



Using Evaluation to Improve Your Services

Three guidebooks help you answer the question, “Is this program making a difference?”

By Terrence Fernsler

The Manager’s Guide to Program Evaluation: Planning, Contracting, and Managing for Useful Results

By Paul W. Mattesich, 102 pages. Softcover. Fieldstone Alliance (www.fieldstonealliance.org). Available for a discount at www.snpo.org.

Evaluation is a formal, common-sense approach to making decisions. In this handy book, Paul Mattesich explores ways you can use evaluation in a process of ongoing improvement.

Taking the manager’s perspective, Mattesich gives an overview of data-gathering and statistical analyses. Never overwhelming you with details, he provides just enough information for you to

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oversee evaluation projects and know what to expect in each phase. He shows how evaluation can help you learn about your successes, share information with key audiences, document client needs, garner support, and deepen understanding of your organization’s work.

Different research methods suit different organizations, even different projects within the same organization. The important point is to see whether a program truly makes a difference, and this book will help illuminate the answer for you. ■

The Sage Handbook of Evaluation

Edited by Ian F. Shaw, Jennifer C. Greene, and Melvin M. Mark. 630 pages. Hardcover. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, www.sagepublications.com.

In this all-encompassing handbook, various authors discuss the evaluation of people-related programs, policies, and practices. In 25 comprehensive chapters, they examine evaluation within such fields as education, health services, social work, human services, criminal justice, and humanitarian aid. They explore ways to use evaluation for organizational learning as well as how to manage evaluations and communicate results.

Evaluation should look not only at what works, but how. It can be instrumental in making decisions and holding organizations and people within those organizations accountable.

It’s hard to overstate the importance of evaluation. As the practice improves, evaluation will increase in value, and we must understand the practice and trends within it to use evaluation most effectively. The most useful evaluations will be both quantitative and qualitative. This handbook thoroughly covers all aspects of evaluation, yet it isn’t too technical to understand. It offers everything an organization needs to know to get the most out of evaluation. ■

Analyzing Outcome Information: Getting the Most from Data

By Henry P. Hatry, Jack Cowan, and Michael Hendricks. 48 pages. Softcover. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute. Also available electronically at www.urban.org.

This guide explains how nonprofits can become more efficient by collecting and analyzing raw data to measure program outcomes. It focuses on basic analysis activities, the kind that nearly all organizations, large or small, can do themselves.

Part of a series on outcome measurement for nonprofits, the booklet begins with basics: reviewing outcomes for all clients, comparison over time, comparisons with goals, and comparisons with similar programs. It examines the pitfalls of using these comparisons, such as data gathered in different time frames (often a problem when comparing state or national data) or dissimilar definitions of indicators.

The guidebook describes how to break data into more detail by groups of clients or by service characteristics. This can reveal whether various demographic groups are obtaining different outcomes, or whether differing methods of providing services cause disparate results. Such analyses can be a great help in making programmatic decisions.

The Urban Institute, which prepared this primer, produces dozens of outcome analyses monthly. Sharing lessons from that experience is invaluable in helping nonprofits analyze data inexpensively yet effectively. ■

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