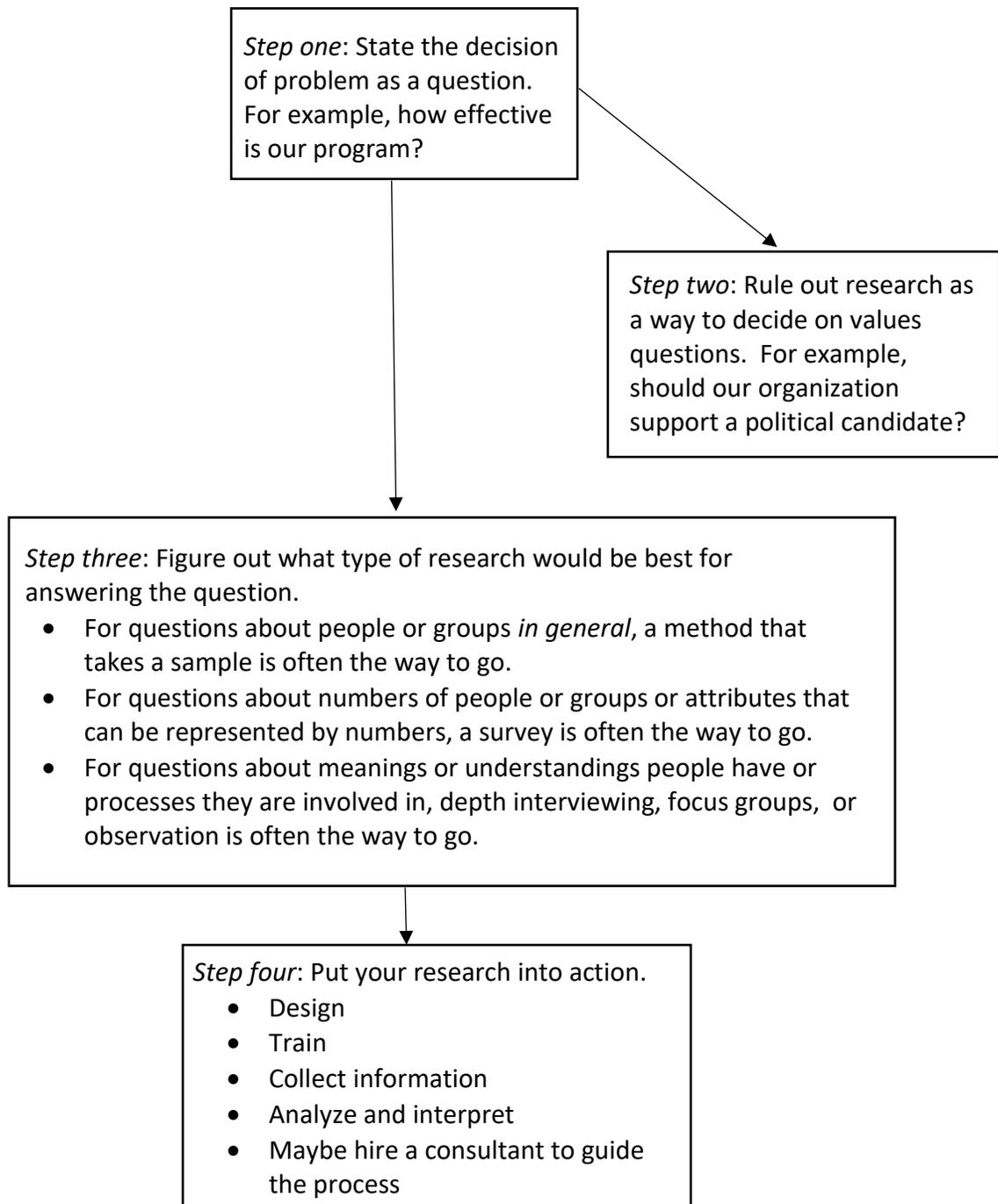


Making Decisions and Solving Problems Using Simple but Systematic Research: Getting Started

Jeff Leiter (<https://sites.google.com/site/jcleiter/>)

Here is a four-step process to get started using simple, but systematic research in your organization. This page gives you the process as a schematic. If it looks interesting, the next page gives you some details.



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First step. State the decision or problem as a question. For example.

1. What is the average age (or percent female or percent African American) of people making inquiries about our program?
2. How satisfied are program participants with their experience?
3. What do program participants mean when they say they are satisfied?
4. How effective is our program?
5. Which form of advertising gets us the most inquiries?
6. Does our program reduce prejudice in our participants?
7. Why are so many of our staff people leaving?
8. Why aren't people of color returning our calls?
9. What percent of people in our community have heard about our organization?
10. How much (if at all) does the length of client program participation affect program impact?
 - a. Why?

Second step. Rule out research as a way to decide on values questions. For example:

1. Should our organization support a political candidate, and if so, which one?
2. What is more important for our mission: changing attitudes or changing behavior?

Values questions require a different approach than research.

Third step. Figure out what type of research would be best for answering the question.

1. For questions about people or groups *in general*, a method that takes a sample is often the way to go. Examples from the questions in step one include: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11. Sampling does not mean gathering information from people who volunteer to give it to you. The sample must be representative of the people or groups you are trying to understand in general. Usually, this is accomplished by *random sampling*. With a representative sample, you do not need to collect information from a lot of people, which makes sampling a cost-effective approach.
2. For questions about numbers of people or groups or attributes that can be represented by numbers, a survey is often the way to go. This could be a survey already done, like the Census, or a survey you do yourself. In most surveys, people's answers fall in preset categories, like yes/no or on a scale from 1 to 5. Examples of questions in step one that lend themselves to surveys include: 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10
3. For questions about meanings or understandings people have or processes they are involved in, depth interviewing, focus groups, or observation is often the way to go. These are often called qualitative methods. The information you gather is in the form of narratives about what people say and do, rather than numbers or counts, as in most survey research. Questions from step one that lend themselves to qualitative methods include: 3, 7, 8, 10a.

Fourth step. Putting research into action.

1. Research of these types can be simple, and it does not need to be expensive. What's important is that it be done systematically so that you and others can believe the results.
2. Your organization's staff can probably be trained to do the research. If your staff learns how to do simple, but systematic research, you can save the money you would spend by contracting out the research, and you add to your organizational capacity.
3. You may want to hire someone *to help you*:
 - a. Refine your research question.
 - b. Design your research to answer your question.
 - c. Train your staff and be available to answer their questions along the way.
 - d. Interpret what you discover through your research.

Do not simply turn over the research to the consultant. Use the consultant to increase the capacity of your organization to use simple, but systematic research for problem solving and decision making.