

CHOOSING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Tips for conducting program evaluation

You can't study everything you'd like to know about your program's effectiveness. The key to a good evaluation is leaving out the not-so-essential.

In order for your evaluation to be meaningful and worth the time and effort, you should focus on the types of information that will actually influence the way you do things. In this issue, we outline the general types of evaluation questions that you should consider. Then we offer tips for weighing your priorities.

Evaluating outcomes

Measuring outcomes is a way to document the actual impact of a program. Outcomes are any changes that, according to the underlying theory of your program, can be reasonably expected as a result of your services.

For agencies providing direct services to individuals, outcomes are typically changes in the characteristics or circumstances of those people. On the other hand, some programs might be working for change at the level of organizations or communities rather than individuals, such as developing

Evaluating the process

Process evaluation is a way to scrutinize your services and see new connections between the way that services are provided and the outcomes or satisfaction levels for

Most program evaluations focus on one or more of these dimensions:

- Outcomes: How does the program change participants (and possibly their families, the community, or some other broader sphere of influence)
- Process: How is the program actually being put into practice?
- Satisfaction: How do key stakeholders experience your program?

a comprehensive continuum of local services or changing public attitudes about a certain issue.

Collecting evidence on outcomes helps you understand the extent to which the program is meeting its goals and to identify ways in which it should be strengthened or refocused. By combining measurement of outcomes with assessment of process and participant satisfaction, you and your staff have richer opportunities to more fully understand how your work makes a difference.

participants. Did each major feature of your services promote or hinder success for participants?

(continued)



Process, continued:

A process evaluation can look at any implementation issues that are important to you. Some examples:

- Are there certain characteristics that make people more likely or less likely to benefit from your program?
- How well do program services match the needs of your participants?
- What factors influence participants' ability to easily access your services?
- Generally, how much service is delivered to participants? What kinds of service?
- How does the amount and type of service relate to differences in outcomes or satisfaction?
- Does your program have a defined point of completion, such as a certain time period or number of sessions, reaching a certain age, or accomplishing certain goals? If so, what percentage of participants successfully complete the program? What factors influence that?
- How much does the program cost? Are the costs appropriate for the outcomes?
- Is the program replicating an established service model? If so, how important is it to ensure that the service is provided as originally designed?
- If you provide services in collaboration with other agencies or organizations, how are those partnerships working?
- What questions or concerns do staff members, participants, or other key stakeholders have about the way services are delivered?
- What challenges and barriers to service delivery have been encountered? How have you addressed those, and with what degree of success?
- Is the program being implemented according to plan (such as timeline, budget, staffing, and number of participants)?

Evaluating satisfaction

This type of evaluation usually explores the satisfaction of the actual individuals who received services. However, in some cases this examination will include other stakeholders, such as family members, referral sources, and collaborating partners. Issues often addressed in this component

include characteristics of staff, quality of facilities and other materials, and benefits of the program. While having satisfied participants is not necessarily the same as having participants with successful outcomes, it can be a useful source of feedback for program staff.

Tips for prioritizing your evaluation questions

Before jumping into the actual evaluation design, consider the full range of evaluation approaches we've just outlined. Then, to make sure that the evaluation will answer your most important questions, prioritize

them. A good strategy is to start with the logic model (see *What a logic model can do for you*, January 2006, and *How to build a logic model*, April 2006).

Choose the top outcome questions

Your logic model should include all of your programs core outcomes—if your logic model is relatively simple, you may be able to measure your progress in all core outcome areas. If your logic model is complex, or if you have very limited evaluation resources, you might not be able to measure each outcome listed in the model. Select the top one or two. Ask the following questions to prioritize your outcomes:

- Which outcomes will be the most useful to understand program success and guide program improvements?
- Which outcomes are most important to the program participants?
- Which outcomes are most important to other stakeholders, including funders?

If you are not sure how to answer these questions, you may need to talk with some of your major stakeholders, such as staff members, current or past participants, funders, or collaborative partners. These sources might also help:

- Review your agency or program communication materials to determine the degree of fit between your publicly stated objectives and each outcome listed in the model. Which outcomes do people most expect you to accomplish?
- Talk with agencies that might be the ‘next step’ for participants leaving your program, to get their views about the most important or common program benefits.
- Learn from others’ experience by looking at the activities and outcomes described by programs similar to yours.

Example: A program provides comprehensive case management and support to families of abused children. Because the array of services is very broad, the logic model includes many outcomes (such as helping families to maintain stable housing, reduce stress, and successfully navigate the legal system). While all of these outcomes are important, the core mission is to improve family relationships and prevent future abuse. The staff chose evaluation questions focused on these central outcomes.

Choose the top process questions

To decide which implementation issues should rise to the top, consider:

- How much would it influence participant outcomes or satisfaction?
- How strongly does it concern staff members or other key stakeholders?
- How substantially would it help with planning or improvement decisions?

Example: A college counseling program provides individual therapy to students who have experienced sexual assault. While the staff would like to learn about many aspects of the program’s accessibility and outreach, they are especially concerned about their hours of service. They offer counseling only on weekday afternoons, which may not be convenient for students. Because this is something within the program’s ability to change, but would entail some costs and staffing challenges, the issue rises to the top of their process evaluation questions.

Prioritizing, continued

Choose the top satisfaction questions

Your program could ask about dozens of aspects of client satisfaction, and each question would probably hold some interest and value. To prioritize, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you suspect that certain elements of client satisfaction make a substantial difference in successful completion of the program or in positive outcomes?
- If it turns out that satisfaction with a certain aspect of the program is low, will you be able to do anything about it, or is it beyond your resources or control?
- Are there key stakeholders whose satisfaction will strongly influence your program, such as those who can refer clients or partner with you?

Example: An agency providing emergency shelter to victims of domestic violence wants to assess the satisfaction of their clients. They know that many people complain about the facility – the building is old and drafty and not always comfortable. However, due to funding limitations, the program cannot address those concerns right now. The staff also believe that the comfort of the facility does not ultimately detract from their top goal, which is to provide safety and support. They decide to focus their satisfaction questions on elements that are within their control and important to good outcomes – such as clients’ ratings of the staff as helpful, knowledgeable, and supportive.

Quick links to more information

Killion, J. (2002). *Assessing impact: Evaluating staff development*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council. Chapter 6: Formulate evaluation questions. www.nsd.org/connect/projects/ai6.pdf

Florida Institute of Education at the University of North Florida—*Safe, disciplined, and drug-free schools evaluation handbook: Choosing the right evaluation questions*. www.unf.edu/dept/fie/sdfs/phasell.pdf

In future tip sheets

- Developing data collection plans
- Selecting evaluation measures
- Writing surveys

Find previous tip sheets on the web: www.ojp.state.mn.us/grants/index.htm or www.wilderresearch.org.

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