

Twelve Chairs

Part Two of a Six-Part Series Sharing What Every Nonprofit Leader Needs to Know to Win in a Data-Driven Funding World



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No consultants were harmed in the making of these opinions

Twelve Chairs

What attendance measures, what it misses, and what happens when you finally ask the people in the room what they actually thought. *Spoiler: You are not going to love the answer. But you need it.*

David R. Childers

Chief Operating Officer, iBridge LLC · *What the data would say if it could talk.*

Somewhere in this country right now, a case manager is writing the same note she has written a hundred times. *“Client attended a financial literacy seminar. 12 in attendance.”* She will file it, close the tab, and move on to the next thing on a list that outlasts the day every day. That note is not wrong. Twelve people were in that room. But it is so incomplete as to be nearly useless and the organization that employs her has built its program evaluation, its funder reports, and its entire theory of change on top of ten thousand notes just like it.

I am not here to criticize the case manager. She is doing exactly what the system asks of her. I am here to say plainly that the system is asking for the wrong thing. And the organizations still satisfied with headcount as a measure of program impact are already having that conversation and losing it.

I have spent thirty years in the gap between what institutions report and what they actually know. I built EthicsPoint now Navex Global on the premise that the distance between what people inside an institution know and what the institution is willing to hear is not a cultural problem. It is a structural one. I am seeing the same structure in nonprofit case management, and I am going to tell you what it costs.



“Headcount is not evidence. It is a starting point. The organizations treating it as a finish line are running a race they don’t know they’re losing.”

WHAT A CHAIR ACTUALLY TELLS YOU

A filled chair tells you one thing: a person was present in a room at a specific time. Full stop.

It does not tell you whether they were engaged. Whether the content was relevant to their actual situation. Whether they understood what was being taught. Whether they left with anything they intended to act on. Or whether the program that put them in that chair is doing what it claims to do.

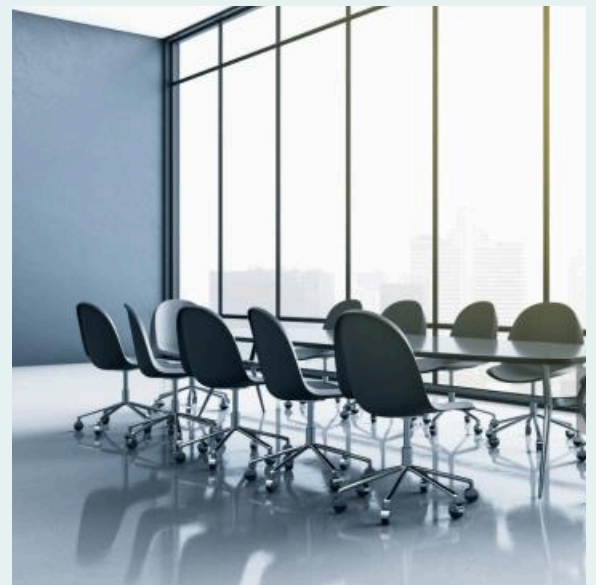
In most other industries, measuring inputs instead of outcomes went out of fashion sometime in the last century. Manufacturing learned that the widgets produced matter less than the widgets that work. Healthcare learned that the procedures performed matter less than the patients who recover. Education has spent decades learning the difference between seat time and learning itself.

Nonprofit human services is still largely counting chairs.

Part of this is understandable. Headcount is what most funders have historically asked for. Easy to capture, easy to verify, easy to compare. When the reporting requirement is *“how many people did you serve,”* headcount is the honest answer.

But the reporting requirements have changed. The organizations that built their entire measurement infrastructure around the questions funders used to ask will struggle with the questions funders ask now.

The difference between “we served 412 clients” and “we served 412 clients, 78 percent completed the full curriculum, exit assessments showed measurable improvement in financial self-efficacy, and six-month follow-up data shows 64 percent had opened a savings account” is not just a reporting difference. It is an organizational maturity difference. Funders have been funding accordingly for years. The organizations that didn’t notice are already behind.



THURSDAY AFTERNOON

Let me make this specific. Abstract arguments about data architecture tend to put people to sleep before they get to the part that matters.

A case manager at a mid-sized nonprofit runs a financial literacy seminar twice a month. She has been running it for three years. She believes in it. Her supervisor believes in it. The funder that pays for it has renewed the grant twice. By every available measure, the program is working.

The available measures are: attendance, averaging eleven per session, and a participant satisfaction survey handed out at the end and collected before anyone leaves. Four questions. Scale of one to five, average score across three years: 4.2 out of 5.

The program is working

Except.

Except that the surveys are filled out in the room, in front of the facilitator, by the facilitator's colleague. The clients are people who depend on this organization for services they cannot easily get elsewhere. The power dynamic is not subtle. A 4.2 in that environment is not the same as a 4.2 in a blind survey administered a week later by a neutral party. What you have is not a satisfaction score. It is a survival score.

Except that three of the twelve regular attendees have never mentioned not once, in any case note or survey response that they take a bus that drops them off twenty minutes late and picks them up twenty minutes before the session ends. They sit in the back. They catch what they can. They mark 4 on the survey because they are grateful for the program and do not want to seem ungrateful.

Except the section on building credit assumes a banking relationship. Four current participants were denied bank accounts due to ChexSystems records from financial hardships that predated their enrollment. That section lands differently for them. Nobody knows this because nobody asked in a way that made it safe to answer.

Except for two participants, who quietly stopped coming after the third session in the last six months. Their case files show no follow-up, no outreach, no curiosity about why. They are counted in the attrition rate, which is considered acceptable. Their reasons are counted nowhere.

"A 4.2 collected in the room, in front of the people who run the program, from clients who depend on the organization for services they can't get elsewhere — that is not a satisfaction score. That is a survival score."

THE SAME THURSDAY, REDESIGNED

Run the same Thursday afternoon through a platform built actually to capture what happens in that room.

Attendance is confirmed by proximity check-in through the mobile app. Not surveillance the clients opted in when they enrolled, and they understand what it is for. Eleven of twelve show up. One is confirmed present for the first forty minutes and then gone. The bus. That pattern, invisible for three years, is now visible for the first time.

At the end of the session, before anyone leaves the parking lot, the app sends a three-question prompt. Not four questions on a paper form handed to them by someone they depend on. Three questions, on their own phone, anonymous, delivered when the experience is still fresh.

Eight of eleven respond before they get home. Average rating: 3.6. Not 4.2.



The gap between those two numbers is the gap between what clients say when someone is watching and what they say when no one is.

Six of eight responses mention the credit-building section. Three say directly that they don't have a bank account. Two say they tried to open one and were denied. One writes in the open text field: *"I don't understand why we keep talking about credit scores when I can't even get a checking account."*

That sentence is worth more to the program director than three years of 4.2 scores. It is specific. It is actionable. It identifies a curriculum gap, a specific barrier, and a population for whom the program, as designed, is delivering the wrong content in the wrong sequence.

By Friday morning, the case manager has information she has never had before. Not because anything dramatic changed. Because the platform finally asked the right questions, at the right time, of the right people.

The data was always there. The clients knew what the program missed. They had no structured way to say it and the organization had no structured way to hear it. A mobile-first feedback channel is not a luxury. It is the minimum viable listening infrastructure for any organization that claims to be client-centered. If you are claiming to be client-centered and you are still handing out paper surveys in the room, you are not client-centered. You are client-adjacent.

ENGAGEMENT IS NOT ATTENDANCE

Attendance is binary. You were there, or you weren't. It is the floor of participation, not the ceiling.

Engagement is what happens after you sit down. Did the content connect to the client's actual situation, or talk past it? Did they leave with a specific next step, or just a vague sense of having attended something? Did they act on it? If not, what stopped them?

None of these questions can be answered from a sign-in sheet. All of them are answerable through a platform that gives clients a structured, safe, and timely way to report their experiences to the organization.

The shift from measuring attendance to measuring engagement is not a reporting shift. It is a program design shift. It requires asking, before running a single session, what you want to know by the time it is over and then building data collection into the program experience rather than bolting it on at the end with a paper form nobody fills out honestly.

That is a thinking shift. And thinking shifts are harder than software installs.

But they are the only shifts that change anything. The organizations that are serious about their mission and serious about competing in the funding environment that is already here, need to make this one now. Not after the next grant cycle. Now.



WHAT FUNDERS ARE ACTUALLY ASKING

The generation of foundation and government funding that built the nonprofit sector on activity-based reporting gave way and the generation that replaced it has been asking the same question for the better part of a decade: not what happened, but what changed.

Performance-based contracts, already standard in workforce development and moving quickly into housing, health, and family services, pay for outcomes. Not activities. If your program claims to improve financial self-sufficiency and you cannot produce data showing that clients who completed it are more financially self-sufficient when they entered you cannot bid on that contract. You are not disqualified for doing bad work. You are disqualified because you cannot prove you are doing good work.

Impact-driven philanthropy is asking the same questions. The newer foundations, the donor-advised funds run by people who have spent careers thinking about measurement want organizations that can tell them, with evidence, what works and for whom. Not because they distrust the sector. Because they want to put money where it moves something.

Twelve chairs is not the answer.

It is a starting point that most organizations abandoned before they ever finished the sentence. The answer has been overdue for years. The organizations that complete it now are not ahead of the curve. They are catching up to where the conversation already is.

“You cannot demonstrate outcomes you did not measure. The file is not the evidence. It is just the file.”



THE PRACTICAL PATH FORWARD



I want to be honest about what I am asking organizations to do, because it is not nothing.

Moving from headcount to engagement measurement requires a platform that makes client feedback easy to collect and easy to act on. It requires staff who understand that feedback is not a threat to their program but information their program needs. It requires leadership that has decided the organization will be accountable for what it learns, not just what it reports. And it requires the willingness to discover that some of what you believed about your programs is not true.

That last one is the hard part. Nobody enjoys discovering that a curriculum they have been running for three years has a section that doesn't land for a third of their participants. But the organization that finds that out on Thursday afternoon can fix it by Monday morning. The organization that never finds out keeps delivering a program with a gap nobody acknowledges, and the clients have given up trying to name it.

Kairos IMS is built to make this shift practical rather than theoretical. Proximity attendance confirmation, post-session mobile feedback, anonymous response options, aggregate reporting across sessions and programs is the infrastructure of a program evaluation model that meets the standard the sector is being asked to meet.

The Thursday afternoon seminar does not have to generate one data point. It never did. We just built systems that only asked for one.

Twelve chairs is where the data starts. It is not where it ends.

About the Author

David Childers has spent his career building systems that give people a voice inside institutions that weren't designed to hear them. As President of Oregon Scientific, he led the company's research partnership with the MIT Media Lab, his first sustained look at the distance between what institutions are told and what they could actually know. He spent the next two decades in compliance technology, founding EthicsPoint now Navex Global, which has become the backbone of workplace ethics and reporting infrastructure for thousands of organizations worldwide. He built that company on a single premise: that the gap between what people inside an institution know and what the institution is willing to hear is not a cultural problem. It is a structural one. Structural problems require structural solutions.

The last fifteen years have been a different application of the same conviction, this time for the organizations delivering health and human services, and more importantly, for the people receiving them. He is COO of iBridge LLC and the driving force behind Kairos IMS. He grew up in Oklahoma. He learned in a pool hall and a boardroom. He has spent hours in both and values what he has learned. He writes from experience. Not from a whiteboard.



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About Kairos IMS

Kairos is an innovative Impact Management System designed to revolutionize the way human-serving nonprofits and social impact organizations operate. By reducing administrative burdens and enhancing interactive care, Kairos IMS enables organizations to leverage technology to increase agility and deliver seamless service.

Kairos IMS was created through a powerful collaboration between [Impactful](http://www.impactful.com) LLC and Microsoft, two teams deeply invested in helping nonprofits do more good. www.impactful.com