Manage Your Measurements, Don't Let Them Manage You!

By Anne S. Honer

Most of us know there are benefits in keeping records. They provide the meat for our funding proposals, and base-line data for planning and evaluation. Records provide documentation of service for recognition of volunteers and staff, and show staff where they are exceeding or not meeting program goals. We can't get around it--record-keeping is the best way we can prove to our board and funding sources that we are accountable for their financial and program support.

Peter Drucker, in Management: Tasks, Responsibilties, Practices (1974), brings out the importance of record-keeping. He points out that what we, as managers, choose to measure and how we choose to measure it determine what we see, what others see, and subsequently, what we do. But it is not enough just to be able to select the critical variables. We must also know what is reasonable to expect at key points in the program (most of us can expect fewer volunteers in the summer months, for example), and what deviations from the expected are reasonable so that we can determine whether program refinements are necessary. In the example just cited, we must be prepared to cut back our programs during times when our staff is limited, or find the resources elsewhere in order to continue providing the services our clients expect. We must be able to plot the route which data travels from monthly report to decision so it can be intercepted, evaluated, and acted upon when significant deviations occur.

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If good record-keeping is so important, why don't we do a better job of it? Why do we wince when it's time to do our monthly reports? There are a number of possible reasons:

- Perhaps nobody uses the reports and our record-keeping efforts are wasted.
- Perhaps our data collection system is too complex.
- Perhaps what we have chosen to record doesn't help us in our day-to-day program maintenance so we put off collecting it.
- Perhaps we don't allow staff enough time to collect and report data to us.
- Perhaps we are collecting some data more often than we need to, making extra work for ourselves.

Putting the problem into a conceptual framework helps to order our thinking and provides some guidance in solving the problem of poor record-keeping. One such framework used frequently with organizations is "system analysis."

System Analysis

William Bearley (1978) presents a number of definitions of a system and concludes that the key concepts in all of them are "wholeness, elements or subsystems within a system, and the interaction or interrelationships among and between the elements and the whole." Bearley also states that organizations can be seen as "man-made systems" with a hierarchy of levels which he calls strategic planning, management control, and operational control.

Operational control, Bearley says, is the level responsible for delivering the organization's services to its clients, while management control involves the coordinative subsystem. The latter is the link between policy-making (deciding what services to

provide) and actual service delivery. The strategic planning level is responsible for setting organizational goals, determining resources and the policies related to resource acquisition, use and disposition. Each of these levels, although within the same organization or system, have different foci of concerns. But all deal with solving problems whose answers require a number of different kinds of information.

Bearley also maintains that the driving forces of organizations are decisions. Without decisions there would be no problem-solving or subsequent actions taken. Although not often called on to present our answer to the community's most pressing needs, volunteer administrators are required to decide upon a wide variety of large and small issues: the color of the new curtains or office furniture; the fee schedule for our clients; the benefits for our volunteer and paid staff. The vital ingredient in decision-making is information, much of which is available only through record-keeping.

As Peter Drucker indicates, decision-making is "based on knowledge, not prophecy. The end result, however, is not knowledge, but strategy. Its aim is action now." Bearley cites Thayer's work, writing: "Thayer points out that in human communication systems information is what people do to data." Data are combined and manipulated to become information, which then becomes the basis for problem-solving decisions. Many of us use information such as socio-economic descriptions of our clients to help us decide which services to provide and where and how to provide them. The effects and consequences of these decisions are evaluated by collecting data, which are then combined (perhaps in tables or charts in our annual reports) and manipulated to provide information on which to base new decisions--and so the cycle continues.

Data

Evaluation — Information

Data Collection & Representation — Decisions

Effects and Consequences

Figure 1. The decision-making cycle

Bearley continues: "It is ... important for an organization to establish organization-wide policies, structures and procedures to manage these (information) resources." Peter Drucker's point only strengthens Bearley's argument:

> ...the effectiveness of an information system depends on the (manager's) willingness and ability to think through carefully what information is needed by whom, for what purposes, and then on the systematic creation of communication among the various parties to the system as to the meaning of each specific input and output.

In essence, a system analysis of an organization is a study of its relationships, or "interdependencies," as Stevenson and Longabaugh (1980) call them. Recognizing the relationships between structural sub-parts implies the ability to identify the information needs that one sub-part must have in order to make decisions about another. What does the placement coordinator need to know about the office to assure that volunteer placement operates smoothly? Knowing the location of agencies seeking volunteers is essential information to placement staff, but not necessarily knowing how many agencies received board training.

Some systems analysts have suggested looking at inputs, throughputs, and outputs as a means of analyzing a system's structures, or the interrelationships of its elements.

Inputs are the organization's resources and the effects of the environment impacting upon it. Some examples are funding, of course, and board policies, organizational goals, objectives, federal and state legislation, funding source guidelines and requirements, natural disasters, climate, staff and their qualifications, terms of the lease --- even weather (a snowstorm on the day of your big fund-raiser).

The administrator must be able to identify these factors. They will influence the organization by generally requiring some feedback as to how the resources were used, usually in the form of periodic reports. Certainly environmental factors will not require written feedback, but they must be considered in planning the method of delivery. For example, geographical limitations may require an organization to transport a clinic in a mobile unit to low-income rural clients to permit access to services.

Outputs are the services (or goods) provided by the organization. These are usually specified in its charges, its goal statement, or its yearly objectives. In human service organizations, according to Hasenfeld and English (1974), the output involves either changing or processing people. Specifically, alcohol rehabilitation would involve changing people, whereas referring an alcoholic to Alcoholics Anonymous would exemplify moving someone through a "process" in the hope that change will come later.

There may also be some unplanned outputs, such as how the organization is viewed in the community by its constituency and/or its adversaries. In addition, newspaper publicity about the organization

or the issue with which it is concerned, may have educated the public, creating the side-effect of a long-lasting impression of the group's mission.

Throughputs are the activities the organization undertakes through its resources to transform its goals into human services (or goods, in a production setting). Figure 2 presents an example.

River City Voluntary Action Center

Input	Throughput	Output
Volunteers	Recruiting	Service to volunteers, agencies, and community Goal: to provide volunteers to non-profit agencies and strengthen volunteer programs of agencies
Board members	Screening	
Staff	Placing	
Money	Site Visits	
	Consultations	
	Training	

Figure 2. The organization as a system

The system organizes these activities by providing the roles and assigning functions to them. Jobs, job descriptions, and organizational charts show the formal channels, roles and functions of the organizational system, but give no indication of the process by which activities are undertaken.

The administrator's analysis of the system's throughputs comes from records kept following identification of the inputs and outputs. The administrator considers who needs what information and often determines how the information is reported, although many funding sources provide the forms on which they want to have the information reported to them.

Implications

There are at least three practical implications of this discussion for managers or administrators of human service organizations trying to sort out the record-keeping task:

1. Administrators must identify the system parts, functions, and interrelationships in their organizations, although they may involve others in the identification process.
2. Administrators must identify the decisions each system sub-part makes, what information it needs to make decisions, what data will provide that information and what data other system parts need from it.
3. Therefore, administrators must also identify the relationships which exist -or perhaps should exist - between sub-parts and provide for channels of communication between them.

Only when these basics are achieved can administrators begin the task of designing the record-keeping system.

Designing the Record-keeping System

After clearly identifying the purpose of collecting, keeping, and reporting data, administrators refer to this purpose in deciding whether or not to collect each tempting bit of data generated by work with the agency's clients.

Beginning with the end "product" or service (the outputs) administrators might design the means to ask:

- What is the desired end-state of the clients?
- How can it best be measured?
- Are the number of inquiries, referrals, socio-economic status of clients, and dollars spent real measures of the program's goals and objectives?
- What information do the board and funding source require about the change or process effected in the clients?

Then, administrators might examine the organization's inputs:

- What are the inputs that permit services to be provided: money, staff, volunteers, goals, objectives, environmental factors, laws, professional standards, parent organization guidelines? Do some of these in fact inhibit service provision?
- Who needs to know about the services?
- Who is paying for services? Who makes decisions about them?
- What do the decision-makers need to know and how often?

And finally, administrators might consider these throughputs:

- What are the key activities that transform resources into services?
- How are people changed or processed?
- Who needs to know what and when about these key activities?
- Who has access to the data to provide that information?
- Who should collect the data?
- How should it be collected: observation, interview, survey, study or other?
- How should it be reported? By whom?

Once the information necessary for decision-making has been determined, it is time to select the measurements that will provide the information. Measurements, says Peter Drucker, should be economical, meaningful, appropriate, congruent, timely, simple, and operational.

Economical measurements imply that the fewest statistics and reports are used, yet there are still enough to be able to understand and anticipate a phenomenon and have a reasonably reliable picture of it. Consider how many data are necessary, not how many are available.

Meaningful measurements measure significant events or potentially significant developments, implying that the administrator has the skill or permission to select these. Measurements should be related to key areas -- is it necessary to measure the number of phone calls that come in, as well as the number of patients and referrals? Drucker believes that some things can be measured infrequently; for example, volunteer hours served in the organization may be compiled only quarterly instead of monthly and still reveal whether the actual number is close to the yearly targeted number.

Measurements must be appropriate to the character and nature of what is being measured so that the user interprets the results correctly. Drucker thinks this is the most important rule of all. For example, the average number of hours per volunteer spent with clinic clients may not be accurately represent the benefits to the clients. On the other hand, specifying the type of work done by volunteers and comparing time spent to what paid staff are able to do may give a much clearer picture of the extent to which volunteers enable the organization to provide services to its clients. Above all, measurements must always be designed to preserve the dignity of the individual by assuring that they indicate the organization is sensitive to the concerns and feelings of those being measured.

In order to be congruent, measurements need be only as precise as the event demands. We may not need to do a chi square or regression analysis to make our point, when mode, mean, median or percentage would serve as well.

Timely measurements correspond with the time span of the events being measured. To ask the bookkeeper to report to you every six weeks when the bookkeeping is done on a monthly basis is not good management. If volunteers are reviewed every three months, arrange to have their supervisors or the volunteer director report to you quarterly, if possible. If a pilot project is expected to take nine months to complete, don't ask for the report when eight months have passed.

Measurement should be simple. This gets my vote for being the most important. Complex forms take time to record, interpret, and report. Drucker suggests that if measurements are complex, the collector's energy is directed to the mechanics and methodology, not to recording the data. Hasenfield and English, too, mention that complex forms often result in goal displacement; the data collector becomes more involved in completing the form correctly than in reporting the information. Rossi (1979) advises that simple measurements are more likely to be kept accurately. In addition, highly-skilled people are free to do highly-skilled work if others with less skill can help record, interpret, and report the measurements.

To be operational, measurements should be designed to reach the person who can act on them. The form used to collect the information should be tailored to the needs of the user. Thus, while designing the instruments, the designer should focus on the action of collecting, not on the information itself. For example, it is just as easy to design the monthly financial report to comply with the funding source's annual report form as to come up with a completely new form. This permits the bookkeeper or director to read from the monthly sheets when compiling the annual report without having to jump from one column or section to another. Some organizations design their periodic reports to conform with their objectives: at the end of the year, they can tell immediately how close they came to meeting their objectives and they have made their reporting process simple.

Once designed, the information system is ready for those persons who will use the forms to review them for clarity, brevity, and appropriateness. Pretesting and redesigning follow. Once the forms are finally approved, personnel should be trained to use the system. Periodically, the administrator should run a quality control check to see whether the content is being recorded accurately and the information is reaching those who need it.

Conclusion

Records are meant to be decision-making tools for many parts of the organization, but they can be tools only if they are used, not stored on a shelf and never referred to again.

Since they are used in decision-making throughout the organization, good records are extremely important. But it is the administrator's responsibility to identify the information people need, and to select the measurements with which to provide the information. It is worthwhile to plan the record-keeping structure and process to eliminate keeping unnecessary, though tempting, data. This plan allows the

administrators to select the important items to be measured and thus greatly influences the decision made.

Resources

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