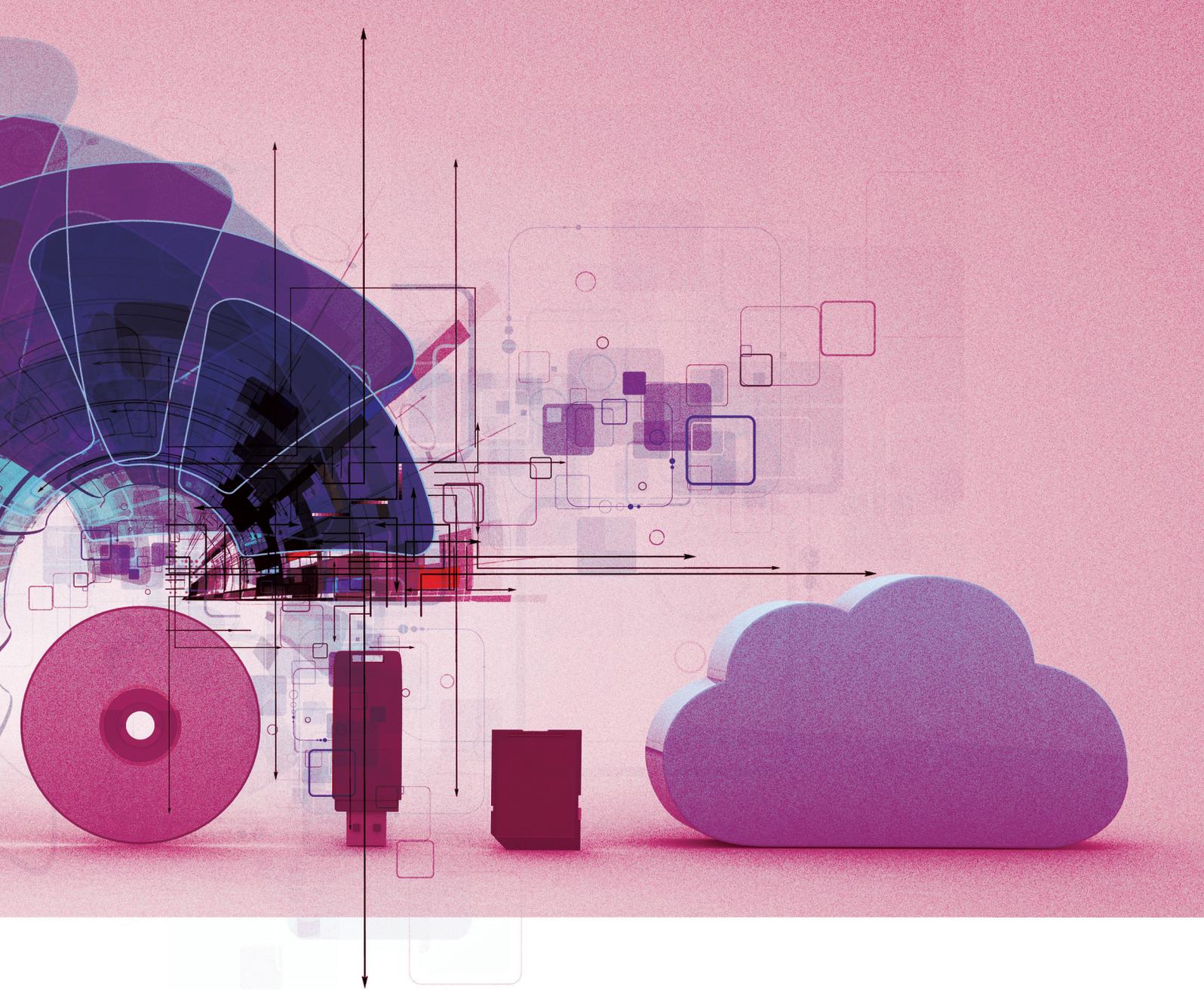




Disarming Data & Analytics

An Old-School Tradition

By Phil Basso



OK, I admit it. I have issues with technology.

Some of APHSA's dearest partners are squarely in this line of work, so I'm wincing as I reveal this. I grew up in the 60s and 70s, so for me a big technology breakthrough was when cassettes replaced 8-track tapes. I refuse to move on from CDs. My office neighbor Mo still laughs at me for installing the first apps on my phone, um, recently. And if someone uses words like "modular code" or "full stack development" in my presence, I immediately think of places to hide.

Like I said, I have issues. That's why it didn't surprise me when at a recent data and analytics symposium we co-sponsored, initial discussions around the word cloud (ugh) brought forth terms like "complicated, frustrating, and daunting." What did surprise me was my own word choice, which was "disarming." As bad as technology feels inside, how do I feel when it comes to turning data into useful information and analytics to solve problems, make decisions, overcome preconceived notions, and generate evidence for what works? Well, I'm all in, and with pleasure.

I'm writing this as a witness to what APHSA's members and their partners are currently accomplishing. In the challenging social and political environment we currently experience, it's heartening to see such a greater focus on social and economic mobility and equity, justice and fairness. To see public health, health care, housing, education, criminal justice, community-based organizations, and public human services joining forces more and more. To see local and statewide data and analysis aims shifting from knowing to doing at a faster rate. In other words, to see a data and analytics culture growing within our systems.

Yes, it's far from perfect out there. We still try at times to plug and play evidence-based practices without understanding why they work, and then we darken those word clouds when they don't work for us. Ours is a field that's been talking about service integration since the 80s. Still and all, a witness with issues like mine can still see that "a change is gonna come," thanks Aretha.

Why is a change coming? What are some of the factors that enable data and analytics capabilities to take shape, even in a forbidding climate? What does a culture of data and analytics look like?

Adaptive Leaders with Vision. If you have issues with organizational jargon, remember that I can relate. But the technical term "adaptive leadership" is worth the risk, because it's so counterintuitive. We're conditioned as leaders to know the answers—to be in charge like that. But the very essence of a data and analytics culture is not

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knowing the answers and being open to what the data tell you. At the same time, leaders have to bring the vision and energy for the sustained effort. We care about data and analytics because we can't otherwise partner to solve tough problems within families and communities.

Good Governance. Data governance and data management efforts have been structured and run with success in many places. Systems that are behind in this regard can easily find examples or procure experts for elements of good governance like data-sharing agreements; memoranda of understanding between parties; effective and meaningful client-consent protocols; tiers of organizational governance for oversight, planning, and implementation; and related facilitation and project management skills and methods. In short, let's stop telling ourselves why we can't overcome the technical aspects of our aims and build the working knowledge to fulfill them.

A Guiding Framework, Factors, and Indicators. Our readers are familiar with the Human Services Value Curve and Social Determinants of Health frameworks, and these have proven to be powerful ways to create shared meaning and language across programs and entities working with the same people. Underlying root cause factors and related indicators need to be modeled for a theory of impact to be defined and measures to be studied. Root causes are both family centered and structural, so this modeling ensures you don't leave out major elements for study such as those contributing to disparate outcomes by race and place.

Staff, Partner, and User

Engagement. Consistent with adaptive change principles, solutions are identified and tested with input from everyone, not just technicians or those at the top. For culture change to really take hold, the people whose expertise and buy-in you need to sustain it have to know the movement belongs as much to them as anyone. Facilitation is a critical aspect of making this a reality, since this level of empowerment does not come naturally to most people.

Keeping Terms Simple. This item may be self-serving on some level, except I've recently heard senior consultants from big technology firms and data science programs at big universities asserting this. There's a natural tendency to associate effective use of data and analytics with the technical platform and statistical methods you need to enable it. But just like turning on a TV or iPhone, we don't all need to understand how it works. I've learned this about the big human services programs—program experts are needed to foster their integrity, but the rest of us need to stay focused on their impact.

Understanding Basic Differences. It is useful to define four general types and uses of analytics, corresponding to the four Value Curve stages. This way they each receive their due, and systems avoid the common occurrence of getting stuck at the second stage:

- Stage One analytics are used to study and improve program-specific integrity.
- Stage Two analytics are used to study and improve client service and experience.



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- Stage Three analytics are used to generate root cause–driven solutions at the family level.
- Stage Four analytics are used to formulate root cause–driven strategies at the environmental and structural levels—“bigger than the family.”

Messaging for Impact. As with keeping terms simple, there’s a natural tendency to describe what data and analytics are telling us by, well, talking about the data in a statistical fashion. But we know from brain science that a culture of analytics will more likely thrive on a foundation of asserting clear values, employing a metaphor for what we’re trying to create, sharing examples of what it looks like, and only then expressing a data-oriented narrative that fits with the first three messaging elements.

Building Workforce Capacity Smartly. The most formidable barrier to a data and analytics culture might be the skill gap in your current organization. The good news is that your workforce may relish the idea of this movement but isn’t feeling competent

and therefore confident to do so. Successful systems are combining outside technical expertise from universities and consultants with in-house teams of “translators” set up to ensure that, over time, those expert skills can be appropriately developed and transferred in-house. It’s important to know that this capacity-building process may take a few years.

Performance Management is a Learning Experience. Data and analysis are often associated with accountability for results, as they should be. But there’s a big difference between tracking performance along with related incentives and using a continuous improvement and learning cycle, within which analytics are used to study open questions about the “why.” APHSA uses the DAPIM™ method for embedding such cycles when solutions are not yet known, and other cycles can also be adopted.

Using Big Data and Rapid Cycle Analytics. For example, health care and human services commonly use different approaches to analytics. Big data and analytics can be used to study

presenting health conditions across large populations and determine standard diagnosis and treatment protocols. Rapid-cycle testing and refining service plans are very useful when working with a family on complex barriers to stability and mobility. In a desired state, each of these general approaches works in harmony, as problems are studied before trauma is occurring or getting worse.

Other witnesses and observers would call out additional dimensions of “what it looks like” to have the desired culture take shape and evolve. The main thing is for us all to stay focused on the desired state: to generate evidence for what works, join forces across system boundaries to solve problems, reshape services and supports for greater impact, and move system energy upstream to prevention and capacity-building. If we keep this focus, we can aspire to an evolving national culture, where we all become better at openness, learning, critical thinking, partnership, and listening to each other.

I know, that sounds very old school. But remember, I have my issues. 



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