

Data-Driven Decision-Making: Using Analytics for Better Planning

Episode 9 Companion Blog

Quick question: How do you know your programs are actually working?

Not "we think they're working" or "people seem happy" or "we've been doing it this way for years." What's your evidence?

If you paused before answering, you're not alone. Most nonprofit leaders we work with do the same thing. That pause isn't failure—it's recognition that something could be better.

In Episode 9 of Mission-Driven Momentum, we dug into what "data-driven" actually means for organizations that don't have data scientists on staff or six-figure analytics budgets. This companion blog expands on those ideas with additional frameworks and stories that didn't make it into the episode.

Forget the Tony Stark Fantasy

When people hear "data-driven decision-making," they picture holographic dashboards, real-time algorithms, and teams of analysts. The Iron Man lab setup. JARVIS projecting metrics in mid-air while you casually solve problems.

That's fun to imagine. It's also completely unnecessary for most organizations.

Being data-driven just means using information to guide decisions instead of relying solely on gut feelings, assumptions, or "the way we've always done it." The difference between "I think this program is working" and "78% of participants achieved their stated goals, and here's how we measured that."

One is a feeling. The other is evidence. Both matter, but only one holds up when a funder asks hard questions or a board member wants to understand where resources should go.

Think about driving a car. Your intuition is the windshield—you see what's ahead and make judgments. Data is your dashboard and mirrors. Speed, fuel level, what's behind you. Information you can't see directly but need to drive safely. You wouldn't close your eyes and just feel your way down the highway. You also wouldn't stare only at the speedometer and ignore the road. You need both.

The 30/70 Rule

We've watched organizations spend thousands on sophisticated analytics platforms and never use them. Licenses renewed year after year, dashboards sitting empty, staff trained on software nobody opens.

Meanwhile, some of the best data work we've seen happens in shared Google Sheets. Donor retention tracked with simple formulas. Program outcomes updated monthly. Volunteer engagement visible to everyone. Cost: nothing. Value: enormous.

The difference isn't the tool. It's the discipline.

Choosing the right tool accounts for maybe 30% of success. The other 70% is implementation and culture—getting people to actually use it and understand why it matters. If your team doesn't know why they're collecting data or how it'll inform decisions, it doesn't matter how good your software is. They'll enter information reluctantly, inconsistently, or not at all. The whole initiative dies quietly, and leadership wonders what went wrong.

Five Ways Data Initiatives Die

After working with nonprofits for decades, we keep seeing the same patterns. These are the traps that kill data initiatives—and they're all avoidable.

The treadmill problem. Organizations set up elaborate tracking systems, staff dutifully enters information, and then... nothing. Nobody looks at it. Nobody uses it. It's the nonprofit equivalent of buying a treadmill and using it as a coat rack.

We worked with a nonprofit that had been tracking client demographics and program outcomes for three years. Three years of staff time entering data into a system. When we asked what insights they'd gained, the answer was "we haven't actually looked at it yet." That's not just wasted effort—it's demoralizing for the people doing the work.

The everything trap. Some organizations try to measure everything and end up measuring nothing well. Fifty metrics on a dashboard, but none of them accurate or useful because everyone's overwhelmed trying to maintain them all. Start with three to five metrics that connect directly to your strategic goals. Master those. Get consistent. Add more later if you need to—but you probably won't.

The empty stadium. Ten thousand Instagram followers sounds impressive in a board meeting. But how many of them donate? Volunteer? Actually engage with your mission? We worked with an organization obsessed with social media growth—celebrating follower milestones, posting about it in reports—while their donor retention rate quietly declined. They were filling seats in an empty stadium. The crowd looked good, but nobody was playing the game.

The dirty data disaster. Your analysis is only as good as your information. One client came to us panicking because their donor retention rate was 40%—terrible by any measure. When we dug into the database, we found hundreds of duplicate records. The

same donor entered three different ways with slightly different spellings. Actual retention rate after cleanup: 68%. Still room for improvement, but a completely different situation than they thought.

The perfection paralysis. Some organizations get so focused on collecting perfect data that they never make a decision. More information, better information, cleaner information—meanwhile nothing changes. Data exists to inform decisions, not delay them. You'll never have perfect information. At some point you use what you know, apply judgment, and move forward.

Finding Your North Star

We ask every organization this question: If you could only track one number—one metric that, if it improved, would mean you're succeeding at your mission—what would it be?

That's your North Star metric. Everything else is either supporting information or noise.

For a youth mentoring program, it might be the percentage of matches lasting at least six months. For a food bank, maybe the number of families who don't return within 90 days—indicating they achieved food stability. For a job training program, employment rates six months after completion.

Once you've identified your North Star, the next question writes itself: What information would help us know if we're on track?

A mentoring organization we worked with tracked match duration for a full year. Just that one number, consistently. What they found changed everything. Matches with frequent staff check-ins during the first month lasted significantly longer. Matches where mentors completed full training lasted longer. Matches started in fall lasted longer than those started in spring. Each pattern suggested a specific action they could take.

No fancy software required. No complex algorithms. Just tracking what matters and using it to get better.

Culture Eats Spreadsheets for Breakfast

The biggest barrier to becoming data-driven isn't technical. You can learn spreadsheets. You can set up tracking systems. The hard part is getting people to care about the numbers.

People resist data when they think it's about judgment or control. If staff believe you're tracking things to catch them doing something wrong, they'll push back. But frame it as learning and improving—"we're tracking outcomes so we can see what's working and do more of it"—and you'll get buy-in.

Support, not surveillance. That framing changes everything.

Make data review collaborative instead of performative. Don't just have leadership present numbers while everyone nods politely. Ask questions. Get input. "Donor retention dropped 10% this quarter—what are you hearing from donors? What's happening on the ground?" Your frontline staff know things the spreadsheet never will.

And never forget: every data point represents a person. A family. A life. Numbers tell you what's happening but not always why or what to do about it. You still need judgment, values, and context. Data-driven doesn't mean data-only.

The Support Cliff

One of our favorite success stories involves a small homeless services organization that had been operating for 15 years. Good reputation, passionate staff, community support. But they couldn't answer a basic question: How many people we house actually stay housed?

So they started tracking three numbers: people housed, percentage still housed at six months, percentage still housed at one year.

The six-month retention looked strong—around 80%. But the 12-month number dropped to 55%. Something was happening between months six and twelve.

They talked to former clients. They surveyed case managers. The pattern became clear: people did okay initially but struggled after case management ended at the six-month mark. There was a support cliff, and people were falling off it.

The fix was simple. Quarterly check-ins and resource connections for months 6-12. Nothing elaborate. Didn't require new grant funding. Just staying connected during a vulnerable transition.

One year later, their 12-month retention hit 78%. Real lives changed—not because of sophisticated analytics, but because they tracked three numbers consistently and asked what the patterns meant.

The Story Behind the Number

Numbers without context lie. Or at least mislead.

"We only served 50 people this year instead of 75." Sounds bad. But what if those 50 people had dramatically better outcomes? What if serving fewer people more deeply was the whole point?

A client came to us with a board in full panic mode. Program enrollment had dropped 30% year over year. Crisis meetings were being scheduled. But when we looked at the full picture, completion rates had jumped from 45% to 82%. They'd made the program more intensive—serving fewer people with much better results. That's not failure. That's smart strategy that hadn't been communicated properly.

Always ask: What's the story behind this number? What changed? What stayed the same? What does this mean for our mission?

Start This Week

You don't need to overhaul everything. Pick one metric connected to a strategic priority. Track it consistently for three months. Review it regularly with your team. Make one adjustment based on what you learn.

Congratulations—you're now data-driven.

Download our free Data-Driven Decision-Making Template at missiondrivenpod.com for frameworks to identify your key metrics, set up simple tracking, and build review practices that stick.

Let's Keep the Conversation Going

Want to go deeper? We're here for it.

Podcast/blog feedback: contact@missiondrivenpod.com

Support for your team or organization: contact@thescanlandgroup.com or visit thescanlandgroup.com

From our family—including Gracie, Moody, and Diamond, whose dinner schedule is tracked with more precision than most strategic plans—to yours: keep leading with heart, keep showing up with purpose, and keep creating a world where everyone belongs.

Until next time—stay focused, stay mission-driven.