gardner perspectives
December 2015

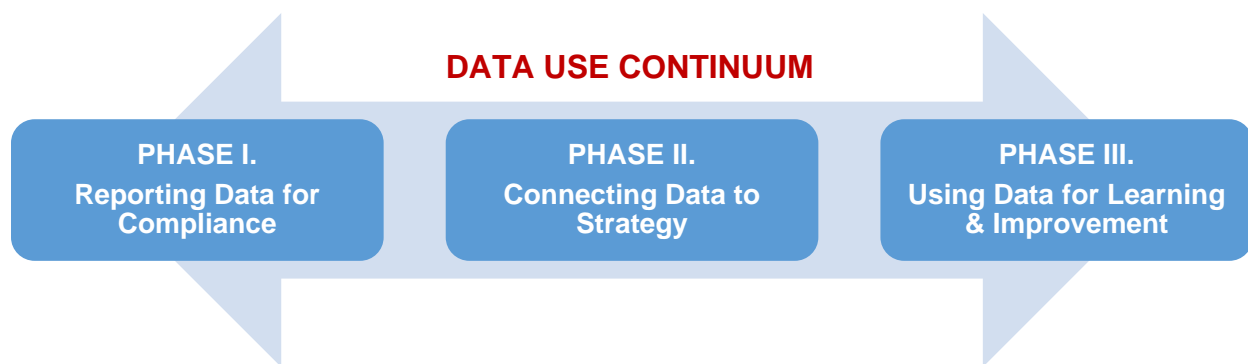## SHIFTING THE NORMS: FROM DATA FOR COMPLIANCE TO DATA FOR STRATEGY

AMY GERSTEIN

Although the rhetoric of "data-based decision making" has been *de rigeur* for many years, the Gardner Center team has found that interest in and commitment to data use is not typically reflected in youth-serving organizations' practices . . . and we think we know why.

In many cases, organizations do not yet view data as a deeply strategic driver. Rather than viewing data use as an opportunity to solve problems, illuminate strategy, and accelerate learning, the habits of gathering and reporting data only for compliance purposes tend to dominate. Consider the last several decades: schools and districts have had to collect and report all manner of data on students, from attendance to grades to disciplinary infractions to test scores to parent education levels. Staff can view this work as cumbersome, and may see few rewards for engaging in inquiry to understand patterns and begin to ask questions of the data. Instead, school-level data—for example, test scores—are viewed in isolation.

Working in research practice partnerships with community youth development organizations, the Gardner Center promotes data use for solving problems and developing habits of inquiry. Our work is rooted in communities and driven by a set of principles that include trusting relationships, equity of youth outcomes, data-informed decisions, and forging connections across silos. We are interested in shifting the norms and behaviors associated with *data for compliance* to *data for strategy*. Over many years, we have observed a continuum, or series of phases, which youth-serving organizations traverse while developing the skills to more confidently use data to support strategic decision-making, and, ultimately, action.

> When strategy is at the center, data can be used to gauge and guide progress.

DATA USE CONTINUUM

PHASE I.	PHASE II.	PHASE III.
Reporting Data for Compliance	Connecting Data to Strategy	Using Data for Learning & Improvement

In **Phase I**, partners are engaged in work with data and information systems largely for compliance purposes. Often, they are mandated by an external party to do so. The drive to collect data is for accountability and not for improvement. No specific research questions are guiding the data collection or use.

In **Phase II,** partners are collecting data but not yet in a manner that is systematically or necessarily tied to the goals and strategies of their organizations. We have observed wide variation at this stage as organizations mature in their understanding of their purpose and the need for data to support learning and growth.

In **Phase III**, partners have developed logic models and/or theories of change, and their data work is clearly connected to their articulated goals, strategies, and outcomes. They have determined that they can use data to inform and improve their work. They look to data to help address more sophisticated, nuanced questions. Engaging potential third-party research partners is critical to this phase.

It is important to note that each phase is not distinct, and progression across the continuum is not linear; instead, we have seen partners move forward and backward along the continuum. That is why, in the diagram above, we have depicted the three phases atop a bidirectional arrow. Consider the following example: at the outset, a partner might seek a research partner (Phase III). All the while, this partner might be hard pressed to articulate how their goals, strategies, and data are related (Phase I). At another point, the same partner might request help in creating a logic model to ensure the data elements are tied to goals, strategies, and outcomes (Phase II).

Understanding this continuum has helped us to be better collaborators. Our goal is to build capacity, supporting our partners at youth-serving organizations to ask researchable questions, interpret findings, and connect their own work to broader literature and experiences in the youth development field. Employing the data use continuum as a guiding tool, Gardner Center researchers are able to approach our joint work with a solid awareness of its intricacies.

Our partners will be the first to say that this is complex work, and Gardner Center researchers would be quick to agree! But, fundamentally, data reveal hidden gems. Despite the challenges, as data use capacities begin to build, so does clarity about goals and objectives for improving youth outcomes. Through data analysis, we learn new ways of seeing our shared work. For those of us striving for excellence in work that spans the youth sector, building the capacity of youth-serving organizations to use data strategically is of the essence.

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