

The Literature Review

A Tool for Transforming Outcome Accountability

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“What did we actually change? In the grand scheme of things, what did our program accomplish?”

How many of you in the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors have struggled with these questions? Nonprofit leaders are motivated by grand visions of social change – and this is a good thing. They believe that their programs, services, and initiatives can eradicate societal problems. These visionary beliefs are fundamental to effective leadership.

However, the problem in the sector is not that leaders strive to achieve these visions. Rather, it is that they propose to donors and funders that they *alone* can make good on these promises. In other words, they sell their societal vision, rather than their direct, and much more humble, target-audience results.

To be fair, this is what funders and donors look for, because, after all, they too want to change the world. Again, there’s nothing wrong with these aspirations if one simply judges them as reflections of good leadership. While we are driven by these lofty ambitions, it quickly becomes clear to those on the ground delivering services that we cannot possibly eradicate societal problems on our own. How



can we really say that it was one program that caused the change, controlling for all other variables in the lives of those we touch? “Did we achieve our long-term, social outcomes, and if so, was it exclusively and significantly due to our programs and services?”

More often than not, leaders would be disappointed with the answer to this evaluation question. Most large-scale governmental programs that have been subject to randomized control trials over the past 20 years have dismal results. Nonprofit leaders need to sell – and funders and donors need to invest in – more direct and realistic outcomes.

For example, an organization that provides parents with education leadership training, shouldn’t promise that the kids’ academic performance will improve directly. They should instead measure – and be held accountable for – encouraging parents to read to their kids, check their homework, meet with their teachers, and volunteer in their schools. There are too many other forces (familial, cultural, community, and political) that affect student

academic performance for this one program to possibly address.

So, what does this have to do with literature reviews? Well, most in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors understand and agree in principle with these points. However, there are many who say, “But what about our funders and boards who want ‘big change?’ Are we supposed to say, ‘we can’t do it?’ We will lose them.” Here is where the literature review, a basic but underutilized research tool, can become the bridge between promises and direct, measurable results.

A “lit review” aims to uncover what other researchers, academics, and practitioner-researchers have learned when rigorously studying problems and interventions within specific populations. It is a process of identifying study findings that elucidate what others have learned about why a problem exists, the complex array of variables (or correlates) associated with the problem, and possible or tested solutions.

There is so much credible, population-based, and “generalizable” research available about the outcomes we are striving to achieve. Yet, in our sector, we don’t turn to the research consistently enough to help us make the connections between the short-term outcomes we control and the vision for longer-term social impacts. We ignore key causal chains that could help us tell the story of how the direct results contribute to big change. Instead, we make apologies when things don’t go as planned and hope that no one pulls the plug.

Let’s walk through an example that can demonstrate precisely how a literature review can be transformative for a nonprofit. Imagine an organization with a vision of increasing high school graduation rates for at-risk kids by providing structured and unstructured sports activities, along with some remedial tutoring. This is tall order. The challenge is that there are so many variables in a child’s world that affect

high school dropout rates, such as home environment, poverty level, safety, school resources, and social networks, any of which might help or hinder kids from completing high school.

Leveraging the Literature

- Nonprofit leaders must have the capacity to assess the quality of and appropriately consume academic research articles.
- Even though most universities and colleges are themselves nonprofit organizations, many do not make their libraries, journals, or abstracts available except to faculty and paying students. Nonprofit leaders should be able to access this literature free of charge.
- Funders need to create digital media dissemination strategies that push translation pieces of the research literature to the nonprofit sector, similar to what *Popular Science* does for the lay reader.

You might say, ‘We don’t need the literature to tell us that this is a complex problem.’ Picture a community where 50% of youth do not graduate from high school. A group of nonprofit leaders working with the kids make the case that they can move this number in a positive direction. After a few years, with rigorous evaluation, they aren’t able to prove they made significant gains in graduation rates. Have they failed?

What the leaders should have first asked themselves was whether helping at-risk kids complete school was a controllable outcome. Can one after school program do this? Their success should not be based solely on higher graduation rates because, as we’ve noted, there are just too many things that affect whether or not kids graduate from high school.

In this instance, the research literature could have been transformative. They should have turned to the studies that identify the predictor variables of high school graduation for populations similar to those they serve. They should have talked to academics who study high school dropout, retention, and completion rates similar to those in their community. This information might have informed their program design and helped them leverage findings to tell investors, donors, board members, community leaders, and other stakeholders what they could achieve directly (in the short-term), and how these results have been proven to be predictive of the longer-term outcomes they want but don't directly control.

The literature would have given these nonprofit leaders permission to measure and achieve the shorter-term outcomes that help youth on the path to graduation. It would have provided a research-based, causal story that demonstrates their program's "contribution" toward long-term success by achieving direct results, rather than having to prove "attribution" directly.

If they can't promise that at-risk kids will graduate from high school, the literature makes the case for shorter-term predictors of graduation, such as getting to class, completing homework, having better attendance, meeting with guidance counselors, and engaging in extracurricular activities.

The research could have helped them "connect the dots" between the direct outcomes that they control and graduation (the long-term outcome). The literature could have given the leaders courage to implement necessary programs and communicate this need to donors. They weren't just trying something new or something they hoped would work. The research proves that their direct results will lead to long-term success.

The literature review empowers philanthropic and nonprofit leaders to make big decisions about where to allocate resources, and allows

them to begin a conversation about what they're investing in and how to gauge success.

The biggest barrier to truly learning what works is the ability to "draw a clear line" between cause and effect. If success mean solving complex, societal problems, over which there is little direct control, how can we learn what works? Learning is only possible when the outcome we measure is an effect we can control.

The more we bring the research into our world, and let it help us measure that which we can change, the sooner we can learn what works, for whom, and under what conditions. The literature review is a critical tool to understand, measure, and communicate controllable outcomes. Good research tells the longer-term, causal story so that the leaders on the ground don't have to.

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