Recruiting: You Need to Know What You Need to Know —by Mike B. Logan

In his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni lists inattention to results as the ultimate dysfunction of a team because it allows team “members to care about something other than the collective goals of the group.” He goes on to say, “Every good organization specifies what it plans to achieve in a given period, and these goals... make up the majority of near-term, controllable results.”

We don't often think of the importance of results in the healthy function and cohesion of a team, but they are the central factor in unifying the energy focus of your organization. Don't miss, however, that it is not just the projection of a goal that matters; the results of our efforts toward achieving that goal are what really matter in the performance of a team. It is impossible to pay attention to results without a means to accurately measure how close you are to achieving them.

I don't believe we have faced a time in the foster care industry in which the effectiveness of recruitment strategies was more critical. We need to be innovative and focused in reaching new families so that we can keep up with the growing placement needs. The greatest challenge with innovation, however, is that the ideas that fuel it are speculative. We think that a particular idea will work, but we don't know for sure. 

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Sometimes that unknown will keep agencies from attempting anything other than what they have historically done, remaining unwilling to spend limited resources on untested ideas.

Whether you find yourself relying on history or ready to run with innovation in your recruiting efforts, you cannot bypass the vital process of measurement.

The Irreplaceable Importance of Measurement

Two important questions guide any successful organization: If something is working, how can we get better results from that activity? And, if something is not working, why are we still doing it? Both questions are pretty simple, and the logic behind them is simple as well. However, you can’t begin to answer either question until you accurately know something about your results. How do you know if something is really working or not?

Organizations often make the mistake of using anecdotal data in their decision making. We used to be happy with reports that said, “It felt like we made some good connections at the fair last week” or “I think we get at least a couple calls a month from our ad in the phone book.” Feelings and impressions are like good intentions—sometimes they produce something wonderful, but sometimes they mean nothing. In order to move beyond anecdotes, we have to find accurate ways to measure the results of what we do.

The agency I lead fell into that anecdotal trap, and when I asked for the first level of measurement (a multimonth net gains and losses in foster homes), the data showed that we had fallen from a high of 72 homes to 54. The impact of this decline was visible in far more tangible ways than what a graph can show. We were unable to take new placements, we didn’t have the ability to provide adequate respite, and everyone on my staff was feeling the pressure. We could have blamed a lot of things; we had plenty of anecdotal theories about why we were where we were, but this first level of measurement showed us what was really happening.

We set out on the path to discover the reason behind the results and got intentional about our recruiting process. We set a goal at the beginning of 2014 to grow the number of homes from 54 to 80 by the end of that year. We met...
that goal, which is a growth rate of well over 40%, by taking an intentional, strategic approach to recruitment and then measuring everything we did.

Measure Everything!

Once you are convinced about the need to measure your results, you must then decide what to measure. My simple answer: Everything!

Here’s a list of the things we measure all the time:

1. How many referrals are we receiving?
   This number establishes the baseline for all other forms of measurement. This number also can be used to set future goals for search engine optimization (SEO) professionals, TV and print advertisers, and agency recruiters.

2. Where are our referrals coming from?
   Sometimes you are so grateful for the calls you receive from prospective foster parents that you forget to ask the basic question, “How did you come to contact us?” We give incentives to existing foster parents for referrals, run 30-second advertisements on local television, set up booths at fairs and community events, and invest money in website content and SEO services. I need to know how many referrals are coming from each of those sources so I can adjust budget dollars up or down and determine which ones to put more energy toward and what should be eliminated.

   Through this measurement I know exactly where our referrals come from in a specific quarter. I found that our website was producing more referrals than any other source. Those data helped me make the decision to hire a service to revamp our website and set up SEO protocols to get our website ranked higher in Google searches. Second to the website was staff and existing foster parent referrals. Using these numbers, we know where to invest energy and money in successive quarters.

3. What is the difference in the quality of referrals?
   We follow the entire process because not all referrals are equal in quality. For example, potential families referred by existing foster parents could be of better quality than potential families who attend a fair or an event. The quality is determined by conversions. The only way to know that is to measure how many referrals come from each source and then follow the

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process to see how many from each source actually convert into a certified home and placement.

Our data informed us that nearly two thirds of our referrals are generated from the website and personal recommendations from our staff and existing foster parents. When we examined the conversion data, we discovered that these two sources also created a higher certification/approval percentage than the other areas. Eighty percent of our certified families come from these two areas; they produce quality referrals.

We found that a referral from an existing parent will generally be better quality. Due to the existing family's connection with our agency, the prospective foster parent will likely know more about us, like us because our parents have shared what they appreciate about us, and trust us based on the testimony of the referring parent.

4. What is the cost of each referral/home?

Once you know the number of referrals coming from a particular source (let's say, a TV ad campaign), you can divide the money invested in that campaign by the number of referrals and determine the cost of each referral.

5. How long is it taking for families to get through our certification process?

This measurement allows us to address a point of frustration for prospective foster parents. It is easy for them to get discouraged as the process of certification grinds imperceptibly forward. Some of the elements in certification are outside our control, but others may be the result of poor processes and stall points in our system. Again, the only way to identify where the sticking points are is to track and measure the time it is taking to move a referral through the steps to foster parent certification.

6. What is our conversion rate?

Conversions take place at a few different stages, so we need to be vigilant to measure all of them. Our SEO service measures conversion rates at the point where a website-generated search results in a form response on our landing page. Another conversion is measured when a referral becomes an active application. Two other conversions happen later in the process: one at the point of certification and, ultimately, the other at the point of placement.

Most of you already know that recruitment involves more than placing an advertisement in the local newspaper. It is a process of attracting, engaging, qualifying, completing piles of paperwork, undergoing home inspections, more vetting, licensing, and, ultimately, placement. If you are only measuring how many calls you received from a community outreach event, you are looking at less than 10% of the total recruiting process.

7. What is our retention rate?

I find that some agencies are measuring on the recruitment side but not on the retention side of foster care. They are active in doing things to serve the needs of existing families, but they don't follow the numbers on how many are leaving and why. I've come to the conclusion that it is far less expensive to keep existing foster parents than it is to recruit new parents.

Our agency has adopted the axiom, “If it matters, measure it!”

8. How long does it take for a newly approved family to receive a placement?

This form of measurement, like measuring the length of the certification process, was elicited by the frustration of the foster parents. They go through all the work, energy, and time to get certified only to wait for a child to be placed in their home. Here again, some of this delay is outside our control. We may find it necessary to revisit the conditions and limitations the foster parents themselves have placed on the age, gender, or ethnicity of prospective children. I've found that if the placement phase is too long, it creates unrest and a temptation for foster parents to look toward other agencies. Our goal is to get a placement or even a respite service within 3 months of certification. How do we know if we are hitting that goal? We measure!

9. Where are our placements coming from?

Some agencies ignore this element of measurement. “That's county business,” they say. “We can't really do anything about it.” Yes and no. We have ridden the waves of favor and disfavor with county officials and watched them shift away from private foster care, hiring more staff to take on more children themselves. While they are responding to
state initiatives, new programs, shifting budgets, and leadership changes within their organization, we still must watch the factors in our organization that are impacting officials’ relationships with us. We have made decisions to expand into other regions to balance out the unreasonable and unreliable give-and-take of county placements, but at the end of the day, it is our job to pay attention to the numbers and find out why things are different now than they were then.

**Conclusion**

This article is obviously insufficient to cover the subject of measurement with the detail necessary to develop a how-to plan. In addition, measurement is just one factor in developing an effective recruitment strategy. My hope is that this general review of measurement will help stimulate your thinking and inspire an approach to recruitment that will increase your effectiveness. I write and develop resources on all phases of the recruiting process. You can find out more by visiting my website at www.MBLogan.com.

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The need is great and growing. Each of us must find the best methods to meet this need and to provide effective, timely, and compassionate care for foster children.

Mike Logan is the Executive Director of Children First Foster Family Agency and Founder of Results Recruiting. Mike will present a webinar on the topic of foster parent recruitment for the FFTA Webinar Wednesdays Series in April. Visit www.ffta.org/webinars for more information.

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