

Something Is Missing: The First Step in Evaluation

Are you skipping the most important step?

By Karen Russon

If you're like most nonprofit leaders, you use evaluation to assess your organization's programs. But is something missing? Have you left out the first—and most crucial—step?

Before you evaluate anything, you need to prepare your organization to make the most of this essential tool with its ability to both determine value and add value. This vital beginning step is called *evaluation capacity development*.

Most grantors ask nonprofits to evaluate their programs' effectiveness, and nonprofits often respond by gathering numbers and quotes from recipients. But what do these activities mean to the nonprofit? How do the numbers translate into an improved program or more efficient use of time, money, and personnel? It's difficult to answer these questions when evaluation is done in a piecemeal manner with a goal of meeting grantor requirements.

What's currently considered "evaluation capacity development" is often limited to developing an individual's capacity to do evaluation. But if you expand this concept to include your entire organization, the potential for creating meaningful change is unlimited. It moves the concept of evaluation from something that someone does to a whole new level—to thinking *evaluatively* by everyone. It adds value to your organization by improving communications among staff and with community members—partner organizations and service recipients alike.

Becoming a more evaluative organization will mean more creative decision-making. And the more indi-

vidual voices that are included in the evaluation process, the richer and more meaningful the outcome. A culture of evaluation, where everyone can be a part of the process, contributes to organizational learning and continued improvement and far exceeds the limited benefits of simply understanding how a single program or project is doing. Here are the keys to creating such an environment:

- **Commit** to building evaluation into your organization, either through strictly in-house evaluation, evaluation collaboration with partners, or by using a "critical friend"—an external evaluator to help you through the process.

- **Pinpoint** the purposes for which you will conduct evaluation.

- **Develop** a vision for evaluation which is shared by all the organization's members.

- **Establish** an organizational design and culture to support your shared vision. Be sure this design and culture are backed by policies that reinforce them—and that these policies are operationalized through a budget that will sustain evaluation activities.

- **Look for** creative areas where evaluation can make a difference. Internally, these areas may be in decision-making processes, communication patterns, and planning. Externally, they may be in delivering services and determining the effects of demographic changes or new funding priorities.

- **Consider** evaluation training needs. Determine who should receive training and what skills they should know. Assess the current situation in terms of skills and abilities. Use training to fill the gap between the identified evaluation needs and current realities.

- **Follow up** to assess the success of training and the effectiveness of evaluation. Be ready to make any necessary changes as a result of this feedback.

These guidelines will build on each other to create a firm base.

Now, with an evaluation foundation in place, you're ready to assess your organization's programs. When you start by building the evaluation architecture, your evaluation practices are much more likely to be effective. ■

Karen Russon (russon@complink.net) is president of the Evaluation Capacity Development Group (ECDG), 22125 Wynsmythe Drive, Mattawan, Michigan 49071.

Evaluation Round-Up

Author's Resources

Trice Gray, Sandra, Ed., *Leadership IS: A Vision of Evaluation*, Washington, DC: Independent Sector (www.independentsector.org).

For information on the ECDG Toolkit, see www.ecdg.net.

Editor's Resources

Gooding, Cheryl, "Using Training Strategically to Build Organizational Capacity," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 14, No. 4.

Tom, Baldwin & Bill Frentzel, "Performance Based Management Builds Funding and Support," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 23, No. 6.

Vogt, Jean, "Developing Your Outcome Measures," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 6.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members. Also see Learning Institute programs online: Outcome Measurement (www.snpo.org/lino).