A Bottom-Up Approach to Data Leadership: Quality Assurance Design in Social Services

By Chris Hess

When an organization chooses to become data driven, it must realign its workforce, corporate culture and interpretation of its mission in support of the change. Employees must learn new databases and time management skills, and eventually generate data-based results. They also must reorient their beliefs about their work product and learn to see the organization's mission differently.

Transformational managers must choose whether to dictate these changes to workers or involve them in the data program design. Top-down approaches may be more efficient under time pressures and more realistic in high-turnover workforces. Yet they could backfire if they send staff for the exits. Bottom-up approaches can generate buy-in from talented employees as the process simultaneously builds their leadership, innovation and ownership for their work product.
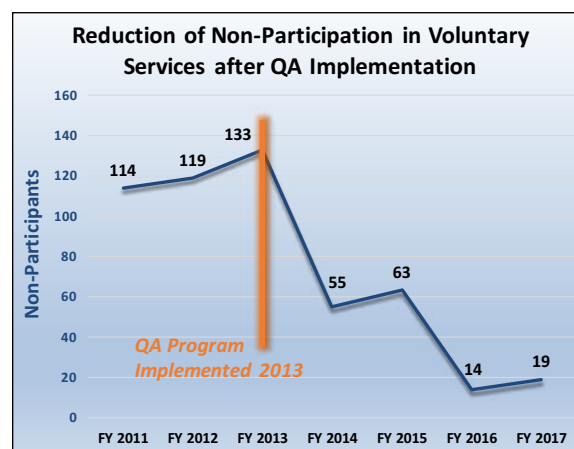
Satellite Affordable Housing Associates (SAHA) implemented two data-driven quality assurance (QA) programs for social services to low-income populations—a top-down approach in 2013 and a bottom-up one in 2016. A nonprofit housing developer, SAHA provides affordable homes with social services to 2,600 senior residents and 900 low-income families. It employs 30 resource and referral specialists—"service coordinators"—who find community resources to support seniors aging in place and families with retaining housing and meeting employment and educational goals.
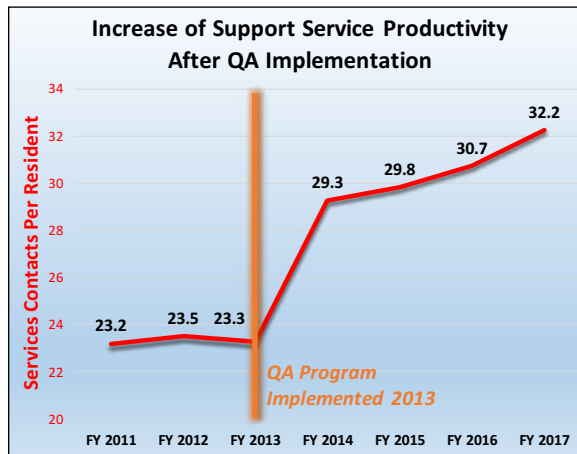
The Top-Down Experience

SAHA management designed and unveiled a quality assurance (QA) program for senior service coordination in 2013. New department-wide standards required staff timeliness in completing the activities of daily living (ADL) assessment and monitoring participation in building activities. Managers began to use the data to focus greater effort on seniors experiencing aging-related changes. SAHA believed many seniors avoided or refused support due to mental health, memory, linguistic or cultural challenges, but actually could benefit from that support the most. QA data quantified the regular, relationship building contacts that service coordinators made with reluctant and isolated seniors.

Anticipating turnover risk, SAHA provided a six-month retraining and adjustment period for staff to understand the program's rationale and standards and to prioritize regular data entry in their schedules. Management hosted group and individual retraining sessions and provided QA reports for information only as real-world practice. Following this period, staff received quarterly QA reports and every employee, including the department director, had a data goal for his or her annual performance evaluation. Service coordinators had data goals at the building level, managers had them for the team under their supervision and the director had a department-wide benchmark.

Service coordinators began to dedicate time to entering data daily, but the data also delivered measurable efficiencies in their work. Staff knew which seniors required the most attention due to hospitalizations, unresolved referrals, frailty or time since the last contact. The QA program increased service engagement from 90.6 percent in 2012 to 99.5 percent of residents in 2017; median resident contacts per month increased by 32 percent. Through this period, SAHA retained nearly all 30 staff, with only two departures related to the data program. Some staff showed morale concerns and frustration with management's attempt to control the program, but overall department satisfaction on the employee survey remained high.

Reduction of Non-Participation in Voluntary Services after QA Implementation

QA Program Implemented 2013

Increase of Support Service Productivity After QA Implementation

The QA project simultaneously brought more hard-to-reach residents into services and increased the frequency that all residents used the program.

The Bottom-Up Experience

Three years later, SAHA took a bottom-up approach to QA for family services. SAHA's data management culture and skill had transformed since the 2013 implementation and management decided to broaden involvement to generate buy-in and improve the program. A working group of 10 direct service staff agreed on family program goals and used them to build a QA program design. Staff tested the guidelines quarterly and reconvened over their performance reports for feedback and revision. No formal performance evaluation ensued; periodic report cards were for staff information only.

The bottom-up approach was well suited to family services as staff need more discretion and flexibility for providing families a wider range of programs and referrals compared to senior communities. Some heads of households need income and employment support; others only want referrals to youth programs, savings tools, recreation, health services or scholarship opportunities. Many families prefer targeted, less frequent contact because they work multiple jobs and provide care to multiple generations.

The bottom-up program is too recent to evaluate turnover impacts and success, but SAHA already detects positive staff morale. Without a high-pressure data accountability regime, service coordinators report new understanding and enjoyment of data and quicker resolution of errors and inconsistencies through peer support. Staff believe more strongly in their purpose and outreach strategies, increasing their efficacy in gaining client participation. Staff now drive innovation around youth programming, expanding their activity offerings and recruiting greater volunteer support at their buildings.

Employee stewardship happens when employees take ownership of their work product and make

excellence their goal, rather than perform to top-down management objectives. SAHA's bottom-up approach recruited direct service staff in organizational transformation, while transforming the staff into stewards of data-driven change.

Chris Hess, an MPA candidate at Presidio Graduate School in San Francisco, is director of resident services at Satellite Affordable Housing Associates in Berkeley. He can be reached at chris.hess@presidio.edu.

OPTIMIZED COMMUNITY POLICING

The community policing example demonstrates an ideal application of locational analytics and its functions within a system of continuous process improvement. Rather than view their adoption as a hindrance or costly endeavor, administrators should consider the long-term benefits of improved strategic planning and resource allocation. In addition to improving accountability and transparency, locational analytics can support optimized strategies to increase officer productivity, raise morale, enhance safety, refine patrol patterns and improve community satisfaction.

Challenges to Overcome

Like all professions, modern policing must adapt to changing times and learn from experiences. Locational analytics must be executed so data analysis and policy review function as part of an ongoing cycle of strategic planning and assessment. The continuous process improvement procedure is not without challenges and is not a panacea for every problem that every law enforcement and public sector agency faces. GIS tools only work if the organization adopting them acknowledges the benefits to be gained. If a department focuses too much on rewarding officers for the number of arrests made, officers may be less inclined to use GIS insights to support community outreach efforts. Additionally, long-term implementation of GIS may help to curb costs, but agencies may face funding constraints, making it difficult to implement technology and hire analysts who can use and interpret the outputs. Yet in overcoming these challenges, locational analytics can help bring community policing and organizational operations into the 21st century.

Roger Chin is a Ph.D. candidate in political science and information systems at Claremont Graduate University and a faculty associate at Arizona State University. He can be reached at roger.chin@cgu.edu.

Jake Campbell is a Ph.D. candidate in political science at Claremont Graduate University and an adjunct professor at California State University, Long Beach. He can be reached at jake.campbell@csulb.edu.