Data isn't a Four-Letter Word:

A Report on a Four-Part Learning Lab for the Experiential Jewish Education Network

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Program Overview

This paper reports on a pilot program aimed at helping nonprofit professionals increase their ability to use data effectively in their work. A four-part Learning Lab taught members of the Experiential Jewish Education (EJE) Network about the process of data collection. The webinar-based series equipped them with knowledge and tools to increase data use and begin to measure their impact. The four sessions were designed using the Schusterman Data Playbook written by Rella Kaplowitz. Click here for more information about the learning lab.

Webinar Titles:

1. Measuring your Impact!
2. What now? Creating a measurement plan
3. What does all this data mean?
4. Bringing it home: Data at your organization

Additional Learning Supports:

In addition to the four webinars, the following extra learning supports were provided:

1. Selected participants were matched with expert mentors. Mentors volunteered an hour of their time to help participants with a data collection project, such as designing a survey.
2. Supplemental learning modules were created and distributed after every webinar to extend the learning. These consisted of additional resources followed by a series of questions. The modules were optional and facilitators provided feedback to participants who completed the modules.
3. Participant data was featured in the form of case studies.
4. A resource folder was provided to participants which included: Powerpoint slides of presentation, webinar recordings, online learning modules, and links to additional resources.
5. Facilitators modeled the use of different data collection instruments:
    a. Surveys: 1) needs assessment before the entire Learning Lab series 2) pre-assessment survey at the beginning of each session, 3) polls conducted during the webinars 4) post-assessment survey at the end of each session, and 5) final assessment at the end of the Learning Lab series.
    b. At the end of every webinar participants were asked to share their take-aways and a question about the topic they wanted to learn more about.
    c. Short interviews with each participant were held between the first two webinars.
    d. An interview protocol for the Director of the EJE network was created for follow-up.
6. Rella Kaplowitz author of the Schusterman Data Playbook gave a guest presentation.

Participants

Ten people enrolled in the Learning Lab. Participants represented synagogues, camps, national youth organizations, and Federations. The group included executives, program directors, and program managers.

What participants wanted to learn[1]:

- Becoming more effective and efficient in using data.
- Improving programs by learning from satisfaction surveys and participant feedback.
- Using data to tell the story of their programs to key stakeholders like executives and board members.
- Creating a culture of increased data use within their organization.

How participants engaged with the Learning Lab:

- Participants attended the webinars.
- Self-directed learning using the online learning modules and the Data Playbook itself.
- Watched recordings of the webinars at a time that was personally convenient.
- Communicated with Naava and Laura, and their mentor about data use at their organization.

Key Outcomes

I. Early Changes in Understanding and Attitude:

After Learning Lab 1 participants expressed the following takeaways:
- "Data doesn't have to be scary...."
- "Collecting data allows us to tell stories."
- "Excel may be more powerful than I knew."

One participants shared the following comment via email: "I am already supremely impressed with the level of professionalism this offering is providing."

II. Three Key Learning Themes:

Based on an analysis of qualitative and quantitative data collected, three themes that emerged from the data[2] were identified and are described on the follow page.

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[1] The Wordle on the cover was created from needs assessment data collected from participants.

[2] Due to the small sample size, the results are not statistically significant.

A. Questions:

Participants gained an appreciation for the power of a well-worded question and the problems with a poorly-worded question. After the learning lab devoted to the topic of questions, most respondents moved up two levels from "slightly able" to "moderately able" to "recognize a question that is well formulated." Participants also became more comfortable selecting an instrument for their data collection.

At the end of the series, multiple participants commented on the role of questions in data collection: "The importance of the way you frame questions can influence your data." Facilitators consider the awareness of the connection between a quality instrument and quality data an important foundation for the responsible use of data.

B. Numbers Tell a Story:

Throughout the series, there was a shift in participants' attitudes towards data: "There is so much more to data than just numbers … numbers tell a story and have meaning."

A number of participants learned "that excel is sophisticated" and became aware of tools and strategies they could use with data they had collected.

Facilitators noticed that some participants had difficulty making meaning of numerical data at the start of the series. The realization that numbers can tell a story was an important conceptual breakthrough. We hope this shift in understanding will bring with it a newfound openness to using data.

C. Creating a Data Culture in Their Organization:

The topic of organizational and culture change was not a topic that facilitators planned to address in the Learning Lab. As facilitators discovered more about the interests of participants, a unit on "How to Create a Data Culture" was added. The unit was presented by Rella Kaplowitz, the author of the Schusterman Data Playbook. In the words of a participant: "changing the culture around data is a slow process but you can be intentional about it and can break it down into concrete steps that are helpful." Building an awareness of cultural barriers to using data and providing participants with strategies to overcome those barriers will increase the likelihood participants can use data in their work.

Summary and Conclusion

I. Challenges:

The following challenges were identified through data collected in the final survey and reflection of the facilitators:

- Participants found the sessions engaging, but occasionally the content was not particularly relevant to their role.
- Participants were not able to consistently attend sessions and cited scheduling conflicts and being busy as the reasons why.
- Facilitators found it challenging to prioritize and adequately cover content in four sessions given the variety of needs of participants and scope of material in the Data Playbook.

II. Overall Trends:

Data collected before and after each learning lab indicates:

- The majority of participants increased their knowledge, comfort, and understanding of the topics covered in each learning lab.
- After each learning lab, a majority of those surveyed reported acquiring new ideas to apply to their work.

Topics:

- Overall, it appears that the learning labs familiarized people with key concepts and tools of data collection such as:
    - Formulating key questions to guide data collection.
    - Baseline and retrospective data.
    - Recognizing a good survey or interview question.
    - Selecting an instrument.
    - Hypothesis testing in data analysis.
    - Causation vs. correlation.
    - Data analysis and visualization features in Excel.
    - Ways to increase data use at their organization.
    - The Schusterman Data Playbook and its extensive resources.

When asked if they would engage in a data collection project at their organization in the future, all respondents indicated they would.

III.   Conclusion:

This was a pilot program. There seemed to be a substantial upward shift among participants in terms of their understanding, skills, and attitudes toward engaging with data. It would be interesting to follow up with them after the summer to see how they are using data in their work.

Since there were important topics that were not covered in the four sessions, this group might benefit from being offered additional sessions on topics such as: key performance indicators and data visualization. There are many others who would benefit from this kind of experience if the Learning Lab were to be offered again.

Recommendations for future sessions:
- Offer sessions between November and Pesach. Learning from similar initiatives indicates this timeline optimizes consistent participation.
- Recruit a larger number of participants for the learning lab to minimize the impact of inevitable scheduling conflicts.
- Use the feedback received about the Learning Lab content to refine the curriculum.
- Explore the possibility of adding one to two more sessions to the series when it is offered in the future.
- Seek ways to encourage all participants to engage with their own data during the course. Participants who engaged with their own data during the course (e.g. through case studies, during mentor calls, and in the online learning modules) benefitted greatly.

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