

Five Ways to Fix Data Silos

The variables at work inside a nimble and responsive nonprofit are complex. Many factors lead to silos, but, almost without fail, all nonprofits will experience them in some capacity. And, they cause headaches. They slow things down, limit the ability to share with stakeholders, create internal confusion and burnout, and, ultimately, impact service delivery. But, you already knew all this. You came for guidance, not commiseration.

Getting Started

- A. *Identify They Exist.* You've probably already done this.
- B. *Decide If It's Worth Addressing.* You're likely thinking about this.
- C. *Identify Ways to Address It.* There are many, but we share five of them below.
- D. *Address It.* It is stealing your energy and time, so put time and energy into fixing it.
- E. *See If It Worked.* Are the staff smiling? Are funders happy? If yes, time for a walk. If no, see item C above.

Where are you? My hunch (based on your download of this document) is item D. Now that we've set the stage and provided a bit of context, here are five suggestions to organize your program data.

1. *Get your leaders to share their data priorities.* This can look like spending a half-day at a silo-breaking event, reflecting on previous data requests, reviewing databases, reviewing strategic plans, or even just documenting all the data from different programs and departments.
2. *Invest in a database.* Nonprofit organizations are continuously being marketed databases because they work. When a database is up and running and staff buy into it, the impact is remarkable.
3. *Chisel at, rather than breaking, the silos.* It may make sense to decide the five metrics all programs and departments will be measuring, reporting and communicating. Throw these into a dashboard or monthly report and hold all accountable for consistent reporting. Add a few more next year and the year after that.
4. *Map your organization's metrics.* Much of the time, the best way forward is with a clear understanding of what lies behind. Full identification of program measures, instruments and tools, metric types, frequencies, reporting channels, and uses will ensure you make a data-informed decision. Having a visual representation of your organization's data to share and to build buy-in will facilitate your decisions with customizable views and filters to guide your metric-by-metric decisions.
5. *Hire an evaluator/data manager.* As your organization grows, it will be important to have a staff member or consultant taking the lead on this ongoing issue. If the pain caused by your silos is resulting in staff turnover or loss of opportunities, it may be time to consider bringing in someone to lead this effort in an internal (staff) or external (consultant) manner.