

How to choose indicators to measure results

For each result, there is a set of indicators that reflect the extent to which the result is being achieved. Figure 3.5 shows some examples of indicators:

Notice the differences between how these very similar results are measured. Montgomery County uses five measures. Vermont uses eight. Only one measure (rate of substantiated child abuse and neglect) is used in both places. Vermont lists poverty statistics here while Montgomery County lists the poverty rate under a separate result: *Economic Self-Sufficiency*. Both lists are powerful and appropriate. There is not a right or wrong set of measures for any given result. Choosing indicators will always be a matter of judgment and compromise, and different groups will come up with different answers about what indicators to use.

How do you choose the best indicators to represent a result? Any choice can be reduced to a set of criteria. The following three criteria have been used to choose indicators in many places.

Examples of Indicators	
Montgomery Co. Ohio⁵⁵	Vermont⁵⁶ (Pre Act 186)
<p>Result: Stable Families</p> <p>Indicators:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Percent of first births where both parents completed high school, parents are married (at any time from conception to birth), and the mother is at least 20 years old. 2. Rate of substantiated child abuse and neglect. 3 & 4. Deaths to children ages 0 - 17 that were ruled preventable, or somewhat preventable, by the Child Fatality Review Board. 5. Domestic violence deaths. 	<p>Result: Children live in Stable Supported Families</p> <p>Indicators:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Percent of children in poverty. 2. Percent of children in families receiving food stamps. 3. Percent of child support paid. 4. Percent of parentage established for out-of-wedlock child support cases. 5. Rate of substantiated child abuse and neglect. 6. Percent of children ages 5 - 17 in families receiving welfare. 7. Rate of out-of-home placements. 8. Average number of moves within the child substitute care system.

Figure 3.5

55. Montgomery County Family and Children First Council, 2004 Progress Report, Outcomes, Indicators and Strategic Community Initiatives, December 2004.
56. Vermont Agency of Human Services, *2004 Community Profiles*, January 2005, ahs.state.vt.us.

Communication Power: Does the indicator communicate to a broad and diverse audience? This criteria is sometimes called the *public square test*. If you had to stand in a public square⁵⁷ and explain the result to your neighbors, what two or three pieces of data would be the most powerful? Obviously you could bring a thick report and begin a long recitation. The crowd would thin out fast. It is hard for people to listen to more than a few pieces of data at one time. The data must be common sense, and compelling. The crime rate has communication power. The rate of successful adjudication does not.

Proxy Power (or Representation Power): Does the indicator say something of central importance about the result? Can this measure stand as a proxy or representative for the plain language statement of well-being? We know, for example, that the percent of children reading at grade level in the 3rd grade is a powerful measure of school success. Children who can't read in 3rd grade have a much higher chance of failing in later grades and dropping out of school. So 3rd grade reading scores are a powerful proxy for the result *All Children Succeed in School*.⁵⁸

The other part of proxy power has to do with the fact that **data tend to run in herds**. If one indicator is going in the right direction, usually others are as well. You do not need 20 indicators telling you the same thing. Pick the indicators that have the greatest proxy power, specifically those that are most likely to match the direction of the other indicators in the herd.

Data Power: Do we have quality data on a timely basis? Is the data reliable and consistent? To what extent do we have the data at the state, county, city and community levels?⁵⁸

Each indicator is rated High, Medium or Low (H-M-L) on each criteria. We are looking for indicators that rank high on all three criteria. These are indicators that communicate well, that tell us something of central importance about the result, for which good data is available. If we can find indicators that have these three characteristics, there's a good chance they will work with our neighbors in the public square.

There are two messages in this rating system. The first message is "Start with the best of what you have." The second message is "Get better."

57. Or perhaps the central atrium of your local shopping mall.

58. Some places prefer to use a larger list of criteria, or phrase the criteria differently. In almost every case, these separate criteria are components of Communication, Proxy and Data power. For example, one county split Data power into four separate criteria: Valid, Available, Accurate, and Reliable. The same county thought "communication power" sounded too much like jargon. So they renamed it "Easily understood." This is all good. Whatever works.

Data is often used as an excuse, "We could be accountable for the children in our community when we have better data." If we are honest, we will admit that we said that 10 years ago. We'll say it again 10 years from now. **Do not make the collection of new data a precondition for getting started.**⁵⁹ You have to start with the data you have. In fact, only by starting with the data you have do you have any chance of generating the support you need to get better data.

Choosing Indicators
Worksheet

Outcome or Result: Safe Community

Candidate Indicators	Communication Power	Proxy Power	Data Power
Measure 1	H M L	H M L	H M L
Measure 2	H	H	H
Measure 3	H	H	H
Measure 4	H	H	L
Measure 5			
Measure 6			
Measure 7			
Measure 8			

Data Development Agenda

Figure 3.6

These three criteria lead to a three-part indicator list for each result:

Primary or Headline Indicators: The 3 to 5 most important measures. These are the ones you have data for that rise to the top in the rating process.

Secondary Indicators: Any other measures for which there is good data. We do not throw away good data. We will use these measures in assessing the story behind the baselines, and other parts of the process.

Data Development Agenda: The priorities for new and improved data.

This is not a process that is done once and is then finished. This is a living, changing list. As you develop new and better data, you may promote one measure to become a primary indicator and demote another measure to become a secondary indicator.

Note that there is a newer shortcut version of this rating system that is easier to use than the H-M-L method described above. After brainstorming possible measures, circle the ones for which you have good data (Data power). Then ask, "If you could use only three of these measures in the public square, which would be your first, second and third choices?" This question combines Communication power and Proxy power into a single step, and yields headline and secondary measures. Then ask, "Of the ones for which you do not have data, which would be the first, second and third ones you would buy?" This yields the Data Development Agenda. (See Appendix G for more information on this method.)

⁵⁹ The RBA process can be started without any data at all. Groups can use the results and experience to drive the thinking process. Groups can also create working versions of indicator baselines based on group consensus about history and what the future will look like if we don't change. See Appendix F.