

Measure Less, Learn More

How to keep the information that serves real work and retire the rest

FOR

program teams, nonprofit leaders, public agencies, funders, grantees, data staff, and anyone responsible for a reporting system

USE WHEN

reporting feels heavy, measures are rarely used, or the available numbers still do not answer the important question

INCLUDES

a measure-job map, burden test, retain-repair-replace-retire framework, action ladder, and a 15-minute team exercise

A team maintains a dashboard with forty indicators. Staff spend days reconciling reports. Participants answer repeated questions. Grantees translate the same activity into several funder templates. Yet when a decision approaches, leaders still ask for a new spreadsheet.

The problem may not be a lack of data. It may be that the reporting system has lost contact with the work its measures are meant to serve.

The short answer

Every measure should have a named job, a person who uses it, and a time when it can affect action. Keep legal and contractual requirements explicit. For everything else, decide whether to retain it, repair it, replace it, or retire it.

A number can be easy to collect and still be nearly useless for deciding what to do next.

The four jobs a measure can do

Measures often become confusing because different jobs are blended together.

Run the service

Operational measures help staff schedule, coordinate, notice problems, and deliver the work. Attendance, referrals, wait times, missed appointments, and caseload may matter here.

Meet an obligation

Compliance and accountability measures provide a required account to a funder, regulator, board, or public body. The requirement may be legitimate even if it does not guide a program decision.

Improve the work

Learning measures help a team understand delivery, participant experience, variation, barriers, and possible changes. These may need context that a standardized reporting form cannot hold.

Decide a commitment

Decision measures help someone continue, change, expand, select, reduce, or stop an action. They must arrive while the decision is open and distinguish between feasible choices.

A measure can serve more than one job, but do not assume that it does. Attendance may help run a service and meet a grant requirement while telling the board little about whether participants' circumstances changed.

Start with use, not inventory

A reporting review often begins by listing every field in every system. That can become another large data exercise. Start instead with one consequential decision or one recurring operating meeting.

Ask:

- What choices are made here?
- Who makes them?

- What information do they actually consult?
- What arrives too late, without context, or in a form they cannot use?
- What do they keep asking staff to explain outside the dashboard?

Only then trace the measures back to their sources and burdens.

The hidden cost of collection

The person requesting information may not carry its cost. A foundation sees a short form. A grantee sees staff training, repeated entry, cleaning, missing-response follow-up, reconciliation across systems, and the relationship cost of asking participants another sensitive question.

For each measure, count more than minutes. Consider:

- Staff attention taken from delivery.
- Participant time and emotional exposure.
- Pressure to give a desirable answer.
- Privacy and data-security risk.
- System maintenance and correction.
- The opportunity cost of not collecting something more useful.

Burden does not automatically make a measure wrong. It means the use should be valuable enough to justify the cost.

Retain, repair, replace, or retire

Retain

Keep the measure when its job is clear, the source is credible enough for that job, and someone uses it in time.

Repair

Keep the underlying concept but fix the definition, denominator, collection process, timing, or interpretation. A completion rate may become useful once “completion” and the eligible group are stable.

Replace

Choose a better indicator when the current one is a poor proxy. Satisfaction may matter, but it may not answer whether housing remained stable or employment lasted.

Retire

Stop collecting when no live use or obligation remains. Record the decision so the measure is not quietly restored in next year's template.

Required reporting belongs in its own visible category. If a weak measure is contractually required, do not pretend it is decision-useful. Meet the obligation, explain its limits, and ask whether the requirement can be changed in the next cycle.

A worked example

A family-support program asks participants to complete an eleven-item survey after every monthly session. Staff report an 82 percent satisfaction rate to the board, but nobody uses the individual answers and response rates have fallen.

The team identifies three jobs. The board needs a fair account of experience. Facilitators need rapid signals about session quality. Leadership needs to know whether the program is helping families reach a specific stability goal.

One repeated survey is unlikely to do all three. The team retains two brief session questions for facilitation, moves the board account to a quarterly summary with response coverage, and develops a separate, less frequent measure tied to the stability decision. It retires six questions that have no named use.

The result is not less accountability. It is a clearer reporting system with different tools for different jobs.

What you can say

- “This measure is required for the grant, but it is not used to judge program effectiveness.”
- “Staff review this indicator every month and use it to adjust scheduling.”
- “We retired four questions because no decision, obligation, or operating use depended on them.”
- “Response coverage is reported beside the result so the audience can see who is represented.”

What you cannot say yet

- “If we collect it, someone will eventually use it.”
- “The dashboard measures impact,” when it mainly reports activity, reach, or satisfaction.
- “The form takes only ten minutes,” without considering repetition, follow-up, and participant burden.
- “Standardization makes programs comparable,” when definitions, populations, periods, and sources differ.

What to do next

Minimum useful step: Choose one meeting or decision and mark which current measures are actually used there.

Stronger step: For each measure, record its job, user, timing, source, burden, and obligation. Decide retain, repair, replace, or retire.

System-level step: Agree a governance process for adding measures. Every new request should name its purpose, owner, collection cost, review date, and what can be removed in exchange.

A 15-minute team exercise

Bring one current form, dashboard, or funder template. Select five measures.

1. Write the job of each measure: operations, obligation, improvement, or decision.
2. Name the person who uses it and the action it informs.
3. Estimate who carries the collection and follow-up burden.
4. Mark whether the definition, denominator, and timing are trusted.
5. Assign each measure to retain, repair, replace, or retire.
6. Choose one change the team can make this month.

If nobody can name the user or action, do not invent one. Put the measure in a review pile and ask why it survives.

A note on dignity

Information requests change relationships. Repeated questions about trauma, income, housing, health, or family circumstances can make help feel conditional on disclosure. A technically valid measure can still be inappropriate if the use is weak, the question is intrusive, or people cannot decline safely.

Ask whether the person being measured would recognize the purpose as legitimate and whether they receive any benefit from the information they provide. Collecting less can be an evidence improvement when it protects trust and makes the remaining record more meaningful.

When to bring in help

Outside support can help when measures span several funders or systems, legal requirements are unclear, teams disagree about what the indicators mean, or retiring a measure has political consequences. The work should produce a usable measurement architecture, not merely a new list of indicators.

A good review leaves the organization with fewer unexplained measures, clearer obligations, and a visible reason for everything that remains.

Questions to carry forward

- What job is this measure doing?
- Who uses it, and when?
- Who carries the burden of producing it?
- What could be stopped without weakening a real decision or obligation?