Outcome Harvesting versus Results-Based Management

Stephen Perry

Two core services offered by Resultant Labs' consultants include conducting evaluations using the Outcome Harvesting (OH) approach and program support to leverage Results-Based Management (RBM) tools more effectively. Both methods focus on understanding and achieving program results, yet they approach these goals from opposite directions: OH retrospectively uncovers results to learn from emergent changes, while RBM prospectively establishes clear targets and a structured plan to reach them. Adaptive Management serves as a valuable bridge between these approaches, enabling organizations to pursue defined goals while remaining responsive to change. This adaptability allows teams to learn from both the unplanned outcomes captured in OH and the structured progress tracked in RBM, creating a complementary framework that maximizes learning, accountability, and impact. The choice of which approach or blend to use depends on the project's environment and the nature of the outcomes sought—whether these are complex and evolving or clearly defined from the outset.

Outcome Harvesting

The Outcome Harvesting process is retrospective and exploratory, where the focus is on uncovering what has happened rather than defining what you want to occur precisely in advance. This method recognizes that change can be complex, non-linear, and often influenced by multiple, sometimes unpredictable, factors. Key questions OH seeks to answer is: *What has changed? and who contributed to this change? How?*

Instead of defining specific outcomes from the program outset, OH identifies ("harvests") results that have already emerged. By tracking back from these observed changes, OH enables practitioners to understand the conditions, actions, and contributors that played a role. This backward analysis is key to uncovering successful pathways or project approaches that can inform and possibly help replicate similar outcomes in different contexts. OH values learning from what has happened, including unexpected successes or challenges, rather than planning out every last detail.

This backward mapping is all about revealing the web of influences that contributed to an outcome, including unexpected players or environmental factors. The process tries to embrace complexity. A key word is "contributed" when we discuss outcomes. By identifying these contributing elements, OH offers insights that can inform future actions in a way that is contextually relevant and tailored. OH acknowledges that in dynamic or complex setting, holding too tightly on to a plan can limit responsiveness (possibly relevance too); thus, OH puts a high level of emphasis on flexibility and learning from what works in practice, rather than just on paper.

Results-Based Management