

Management and Technical Assistance Publication Series No. 4

The Transition to Results-Oriented Management and Accountability: The Issue is Survival, NOT Compliance

by Positive Outcomes™
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One by one agencies are being confronted with greater numbers of their funders asking for proposal submissions and reports in outcome or results-based language. Head Start, HUD, Foster Grandparents, United Way, The Pew Charitable Trusts, Social Services Block Grant, and the Human Services Development Fund are just a few examples of funding sources now requiring minimal levels of outcome data collection and reports. The Community Service Block Grant leadership is slightly ahead of the curve.

When the Community Service Block Grant Monitoring and Assessment Task Force began its work in 1994, it struggled to reach consensus on whether it was even possible to quantify the results the Community Action Network achieves. How to report the information in a meaningful way created more questions. In the field, some agencies feared that the process was a covert attempt to force emergency services providers to shift into case management and family development activities. Other agencies believed that because they worked exclusively on the community level and offered no direct services at all, their results could not be measured. Agencies which subcontracted all their service provision were confused as to how to show the results of CSBG dollars when combined with other funding streams. Public and statewide Community Action Agencies covering multiple political jurisdictions had difficulty reconciling their political realities with what appeared to be a form of national network strategic planning. The sheer number of different programs offered by the network is compounded by the different forms of service delivery. With so much confusion afoot, how could success ever be attained?

The Secret is Context

Our task is to show how our services affect our customer's lives and function within the framework of our community. Outcomes can occur for our agency, our clients, and our community, and we need to learn to separate these levels of outcomes from each other. Then we must separate short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes on each level. Time frames for each level are also very different. A "long" time to our clients may be one week, or six months, while a "long" time to our community may be a generation. A "short" time to our agency may be a payroll period or the date

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the next quarterly reports are due, while a “short” time in the community is a four-year election cycle. It takes practice and time to begin to differentiate between these outcome levels; of course, different measurement tools would be used for different levels of outcomes.

Many tools exist for measuring changes in a client’s behavior, and for aggregating a series of measurements into a picture of the client’s well-being. Because these tools are prevalent, and therefore are often used as examples of accountability systems an agency can implement, some agencies’ staffs have gained the impression that these are the only changes an agency can measure. Further confusion exists because the examples have not highlighted the function emergency service provision plays in stabilizing a family or the community in which it lives. It is precisely because this confusion exists that we must work harder than ever to overcome it.

Whether you are measuring outcomes at the community, agency, or family level, the idea is to tell your story in the context of other services and interventions. But the greater challenge is to adapt processes in our agency operations that transfer our skills at measuring incremental client success to measuring incremental changes in our agency’s capacity to serve and the community’s capacity to offer its citizens an opportunity for economic self-sufficiency. Because we previously have not had to prove the worth of our emergency services or community advocacy activities, the methods of accountability seem especially awkward and ill-fitted when we first open ourselves up enough to even consider them. We must recognize this growth phase and struggle through it.

Growth Stages Pass Quickly

Agencies that learned quickly how to write grants in outcome terms are now experiencing the growing pains of outcome measurement and reporting. Data systems built to manage only transactions and demographics must be expanded to handle status changes and indicators for outcome measurements. Reporting systems must be revised. Staff must be trained and data management policies revised.

Agency resources must be reallocated for tracking, surveying, and follow-up activities. With the suddenness of a lightning bolt, astute agencies realize that separate tracking systems are not always necessary. They develop data-collection systems that gather pertinent information whenever and wherever the client emerges for new services within the agency or referral network. These agencies analyze the relative value of each outcome their services provide, and gather information specifically on those outcomes most important to their funding sources, and showing the greatest return on investment.

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An infectious joy spreads fast when agency staff begin to understand that they can measure the impact their advocacy work has on the decisions made by corporate and public grantmakers regarding policies and programs for low-income people. Managers revel in their ability to delegate with clarity and achieve better results using outcome-based techniques. Caseworkers are exhilarated when they can celebrate each success their clients achieve, no matter how small. This growth stage often leads to over-experimentation with measurement processes, but also subsides when agencies realize that the massive amounts of data they're generating present storage and record management problems. Results from different departments within one agency may not even be comparable to each other. This stage ends with the agency adopting either a standardized measurement system or a template into which their results can be aggregated. The most common template used today is a status-of-progression scale which can be used at the family, community or agency level: in-crisis, vulnerable, safe, stable, and thriving.

Emergency service staff often complain that the accountability process takes longer than providing the actual service. That may be your reality, too, as you move to results-based accountability, but this stage will not last long. Staff and clients will quickly adapt to answering a few more questions on a form or a report. They'll streamline the process after a little practice, sorting out what information is crucial to the most meaningful aspects of the program you operate.

Transferable Skills

The lessons we learn in reporting outcomes for the CSBG can certainly be transferred to other grants, especially if we can help our funding sources understand the organizational ramifications each separate outcome measure creates. By learning to tell our story within the context of the Community Service Block Grant, we can tell CSBG's story within the context of our communities.

Instead of just saying "CSBG is the glue that holds the agency together," we can measure its impact not only in dollars leveraged, but in services provided with those leveraged dollars. Did we increase the community resources, which thereby lessened the burden on individual families? Did we increase the opportunity for residents to participate in community leadership positions? Did we reduce repeated generational dependence on welfare? Did we increase viable employment opportunities within the community? We can prove it. Let's do it!

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