



Evaluation Dos and Don'ts for Program Managers

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I remember my first course in program evaluation at university seventeen years ago. I can clearly recall my professor telling us to pay attention because "this was the single most important course" we were going to use once we graduated. At the time I didn't believe her, but, wouldn't you know, she was right. Back then, I spent a great deal of time explaining to people what program evaluation was all about. Ten years later, when I first went out on my own as an evaluation consultant, many non-profit managers I spoke with still did not appear to appreciate the need for evaluation.

Nowadays, however, there are very few front-line staff who have not at some point heard the term "outcome". The fact is, as funders and organizations alike have embraced evaluation and outcomes measurement more widely, it has become a more important part of how

community organizations operate. As an experienced practitioner with many evaluations under my belt, permit me to share my own personal list of evaluation "dos" and "don'ts" to make it a more effective process.

Don't think evaluation is only for your funder.

Somewhere along the line, as governments and foundations began to place more emphasis on evaluation, many organizations started to see it as just another exercise for the funder. This is unfortunate, as nothing could be further from the truth. Evaluation is an activity that all programs should undertake because they genuinely care about whether or not their work is having an impact and making a differ-

ence in the community. In addition to satisfying your funder's need for accountability, evaluation has enormous benefits for your program. Among other things, it can provide key information for decision-making, retain or increase your level of funding, identify training needs for staff, highlight positive results for program marketing, supply feedback to donors, and promote program sustainability.

Don't get overwhelmed by different labels.

Along with increased attention to evaluation has come greater complexity. What was once known simply as "program evaluation" now encompasses a dozen different models. Many program staff get confused and frustrated when each funder appears to use a different model. Although some individuals and academics may disagree, they all represent

essentially the same basic underlying theory. Don't panic if you don't know the difference between outcomes measurement, results-based management, performance management, or summative evaluation. If you have a basic understanding of the program logic model, one of the fundamental concepts of evaluation, you can apply this foundation to any model you come across. As a program manager it is important to be able to differentiate between an output (measurable products of your activities) and an outcome (short, intermediate, or long-term benefits or changes as a result of your activities). It's also helpful to know the difference between an evaluation that assesses how a program is operating versus

one that measures how well it is achieving its outcomes.

Do educate your staff on evaluation.

Evaluation has become such a critical part of program management that it is now arguably just as important a skill as supervision or budgeting. Staff with some training in evaluation are less resistant to the process, develop more concrete program plans, and are more proactive about monitoring and collecting baseline data. While it is not always feasible for staff to conduct an entire evaluation themselves, they are more confident of their needs when working with a consultant if they have some understanding of the process.

Thankfully, there are many user-friendly evaluation resources available these days for staff wishing to improve their skills. Two resources I continue to recommend to clients are the United Way's *Measuring Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach* (www.unitedway.org), and PLAN: NET's excellent *Splash and Ripple Outcomes Measurement* model (www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/community_programs/publications).

Do plan for evaluation at the beginning of a program.

Many people are under the impression that evaluation happens at the end of a program, when in fact, it really starts at the beginning! In addition to helping you design your evaluation, a program logic model is a valuable planning tool for any program manager. When you are able to identify what outcomes you expect your program to have, you can review and revise your planned activities to ensure they will, indeed, accomplish this. You can also identify ahead of time what evaluation data you'll need to collect, which leads us to the next point.

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Do be diligent in collecting baseline data.

I wish I had a dollar for the number of times I've been brought in to evaluate a program only to find out key data that could demonstrate whether or not outcomes are being achieved have not been collected. Well, okay, it might not make me rich, but collecting appropriate baseline data is absolutely essential to documenting any impacts as a result of your program.

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Savvy program managers have identified these data needs ahead of time with their program logic model and evaluation plan. But collecting data takes time, which is one thing most staff do not have. However, those who understand and have prepared their own evaluation plan, with or without the help of a consultant, will have identified which data is feasible for them to collect consistently and which is not.

Do resource it properly.

Over the years, evaluation practitioners have noticed a disturbing trend where funders and program managers are trying to squeeze in more evaluation for less. Tight budgets everywhere are forcing managers to make hard decisions and evaluation often seems to be one of the first things to suffer. Unfortunately, this means that many quick and dirty attempts at evaluation are being passed off as legitimate research, often with no real outcomes being measured at all. This is something that has the evaluation community concerned, and it should concern funders and program managers, too. If you truly appreciate how evaluation improves the quality of your services, the satisfaction of your clients, your potential for re-funding, and the sustainability of your program, you'll want to resource it sufficiently, too.

Do involve your staff and clients in the process.

Although involving staff and clients in the evaluation process can sometimes be a challenge, it is very rewarding

when they play an active role in determining what is going to be evaluated and how. Making it a participatory process can result in an increased sense of ownership in the program, less resistance and increased understanding of the evaluation process, a more realistic and feasible evaluation plan, more relevant recommendations, and a greater likelihood that final recommendations will be implement-

ed. Depending on the complexity of the evaluation, stakeholders can be involved from the initial planning stage right through to collecting and analyzing the data and preparing a final "report".

Don't assume you need to hire a consultant.

Many program managers assume evaluation always requires hiring an external consultant, which is not necessarily true. The main arguments for using an evaluation consultant are the expertise, objectivity, and time they are able to devote to the evaluation, three things that staff frequently lack. On the other hand, consultants are more expensive and have a tendency to "parachute" into your organization for only a short time. Consequently, they may lack a real understanding of your program. Depending on the consultant, his or her involvement may also make it a less participatory process.

Yet it doesn't have to be an all or nothing relationship. If program staff have developed their own logic model and evaluation plan, a consultant can be brought in to conduct objective data collection and analysis and prepare the final report. A less expensive alternative is to hire a consultant to mentor your staff through the evaluation process. In this way there are checks and balances on the quality of the evaluation while at the same time staff learn new skills that stay within the organization. If budgets are really tight, another alternative is to hire a

summer student or graduate student if it is a more sophisticated evaluation.

Don't wait until the last minute to call an evaluation consultant.

If you do decide you need some outside help, don't wait until the last minute! I remember once receiving a phone call from a client late one Wednesday night asking if I was available to help with an evaluation. "Sure," I replied, and asked him about his timeline. "Next Friday," he said. I practically fell off my chair! Although this is an extreme example, it is not uncommon for programs to begin thinking about evaluation a few months before their program cycle ends. While this doesn't make evaluation impossible, you will hopefully have learned from the points above that leaving everything to the last minute will impact the quality of the overall evaluation greatly. If you've done your homework, this shouldn't happen to you.

Don't let the final report sit on a shelf.

An evaluation report is not a doorstop. It is an important tool that goes well beyond improving the quality of your services. Use it to support future program and organization-wide strategic planning. Incorporate it into funding proposals to justify resource allocations. Communicate it widely to stakeholders and the public to promote how successful you are. Market it to recruit talented staff, volunteers, and donors. Just don't leave it collecting dust on the shelf.

Conclusion

So there you have it: ten evaluation tips for the program manager. Although evaluation might not be "the single most important" part of your job, it certainly has more prominence today than it did ten years ago. If you follow these guidelines, you'll find your program to be well on top of evaluation and starting to see benefits for both your organization and stakeholders. **V**

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