Why Do You Need Program Evaluation?

Program evaluation is an essential tool for program managers seeking to strengthen their programs and improve their outcomes. Program evaluation answers basic questions about the program's effectiveness and the data collected in an evaluation can be used to improve service delivery. But what is program evaluation and how does it work? Should you consider evaluating your program?

Program evaluation is a systematic means of collecting, analyzing and using information to answer questions about a program (US HHS 2003). While many associate an evaluation with summative assessment of a program, in fact evaluations serve both summative and formative purposes.

It is usually a good idea to evaluate your program in order to improve the design and implementation of your program as well as to demonstrate the impact of your program. It is important to periodically assess and adjust your activities to ensure they are as robust as they can be. An evaluation can help you identify gaps that may be holding you back from fully realizing your program's goals. Additionally, when you share the results of the evaluation, you help advance the work of your entire field.

In terms of demonstrating impact, evaluation allows you to demonstrate successes and to communicate the impact of your program to others. These are essential for promoting your program, increasing and holding staff morale, and retaining and growing your donor base.

There are times though when program evaluation may not be a good idea. If program is unstable or does not have consistent routines, then evaluation is not a good idea. If the program's stakeholders cannot agree on what a program is trying to achieve, evaluation is not a good idea. Finally, if funders or primary stakeholders refuse to include issues that are central to a program in an evaluation, then evaluation is not a good idea.

The best evaluations are those that are encompassed within the program. You collect relevant data on an on-going basis and use this data to improve your program. Implementing this type of data collection and evaluation system is often difficult though, not from a technical point but from knowing the types of questions to ask, how to collect the data, and how to use the data to draw out

conclusions about the program. However, this type of evaluation has major benefits for your program:

- You will better understand who your target audience and stakeholders are and learn how to best meet their needs.
- You will be able to design objectives that are more achievable and measurable.
- You will be able to monitor progress in an effective and efficient manner.
- You will learn more about your program.
- You will increase your program's effectiveness.

Engaging the Right Stakeholders for Your Evaluation

Evaluation involves balancing technical rationality with political feasibility in order to mobilize support for research-based practices. This means that evaluators must have both technical skills and people skills. Far too often evaluators are technically competent (sometimes scarily so) but lack the requisite people skills or political aptitude to engage, convince, or ameliorate stakeholders who may be lukewarm or even opposed to the technical engagements one is proposing. This is not just a matter of playing politics with would-be supporters or detractors but involves interpersonal, political, and cultural skills in conjunction with solid technical abilities. How one builds these, identifies targets to work with, topics to address (and not address), what to say, how to say it, and so on is the trick then.

To begin one must think about stakeholders' interests, what influences them both economically and socially, their organizational and political ends, their roles within their given organizations. That is one sentence, but the work involved in that task can be monumental and should not be taken lightly. With this purpose in mind, when one engages in an evaluation whether it be a small scale evaluation within their own organization, or if they are working as a professional evaluator there are some specific techniques one can employ to make this lift easier:

In the planning phase, you already have an idea of what you want to know and what the value of this knowledge will be. Now you must take on the monumental task of engaging the right people and getting their buy-in. First, list out all possible stakeholders. This is not as simple as it may sound. For example, if we were to think about fire service delivery we may just list out firefighters, city/county

council, and the public – a rough general list. What about the fire truck and hose manufacturers? What about the water company? What about the alarm service providers and the phone or cable companies that provide that service? What about neighborhood developers? I could go on, but you get the point; the list can grow very quickly, and it should because most problems have a broad array of stakeholders.

Once you have your list, it is good to sketch out, or at least list out, how the individual stakeholders are connected to each other. For example, we know that fire trucks drive down roads so we would want roads that are rated for a specific weight, e.g. a connection between developers and firetrucks. We also know that since the mid-2000s developers are building more confined neighborhoods, i.e. almost no cut-through streets - another connection. We know that firetrucks are capital investments, so they need either a capital reserve fund or a bond for their purchase – there is a connection between firetrucks, city/county council and citizens.

Next it is useful to place the stakeholders in an order of influence and then weight them by the power they have in the process. We know for example that citizens have the ultimate say in who is elected to the city/county council and the city/county council both purchases firetrucks as well as roads from developers. They have little to do with the types of signals an alarm system is broadcast over – that is a state and federal issue, but developers purchase alarms to go in houses. There is really no proximal stakeholder in this order other than the city/county council and the executives in the firetruck companies (so point of negotiation #1) and the developers and the alarm companies (so point of negotiation #2). This also includes thinking about the influence stakeholders have over your own evaluation. One of the key inputs that may be overlooked when conducting an evaluation is legitimacy – there are some stakeholders who must give their blessing for the evaluation, no matter how rigorous, to be taken seriously. Another one is authority – having the junior executive of acquisitions of a firetruck company agree to share data with you is nice, having the VP of government accounts is even better.

After coming up with the negotiation points, it is helpful to think about what the power base or chief incentive for each stakeholder is and if it is complemented or opposed by other interests. The power base of a city/council is political will, but their incentives may be myriad – reelection, higher

office, pork for their council district, etc. The power base for an alarm company or a truck manufacturer is monetary (whether it is profit or market share may also matter but we will try to keep it as simple as possible for now). It is good to think about this in terms of competition, specifically where doe the decision-making power lie? Are their multiple stakeholders who are in a coalition together? Is that coalition stronger or weaker than a single stakeholder? How can the interests of stakeholders be satisfied or in some cases ameliorated and still move forward with the evaluation?

Once you understand this you can think about how the individual stakeholders will involve themselves in your evaluation process and why. You can then plan ahead regarding how far you are willing to negotiate and gain insights on how different stakeholders will likely react to your evaluation proposal. You can then take your proposal to the stakeholders and collect feedback from them on different proposed methods of going about your investigation and analysis. You will also be able to identify approaches and activities that have strong stakeholder support, or at least support from a strong enough coalition of stakeholders to be viable. You can then compare the relative importance of your evaluation plans (or recommendations for plans) against the support or opposition you receive and from what stakeholder(s) or coalition. Is not having the full support of a single coalition or a single stakeholder going to sink your evaluation? Will the majority of the stakeholders be satisfied that their questions have been addressed one, two, or all proposed recommended approaches?

Once you have gained this insight it is now time to dole out responsibilities to stakeholders so they can get a better picture of what will be required of them in the evaluation process. However if you go into an evaluation with a cursory idea of who the stakeholders are or if you do not get buy-in from the right stakeholders or coalition of stakeholders, you will be hard-pressed to have your efforts taken seriously, or you may have them scuttled altogether .