

Program Evaluation 101 (part II)

Preparing for Evaluation

Addressing resistance. Advance planning for a program evaluation can help reduce the potential for resistance from staff, clients, partners and other key stakeholders. Some common reasons for resistance include the following concerns:

- Clients will be harmed or treated in a disrespectful manner by evaluators
- Anonymity of those participating in the evaluation will not be preserved
- Front-line staff, management and clients will need to take time away from service delivery to work on program evaluation
- The “driver” for the program evaluation is the funder
- Results of the evaluation will not be shared with program staff
- The evaluation is being conducted because the program is viewed as ineffective and changes will be implemented
- Negative feedback from key stakeholders, particularly clients, will reflect poorly on program staff
- The true benefits and value of the program will not be captured because of the data sources and data collection methods

It is important to assess the level of resistance to evaluation and the reasons for it. Resistance may be diminished by:

- Providing a forum for key stakeholders to share their concerns
- Explaining the evaluation process including the impact on staff, clients, etc.
- Providing regular updates regarding the program evaluation process
- Ensuring the participation on the part of all parties is voluntary
- Ensuring the anonymity of responses

Planning the Evaluation

Timing of evaluation. Most people think that planning for an evaluation should occur just prior to conducting the evaluation. Many also view the planning and conducting of the evaluation as later stage in the lifecycle of a program.

Evaluation planning is an important step early in the lifecycle of the program. Evaluation plans can be included in proposals for funding or grant applications with the intent of securing resources to fund this important activity. Discussions about the type of evaluation that will be conducted can also help inform program design, development of program goals/objectives and program outcomes.

Frequency of evaluation. While program performance measures should be monitored on an ongoing basis, program evaluations need not be conducted annually. Performance measures are intended to assess whether or not programs are “doing things right” while program evaluation addresses the question of whether or not the program is “doing the right thing”.

Key steps

1. Before collecting any data, it is important to clarify the purpose and audiences for the evaluation. If using an external consultant, involve this person in this task.
2. The next step is to gather all relevant background information (secondary data). This can include previous program evaluations, reports, minutes of meetings discussing the program, client feedback, program manuals, marketing materials, etc.
3. At this point it is timely to identify the questions you are intending to answer through the evaluation. It is important to involve key stakeholders in determining these questions –including front-line staff, management, funders, partners, etc.
4. Consideration of the commitment of resources to this program evaluation is very important. Those involved or affected by this process should be advised of the purpose and timing. Staff members need to clearly understand their expected contribution to program evaluation activities.

It is advised that three plans be developed: an evaluation plan, a management plan and a communication plan.

The **evaluation plan** will include:

- the evaluation questions
- the data that is required for each particular question
- where you will gather this data
- the tools that you will use to gather this data
- who will collect this data
- the timing of data collection (how often, what time of the year, etc.)

- how you will share this data with interested audiences

The **management plan** will describe who is responsible for:

- determining evaluation questions
- developing and field testing data collection instruments
- collecting data
- analyzing data
- writing the evaluation report
- managing the resource requirements and timelines of the program evaluation.

The **communication plan** is a critical and often overlooked step. It is advisable to determine the various audiences who are interesting in learning about the progress and results of the program evaluation. In addition, it is wise to determine the frequency and medium (face-to-face, written, email, etc.) for communicating with these audiences. Caution should be exercised in sharing of preliminary findings. Sometimes data collected early in the program evaluation process may reflect a different perspective on the program than that which is collected later.

Resources to Support Program Evaluation

Internal or external evaluation resources

The concept of internal evaluation conducted by staff members within an organization has been described in the literature for many years. In addition to being cost effective, internal evaluation may be the most appropriate approach in situations where clients may be unwilling to meet with an external evaluator. With training and proper orientation, staff may become quite proficient in conducting internal evaluations.

An external evaluator can work with staff members to assist with the development of evaluation frameworks and data collection tools. S/he can perform audits of data collection and analysis. While there is a cost associated with hiring an independent, professional evaluator the knowledge and expertise brought by this individual will benefit every aspect of the program evaluation. In some cases, a funder may require that an independent, professional evaluator conduct a program evaluation.

A decision will need to be made about whether to utilize internal or external resources or a combination of both to conduct the program evaluation. Evaluation consultants can be located through the Canadian Evaluation Society (<http://www.evaluationcanada.ca/site.cgi?s=1>).

Locating evaluation resources

Books about program evaluation can be accessed through several sources including:

- Resource Centre for Voluntary Organizations
- Grant MacEwan College Learning Resources Centre
- University libraries
- Local public libraries (including inter-library loan)

On-line resources can be accessed through

- Centre for Philanthropy (<http://www.nonprofitscan.ca/page.asp?library>)
- Western Michigan University (<http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/>)

Learning opportunities

Credit courses on program evaluation are offered through colleges and universities. Non-credit courses on program evaluation are offered by provincial chapters of the Canadian Evaluation Society. For more information, visit the Canadian Evaluation Society website noted above.

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