

4 A's of Nonprofit Data Management

Data management can be a challenging task. Many nonprofit organizations struggle to collect data and many organizations also struggle to find meaning in the data they collect. Data management requires discipline, focus, and organization. When data management is done right, it can help you improve the way your organization operates. Good data management practices can help your organization make more informed decisions and take smarter actions. While this sounds great, data management can be a complex, amorphous, and hard to define. As a result, you may be asking...

- What are good data management practices?
- How can we use data in a meaningful way?
- How can data improve our work and mission?

I've stated numerous times on this blog, I am a fan of simple, straight-forward solutions to complex challenges. As a result, this post describes an easy-to-remember strategic framework to help you use data. It's called the "4 A's of Nonprofit Data Management."

What are the 4 A's of Nonprofit Data Management?

The "4 A's of Nonprofit Data Management" are based on a framework called the "Information Hierarchy."

While the information hierarchy defines the different types of types of data, the "4 A's of Nonprofit Data Management" defines a list of steps and actions you can take to collect, manage, and use data at your organization.

The "4 A's of Nonprofit Data Management" are...

- Accumulate
- Analyze
- Apply
- Act

Accumulate

Step one in nonprofit data management is to accumulate data. This is the easiest of the “4 A’s.” In order to use data, you need data. While data accumulation is relatively easy, accumulating data for data’s sake isn’t the goal. The goal is to collect quality, clean, consistent, and relevant data. By accumulating “good” data you are setting yourself up for success with the other steps in this list.

Accumulate “good” data by implementing these actionable tips...

- Determine what data is valuable to your organization and collect that data.
- Define how you will accumulate relevant data and what tools you will use.
- Set-up data entry standards and create data entry manuals for your organization.
- Manage data quality with operational controls and data quality reports.
- Support users responsible for data entry with training and guidance.

What data should I collect? Where should I start? [Start simple.](#)

Analyze

Data in and of itself is useless, unless you do something with it. Data requires aggregation, context, formatting, and consolidation in order to be useful. Analysis is all of those things. Analysis may require some math, interpretation, and deep thought, but analysis can help you uncover the hidden meaning behind the raw data. Analysis will provide you the empirical proof, trends, and patterns required to make informed decisions and take smarter actions.

Analyze raw data by implementing these actionable tips...

- Create reports with data that is relevant to your strategic objectives.
- Run reports on a standard schedule so analysis is a consistent practice.
- Ask questions like: what is the data telling me, what data am I looking for, and is the data what I expected?
- Confirm your analysis by reviewing your conclusions with others.

Apply

During your analysis you asked questions like: what is the data telling me, what data am I looking for, and is the data what I expected? Now it is time to ask yourself a new question, what does this data mean for our organization? After analysis is complete, you must apply any insights or learnings to your organization. Data management is about taking data and making it practical. This step gives you the opportunity to take data and apply it in ways that “make a difference.” Application turns raw data into actionable intelligence that can be used in real-life situations.

Apply practical data by implementing these actionable tips...

- Compare real-outcomes evidenced by data to your goals or objectives.
- Find discrepancies or alignments between expected and actual results.
- Contextualize trends, patterns, and single metrics in time.

Act

The last and most important component of nonprofit data management is action. Databases, forms, spreadsheets, and notepads full of data are useless unless they are used to “act.” Data informs and data empowers, but data cannot change the world, save a life, coordinate volunteers, raise more funds for mission, or lead staff. Data is a tool and any tool needs an operator. Action is informed by your application of data to a real-life situation. If you aren’t using data to take action, then the data you are managing isn’t achieving its most valuable state. Data is valuable if it is used to act. As a nonprofit, accumulating, analyzing, and applying data aren’t enough. Taking action is the ultimate positive outcome of nonprofit data management and should be your primary focus.

Act on insights from data by implementing these actionable tips...

- Develop action items from insights gained during analysis and application of data.
- Use insights from data to define new goals, new strategies, and new tactics.
- Position data as a motivator for continuous performance improvement.
- Take action on a consistent and timely basis.

- Communicate and reinforce strategic decisions and actions with empirical, data-driven proof.

Data management can be a challenging task. However, if you adhere to the “4 A’s of Nonprofit Data Management” you can use data to make a significant impact on those you serve and your community. This framework outlines a progression of steps that data must take to be useful to your organization. Each step in the process makes data more valuable and more relevant. Each step shapes, molds, and sharpens data so it is practical, applied, and actionable in your daily work. Data can be complex, but following a methodical process like the “4 A’s of Nonprofit Data Management” can help you evolve data into a productive asset for your organization.

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