



The Muddle of Outcome Measurement

Be careful how you measure programs.

BY BRUCE GLASRUD

Once, nonprofits validated their efficacy chiefly through “glory stories”—anecdotes of successes with clients. As nonprofits became more businesslike, their method of satisfying funders became the “McDonald’s school” of quantitative measurement—some sort of “billions served” model. Despite all that reporting, many social problems still seem intractable.

Let’s face it: Society’s traditional remedy for social problems is the quick fix. To relieve people’s anxiety about social change, nonprofits are under pressure from funders to apply qualitative, outcome-based assessment measures to their missions and methods. This new stepchild of the “McDonald’s school” of measurement essentially proposes that the burger first be served—and then tracked through the customer’s digestive cycle.

Part of the push for outcome-based accountability comes from the corporate mindset that has been sweeping over the funder community. This trend is not all bad. Eventually it may help root out entrenched inefficiencies and outmoded notions in the nonprofit sector. At the same time, an industrial business plan for, say, manufacturing widgets or developing software is much more straightforward than a plan for engineering

social and human change. Human subjects and social systems are less malleable than steel and silicon.

The McDonald’s corporation still measures its success through those “billions served” sales figures. In the corporate sector, such measurements do show customer satisfaction with the product. In the nonprofit sector, however, measuring human and societal outcomes is much dicier than almost any assessment required in the business sector.

There have been many articles here in *Nonprofit World* and elsewhere dealing with outcome assessment. On the surface, it seems a good tool to help funders see what bang they’re getting for their buck. For nonprofits themselves, a better connection between their inputs and results is useful for planning. Yet, what nonprofits and their funders have placed into practice may set up forces counterproductive to their goals of benefitting the community.

Outcome-based evaluation is an uncertain affair even in the largest nonprofit organization with funds for evaluation staff, data-crunchers, complicated survey tools, and the like. Such a labor-intensive process draws precious resources away from service delivery. And even with sufficient resources and evaluation systems in place, what is measured isn’t always what needs measuring. Without ade-

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quate grounding in research sciences, many nonprofits have trouble coming to terms with what outcome is actually produced by their program or service.

By definition, an outcome is a response variable. This response must be directly linked to an actual program stimulus or to a specific intervention. Many nonprofits show a large cognitive gulf between their program’s stimulus or intervention and how they track and measure their response or outcome. They seem to be saying that the way they’re going to produce their desired outcome of, say, a bushel of apples will be to plant and fertilize an orange tree!

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Many funders are just as confused. One example was posted on the United Way of America's Web site—as a good example to follow, no less. It concerned a nonprofit program to help elderly citizens continue living in their own homes. The program interventions and services were well stated in the illustration. That's usually the easier part anyway. When it came to measuring the desired outcome, the metrics became muddled. The stated outcome was to keep elderly persons in their own homes and out of nursing homes. To measure this outcome, the organization periodically phoned local nursing homes and asked whether their bed census was up or down. The holes in this theory are almost too numerous to mention, but let's consider the major glitches:

- A nursing home's census may fluctuate independently of any program. People who haven't participated in the nonprofit's program may be admitted to the home.
- Participants in the nonprofit's program may be admitted due to ill health or other factors extraneous to the program's services.
- Deaths and discharges may drastically change the nursing home's census.

A much better outcome measurement is at this nonprofit's fingertips. A simple telephone call to program participants would yield much more useful outcome data:

- The elderly clients can say with absolute accuracy whether they're at home or in a nursing home.
- Interviewing clients directly will yield other useful feedback. After all, *real* program outcomes are what clients say they are, not what the nonprofit organization maintains they are.

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- Clients will appreciate that friendly call about their welfare much more than the put-upon nursing home employees appreciate an interrogation into their business cycles.

You pay
through the nose for
short-lived shows.

You might think that a futurist would view outcome assessment as a future oriented practice. Not so. The problem with most current outcome measurement is that it is geared to the need for immediate gratification. That need has tainted those who fund our human and social service systems—and *what* sort of programs and services they fund.

Witness our attempts to paste together idealized family structures, to resuscitate obsolete educational systems, to connect youth with synthetic mentoring relationships. Such programs can be attributed to funders' nostalgia for the past, anxiety about the future, and affinity for quick fixes. This state of affairs isn't improved by those nonprofits that jump on practically any fundable bandwagon—mission related or not.

On the other side of the spectrum from the bandwagon nonprofits are the freethinkers. They share these common traits:

- They are seriously invested in research and development.
- They're not afraid to stick their necks out to do rigorous experimentation and critical evaluation—even if that means disproving their "pet" theories and solutions.

- They are searching for new methods and better practices to fit a new era.

For all our talk of "building for the future," it is the bandwagon nonprofits rather than the freethinkers who usually get the greater funding.

Outcome-based assessment is an artifact left over from the industrial age. It rests on four engineering assumptions:

- All human or social system behaviors can be deconstructed into independent step-functions.
- Analysis of step-functions is the method for gaining knowledge of effectiveness.
- Step-functions are the vehicle to induce the preferred change.
- One step-function fits all.

With no ability to track social or human change over time, many nonprofits have no choice but to abridge their programs down to short, step-function systems. This connect-the-dots approach merely provides a way to show accomplishment of short-term goals. It also reinforces an already short-term future view. In a medical analogy, it focuses not on the patient's overall well-being but on how efficiently the band-aid is placed.

Let's build
for the long term.

Outcome measurement won't produce future-positive results until we examine our program or service before we worry about step-function outcomes. Here are some places to initiate some forethought:



Selected Resources

Glasrud, Bruce, "Being Proactive Means Being Pro-Future," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 5

Glasrud, Bruce, "Your Future Just Walked in the Door—Or Out of It," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 4

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, 608-274-9777, Ext. 221, www.danenet.org/snpo.

- **Examine every proposed solution** in the context of the total social system in which it will function. Otherwise, it may lead to a worse problem or have no effect at all.
- **In evaluating a proposed program, look** not only at its postulated outcomes but also its emotional, cultural, and symbolic effects. What good does it do to empower your client population if it exacerbates the underlying deficiencies intrinsic to the overall social system?
- **The more desirable a proposed solution appears, the more questions you should ask** and the more suspicious you should be of adopting it. Beloved "pet" theories and solutions born of an earlier decade should be the most suspect.

- **Commit to the hard work of tracking outcomes** over an entire social system and a long-term horizon.
- **Move toward a system** that rewards research and development instead of rehashes of failed solutions.
- **Remember that most individual and social problems have developed over time.** They're unlikely to be counteracted by fixes measured at the end of a funding cycle.

The long view is the future view. Let's renegotiate with our funding community to give outcome-based evaluation the long-term option. Then, let's agree among ourselves to give real collaboration a chance in a social system-wide effort that is guided by research and development, not by reaction and rehash. Wouldn't those be excellent outcomes? ■



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