

# IOWA

Division of Student Life

# Evidence-Based Decision Making

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How do I make decisions based on good evidence?

In today's data-driven world, making informed decisions is crucial for the success and growth of any organization. Evidence-based decision-making is a systematic approach that involves gathering data, engaging in meaningful dialogue, and taking action based on the insights gained. By embracing evidence-based decision-making, organizations can enhance their decision-making processes, foster a culture of continuous improvement, and ultimately achieve better outcomes.

# Data Dialogue

In evidence-based decision making we gather data, have a dialogue about our data, and then act on what we have learned to make decisions. The three principles below can help guide your response to data collected.



## 1. Gather data and openly share the results and the process for utilizing the results.

Be as open and transparent as possible when sharing your data. To gain the advantage of this step, communicate early. Outline a process for how you will utilize the results.

- Plan for who gets the results right away, and who gets them after some dialogue.
- Plan for dialogue about survey results. Who engages in dialogue sessions?
- Who will draft and then approve action plans?
- Decisions made should clearly connect to your results.

The point of having a dialogue about the data is to get individuals talking and collaboratively planning to utilize strengths and plan for improvements. Therefore, it is not necessary or advisable to have all of the answers or solutions planned before sharing the results.

## 2. Active involvement (dialogue) in interpretation of results and selecting area of focus.

Interpretation of the results is most effectively done through a dialogue process. It is important to include diverse perspectives in the dialogue. Below are some questions you can use to think about the data you have collected and have a discussion.

### *Discussing Data:*

- What surprises you about the data?
- How does this data fit (or not fit) with other data sources you have?
- If you were to pick one thing to dig into and learn more about, what would it be?

- What are we doing well?
- What should we celebrate?
- What should we change?
- For areas of strength, consider:
  - Are there specific policies, practices, programs (both informal and formal) that support this component within your department?
  - How can you continue to build on/support these elements?
  - In what ways do the areas of strength match the department's areas of focus over the past couple of years?
  - What you have done to communicate this value to your staff members?
- For areas of growth, consider:
  - If you feel there is a mismatch between respondent perception and reality, how can you better communicate your efforts in this area to stakeholders?
  - In what ways are the areas for growth aligned or not aligned with the department's focus over the past couple of years?
- For a representative sample, consider:
  - Do we have the full breadth of social identity groups and perspectives participating in this assessment? (who is missing?)
  - What could we do to capture the perspectives of those individuals knowing that they already have chosen not to respond to our assessment?
  - How might our unconscious attitudes and assumptions about these populations be playing out in the decision not to target our efforts to get more responses from them?
  - How might making conclusions based on this data inadvertently advantage some and disadvantage others?

### **3. Shared responsibility for developing a plan, measuring progress on the plan, and achieving results.**

Provide an opportunity for individuals to engage in the action planning process. This will further engage them and distribute responsibility for change.

- Begin with a celebration of successes, particularly as it relates to important organization initiatives and efforts over the past year.
- Finalize the plan for who is responsible for what and when it will occur: when and how will they communicate? This could be a new working group or already established committee or work group.
- Establish key steps with deadlines, and ways to measure success, such as tailored follow-up (pulse) surveys.
- Share the goals and the action steps broadly within the organization.

# Implementing Change

In the book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins compares companies that went from being good to being great with companies that failed to make the same leap. Upon looking at these companies Collins concluded that the good-to-great companies, “confront the brutal facts,” “have a culture of discipline,” and were transformed through a cumulative process. At first glance, the book has little to do with assessment – the word “assessment” doesn’t even appear, in fact. But the good-to-great companies share some characteristics related to organizations with strong cultures of assessment. The idea of a culture of disciplined thought and reflection, the claim that the lack of resources does not mean a lack of disciplined thought (it makes rigor all the more important) and confronting the brutal facts and doing “autopsies” on projects without placing blame are common in both good-to-great companies and assessment.

Assessment is ultimately about making sound decisions based on good evidence. In *Good to Great* language, it’s about disciplined thought. The concept of “autopsies without blame” is also relevant to assessment. One of the barriers to good assessment is the fear that our results will show our programs or services aren’t effective – and perhaps, that we’ll lose status, resources, etc. The reality is that a culture focused on improvement, not perfection, is our goal. Autopsies without blame involve sharing assessment data, looking at it honestly, and finding ways, together, that we can improve.

At the same time, we need to foster a culture of discipline. We need to act on our assessment findings. We need to ask ourselves the question, according to Collins, “Once you know the right thing, do you have the discipline to do the right thing and, equally important, to stop doing the wrong thing?” Assessment gives us the ability to stop programs or practices that “we’ve always done that way” if we have evidence that they aren’t meeting our goals. We need to take advantage of this opportunity.

Finally, we should always celebrate the small successes. Assessment is a cyclical, cumulative process. Transformations do not happen in an instant and every small success we encounter should be celebrated, especially as a stepping stone to a good-to-great transformation.

Evidence-based decision-making is not just a methodology but a mindset that encourages transparency, collaboration, and accountability. By integrating data, dialogue, and action, organizations can make more informed and effective decisions. The principles outlined in this handout serve as a guide to help you navigate this process, ensuring that your decisions are grounded in solid evidence and aligned with your organizational goals.