Linking Systems of Care for Children and Youth Project

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Building Organizational Data Capacity

Overview

Capacity building is a long-standing technical assistance activity designed to improve an organization's performance by identifying and targeting gaps to increase functionality and create greater stability within the organization. While organizations have long participated in various capacity building activities, they often struggle with learning to build data capacity. However, there are some basic strategies organizations can implement to help them learn to collect, analyze, and use data in a way that increases their organizational capacity.

Data is one of the most valuable assets of any organization. Everyone within an organization uses data to get their jobs done, and for those in leadership positions data is often used for decision making. Why then do so many organizations struggle with building data capacity? There are several reasons why organizations of every size find it hard to build and sustain processes and systems around their data. Below are some of the most common reasons organizations struggle with building data capacity and some solutions to improve organizational data capacity.

Lack of a Strong Data Culture

One reason organizations struggle with building data capacity is the lack of a strong data culture. Organizations that have not traditionally used data consistently or prioritized data within the organization can often find it hard to shift their data culture. To create an organization with a strong data culture, organizational leadership must be invested in creating a strong data culture and openly support the importance of data within their organization.

Creating a strong data culture takes time, resources, planning, and constant monitoring. Many larger organizations have entire departments whose sole focus is on data management, research, and, planning. In smaller organizations with constrained budgets, this is not always feasible, however, this does not mean that smaller organizations cannot build a strong data culture. For organizations that have a strong desire to build their data capacity but lack the resources to hire additional staff for this role, there are other alternatives to consider.

Undefined Roles and Responsibilities

To successfully complete any project, there must first be well defined roles and responsibilities for each team member. This is also true for building data capacity. Clearly communicating these roles and their associated responsibilities will make it easier to hold individuals accountable and manage expectations.

One of the most important aspects in building a strong data culture in an organization is leadership. To be successful, the organization must have leadership that understands the value of data and is willing to support data capacity building efforts. Having a leader who is also a data champion is the first and most critical step in the data capacity building process. Having the support of leadership is essential for the success of any data capacity building effort.

Selecting individuals to serve on a data capacity committee is another strategy organizations can implement to begin to build a strong data culture. Be sure to have representation from every area or department and from various levels of the organization. Including a diverse group of team members is important because you want to gain not only insight but buy-in from every level across the organization. Building a strong data culture will require the members of the committee to be empowered by leadership with the necessary resources, including adequate time to do the hard work of shifting organizational culture.

Building a strong data culture takes time and energy. Having a group of individuals that are committed is important because changing any facet of organizational culture is one of the most difficult tasks, even when it relates to data.

Data Silos

Organizations struggle with building data capacity because data silos limit data sharing. Organizations collect enormous amounts of data and the larger the organization, the larger the number of data collected. Understanding the who, what, where, when, and how of every piece of data collected by an organization is an impossible task, however, there are strategies organizations can implement to help them think about data from a different perspective.

One of the most common impediments in building data capacity are data silos. While it is important for organizations to delineate business functions by department, of equal importance are the processes implemented to ensure critical data elements are shared with organizational decision makers.

While it may not be feasible to centralize all of an organization’s data or to dismantle data silos altogether, the creation of data sharing pathways may prevent important data from being isolated and unused.

Taking time to evaluate who collects data, where it is stored, and how it is used is essential in building organizational data capacity. Conducting assessment activities may

take some time, but they will help to uncover separate, often undisclosed data collection that is occurring across the organization. How many individual spreadsheets are kept by employees who track specific data and use it for a single purpose? Often, these assessments expose redundancies in data collection and stimulate conversations about organizational efficiency and resource management. These assessment activities, while time consuming at first, frequently result in the streamlining of processes and increased efficiency. They also assist leadership in better understanding what types of data are collected across the agency and how data can be better used in other capacities. Without a clear understanding of the data your organization is collecting, it is impossible to build additional data capacity.

Failing to Use the Data

Organizations should not collect data that they do not intend to use. Requiring staff to collect data that is never used is counter-productive in building a strong data culture. Communicating how organizational data will be used to all members of the organization is another way to support data capacity building and create a strong data culture. Presenting data in meetings, memos, reports, and in other creative ways demonstrates the organization's commitment toward building data capacity. Likewise, teaching staff, when appropriate, where to find and how to use data in their individual roles promotes positive attitudes toward building data capacity. Making it mandatory that staff in every capacity within the organization are aware of and required to make use of data that is relevant to the work they perform is an excellent way to build an organization's data capacity.

Lack of Innovation

While you don't want everyone to become data innovators, it is important to support the staff in sharing their ideas around data. Allowing staff members to share their experiences with data can act as a continuous quality improvement (CQI) activity and help the organization develop strategies to improve data collection, analysis, and storage. Providing space and support for staff to think of creative and innovative ways to use data has the potential to not only build data capacity, but to promote a spirit of teamwork and increase organizational morale.

Examples of How Data can be Helpful to a Project

There are many ways that data can be helpful, especially when managing a project. Without data, there is no way to know if the project goals are being met or if the project is within budget or being completed on time. When serving individuals, it is important to collect data that demonstrates who is being served, how many individuals are being served in a given period of time, and also to collect data on their experience to help understand if they are satisfied with the quality of the services provided.

Data Considerations

Organizations have a responsibility to protect the data they collect. This is especially true when the data is sensitive in nature (e.g., personal health data, medical/mental health data, financial data, and personally identifiable data such as social security numbers). The best practice in collecting data is to ensure the data is de-identified.[1] De-identifying the data ensures that the information cannot be used to identify an individual, which is especially important with working with vulnerable populations such as children. In addition to de-identifying the data, storage of data is also a critical component in protecting data. Storing data on secure servers that have strict and limited access is also a best practice for storing electronic data. For organizations that do not have this capability, storing data on computers that are password protected with limited access is another way to secure electronic data. For data that is collected on forms or other hardcopy mediums, storing the documents in a locked file cabinet in a room that also locks is ideal. While these are not the only considerations for ensuring the protection of data, they are the most frequently used.

[1] How to De-Identify Protected Health Information: Guidance Regarding Methods for De-identification of Protected Health Information in Accordance with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) Privacy Rule.

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