

# The Surprising Alchemy of Passion and Science

by Lissette Rodriguez

Through the smart use of data, organizations can better assess the reach and success of their missions without sacrificing the passion undergirding their work. Learning organizations exemplify the fundamental characteristics required to determine whether an organization is fulfilling its goals—and if not, how those shortcomings can be addressed.

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**W**E ALL COME TO THIS WORK with a passion for improving lives. It drives us to get up early, stay late, and work through lunch. We do it even when the challenges are great and the rewards are tough to reach. (And let's face it—we did not get into this business for the money!) We also work at a relentless pace that does not leave much time for rest or reflection—because the need usually outpaces the resources we have at our disposal. So passion is our fuel, and it's what has made the third sector a robust part of our communities.

A few weeks ago I was visiting an organization working just outside of a major U.S. city. Working with poor, mostly migrant families to provide social, counseling, and educational services, this organization was living proof of what passion can accomplish in an

underserved and underresourced community. Through sheer grit and determination, the board and executive director have built a \$2 million agency in a place with little funding, infrastructure, or services—but, of course, great need. Passion helped that organization start and get to where it is today. But will it be enough to get to the next level?

Over the last few years I have focused on this very question: How do organizations and leaders harness their passion for justice, love of people and communities, and commitment to better our world while increasing their understanding of whether and how they are having an impact? I believe science and measurement can help us and can do so in the context of the passion that drives us. It can be done without turning our organizations into soulless assembly-line enterprises. It can happen without

sacrificing the deep feeling of mission that often feeds personal and organizational purpose and meaning. It takes a delicate balance of trust in what we know and the recognition of what we don't yet understand, and it takes a deep appreciation for the seen and the unseen and the measured and the intuitive, giving each its proper place and due.

I am an unlikely convert to this work. For twelve years at YouthBuild I saw young people who had dropped out of high school arriving at the doors of local programs with many disappointments, lack of support, and failures weighing them down. They were facing tough odds; but they were also young, full of promise, and, with the right supports, ready to take advantage of opportunities. These youth had no time to waste, and neither did the adults seeking to support them. The goal was to make every minute

count if participants were to emerge with better prospects for the future.

By the time I arrived at the organization, YouthBuild leaders had spent years on program design and implementation. They'd also listened deeply to participants to calibrate the approach. But we still had many questions about how best to carry out certain elements of the program to make the greatest difference in preparing young adults for a healthy and self-sustaining life. We had some clues, but we needed more information to get better. It was at YouthBuild where I developed a sense of urgency for understanding how we might better use data to make the nine program months really count.

Prior to this, I had often seen myself squarely in the passion camp. I thought my side was incompatible with the data nerds. Either you run an organization driven by passion or you're a bean counter. Either your workplace is a place where individuals are unique or you run a nonprofit as a heartless business that crunches numbers, drives toward maximum efficiency, and takes human connection out of the equation.

I was caught up in a false dichotomy: do you care about odds or do you care about people?

But that isn't the way I see it today. I've learned that you can improve the odds *and* make a real difference in people's lives.

I believe we can all harness data to empower ourselves and our organizations to make the most of our passion. Your passion is what brought you to this kind of work; it's what gets you out of bed each morning, and it may have gotten you through more than one sleepless night when you wondered if your organization was going to make payroll. You need it, and the world needs it as well. But passion is not enough if you want to truly understand whether and how you are making a difference.

All of us who have worked with families in crisis or struggling communities have countless anecdotes to illustrate the ways in which we've helped people, neighborhoods, and organizations. These stories are important because they bring to life how our work is making a difference in the lives of individuals. But beyond these stories, do we truly know how we are doing with the groups of people that we reach through our organizations? How can we know we are doing the best we can with our resources if we don't collect and use data about our services? How do we know what we might improve—or stop doing—if we don't take the time to analyze and act upon the information we are collecting?

Smart use of data is what helps you do the job today even better than you did it the day before. It enables you to keep learning from your experiences. It is an important and vital addition to the intuition you already possess and use every day. Science plus passion gives us more fuel for the work than either one alone. It creates a powerful alchemy that enables us to do more, achieve more, and create more for the people and communities we serve.

### The Propel/Next Story

To show how this can work, I'm going to tell you about Propel/Next, an initiative housed at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. We help youth-serving nonprofits boost their impact on young people's lives. To do so, we support our grantees to collect and use their data to understand who their clients are, what they need, and how they can serve them better. We are one of many organizations working on this, and our approach is hardly the only one; but core to our hypothesis is the belief that there is a way to do this work that enhances and does not detract from purpose and mission. Central to our approach is the

idea that the bridge between science and passion is the creation of cultures of learning.

We've all heard the term "learning organizations." I remember when I first heard that phrase: it was in 1990, after the release of Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline*. So, what is a learning organization? In our context, it is an organization that appreciates its past performance but does not rest on it, and is always open and looking for new ways to do deeper, better, more impactful work. It is an organization that does not use data just once, making one set of changes and then moving on. It creates an ongoing process of review, learning, and reflection. Leaders in these organizations regularly ask themselves, "Are we doing the best we can for every client?," and look for the answer to that question in data, not just anecdotes. And for every improvement they make, they reassess, tinker, and continue to improve.

From time to time, they'll go back and ask themselves deeper questions, such as, "What were we trying to achieve when we created or revised this program? Why are we implementing it this way, and does this still respond to the needs we want to address?" They routinely inquire, "What do our beneficiaries or participants think of the services they are receiving? Have funding pressures diluted or changed our approach in ways that undermine our goals?" This is one way our grantees have connected passion and science: by revisiting the original vision that brought the organization to life and examining that vision in today's light to see what is still relevant, what needs to shift, and what's the best way to use data to inform the next set of choices.

This may all sound good, but anyone who has run an organization or a program knows that pulling this off is not an easy feat. I get it. Just yesterday, I was sitting in a meeting with the

evaluators of *PropelNext*, and believe me, it is hard to maintain a learning orientation while listening to what has not gone well from people who share that information in excruciating detail. But I hang onto the fact that we want to get better, and that helps to deal with the disappointment of what didn't go as expected. I remind myself that I would rather know sooner than later that something is not working as we thought it would. Why keep repeating what does not appear to be successful? That's what keeps me going.

To illustrate how becoming a learning organization can make you both more passionate about your work and better at it, I want to share the story of one of our grantees, Taller San Jose. Taller San Jose was founded twenty years ago by Sister Eileen McNerny, who, over the years, built a highly regarded program that trains hard-to-reach, disadvantaged young people for careers in healthcare, construction, and business. Everyone at Taller is driven by a deep commitment to giving youth opportunities for productive and meaningful lives.

By being deliberate and thoughtful in their learning, Taller's staff have used data to reactivate their passion. Executive director Shawna Smith recently told me that using data has created a fresh opportunity for her organization to deliver on the promise it originally made to the young people of their community.

How? First, Taller was able to better understand and reconnect with those it wanted to serve.

Taller San Jose was founded to serve the most disconnected, hardest-to-reach young people—those youth who did poorly in school, dropped out early, landed low-paying jobs that they could not hold. Maybe they didn't even have a place to sleep at night. These young people are challenging. They are hard to engage and hard to support. But these were the very

youth that Taller saw as full of promise and was committed to serving.

Over the years, Taller began to drift from these young people without realizing it. They still served high-risk youth, but maybe not *quite* so high-risk. Maybe their students were reading at a ninth- or tenth-grade level instead of a fifth-grade level.

Supported by a team of consultants, Shawna and her team looked at their data and recognized this shift. They recommitted themselves to serving the highest-risk young people, and created a more purposeful approach to reaching them. They defined the requirements for participating in their program in a way that was clear, specific, and measureable. Today, a significant percentage of the youth at Taller represent the highest-risk young people from low-income families with reading and math levels at the fifth- to eighth-grade level—youth with the fewest options and the greatest needs. Data enabled Taller to do a better job of reaching the youth it had intended to reach all along.

It also enabled them to serve those clients better. And that leads into the second example I want to share.

The staff at Taller learned something important from looking deeply at their data. The young people who graduated from Taller's training programs were successful at landing jobs. They knew that. But until they analyzed their longer-term results, they did not know these youth were far less successful at keeping those jobs. With this knowledge, Taller went digging deeper to understand why. Staff learned that when the youth lost jobs, it almost never had anything to do with the technical skills Taller had taught them. Instead, the problem was life circumstances and life-skills challenges. These youth lost their transportation. Or their housing. Or their child care. In hindsight, this is not surprising, of course: these were the very challenges

the youth brought with them in the first place, and they were not going to magically disappear after training. But Taller's staff had overestimated the power of their training to get participants through *future* tough circumstances. Looking at their data, Shawna and her team realized that technical skills were an insufficient investment without additional supports and life skills.

This insight led to a major redesign of the program. To make a lasting change, Taller knew it had to beef up its supportive services to be on par with the technical training. Until then, Taller's supportive services were informal, ad hoc, and not well tracked. The organization's emphasis was on its highly regarded technical training programs. Today, Taller invests as much in supportive services as it does in its technical training. Taller developed a set of indicators that measure how a young person builds self-sufficiency. These indicators aren't just to monitor progress—Taller uses them to pinpoint specific areas where a young person might need additional support.

If Shawna were here, she'd be the first to tell you that this change was hard. Her staff had to rethink their roles and work in new ways. Budgets had to adjust. But the results are impressive. Today, 77 percent of Taller's participants represent the highest-risk youth they were created to serve, up from 36 percent just two years ago. Remarkably, in spite of serving an even more challenging group of youth, program retention is slightly up, at 76 percent, indicating that the program is addressing the needs of a substantial number of participants. But the results were transformational. Young people are doing better. They are sticking with the program, and their job retention rates are much higher. The youth are getting jobs and keeping them!

The staff at Taller became empowered and invigorated by a richer understanding of their impact, and funders are impressed by the results and are now funding a significant expansion of Taller's programming.

By now I hope you're thinking, "I'm intrigued." You may even be thinking, "Can I do some of this (or more of this) at *my* organization?" I think the answer is yes, you can. PropelNext may only be able to directly help a small number of organizations, but we are committed to sharing what we learn and offering insights and resources for those of you looking to incorporate data more fully into your work.

So I'd like to share what, based on our experience, I believe are the prerequisites for becoming a learning organization:

1. *Committed leadership.* Leaders—not just the executive director but also board members and top program people—need to be committed to the idea that using data will eventually make the work and results better. In my experience, leadership support is foundational, and nothing moves without it. It takes courage to be this kind of leader, and to be open to hearing exactly what you may not want to hear and take action to turn it around.
2. *Healthy curiosity and spirit of purposeful inquiry.* This is not data to hammer people over the head with nor inquiry to see what your staff is doing wrong; this is information to feed learning about what can be done better. Yes, your data may lead to some tough decisions, but the first steps are to make it safe for people in the organization to ask questions, and to help identify options for moving forward.
3. *Resources.* It is critical to line up resources to do this work. Nonprofits often need some outside expertise

to help guide the process and internal skills to advance the work. Also, in my experience, time for analysis and reflection is also an important resource. You need to be intentional about setting aside time for reflection—after all, collecting data and never looking at it would truly be a waste. Of course, this means funders must invest in you in order that you can take this on. In the end, you want quality data that provide you with a platform for strategic decision making and from which to act upon what you're learning, even when that leads to hard choices and unpopular decisions. You owe it to the people and communities you serve.

4. *Stamina.* This kind of work takes time—often years—and requires patience. It is important to pace yourself and limit the data that is collected to what can actually be used, rather than trying to gather everything you think you will want to know on day one. Becoming a learning organization does not happen overnight. It is an iterative process and will hopefully lead you to make each version of the work better than the one before.

If you take on the journey toward become a learning organization, know that the path is not straightforward. You will hit obstacles. Your passion will be tested. Your assumptions and beliefs *will* be challenged. But it is a journey that has the potential to change what you do and how you do it, with people and communities being the ultimate beneficiaries.

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