

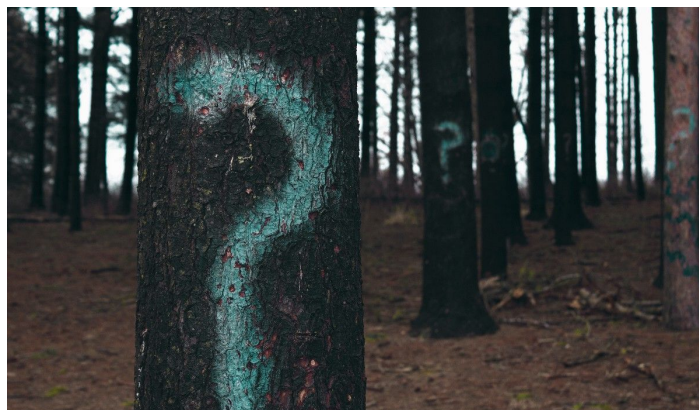
## Questions you should never ask if you're in the business of making an impact

I can't remember the number of times I was asked questions like this:

*"Our nonprofit is collecting all this data about our client outcomes. How do these relate to our demographics?"*

*"What is our funding mix? Is it good?"*

*"How do we know what donors are probably going to give again next year?"*



I've worked in and around many nonprofits and social enterprises, enough to know questions that can be answered with data come up all the time. Much of my work over the last several years has been helping social sector leaders answer questions like these. This work can be tricky — over five years ago, David Henderson pointed out, "[Data helps answer questions, it does not determine what questions should be answered.](#)"

Asking good questions with the data at hand is an important skill for teams and organizations making the world a better place. But all this questioning and analysis can have a shadow side — asking the wrong questions can be a waste of time and distract your team from your most important goals. Here are 5 common traps leaders in the social sector make when asking questions, and how to avoid them.

**1. Questions without an objective:** Those of us who work in the nonprofit or social enterprise space often give up financial gain to pursue work we find interesting, challenging, and meaningful. But when we're thinking about investing resources to answer questions about the work we do, "interesting" is not good enough. Is it clear to your staff why your question is important? For example:

- **OBSCURE OBJECTIVE:** "I just saw one of my friends share a really interesting article from the Huffington Post about the link between family stressors and early childhood health outcomes. Can you tell me how these are related in our clients?"
- **CLEAR OBJECTIVE:** "As we talked about last year, one of our top learning questions is to understand and promote positive health outcomes for our clients. Can you help us analyze whether our children's health indicators have any relationship to their parent's reported stress levels?"

**2. Questions that have low strategic value:** A second criteria for considering questions to answer through data analysis is, "Does the answer help us improve our ability to fulfill our mission?" For example, questions that test your assumptions or logic of how change happens are often strategically important, even if they make you or your staff uncomfortable. So too are questions that have clear implications for your budget or resource allocation.

- LOW VALUE: "How many clients expressed satisfaction in our financial counseling program last year? Is there a better number that demonstrates how well our program is working?"
- HIGH VALUE: "Our program assumes that because clients set unique financial goals and have unique circumstances, the amount of support each will receive must vary widely. However, are there any cutoffs where additional support from us is unlikely to help a client increase his or her financial well-being?"

**3. Questions where you don't have expectations:** A third important aspect to a good analysis question is: Is the answer testable? If you don't have any internal expectations or external points of comparison, interpreting whether the answer you get is good or bad isn't possible.

- NOT TESTABLE: "What was the effect of our program to increase parental resilience among the at-risk families we serve?"
- TESTABLE: "Other programs like ours using the same assessment tools find they have a small positive effect on parental resilience, as measured by an effect size (Cohen's D) of 0.3 or greater. What's our effect size?"

**4. Questions that have been answered before:** In the world of nonprofits and social enterprises, there is a commonly held belief that each organization is unique beyond the point of comparison. While this is true to a certain extent, chances are the issue you're addressing has been around for a while. Please, before you start mining your own data spend a few hours on Google Scholar or at your local college or university checking out the research literature on the issue you're addressing. You may not find the answer you need, but may find out how to ask a better question.

- ALREADY ANSWERED: "Is the head start approach to early childhood education really effective?"
- NOT YET ANSWERED: "As a startup early childhood education provider, how does the social and emotional development of our children compare to that seen in similar head start programs?"

**5. Questions where the opportunities for action are unclear:** Perhaps the most important aspect of a good analysis question is whether the results are actionable. Will the results potentially cause you to change your strategy, execution, or culture? If not, the question may not be worth exploring.

- NOT ACTIONABLE: "Can you give me a summary of client outcomes for each of my direct reports? I'm not sure we have enough data to talk to them about the results, but I think looking at this could be interesting."
- ACTIONABLE: "Can you tell me which workshops last year were most engaging for our clients based on their feedback? We only have budget this year for three workshops and I need to decide which ones we should focus on."

One final thought — as a changemaker in the social sector, timing is everything. Sometimes it might seem that you can't make a decision without more analysis; other times you don't have time for any analysis; often you'll have these thoughts at the same time! One strategy is to set aside time for answering critical questions about your finances, programs, and operations every year. As questions come up, save them for your Annual Analysis project. Prepare your staff to be engaged, and if you need outside experts or volunteers, get them lined up. Then focus your attention on your most important, timely, and strategic questions.

To help you do this, I'm including an **Ask Good Questions Scorecard** on the following page. Use this with your team as you're prioritizing learning questions, and focus your limited learning and analysis time on what questions score highest.

## Ask Good Questions Scorecard

Instructions: List out the learning questions you and your team have brainstormed along the top of this scorecard, or on a whiteboard. Talk through the five common questioning traps, and then rate each question along these dimensions. You may ask each individual to select one or more questions to rate, then have their rating 'checked' by another member of the group. Finally, total up the score for each to identify your team's top priority learning questions.

Learning Question Element	How to Rate (1 - 5)	Q1:	Q2:	Q3:
<b>Clear Objectives:</b> Interesting is not enough - why the question is worthy of staff time to answer must be clear.	1 - "I'm not sure why this question is important"  5 - "I know how this question impacts my work"			
<b>Strategic Value:</b> Given limited time for analysis, questions should relate to advancing your organization's strategy or mission (i.e., test operating assumptions, program logic, resource allocation, etc.).	1 - "Answering this question will not impact our long-term strategy or operations"  5 - "Answering this question is critical to our organization's long-term strategy"			
<b>Established Expectations:</b> Do you any internal expectations or external points of comparison that will help you interpret the answer? Is the answer testable?	1 - "We have no expectations for judging our results"  5 - "We have clearly defined goals or benchmarks relating to this question"			
<b>Answer New Questions:</b> Has this question been answered before in your or other organizations? Are there good reasons why new analysis is more appropriate than reviewing existing literature?	1 - "We're not sure whether this question has been answered elsewhere"  5 - "After reviewing other sources, we're sure this can only be answered by our own analysis"			
<b>Actionable:</b> To what extent will the results potentially cause you to change your strategy, execution, or culture?	1 - "No matter what the answer, we can't or won't change something as a result"  5 - "We know what answer will lead us to choosing each potential course of action"			
<b>Total Score</b>				