
2026 Washington State Nonprofit Conference

*From Data to Donor-Ready Stories:
Building a Culture of Evaluation, Learning,
and Impact Communication*

Vernon Loke

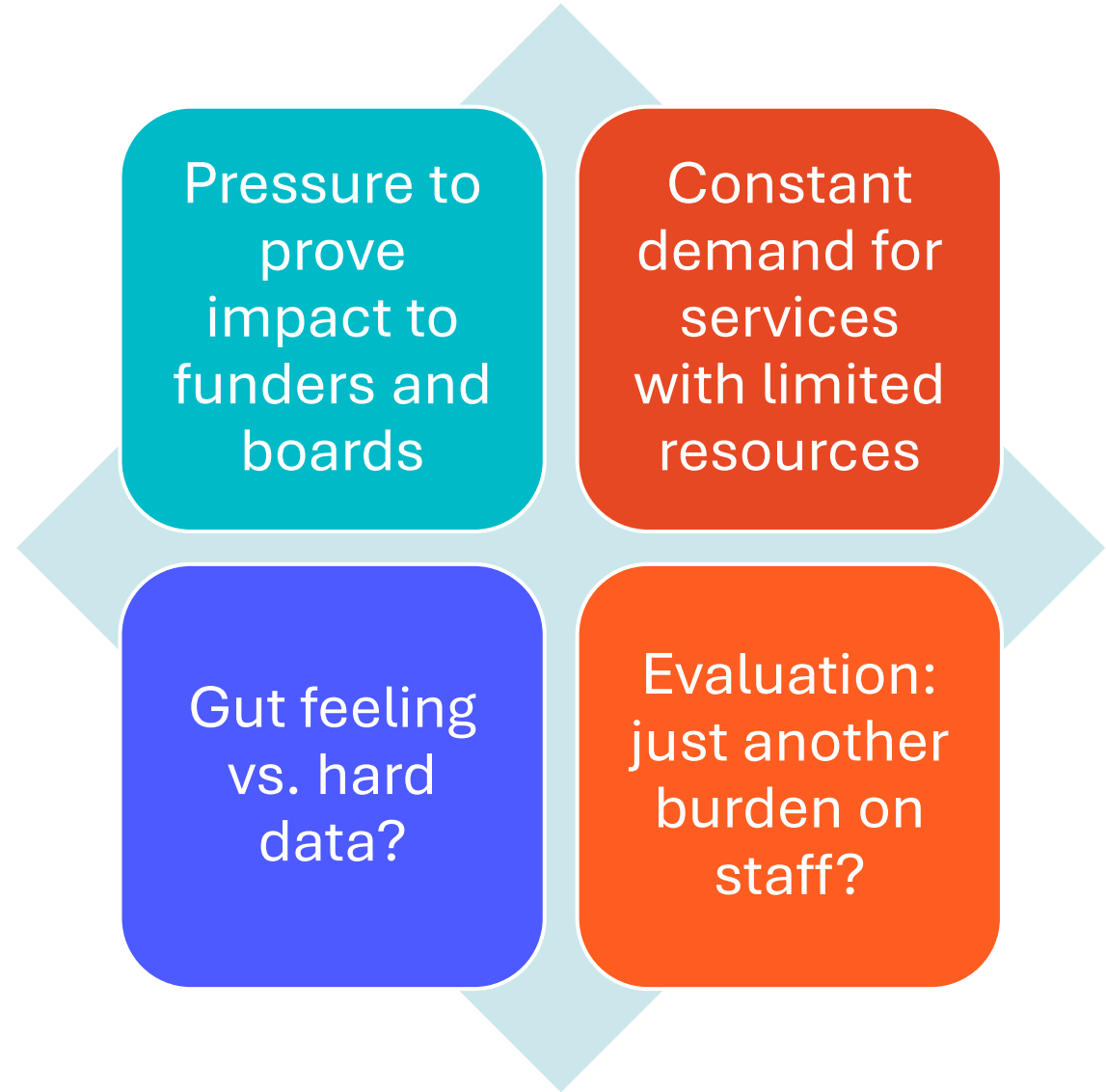


Mason Burley



Friday May 15, 2026 / 01:30 PM - 02:45 PM

The Balancing Act: Are We Making a Difference?



Why Programs Fail: The 7 Deadly Sins of Nonprofit Thinking



-
1. **The Savior Complex:** "We know what's best."
 2. **Scarcity Mindset:** "We can't afford to learn."
 3. **Activity Trapping:** "Busy = effective."
 4. **Donor Distortion:** "We measure what funders want."
 5. **The Anecdote Fallacy:** "One story beats 1,000 data points."
 6. **Defensive Denial:** "The data must be wrong."
 7. **Impact Inflation:** "We take credit for everything."

The Challenge ...



EVALUATION TOOLS



EVALUATIVE MINDSET



An Evaluative Mindset



The Shift: From Compliance...

- Old Mindset
 - Compliance
 - Evaluation is a report at the end of grant cycle

The Shift: ... To Curiosity

- New mindset
 - Curiosity (Evaluative Mindset)
 - Evaluation is a series of questions we ask at the beginning, middle, and end of our work



Reframing Evaluation: Evaluation As a Way of Thinking



Curiosity



Inquiry



Evidence

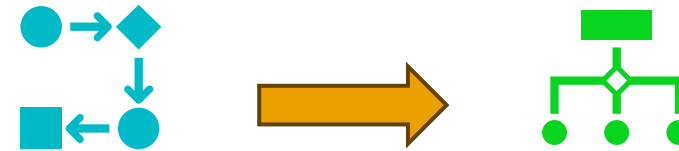


Reflection



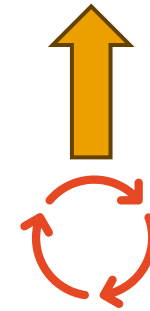
Adaptation

Evaluation is Not a Destination, It's a Compass



Design: What does success look like? (Needs Assessment)

Implementation: Are we doing what we said we would? (Process/Formative Evaluation)



Refinement: How can we do better next time? (Continuous Improvement)

Completion: Did we make a difference? (Outcome/Summary Evaluation)



The Shift: From Compliance to Curiosity



FROM “GOTCHA” TO
“GROWTH”



FROM **PROVING** IMPACT
TO **IMPROVING** IMPACT

Why We Need This Mindset: Evaluations Improve Impact



LEARNING CULTURE



STRATEGIC CLARITY



BETTER RESOURCE
ALLOCATION



IMPROVED
PROGRAM
PERFORMANCE



STRONGER FUNDING
CASES



Developing an Evaluative Mindset

Step 1: Understand Your Brain

- **The Threat Response:**

- Challenging data → Amygdala activates → Fight, flight, freeze
- Result: Defensiveness, denial, blame

- **The Learning Response:**

- Curiosity → Prefrontal cortex activates → Openness, exploration
- Result: Growth, adaptation, insight

- **Key Insight:** You can't change what you don't notice.



Step 2 – Name Your Barriers



-
- **Common Barriers to Evaluative Thinking:**
 - Fear of bad news
 - Lack of time
 - Limited resources
 - No expertise
 - Funders don't ask
 - Board doesn't understand
 - **The Principle:** You can't solve a problem you won't name.

Barrier-Busting: From "Can't" to "How Might We"

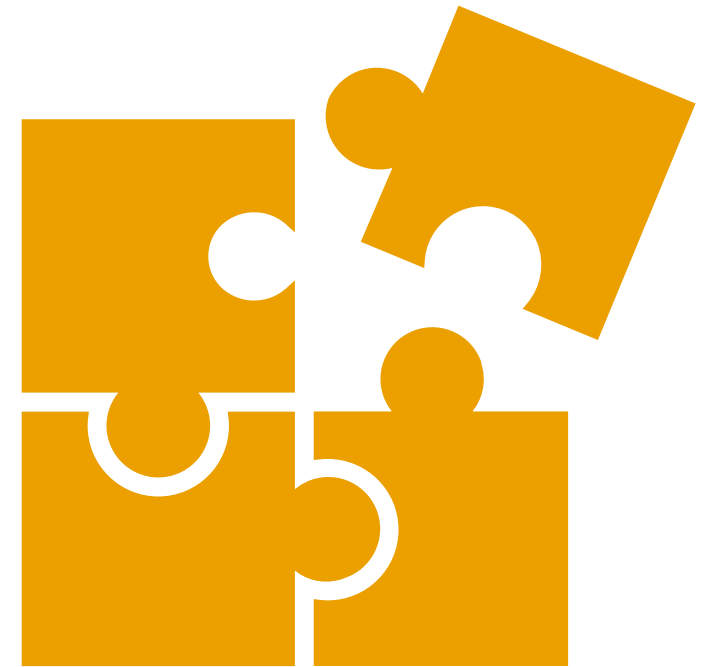
Reframing Barriers into Questions

- **From "Can't"...**

- "We don't have money for evaluation."
- "We don't have expertise."
- "Our board won't understand."

- **...to "How Might We"**

- "How might we evaluate on a shoestring budget?"
- "How might we partner with a local university?"
- "How might we educate our board about outcomes?"



Step 3 – Practice Daily Habits



The Power of Small:

Major shifts come from small, consistent actions

Habits rewire neural pathways over time



Four Core Habits:

Question Your Assumptions

Seek Disconfirming Evidence

The 5-Minute Evaluative Pause

Embrace "Intelligent Failure"



Habit 1 – Question Your Assumptions

Killer Questions to Ask Daily:

- Why do we believe this program works?
- What would prove us wrong?
- What are we assuming about our clients?
- If we were starting today, would we build it this way?

Habit 2 – Seek Disconfirming Evidence



Confirmation Bias: We seek information that confirms what we already believe.



The Antidote: Actively look for data that proves you wrong.



Why It Matters:

Early problem detection saves resources

Failure to learn = failure to serve



Quote: "It is the peculiar and perpetual error of the human intellect to be more moved and excited by affirmatives than by negatives." — Francis Bacon

Habit 3 – The 5-Minute Evaluative Pause

A Daily Leadership Practice:

[] **STOP:** Before a major decision, pause for 5 minutes.

[] **ASK:** "What am I assuming? What evidence do I have? What am I missing?"

[] **ADJUST:** Make one small change based on that reflection.



The Science: Brief reflection improves decision quality and reduces cognitive bias.

Habit 4 – Embrace "Intelligent Failure"



Definition (Amy Edmondson): A failure that provides new knowledge that couldn't have been gained any other way.



Characteristics:

New Territory
Goal-Oriented
Small in scale (fail fast)
Yields actionable insights



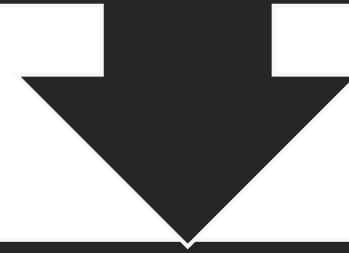
Leader's Role: Celebrate the learning, not the failure itself.

Reflection

- Name the most imposing barrier to you developing an evaluative mindset?
- Which habit would be most challenging for you, and why?
- What suggestions could you offer to reframe the name barriers and challenges that you have heard from your peers?

Step 4 – Create Supportive Structures

**Habits need structures to
survive.**



Three Essential Structures:

**A Learning
Agenda:** Your
prioritized questions

**Protected
Time:** Blocked
calendar time for
sense-making

**Simple
Tools:** Systems that
make evaluation
easy, not hard

Step 5 – Build Team Capacity



From Individual to Team:

Your mindset matters, but team culture matters more.



Four Ways to Build Team Capacity:

Normalize Learning Questions in every meeting

Train Together

Celebrate Curiosity publicly

Provide **Psychological Safety**

The Prerequisite: Psychological Safety



Definition: The belief that you won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.



Without Safety:

Bad news is hidden
Problems grow silently
Learning stops



With Safety:

Issues surface early
Innovation thrives
Evaluation is
welcomed, not feared

Reflections

- What are a few concrete steps that you could take to create the supportive structures and/or to build team capacity at your organization?
- How would you access the psychological safety at your organization? How could you improve it?



Thinking Like an Evaluator (Even if You Hate Math)

Three Pillars:

- 1.Questioning Assumptions (Inquiry):** "Why do we do it this way?"
- 2.Seeking Evidence (Evidence):** "What does the data tell us?"
- 3.Willingness to Adapt (Adaptation):** "What will we change based on what we learned?"

From Data to Story

"Data is just facts. Story is the meaning we make of those facts." — Wilfreda Edward

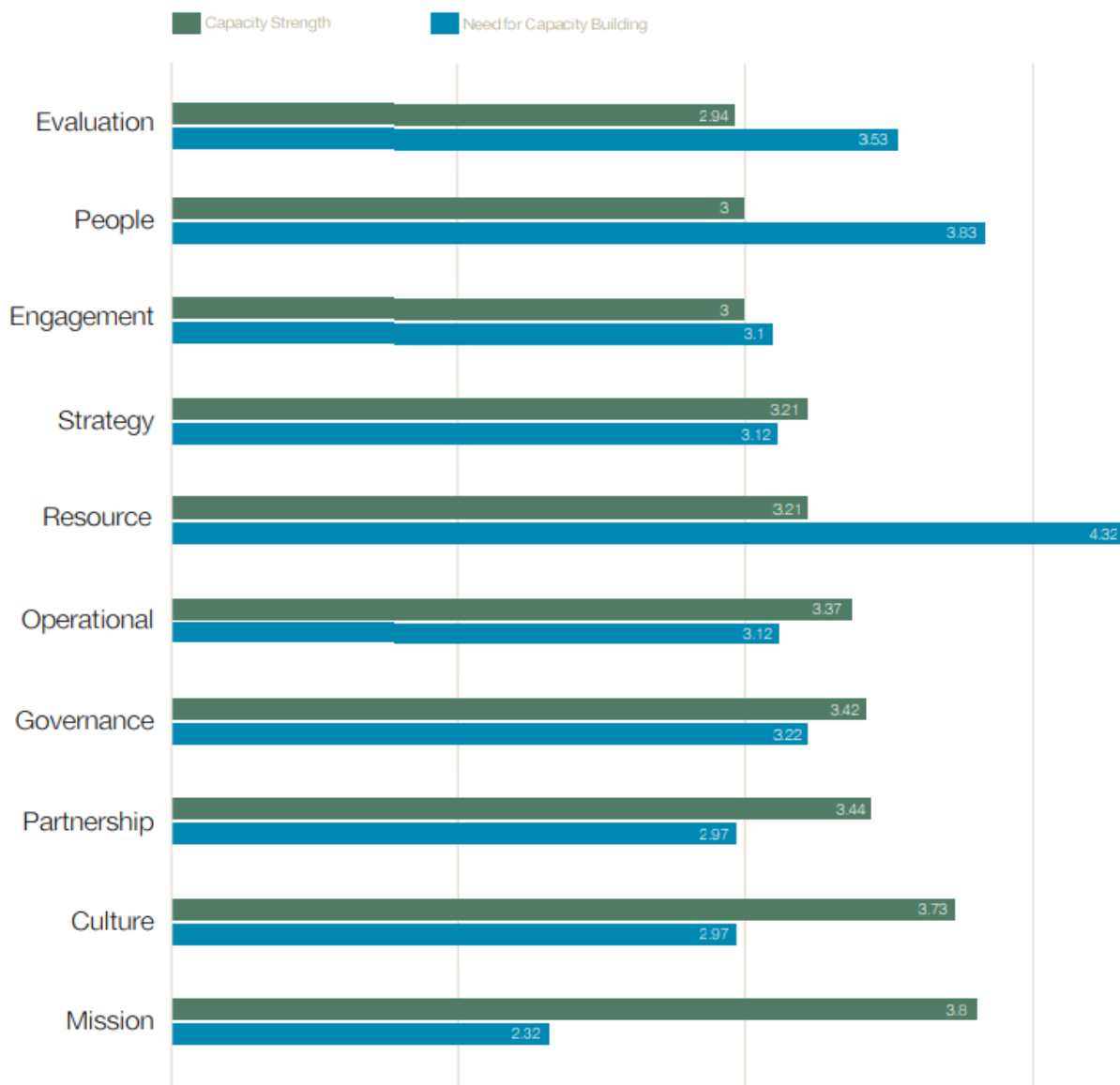
Action: Pair your quantitative data (the "What") with qualitative data (the "Why") to move hearts and minds.

Visualizing Outcome Data

1. Create chart headlines, not just titles
2. Reference is relevance
3. Color can connect and convince
4. Ditch legends and give direct labels
5. Humanize data points & stimulate emotion



Capacity Strength and Perceived Need for Capacity Building



#1 – Create chart headlines

- Nonprofits Excel at Their Mission Despite Deep Financial Vulnerability
- The largest gap exists between what we do and what we can afford
- Northwest Nonprofits Report a Critical Gap Between Mission Strength and Financial Capacity

In summary, there are 12 high-level takeaways from the data:

1

Missions and culture are strong

Nonprofits of the Northwest are driven by a clear cause. They are focused on their mission and aligned in their core work to their mission. The strength of organizational and team culture they create is, in the perceptions of the respondents, exemplary. The data reveal the organizational clarity and health of culture to energize and advance their cause.

2

Resources and people are top capacity needs

There is a gap between how nonprofits rate the strength of their mission, strategy, and culture effectiveness and the challenges they report in resource and people capacity. They see their organizations as being focused, healthy, and effective, but they also struggle having the funding and people they need to function well.

3

Organizations struggle with time, resources, and ability to measure impact

Evaluating and communicating sector and subsector impact is challenging. Organizations are not adequately evaluating the impact of their programs beyond outputs and activities. Evaluation is the lowest rated capacity of the survey. Building expertise and developing habits to prove and improve their impact using evaluative data of all kinds is an obvious need for capacity-building.

4

Succession planning and leadership development are high capacity needs

The long-predicted leadership deficit is here. The survey reveals succession planning is a continued, if not growing, challenge for nonprofits. The capacity to develop staff into leaders is also a need for nonprofits. If nonprofits in the Northwest are to thrive into the future, capacity for developing current and future leaders will need to be a focus for capacity-building.

5

Funding diversity is key capacity challenge and risk to mission achievement

One of the greatest needs for nonprofits in the Northwest continues to be the sufficiency and diversity of funding. Whereas the capacity for financial management is rated relatively strong, the capacity for fund development is lagging. Nonprofit leaders see a need for strengthening their fund development competencies and funder relationships. In open-ended questions about the greatest barriers and greatest needs for capacity in all 10 domains, leaders commonly cited the need for sufficient financial resources. Leaders of nonprofits see capacity funding as the critical key to strengthening capacities of all kinds.

6

Small, early stage, and culturally specific nonprofits report lower capacity

Nonprofits that are small, early stage, and culturally specific report the greatest needs for capacity-building across many of the ten domains represented in the survey. All nonprofits have the opportunity to develop in areas of capacity to be more effective. To uplevel all nonprofits, investment will need to be offered to small, early stage, and culturally specific organizations.

7

Involvement with the state nonprofit association correlates to higher capacity

Involvement with the nonprofit state associations corresponds to a higher capacity across all domains. Nonprofits that engage with the programs and services of the nonprofit state associations demonstrate a higher level of capacity than average. This finding suggests that the community, content, camaraderie, and support of the nonprofit state association aligns with capacity.

8

Culturally specific organizations are leading in efforts to increase inclusion and belonging

Culturally specific organizations rate substantially higher than the average in (a) engaging communities that have been historically underserved and underrepresented, (b) applying policies and practices that advance inclusion and belonging with historically marginalized communities, and (c) using the lens of power and privilege to examine and advance the work. There is an opportunity for the sector to learn from the expertise of these organizations.

9

Organizations report lower capacity to partner cross-sectorally

Amidst the relative strengths of partnership capacity, the data reveal possibilities for improvements in cross-sectoral work. There is yet untapped potential for nonprofits to work together with public and private sector organizations and agencies to achieve significant and durable impact in and for communities.

10

Public policy advocacy is an opportunity for increasing capacity

The survey reveals an opportunity for nonprofits to be better mobilized to make a difference in public policy by exercising strategic influence. Mobilizing the collective influence of nonprofits to influence societal systems, structures, and policies is an area for capacity-building consideration.

11

The nonprofit sector is strong!

The survey demonstrates strength of capacity in each of the ten domains. The survey shows Northwest nonprofits as competent, resourceful, skilled, and able. They have developed capacity in critical areas of nonprofit effectiveness that explain the scale, scope, and depth of impact they are having in communities throughout the Northwest.

12

Capacity scores are remarkably consistent across the five states

There is remarkable consistency in the data across all five states. In very few instances, there are small differences in the ratings between the states. Mostly, however, the data show similarities in the perceived strengths and areas of need in capacity.

#2 – Reference is relevance

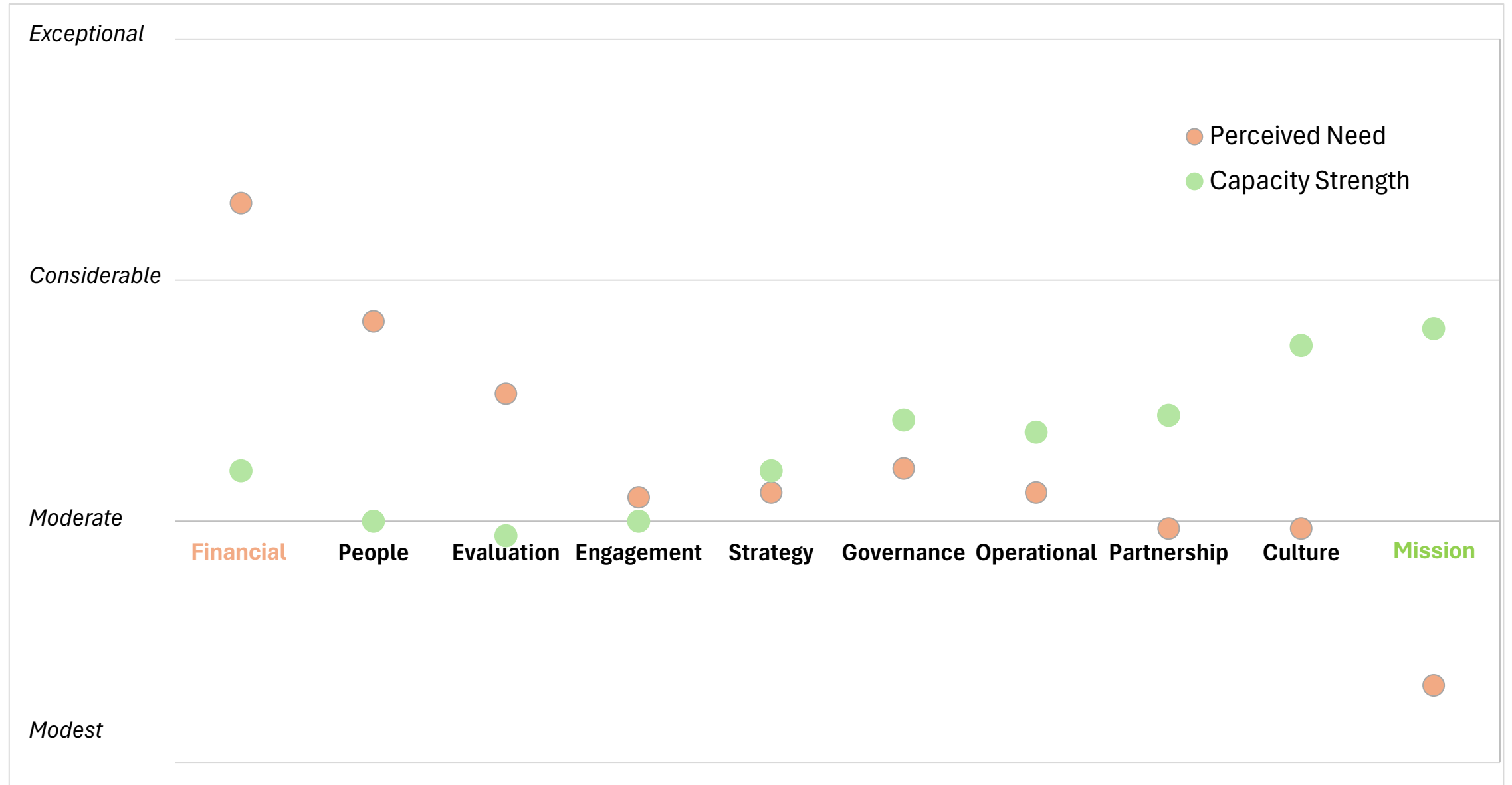
Northwest Nonprofits Report a Critical Gap Between Mission Strength and Financial Capacity



**based on 1-5 scale where 3=moderate strength*

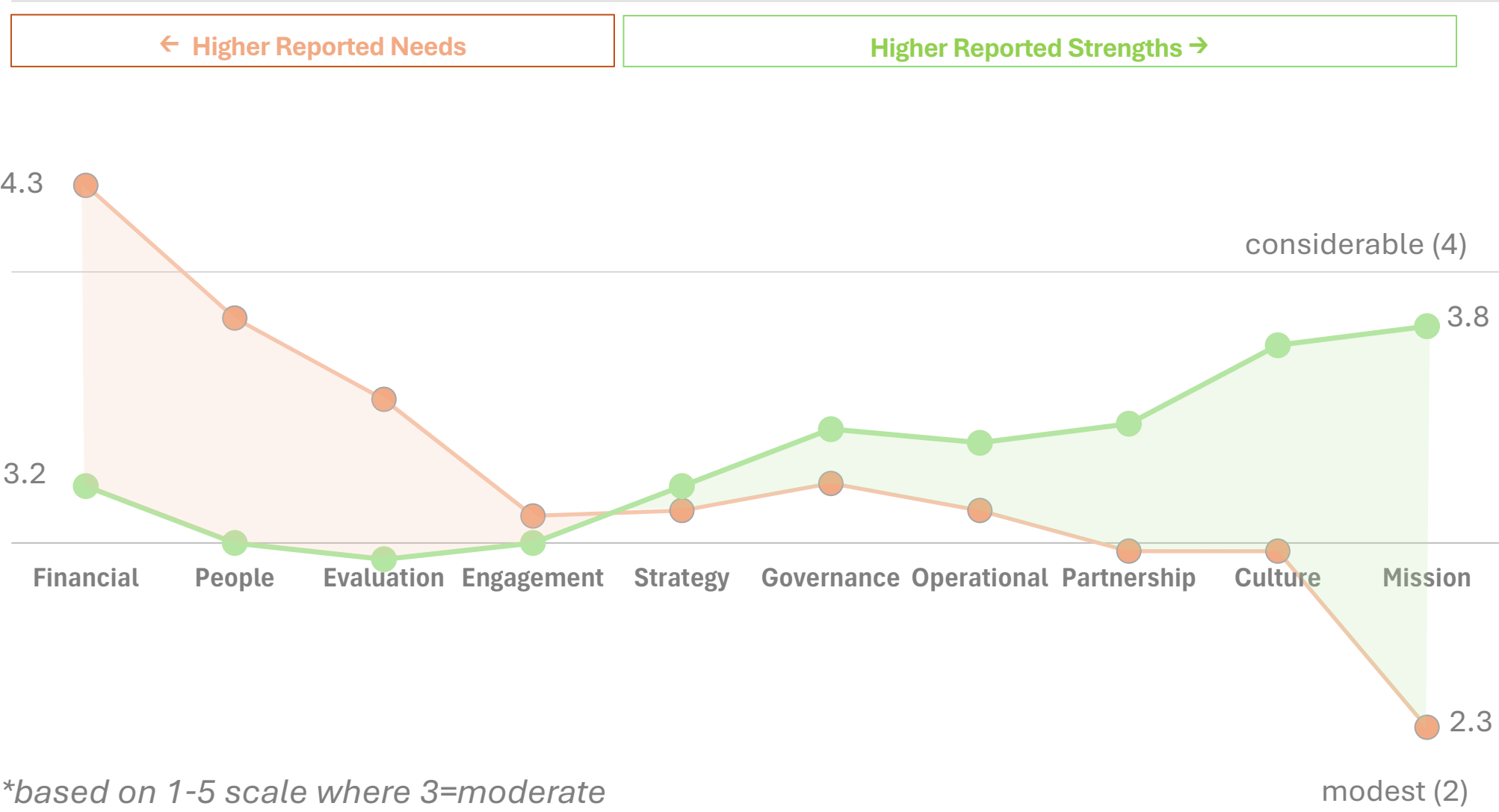
#3 – Color can connect and convince

Northwest Nonprofits Report a Critical Gap Between **Mission Strength** and **Financial Capacity**

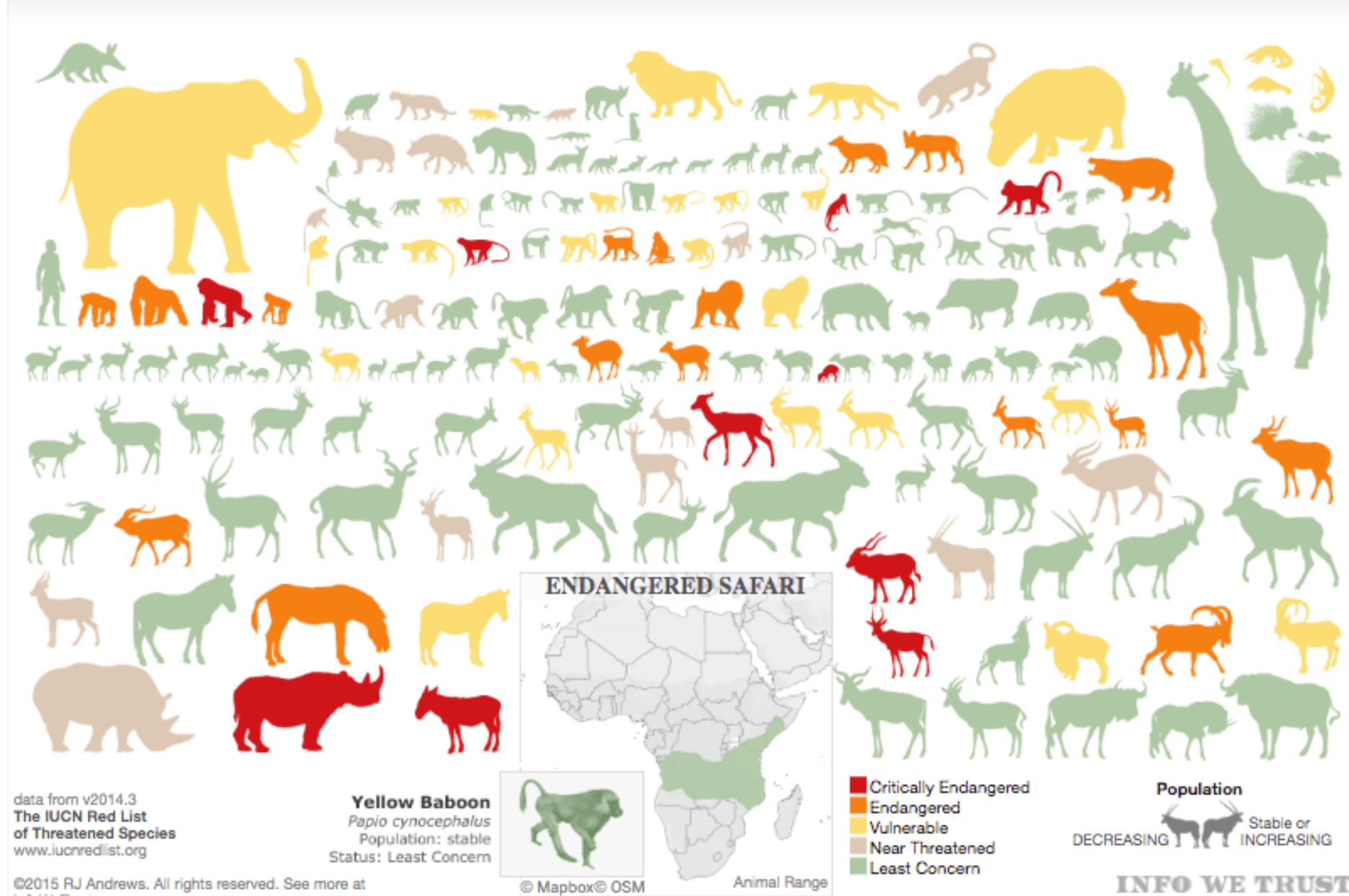


#4 -Ditch legends and give direct labels

Northwest Nonprofits Report a Critical Gap Between **Financial Capacity** and **Mission Strength**

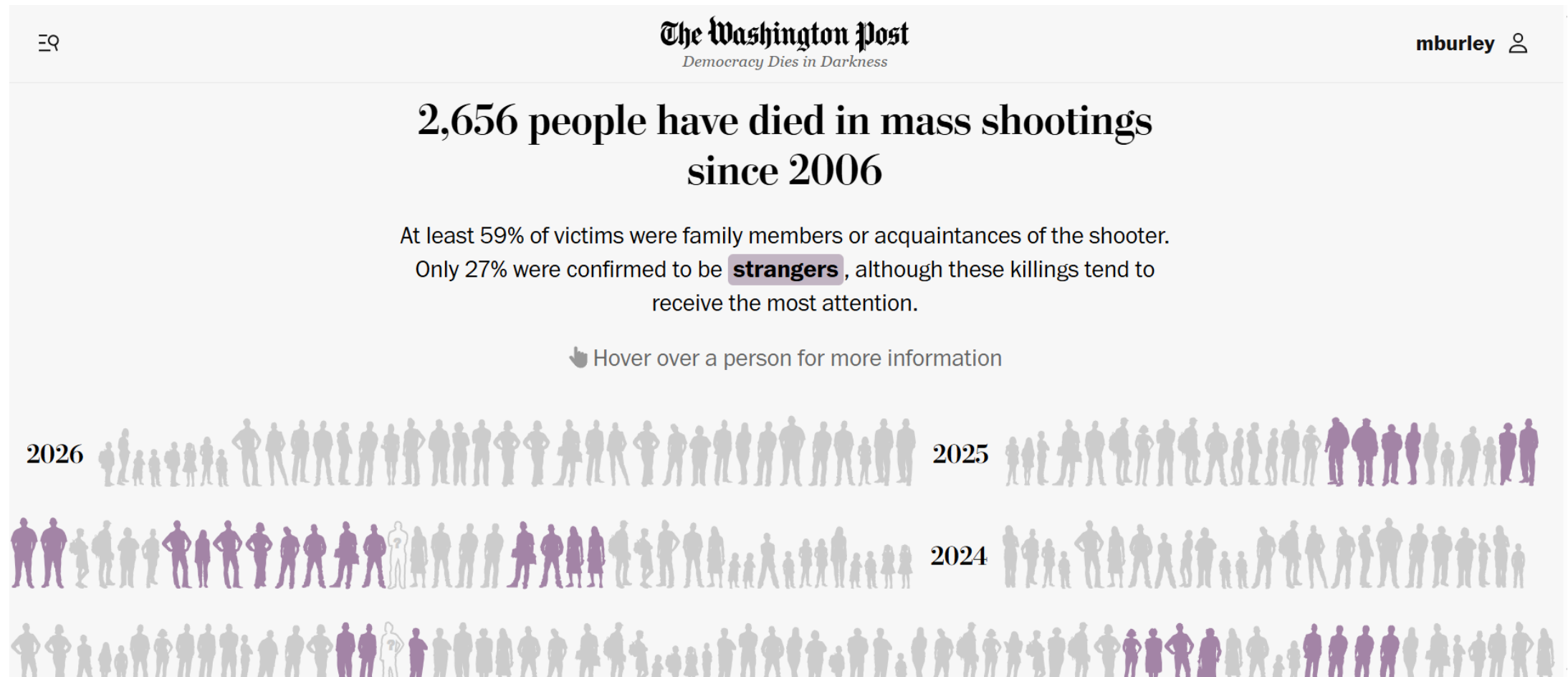


#5– Humanize data points & stimulate emotion



#6 – Humanize data points

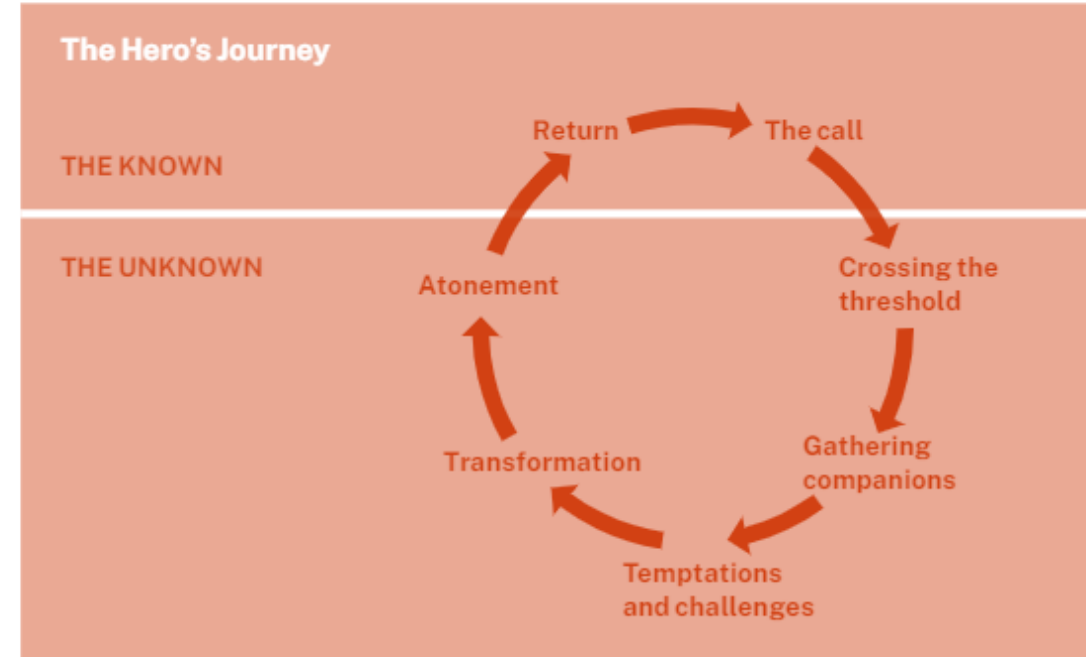
While tragic to view, the data presentation in this [Washington Post graphic](#) reminds us that there are people behind the numbers in our charts



Data Storytelling

Good stories are circular

-  **Connect** – this affects you
-  **Point out adversity** – challenge
-  **Map problem** – show you understand
-  **Demonstrate solution** – manageable
-  **Show your how** – capacity/expertise/credibility
-  **Present data** – legitimizes, generalizes, inspires
-  **Connect** – back to personal action, celebrate success



FR1ENDS of the
CH1LDREN

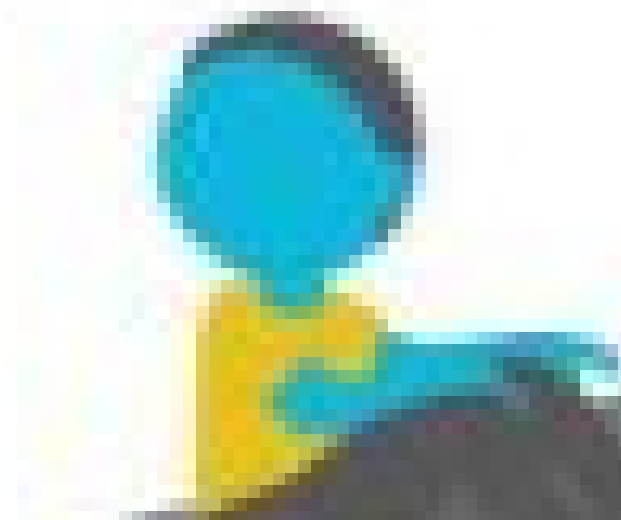
BE A CHAMPION FOR CHILDREN!



EMPOWERING YOUTH FOR 12+ YEARS, NO MATTER WHAT.

ABOUT US | OUR MISSION | OUR VALUES | OUR IMPACT | OUR PARTNERS | OUR STORIES | OUR CONTACT

SALARIED PROFESSIONAL MENTOR



What Does Success Look Like in 2026?



- 01 Do you have a clearly defined mission statement that speaks to your why's?
- 02 What is the connection between the services you provide and the outcomes you produce?
- 03 How is your work contributing to positive changes in the community?
- 04 What are the milestones you can measure and control to get there?
- 05 Do you have an effective and efficient system to collect and analyze your metrics and milestones?
- 06 What do you want your impact story to show at the end of 2026?