



Empowering Those Who Empower

I am an epidemiologist – that means my profession involves looking at disease patterns by person, place and time to help inform health program planning. Essentially, I help my clients use data to make decisions and evaluate the results of those decisions. The principles used in healthcare can be applied to all areas of decision making – good quality data supports good decisions, which can include planning for challenges associated with those decisions; poor quality, non-existent or ambiguous data generally leads to poor decisions.

I would like to chat about HOW and WHEN Data becomes INFORMATION that can be used to empower real-time evidence-based decision making.

“MANAGEMENT IS EFFICIENCY IN CLIMBING THE LADDER OF SUCCESS; LEADERSHIP DETERMINES WHETHER THE LADDER IS LEANING AGAINST THE RIGHT WALL.”

— STEPHEN COVEY (AUTHOR “THE SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE”)

Whether making decisions related to high stakes multi-million dollar infrastructure projects or evaluating smaller community programs, developing your community strategic plans or making the multitude of other decisions expected of leaders, you need data to find out where the “right wall is” and how far you are away from that wall.

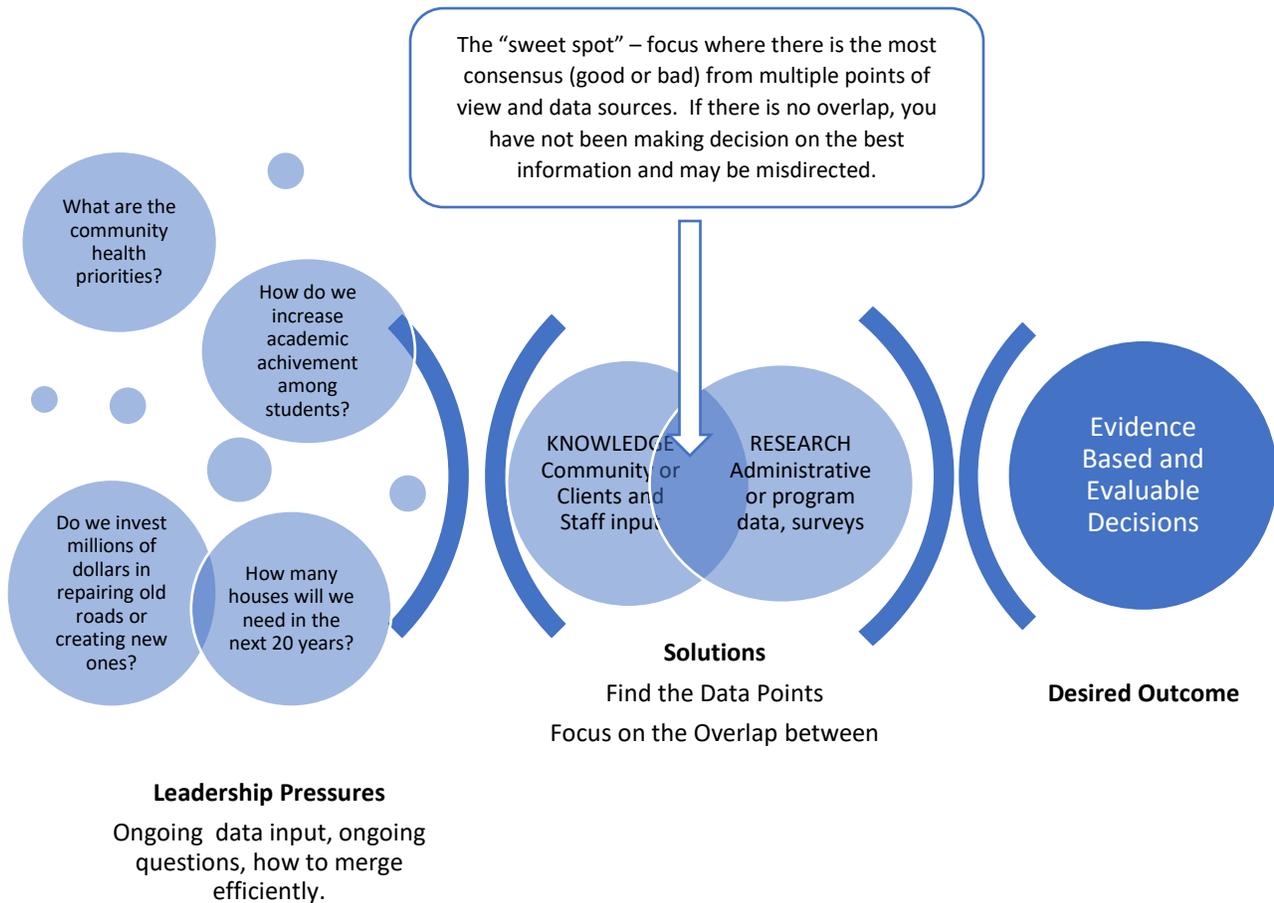
When I was looking for inspiration for this concept, I found a quote by Bill Gates. What a find! Not only did he create the pathway to many of the information support systems we use today but he too links leadership to **empowerment**, not to **management** skills.

“AS WE LOOK AHEAD INTO THE NEXT CENTURY, LEADERS WILL BE THOSE WHO EMPOWER OTHERS.”

— BILL GATES (CO-FOUNDER MICROSOFT CORPORATION)

The biggest challenge facing my clients is that leadership is often overwhelmed with need of community members but often have little access to information to support funding for programs that they know are needed. The concept of evidence-based decision making is not of course unique to the health system. All leaders, regardless of how powerful their “gut instinct” might be, need real data to support their decisions and they need to empower staff to provide them with this information.

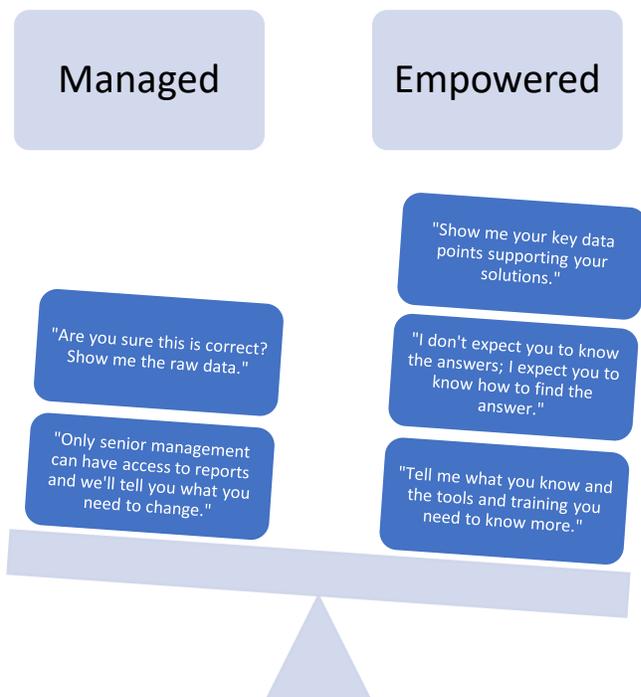
The path from multiple data inputs to confident decision making.



How does your staff help you get to the desired outcome?

Leadership does not have time to develop data collection plans, analyze the data or make first round decisions about what the “raw data” means to their business or community. However, staff cannot be expected to simply know how to do this; investment in training and then trust in the information provided to you as the leader is imperative.

The more staff understand why it is important to fill in what can seem to be meaningless and tedious paper work or data



entry on the computer screen, the more they will “buy-in” to doing their part by empowering the organization with good quality data.

In order to do so, leadership must consider “what do we need to know”, “how are we going to get this information”, “what is the IT and training investment”, “who will be trained to analyze this data so that it is reliable information”, and most importantly, “how do I ensure staff are continually updated on progress toward organizational or project goals using the data they helped collect?”.

Leader’s perspectives on the link between data, empowerment and leadership

Industry

My Friend Warren loves tractor videos, in fact this could include any kind of video involving heavy machinery in operation. While he watches these videos, he is monitoring and learning from how others dug up dirt, paved a road or tilled a field. That is, he is constantly “collecting data”, learning from the experience of others and applying it to his own work and training opportunities for staff.

The goal of his company is to “build infrastructure and improve lives”. He works with northern communities in long-term planning (such as sanitation and winter road access) as well as crises related to infrastructure (such as flooding).

When I asked him to tell me more about his work, beyond, “we build roads”, his passion as an industry leader in finding the right solutions to fit each client is clear. He emphasized the importance of starting with the right data and processing this with historical knowledge to achieve results. That is, no matter how much “hard data” they collect, he or his staff routine connect with elders and other community residents to reality check their perspective of the situation. In these situations, detailed calculations with the right data matter, but this must be supported by field knowledge to double check the results. In that he emphasises that “double checking” means ensuring the community members are empowered, just as are his staff, in guiding the solution.

He often says, “show me the data that supports your conclusion”. He does not expect staff to know solutions to every new situation they encounter, but he expects them to have the skill set to identify how to find that solution and what tools they need to get there.

Once challenges and solutions are identified, he knows it is his job to listen to the community leadership and project team. From there he will provide feedback on areas that may have been over-looked or data that may have been misinterpreted. Each time he sees the opportunity to provide feedback as learning and growth for his staff who may be new to working in northern and remote environments. In this way, morale in a difficult business is kept high as staff continue to grow and connect with community members who are impacted by the work. In pursuing this approach to leadership, he can be confident that the product he has promised communities to help their members have a better quality of life, will be achieved on time and on budget.

Security

My friend Bob and I met over thirty years ago as high school “military brats” on a Canadian air force base in Germany. Even back then, he had a sense of organization and motivation that made him stand apart. After university he joined the army and eventually became a Lieutenant-Colonel in Special Operations. He has now retired from the army and is the Vice President of Operations at one of Canada’s largest Banks.

I asked him for his thoughts on leadership and staff empowerment and for examples of how data drives leadership decisions both in the military and in his current industry. I found his response enlightening to say the least!

According to Bob, while it is common perception that the military functions through leaders giving orders and soldiers obeying them, this is far from the truth. Leaders focus much of their attention to providing their teams with their intent. This intent forms the common goal to achieve and then leaders enable them with the resources and decision-making authorities to reach it.

What is known as “mission command”, is based on a very high level of trust between all levels of the organization. In this model, data, or critical information drives the analysis to make timely decisions to meet the intent. Similarly, trust and data allow him to empower his team to make decisions that impact the ability for the Bank to achieve the goals of customers and shareholders. When teams are not empowered, either through lack of resources or clarity of purpose, then the risk of failure increases. In the military, this could leave to devastating consequences, such as the raid at Dieppe where the lack of information, strategy and resources led to a catastrophic defeat.

How Do You Get There?

If you believe in the concept that empowered staff with access to, and skills to use, data will help you lead your organization toward success, here are some starting points with minimal financial investment:

- Hold a one-day workshop with a skilled facilitator and include ALL staff members, no matter the level or job title – all will tell you of at least one example where they needed information and could not access it.
- Guide them toward open communication and problem solving, even if not every proposal is achievable right now.
- Identify where the gaps are in both information technology (storage capacity) and in basic data collection (about programs, activities, sales) to help measure your operations.
- Lay out your annual or long-term strategic plans and work together to either modify or create new indicators of short, medium- and long-term progress toward stated organizational goals. These are both activities and outcomes.
 - For each of these indicators – “more people come to our restaurant”, “more people graduate from high school”, “we have road access to our community all year” – think of how you might specifically measure the progress, how often you are going to measure and report on this and who will be responsible.

When Do You Get There?

It won't happen over-night but on-going training in data collection and comfort in trusting data, will empower your staff and increase your confidence as a leader that you can achieve the strategic goals you have identified.

- Look at your key information gaps and do not over-invest in a complicated technical solution.
- Perhaps start with one or two staff members who are keen to learn more and let them develop a simple Excel Spreadsheet as a start. Electronic data can easily be "uploaded" or linked to a technical solution later, but the earlier data collection starts, the more informed you will be.
- You might want to start with a comprehensive "Baseline Assessment" where you hire an expert to assist your organization in determining what information you have, how it can be used, what other systems may have data to help you (for example national statistics on employment or national surveys, education achievement, hospital statistics that you can request). Once you have a baseline, set annual goals for data collection and continue to expand as staff comfort and capacity expands.
- The key is to invest in a solution that is sustainable and that does not impose too much extra workload on staff – the other key parts of their jobs will suffer, or they will simply stop collecting data.
- Always include opportunity for client, community, staff feedback to "reality check" to inform your administrative or technical data gaps. Never simply rely on administrative data without proper consultation to help you understand the context – you will note that every retailer now offers prizes for us to complete a "short survey" linked to our receipt. This is not because they do not already have extensive data about our spending patterns, but because they want to link those patterns to better insight about what drives our decisions and how to continue to entice us to access that retailer or service.
- Look for ongoing improvement in both collecting data as well as in staff using the data to illustrate key areas of operational utilization, success and challenges.

Empower your staff, use data to support your decisions and your organization will continue to thrive!

Cynthia Carr is an epidemiologist and principal consultant with EPI Research Inc. She has worked for more than 25 years using data to support program planning, evaluation and knowledge exchange.

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