

What Is Data Governance?

DAMA, the international association that coordinates knowledge about data management, defines “data governance” as:

“The exercise of authority and control (planning, monitoring, and enforcement) over the management of data assets.”

Civic Impact has experience working with dozens of organizations on their efforts to initiate, or improve, a data governance function. We advise and assist organizations as they reflect on existing organizational dynamics and resources, then design an effective data governance program with clear and appropriate staff assignments.

Why does governance matter? Modern organizations, regardless of scale, handle large amounts of data in the course of delivering services. Handling data means assuming responsibility for enforcing privacy and security measures. Furthermore, data is a valuable asset, with the potential to fuel analysis that produces insights. These insights can be used to make operations more efficient and equitable. Sharing data or analytic products can also be a powerful strategy to build trust and communicate with partners, or the public.

How do organizations get it done? In order to create and sustain a data governance program, an organization must understand and match two components: existing internal **staff capacity**, and the desired **role and capabilities** of data governance within the larger organizational context.

Assessing internal capacity includes three activities:

1. Inventorying stakeholders and then engaging to inform them of basic concepts in data governance;
2. Understanding their engagement with existing data management practices; and
3. Assessing their capacity (time and authority) to contribute in the future.

Identifying the potential role of data governance within the organization requires engagement with leadership to understand their priorities; it also includes surveying staff to get a sense of their constraints and pain-points.

The resulting plan for data governance may be inspired by exemplars from other organizations, but it must be customized to the needs and priorities of the subject organization.