**POWER OF RESEARCH**

**Sector Solution**: Power of Research by Stanley Ebede, Community Engagement Research Associate, University of Northern Iowa’s Office of Community Engagement

When you hear the word ‘research’, what do you imagine? What is your first thought? Scientists experimenting with chemicals and/or specimens in medical or clinical laboratories? Professors and/or doctoral students working together to address most pressing issues? People who speak the research language? Generating new ideas or information? All these could be considered as an aspect of research. Research activities could be in a form of program evaluation, needs assessment or quality monitoring/improvement. Engaging in research might not be as fun as creating catchy headlines or writing an amazing blog. However, the significant aspect of research being enjoyable is its key to awareness (knowing the unknown). From my experiences, I believe that research is fun! I see research as a quest for knowledge and a means to seek for possible solutions to a problem. We tend to forget that in order to inform actions, you need information and knowledge gained from research.

Continually, most organizations especially nonprofit agencies look for different opportunities to increase an understanding of their programs and services in order to improve operations and practices. There is no better way of gaining information to improve the practices of an organization than to conduct research. The question is, why is research often overlooked by many nonprofit agencies? Some could say that they do not have the resources (time, finance, commitment, human skills or expertise, technology or software etc.) to conduct an extensive research regarding their organizations’ effectiveness as it relates to program development, implementation, and management. Others might suggest that they have an existing anxiety going through the research process as a result of previous research endeavors that may have been imposed on their organizations by external bodies (e.g. funders). In order to overcome such barriers and anxiety, a nonprofit agency’s leadership team including senior staff and the board of nonprofit agencies needs to agree on the purpose and importance of potential research endeavors.

**Why is it important for nonprofit agencies to engage in research?**

1. Helps to gain an understanding of specific needs, wants and desires of clients, customers or consumers.
2. Improves services (updates you on the progress of your services and programs).
3. Fosters relationships and creates opportunities for partnerships and collaborations.
4. Provides a better understanding of community needs as well as providing solutions to address such needs
5. Strengthens a case for financial support of programs or projects.
6. Measures program benefits that could be shared with funders, board, stakeholders etc.

Research has worked over the years. Last year, the University of Northern Iowa’s Nonprofit Leadership Alliance (UNI NLA) collaborated with R.J. McElroy Trust and Northeast Iowa Food Bank on research projects. Serving as the lead person for these research projects, I organized a team to identify what needed to be studied/researched and determine various ways to analyze and report the data. The R.J. McElroy Trust’s research project aimed at examining the effectiveness of R.J. McElroy Internship program by assessing the following key areas: (a) skills developed, (b) valued experiences, (c) lesson and personal growth, (d) what makes a premiere internship experience?, and (e) “where our interns are today”. The Northeast Iowa Food Bank’s research project focused on examining the Mobile Food Pantry to identify the needs that commonly minimize residents’ access to food. Overall, these research endeavors highlighted more on positive impact and values of these programs and services in the community. From a personal perspective, these research endeavors have continually provided me with an absolute understanding of the effectiveness of various programs and services in Cedar Valley community.

**Let’s empower our agencies more through research as this will improve the life of our community which could potentially lead to social and economic transformation**.