

Performance Measurement Starter Guide

Build a simple, effective framework to track what matters and improve results. Use it to turn a program's intended results into a short set of measures your team can actually collect, review, and act on.

ORGANIZATION / PROGRAM	MEASUREMENT OWNER	DATE

Easy Adoption Summary

WHAT IT DOES	Turns a program's intended results into a small set of defined indicators, each with a baseline, a target, an owner, and a review cadence. It separates what the program did from what changed.
WHO USES IT	Executive director, program director, evaluation or data lead, grant staff preparing reports, and board members reviewing performance.
WHEN TO USE IT	Build it while a program is being designed or refreshed, before the first participant is served. Review it quarterly, and again before each funder report.
HOW TO USE IT	Name one primary outcome. Choose one or two indicators for it. Define each precisely, set a baseline and a target, assign an owner and a cadence, then review on schedule and record what changed as a result.

What performance measurement is, and is not

Performance measurement is the practice of tracking a small number of clearly defined indicators over time so an organization can tell whether a program is working and decide what to change. It is not evaluation, which asks whether the program caused the result. It is not reporting, which communicates results to someone else. Measurement supports both, but it exists first for the people running the program.

Outputs, outcomes, and why the distinction decides everything

An output is what the program produced. An outcome is what changed for someone because of it. Most nonprofit measurement stalls at outputs, because outputs are easy to count and always available. Counting them proves activity, not effect. A program reporting 412 participants served and nothing else cannot tell a funder, or itself, whether those 412 people are better off.

How many measures do you need?

Fewer than you think. Three to five indicators per program, collected consistently, will support better decisions than fifteen collected occasionally. Every indicator carries a cost: someone has to gather it, store it, clean it, and interpret it. If you cannot name the person who does that for a given indicator, do not adopt it.

The five parts of a usable indicator

1	A precise definition	Written so two people counting the same thing arrive at the same number.
2	A source	Where the data comes from, and the system or form it is recorded in.
3	A baseline	The value before the program, or before the change you are making.
4	A target	The value that would count as success, and the date by which.
5	An owner and cadence	One named person, and how often the measure is collected and reviewed.

How performance measurement works

#	STEP	WHAT TO DO
1	Name the outcome	Write the change the program intends to produce, for whom, and by when. One primary outcome, and no more than three supporting ones.
2	Choose indicators	Pick one or two observable measures per outcome. Prefer measures you can collect from work the program already does.
3	Define each one	Write the definition, the numerator and denominator, the source, and any exclusions, before collecting anything.
4	Set baseline and target	Record the starting value. Set a target that is both meaningful to the people you serve and realistic for the program.
5	Assign owner and cadence	Name one person per indicator. Decide how often it is collected, and how often it is reviewed. These are not always the same.
6	Review and act	At each review ask three questions: what does the data say, what does it not say, and what will we change as a result?

Output or outcome? Five worked examples

PROGRAM AREA	OUTPUT — what you did	OUTCOME — what changed
Workforce training	120 participants completed the course	68% employed at 90 days, up from 41%
Food assistance	9,400 meals distributed	Household food insecurity score fell one band
Youth mentoring	2,300 mentoring hours delivered	84% advanced a grade level on time
Housing navigation	310 households received navigation	72% in stable housing at six months
Financial coaching	540 coaching sessions held	Median credit score rose 46 points

A worked indicator definition

This is the level of precision that prevents two reports from disagreeing.

INDICATOR	Employment at 90 days
DEFINITION	Share of program graduates working 20 or more hours per week, 90 days after completion.
NUMERATOR	Graduates reported as employed 20+ hrs/week at the 90-day follow-up.
DENOMINATOR	All graduates successfully reached for 90-day follow-up.
SOURCE	90-day follow-up call, logged in the case management system.
EXCLUSIONS	Participants who withdrew before completing the course.
BASELINE	41% (2025 cohort)
TARGET	60% by December 2027
OWNER / CADENCE	Program Director / collected monthly, reviewed quarterly

Adoption tip. Write the definition before you collect anything. Most measurement problems are definition problems, and they only surface when two people report the same thing differently.

Six ways measurement goes wrong

Measuring everything	The plan collapses under its own weight within two quarters, and the team quietly stops collecting.
Counting only what is easy	Attendance stands in for learning, sessions stand in for change, and nobody notices the substitution.
No baseline	You can report a number but not whether it moved, which makes every result unarguable and unpersuasive.
Definitions that drift	“Served” means one thing at intake and another in the annual report. The discrepancy surfaces in front of a funder.
Measuring only for the funder	The data leaves the building on a schedule and never once informs a decision inside it.
No disaggregation	A single average hides that the program works well for some participants and not at all for others.

Worksheet 1 — Measurement plan

One row per indicator. Three to five rows is a complete plan for most programs; if you need more than eight, the program is probably doing too many things.

OUTCOME	INDICATOR	SOURCE	BASELINE	TARGET	OWNER	CADENCE

Worksheet 2 — Indicator definition sheet

Complete one sheet for each indicator in the plan above.

INDICATOR	
DEFINITION	
NUMERATOR	
DENOMINATOR	
SOURCE	
EXCLUSIONS	
BASELINE	
TARGET	
OWNER / CADENCE	

Worksheet 3 — Quarterly review

Work through these six questions at each review and write the answers down. The last one is the point of the exercise.

1	Which indicators moved, and by how much, against baseline and target?	
2	Which did not move, and what is our best explanation?	
3	Where does the data disagree with what staff are observing?	
4	Which participant groups are served well, and which are not?	
5	What will we change before the next review, and who owns that change?	
6	Is any indicator costing more to collect than it is worth?	

Where CAMPBELL comes in. We build performance measurement frameworks, KPI sets, dashboards and reporting structures with organizations that need data to inform decisions rather than only satisfy funders. If you have completed these worksheets and want a second pair of eyes, or you would rather not start from a blank page, get in touch.