

OUTCOME MEASUREMENT

THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT OUTCOME MEASUREMENT

Learning as we go - A conversation with Peter York

Peter York is a man on a mission.

As Chief Research and Learning Officer at TCC Group and a national expert on outcomes measurement, he was used to people's eyes glazing over when they heard the word "evaluation." And for the most part, he agrees. Evaluation conjures the image of a process reserved only for academics at the end of a program, testing and measuring results with lab coats and clipboards. He is used to organizations thinking about evaluation as "proving that your program works."

York encourages us instead to think in terms of learning what works as we deliver our programs, and tweaking services along the way to incorporate what we've learned, in order to get the best results. There's good reason to think this way. Studies have shown that those organizations regularly involved with this kind of learning are more effective, have stronger leadership and more sustainable growth.

"It makes sense on so many levels," says York. "Evaluation is really about learning — understanding which specific strategies have the biggest impact — so that you can build your programs around your strengths."

Rather than using data to prove you have been successful for a percentage of the participants at the end of your program, it is far more useful to understand which specific factors were crucial to success. For example, rather than saying at the completion of your program that 25% of your students had a higher reading level because of their participation in your program, it is far more useful to understand what factors are positively influencing those improved readers and begin using it with all program participants.

"It's clear that traditional evaluation is not ongoing learning and can't be of benefit to participants while they are in a program. Real learning looks to understand the cause of the positive change, not just the effect, so it can be replicated and built in as standard practice," stresses York.

One of the questions York is most frequently asked is about the best way to structure this learning process and the ability to show cause and effect between near-term activities and long-term outcomes.

For example, can a small reading program encouraging parents to read to their kids every night really show a correlation to high school graduation rates? "No," says York, "and they shouldn't try to show a direct cause-and-effect relationship." He goes on to explain that organizations should only try to measure activities in which they are involved — also called proximate outcomes - and let national studies fill in the gaps.

Figure 1 shows a genuine cause and effect relationship for a small program encouraging parents to read to their elementary school age children for 30 minutes at least 5 nights a week.

For data collection, York recommends these *Guiding Principles for Effective Learning*:

1. Measure achievable outcomes, next actions and direct results.
2. Gather as many relevant metrics as possible from a sample of the population of interest, **quickly**, by quantifying the qualitative.



3. Gather all data by asking the recipient/target, not the implementer.
4. Analyze for patterns of cause and effect.
5. Program leaders, designers and implementers meet often to analyze data, make meaning, and make improvements.

What do we do with this information once we gather it? York explains it as a three step process.

1. Explore patterns, with key questions such as:
 - What are some unique characteristics of the top 30% group? The bottom 30%?
 - What are the key factors that distinguish the top 30% from the rest? The bottom 30%?
2. Draw conclusions, with key questions such as:
 - What patterns do you see?
 - Which program quality was most critical to outcome achievement?
 - Who benefited most?
 - What preliminary cause-and-effect conclusions can you make based on the data?
3. Put findings into action, with key questions such as:
 - What do the conclusions tell us about how we should manage our program/strategy resources better?
 - What do the conclusions tell us about the case we need to make to investors, donors, funders and the community?
 - What do these conclusions tell us about further needed learning?
 - What conclusions do we disagree with and why?

By committing your organization to learning as you go, your organization grows, builds stronger leadership and benefits your program participants. “That’s a pretty powerful combination by anyone’s measure,” says York. How nice that the most sensible and straight-forward thing to do is also the most powerful.

Figure 1

