372, no. 10 (Jan 2015): 897-899.