Bringing Data Home

Data Matters

Data is the lifeblood of our economy. Whether seeking funding, engaging community members, or planning a public works project, data is necessary. The challenge for municipalities is that the internet in general and the massive investment from major tech companies into mobile technology has led many to believe data should be readily available to answer any question.

Data Is Getting Easier To Collect

While collecting and dealing with data is challenging, meeting citizen and consumer expectations is becoming easier. Some data collection tools like internet-connected sensors attached to everything from trash cans to street lights can be expensive; however, basic tools for implementing online surveys or visualizing data are often inexpensive or free! If you need to figure out what trash cans are used the most, those sensors may be worth your money. For many situations, local officials probably do not need to go this far.

Plan Ahead For Collection And Analysis

Instead of beginning a massive investment in a data collection and an analysis system, start simple to build capacity over time. This may seem like a tedious process but laying out all the steps will help you measure your work. Pick one thing to measure. If you have an important goal for your community, start with a single, desired outcome on the path to achieve that goal. Next, list the resources that will contribute to implementing that activity and achieving that goal; list the specific activities you will undertake; and list the desired measurable outcomes.

Double- and triple-check your assumptions before you invest resources in the activity and try to find good evidence supporting the assertion that the activity will lead to the desired outcome. It is important to make sure that the money intended for this activity be spent in a way it is intended. Watch for grant funds that may have very specific restrictions or reporting requirements.

Break outcomes into short, medium- and long-term goals to better focus data gathering and analysis efforts. This planning will help you gather the appropriate information, instead of gathering all information. Check to make sure the data being gathered can be analyzed with the tools you have available. You do not want to buy some really cool sensors only to later discover the data analysis requires extensive consulting time, advanced technology or specialized software.

Finally, make sure to train everyone involved in the process to be sure data is collected consistently. Differences in survey questions, for example, can change the responses and make it difficult or incorrect to compare the data.

Understand The Data

After setting goals and collecting information, it is important to analyze, reflect and react. Watch for trends. A single data point collected at a single point in time may not reveal much, and trends over a few data points could be completely random. Looking at data over several weeks, months or years can help determine whether outcomes are headed in the desired direction. With some basic trends you can start testing different policy or programmatic changes to test what happens.

Proving whether or not a program or activity is accomplishing the goal is more complicated, but it can be done. If you find reliable, scientific evidence indicating your activity should lead to the desired outcome, track to ensure it is working correctly. If it is not, talk to the people engaged in implementation to find the breakdown.

It is important at this stage to reflect on the data and any predictive models that may have been created. Data never speaks for itself and never tells the complete story. Instead, we use data to create and support stories. Does the data seem right? Does it fit the theory of how a program or activity is supposed to work? If something does not seem right, it may not be! On that same note, do not doubt information just because it does not fit expectations. Use the data to keep a conversation going.
A Simple Customer Service Initiative

Creating a project around improving customer service is a great place to start work with data. Improving the citizen customer experience can make the community happier and more engaged. There are a wealth of satisfaction surveys available to draw from to create a survey of your own, and there are open source (free!) tools to help implement surveys.

Start with a survey of your community to determine where there are pain points in interactions with local government; make some adjustments around those points; and survey again to evaluate any changes. It may take some time for changes in activities to reflect changes in attitudes, but the pace of such a shift should not deter you from tracking and measuring those changes.

From this simple survey data, staff can begin to create a body of knowledge and experience regarding data collection and analysis. The processes of planning, developing, implementing, analyzing, and adjusting can be replicated across many activities and will become easier as it becomes routine.

Do you have an incentive program for businesses? Step back and check if the incentives lead to the desired outcomes. Are you spending time writing grants? Gather up some information and check to see if that investment of staff time is leading to positive outcomes or burning time.

No matter what you are doing, citizens expect to see data demonstrating tax-dollar investments that lead to productive outcomes. There is no reason to shy away from this expectation. Instead, follow some simple and consistent steps across all activities to make data collection and analysis part of your routine.

Dave Overfelt is a consultant and analyst at Kolibri Associates where he evaluates programs and processes to help teams make better decisions. With experience across diverse industries, Dave has helped many teams improve the organization and execution of their day-to-day activities by focusing on understanding their work and their data. He can be reached at Dave.L.Overfelt@gmail.com.

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