Centering Community in Your Data Practices

Purpose: You probably work at a community-based organization because you wanted to focus on community, not funders or models. Therefore, community should be at the center of your data processes. These are some favorite tips for honoring the communities you serve and their stories that are entrusted to you with your data practices.

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Use Culturally Responsive Data Practices

Using the same tools and processes for all of our clients, ignoring diversity in culture and lived experience, will mean our data is not actually representative of the communities we serve.

There are many things to consider when deciding what data to collect and how, including:

- Historical context
- Cultural norms
- Trust building
- Language needs
- Accessibility
- Setting for data collection

*See Page 2 of this tool, and our **Culturally-Responsive Data Practices** emPower Tool for more details and best practices.*

Review the Data You Are Collecting

Look methodically through each of your data collection tools, including surveys and org-level forms. Look for repetition and outdated measures. For each question you ask clients, consider:

Is this question phrased in a way that I would feel comfortable discussing with a stranger?
Do the response options reflect how my clients and the communities I serve talk about themselves?

Break Down Power Dynamics in Decision Making

Does that question HAVE to be mandatory? Says who? Include current and former clients in every step of your data decision making, from deciding what to collect and how, to analysis, to the using of the data to make decisions, apply for more funding, advocate for emerging needs, and so forth.

*See our **Building Teams for Decision Making and Change** emPower Tool on building equitable data teams.*

((COMMUNITY))

Rethink Your Intake Process

Is your intake process building trust or causing harm? Do you really need to ask that question now, or can it wait until you have developed more of a relationship? Often, intake forms are the least-revised form at an organization but they may form the first impression that you are giving a client about what it will be like to work with you. A regular review of your intake process, with a critical toward what information you need immediately vs. what information you need eventually, can allow you to restructure your intake process to be more client-focused.

Be Transparent

Be clear WHY you are asking for the data you are collecting, WHAT will happen to the data, and HOW it will be used. Get informed consent before you proceed, and make sure people understand what might be required to receive services and what is optional.

Get Regular Feedback

Build full cycles of feedback into your data practices. Ask for feedback on your data processes from clients—and staff—at often as you can without creating a burden. Allow people to provide feedback **confidentially** so they can be honest. Make sure you can **do something** about the feedback you receive, so people trust their voice is respected.

Who is Driving Your Data?

Who has the biggest say in what you are collecting? Most of us collect data based on what funders require, and (if using a model) fidelity measures. We have to collect data for those reasons, but they should not be the primary driver. The communities you serve—their lived experiences, needs, norm and language—should be central to the data you collect and how you collect it. Example: including a self-identification option for racial category along with the funder-required federal categories. Take the self-report data back to the funder to advocate for your clients!

Who Owns Your Data?

To whom does your data belong?

If we believe in **data justice** *(see below)*, our clients should own their own data. It is *their* stories, about *their* lives and experiences, and they should have a choice in what they share and how the data is used.

Data Justice aims to capture forms of knowledge and lived experiences that are community-centered and community-driven to counter the systemic erasure and harm perpetrated on BIPOC communities.

With **Data Justice**, data should:

1. make visible community needs, challenges, strengths
2. be representative of community; and
3. treat data in ways that promote self-determination.

Pick the Right Methods

Surveys get used a lot for very good reasons—they allow you to reach a lot of people quickly, they are cheaper than other methods, and the data can be relatively easy to analyze.

At the same time, surveys are not always a good fit for every community. People from cultures where storytelling is the norm may struggle to answer survey questions. At the very least, you may be missing out on important details and context.

Qualitative data (stories, text, images, etc.) can be much more community-focused than numbers. Using methods other than surveys can capture some of life's complexities and nuances that allow you to *make meaning* of your data. However, the analysis can be more challenging and time-consuming. These include:

- Interviews
- Focus Groups
- Community Cafes
- Photo Voice Projects
- Storytelling Projects

It is good to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of multiple approaches and come up with data collection plans and processes that work best for the communities you serve, and your internal capacity to collect and analyze the data you get.

*See our **Collect Meaningful Data** empower Tool series.*

Share Back Data Regularly

The data you collect ultimately belongs to the communities from which it was collected. Demonstrate your community-centered values, and honor the stories that are entrusted to you, by sharing the data you collect back to communities regularly. Clients may also love to see how they are part of something bigger, and data can help potential clients see why it is worth their time and trust to sign up for your programs.

Data can be shared in newsletters, annual reports, your marketing materials, town hall / community café events that solicit feedback, and more.

Consider weaving data into all of the ways you communicate with community to look for opportunities to share those stories.

*See our **Creating Data Feedback Loops With Staff and Community** emPower Tool for more ideas.*

More on Research and Data Justice

For more information on Research and Data Justice, see the Coalition of Communities of Color
https://www.coalitioncommunitiescolor.org/-why-research-data-justice.