

# A Basic Guide to Program Evaluation

*By Carter McNamara*

There are numerous books and other materials that provide in-depth analysis of evaluations, their designs, methods, combination of methods and techniques of analysis. But you don't have to be an expert in these topics to carry out a useful program evaluation. The "20-80" rule applies here—20 percent of the effort generates 80 percent of the results. It's better to do a simple evaluation than to do no evaluation at all. (And if you decide to bring in an evaluation consultant, make sure you're a smart consumer. Far too many program evaluations generate information that is either impractical or irrelevant—if the information is understood at all.)

Let's start by examining some common myths about program evaluation:

## **Myth #1 - "Evaluation is an extraneous activity that generates lots of boring data with useless conclusions."**

That may have been a problem in the past, when program evaluation methods were chosen largely on the basis of their ability to achieve complete scientific accuracy, reliability and validity. That approach would often generate extensive data from which very carefully chosen conclusions would be drawn. Generalizations and recommendations were avoided. As a result, evaluation reports tended to reiterate the obvious and left program administrators disappointed and skeptical about the value of evaluation in general. More recently (especially as a result of Michael Patton's pioneering work with utilization-focused evaluation techniques), evaluation has focused on utility, relevance and practicality at least as much as scientific validity.

## **Myth #2 - "Evaluation is about proving the success or failure of a program."**

This myth assumes that success is implementing the perfect program and never having to hear from employees, customers or clients again—the program will now run itself perfectly. That doesn't happen in real life. Success involves remaining open to continuing feedback and adjusting the program accordingly. Evaluation gives you this continuing feedback.

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**Myth #3 - "Evaluation is a unique and complex process that occurs at a certain time in a certain way, and almost always includes the use of outside experts."**

Many people believe that they must be completely conversant with concepts such as validity and reliability. They don't. They do have to consider what information they will require in order to make current decisions about program issues or needs. And they have to be willing to commit to understanding what is really going on. People regularly undertake some form of program evaluation—they just don't do it in a formal fashion, so they don't get the most out of their efforts. Or they draw conclusions that are inaccurate.

So just what is program evaluation and what can it legitimately be expected to accomplish? Program evaluation can help us to:

- 1. Understand, verify or increase the impact of products or services on customers or clients.** These "outcome" evaluations are increasingly required by nonprofit funders as a means of verifying that grantees are indeed helping their constituents. Too often, service providers (for-profit as well as nonprofit) depend on their own instincts and passions to decide what their customers or clients really need and whether the products or services they provide are in fact what is needed. Over time, these organizations find themselves relying on guesswork to decide what would be a good product or service, and relying on trial and error to decide how new products or services should be delivered.
- 2. Improve delivery mechanisms so that they will be more efficient and less costly.** Over time, product or service delivery can easily turn into a collection of activities that are less efficient and more costly than they need to be. Evaluations can identify program strengths and weaknesses to improve the program.
- 3. Verify that you're doing what you think you're doing.** Typically, plans about how to deliver services end up changing substantially as those plans are implemented. Evaluations can verify whether the program is really running as it was originally planned.
- 4. Facilitate management's thinking about what a program is all about.** This includes thinking about the program's goals, how to reach its goals, and how to know whether it has reached its goals.

**5. Produce data or verify results that can be used for public relations and promoting services in the community.**

**6. Produce valid comparisons between programs to decide which should be retained.** This is especially important when the organization has to cut programs because of budget cuts.

**7. Fully examine and describe effective programs for replication elsewhere.**

Usually, management is faced with having to make major decisions due to decreased funding, ongoing complaints, unmet needs among customers and clients, or the need to improve service delivery. Your program evaluation plans depend on what information you must collect in order to make such decisions. Do you want to know more about what is actually going on in your programs, whether a particular program is meeting its goals, or about the impact of a program on customers or clients? You may want your evaluation to yield one of these results, a combination of these results, or other information. Ultimately, it's up to you.

The more focused you are about what you want to examine in carrying out the evaluation, the more efficient you can be, the less time it will take, and the less it will probably cost you.

There are trade-offs, too, in the breadth and depth of information you get. The more breadth you want, usually the less depth you get (unless you have lots of resources at your disposal). On the other hand, if you want to examine a certain aspect of a program in great detail, you will probably not get as much information about other aspects of the program.

Consider the following key questions when designing a program evaluation.

**1. For what purposes is the evaluation being done?** In other words, what do you want to be able to decide as a result of the evaluation?

**2. Who are the audiences for the information from the evaluation?** (e.g., funders, board, management, staff, clients)

**3. What do you need in order to make an informed decision and/or enlighten your intended audiences?** (e.g., information to explain the product or program—its inputs, activities and outputs; the customers or

clients who use the product or program; strengths and weaknesses of the product or program; outcomes for customers or clients; how and why the product or program failed)

**4. From what sources should the information be collected?** (e.g., employees, customers, clients, groups of customers or clients and employees together, program documentation)

**5. How can that information be collected?** (e.g., questionnaires, interviews, examining documentation, observing customers or employees, conducting focus groups of customers or employees)

**6. When is the information needed and by when must it be collected?**

**7. What resources are available to collect the information?**

### **Goals-Based Evaluation**

Often programs are established to meet one or more specific goals. Goals-based evaluations involve evaluating the extent to which programs are meeting predetermined goals or objectives. Here are questions to ask yourself when designing an evaluation to see if you have reached your goals:

**1. How were the program goals (and objectives, if applicable) established? Was the process effective?**

**2. What is the status of the program's progress toward achieving the goals?**

**3. Will the goals be achieved according to the timelines specified in the program implementation or operations plan? If not, why not?**

**4. Do personnel have adequate resources (money, equipment, facilities, training, etc.) to achieve the goals?**

**5. How should priorities be changed to put more focus on achieving the goals?** (Depending on the context, this might be viewed as a program management decision, more than an evaluation question.)

**6. How should timelines be changed?** (Be careful about making these changes—know why efforts are behind schedule before timelines are changed.)

**7. How should goals be changed?** (Be careful about making these changes—know why efforts are not achieving the goals before changing the goals. And ask whether any goals should be added or removed.)

**8. How should goals be established in the future?**

### **Process Evaluation**

Process evaluations are geared to fully understanding how a program works—how it produces the results that it does. These evaluations are useful when long-standing programs have changed over the years, when employees or customers report numerous complaints about the program, or when there appear to be inefficiencies in delivering program services. They are also useful for accurately portraying to outside parties how a program truly operates (e.g., for replication elsewhere).

Examples of questions to ask yourself when designing a process evaluation are:

- 1. On what basis do employees and/or customers decide that products or services are needed?**
- 2. What is required of employees in order to deliver the product or services?**
- 3. How are employees trained to deliver the product or services?**
- 4. How do customers or clients come into the program?**
- 5. What is required of customers or clients?**
- 6. How do employees select which products or services will be provided to the customer or client?**
- 7. What is the general process that customers or clients go through with the product or program?**

- 8. What do customers or clients consider to be strengths of the product or program?**
- 9. What do staff members consider to be strengths of the product or program?**
- 10. What typical complaints are heard from employees and/or customers?**
- 11. What do employees and/or customers recommend to improve the product or program?**
- 12. On what basis do employees and/or customers decide that the product or service is no longer needed?**

### **Outcomes Evaluation**

Program evaluation with a focus on outcomes has become increasingly important for nonprofits, and funders are demanding it more and more. An outcomes evaluation helps you decide if you are really conducting the right program activities to bring about the results you believe (or better yet, you've verified) to be needed by your clients (rather than just engaging in busy activities which seemed reasonable enough at the time). Outcomes are benefits to clients from participation in the program. Outcomes are usually stated in terms of enhanced learning (knowledge, perceptions/attitudes or skills) or conditions, e.g., increased literacy, self-reliance, etc. Outcomes should not be confused with program outputs or units of services, e.g., the number of clients who went through a program.

The United Way of America provides an excellent overview of outcomes evaluation at its Web site (<http://national.unitedway.org/outcomes/>). It includes an introduction to outcomes measurement, a program outcome model, an explanation of why you should measure outcomes, steps to success for measuring outcomes, examples of outcomes, and outcome indicators for various programs. The following discussion summarizes some of that information.

To perform an outcomes evaluation, you should:

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**1. Identify the major outcomes that you want to examine or verify for the program under evaluation.** You might reflect on your mission (the overall purpose of your organization) and ask yourself what impacts you will have on your clients as you work towards your mission. For example, if your overall mission is to provide shelter and resources to abused women, then ask yourself what benefits this will have on those women if you effectively provide them shelter and other services or resources. As a last resort, you might ask yourself, "What major activities are we doing now?" and then for each activity ask, "Why are we doing that?" The answer to this "Why?" question is usually an outcome. This "last resort" approach, though, may just end up justifying ineffective activities you are doing now, rather than examining what you should be doing in the first place.

**2. Choose the outcomes that you want to examine,** prioritize the outcomes and, if your time and resources are limited, pick the top two or three most important outcomes to examine for now.

**3. For each outcome, specify what observable measures, or indicators, will suggest that you're achieving that key outcome with your clients.** This is often the most important and enlightening step in outcomes-based evaluation. However, it is often the most challenging and confusing step as well, because you're suddenly going from an amorphous concept (e.g., increased self-reliance) to specific activities (e.g., supporting clients in getting themselves to and from work). It helps to have a "devil's advocate" during this phase of identifying indicators, i.e., someone who can question why you can assume that an outcome was reached because certain associated indicators were present.

**4. Specify a "target" goal of clients,** i.e., the number or percentage of clients with whom you commit to achieving specific outcomes- for example, "increased self-reliance (an outcome) for 25 percent of adult, African American women living in Placerville neighborhood of Metropolis as evidenced by the following measures (indicators)..."

**5. Identify what information is needed to show these indicators.** For example, you'll need to know how many clients in the target group went through the program, how many of them reliably undertook their own transportation to work, and so on. If your program is new, you may need to evaluate the process in the program to verify that the program is indeed carried out according to your original plans.

**6. Decide how that information can be realistically and efficiently gathered.** Consider program documentation, observation of program personnel and clients in the program, questionnaires and interviews about clients' perceived benefits from the program, case studies of program failures and successes, etc.

**7. Analyze and report the findings.**

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