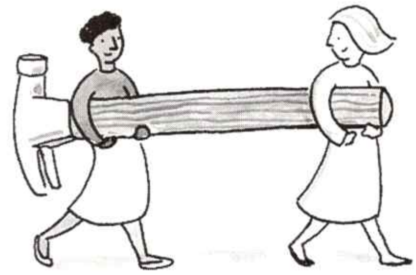
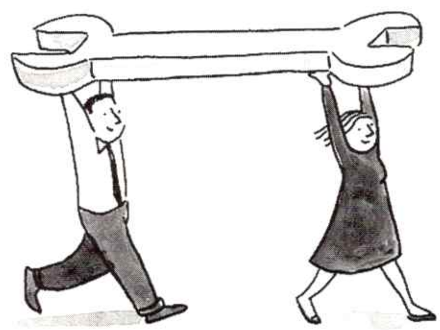
Workshop

Evaluation

Map Your Organization's Path to Success



Imagine starting on a journey without a map. How would you know where you're headed? And once on your way, how could you chart your progress? Evaluation is an organization's equivalent of a good highway map. It can help any organization get where it wants to go. And it's at hand to keep you from taking a wrong turn. However, evaluation needs to be well planned and well implemented to be effective. We've asked some experts on evaluation to share their insights and experiences on topics ranging from evaluation theory to an actual case study. All the better to help your organization plan a smooth and successful journey along its chosen path. ■



Workshop, a standing feature in *Leadership,* offers how-to tips and valuable insights on selected topics. If you'd like to be a guest editor or want to suggest topics for future coverage, write to Leadership Workshop, The Points of Light Foundation, 1737 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006; telephone: 202-223-9186, extension 146; e-mail: JANEMCH@aol.com

Evaluation: A Smart Way to Learn

By Edward T. Weaver

There is widespread interest in organization and program effectiveness among not-for-profit and philanthropic organizations. This interest is prompted by the continuing drive for accountability, the need to maximize scarce resources, and the desire of staff and volunteers, often overlooked, to be as effective as possible. Learning which comes from evaluating organizations and programs, if used to make adjustments in how we do things, leads to greater effectiveness.

Let us consider the implications of evaluation as learning.

First, if learning is an objective of evaluation, timing is very important. Second, everyone involved in an endeavor should be a learner, therefore, everyone needs to be evaluative. Third, learning and evaluation needs to be integrated in all we do. Evaluation should not be viewed as an add-on—as separate from the program or organization.

Timing

Learning should have practical utility. We should be able to apply learning in a way that increases effectiveness. This perspective leads naturally to the conclusion that learning that leads to improvement is more useful than learning that occurs when it is too late to improve past performance. Ongoing feedback is preferable to a "report card."

Edward T. Weaver is chief administrative officer of the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

Evaluation is best and most useful when it is continuous from the initial program concept, through pilot testing and demonstration, through full implementation and ongoing operation, to the conclusion of the project.

This common sense approach is more radical than it may seem for it turns traditional thinking on its head. Traditional thinking would define evaluation as measurement of outcomes, while evaluation as learning characterizes evaluation as a contributor to achieving outcomes.

Everyone Evaluates

In everyday life we all evaluate. In choosing a spouse or in choosing a product in a store, we assign value to qualities we like or dislike and we act based on those evaluations. Should we not do the same in our professional and work life? We should ask questions such as: What are we doing? Is it moving us closer to our objective? If not, what can we do to correct the situation? This involves gathering information on progress toward outcomes and systematically assigning value to the information. We do this all the time, but we need to be purposeful, intentional and systematic.

The fact that everyone evaluates and learns from the process does not mean that we do not need skilled professional evaluators. The point is that we need to be evaluative in our thinking, and we need to partner with professional evaluators in at least two ways:

■ First, skilled evaluators can help us define our objectives. What precisely do we want to measure and for what purpose? They can also help us to identify and gather useful information better and help us learn how to assign value to the information as systematically and objectively as possible.

■ Second, professional evaluators add benefit by using appropriate design and techniques in carrying out formative and summative evaluation studies. Their work provides additional learning and adds credibility to the findings. Such studies, when designed in partnership with program and organizational clients, also create opportunities for improvement of client evaluation skills. If everyone evaluates, we need to learn to do it better.

Not an Add-On

While this idea is implicit in the foregoing, its importance warrants special attention. Evaluation is part of a program. It is, or should be, an ongoing part of organizational life. There should be no program or organization without evaluation—just as there should be none without learning. Thus, evaluation should not be seen as an add-on, as something that detracts from program or organizational time and resources.

Although formal evaluation costs time and money, it is better to spend some funds and time to learn how a program or organization can be more effective than it is to fail to achieve the program or organization's objectives. If we don't know how we're doing, we are unlikely to make good decisions about how we can do it better.

The essential idea is that evaluation as learning is integrated in all we do—it is a continuous process not an event. ■

Five Steps to Effective Evaluation

By John A. Seeley

As a nonprofit becomes more visible, the pressures for accountability mount. Funders want to know what impact their money is having. Program professionals want to know if they are achieving their objectives and how they can improve their work. Program participants long for better days.

Important stakeholders request data in different forms and at different times. And increasingly, continued funding is linked to providing "measurable results." All this pressure offers a wonderful opportunity for nonprofits to take the lead in developing and communicating useful and usable information for their many audiences in a systematic way.

The systematic five-step process outlined below focuses on making evaluation useful. It is based on the theory and practice of stakeholder-based or participatory evaluation. And it suggests when the stakeholders—people who want the information—should be involved in designing the evaluation and using the information.

Step 1: Design. Identify the key stakeholders and find out why they want an evaluation and then ask them what they want to know. Push them to help you define what they want. Don't leave it at the level of "I want to know if community problems are being solved."

Ask them to be specific about the problems and about what "solved" means. Think in terms of some key indicators of success given your organization's vision, mission and goals. For example: We had 35 volunteers tutoring 60 youngsters in grades 4-9 for one school year and they improved their reading by two grade levels.

Describe the goals, activities, structure and resources of your Volunteer Center or the program that you think is having an impact or that you think needs improving. This description helps you build the case for your impact.

Stakeholders should be involved in designing the evaluation.

Once you know the evaluation purposes and questions and have defined the program or organization, think through how you are going to collect, analyze and report the information. Also, develop a schedule and a budget that includes personnel time and direct costs such as telephone, mail etc.

Step 2: Collect the data. Use whatever method fits the subject matter, the budget, the skills of the data collector, and the style of your organization. Surveys, interviews and focus groups are some, but not all, of the standard methods. Remember to review the information you already have to see if it can be reworked to answer the evaluation questions.

Step 3: Analyze the data. Think through the implications of organizing and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data. Think through the number of people you will be collecting information from. Do you need to use a spreadsheet? The answer is probably yes. It takes some start-up time to learn but it will prevent many problems and allow you to organize, analyze and present the information in charts and graphs and in other creative ways. It can even be fun.

Step 4: Report the information. In Step 1, above, figure out what your various stakeholders want in a report—numbers or narrative, length, how fancy and how polished. The guiding principle is to make it useful in terms that are responsive to your stakeholders.

Step 5: Utilization. Understand up front (Step 1) why and how the information is going to be used and then encourage or facilitate that process. Think utilization, not just reporting or dissemination. Uses vary from stakeholder to stakeholder. Staff will use the information in one way, your board, your funders or potential funders will use it in another way. Eventually assess whether it was, in fact, used. Hopefully you will find out that your time was well spent.

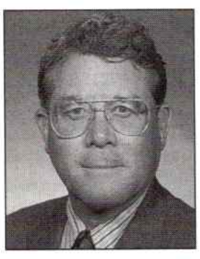
Getting Started

Now, all you need to do is get started. The following four points may help:

■ Use existing data whenever possible.

■ Set realistic expectations with your stakeholders; don't over promise what you can deliver.

■ Take a small step; collect and report a small amount of data that truly addresses the needs of your stakeholders. Set priorities. Rome wasn't built in a day. ■



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The Kellogg Approach to Evaluation

By Ricardo Millett

At the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, evaluation is a key part of our work. It helps projects become even better than they were planned to be. And it helps project staff see other options, avoid pitfalls, and clarify goals and objectives. Through evaluation, we can clarify what is going to be different in one year, two years, three years, and down the road even further.

Through evaluation, we examine important questions about the environment or context in which the project exists; about lessons learned from the experience of implementing the project; and about important intended and unintended outcomes.

Framework for Evaluation

The Foundation has developed a framework to assist in designing and implementing evaluation activities. That framework has three dimensions: levels of evaluation, the focus within these levels, and questions that guide evaluation.

Foundation evaluation should take place at three levels: individual projects; clusters of projects with either similar target populations or similar strategies; and foundation programming and board policymaking. Project-level evaluation is the responsibility of individual projects; cluster evaluation is directed by the Foundation.

Evaluation Focus

The focus of evaluation at each level should include consideration of the following areas:

■ Context—the settings or environment that make every project unique. Context data can reveal how certain settings contribute to or impede success. One might consider the needs of targeted individuals, cultural, political, social, economic, or geographic factors that may influence the project .

■ Implementation—the activities undertaken to achieve certain outcomes. Evaluation of each of the components or activities of the project can help us learn what works and what doesn't.

■ Outcomes—assessment of expected and unexpected changes. Special attention should be placed on assessing the achievement of project goals, and on unintended project outcomes. Drawing together Context, Implementation, and Outcomes information help both the Foundation and grantee to understand better what happened and why.

Key Questions

One of the most difficult parts of evaluation is deciding which questions to ask about projects. What aspects of the many factors that might be considered in the context of the project have greatest bearing on what may be learned about project success? What implementation activities are most critical to monitor? What are the most highly "valued" outcomes of a project, cluster or goal?

For example, context questions from a health program for the elderly included the following: What effect did geographical distance have on health program access? In what ways is cost a factor in the use of health services?

Implementation questions included: How effective was the marketing of the program? In what ways was collaboration among service-providing agencies successful?

Outcome questions included: Did the number of elderly using the services increase? Which subgroups remained underserved?

As potential projects are considered for funding, or as clusters of projects are considered for a cluster evaluation, they are asked to develop the questions most important to them. These questions should prompt answers about implementation strategies, context, and intended outcomes.

The Foundation also develops a list of important questions about what it hopes to learn from an individual project or cluster of projects. These can help the Foundation answer larger questions about the successes and lessons learned in a given grantmaking area.

Grantees' Guide

The following outline is a guide to potential grantees who are developing project evaluation plans. This outline may be adapted to fit project and grantee needs.

1. Purpose of the evaluation
2. Audience for the evaluation
3. Important questions to be addressed, categorized by:
    a. context questions
    b. implementation questions
    c. outcomes questions

(These questions should be consistent with the plan for the project and the objectives for the evaluation.)

4. Methods that will be used to address each important question
5. Persons responsible for evaluation tasks
6. Evaluation reporting plan
7. Budget for the evaluation ■

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Painting an Accurate Picture of Community

By Sherry Salway Black

I participated on a Points of Light Foundation conference panel on evaluation entitled, "Painting a Picture of Our Communities." This title is descriptive but somewhat deceptive—descriptive in that the participants wanted to convey that evaluation could be viewed as a critical tool in defining the goals and measuring the progress of our communities. "Painting a picture" conveys an easily understood, nonthreatening concept. I say deceptive because a "picture" conveys the static concept of our communities at one point in time, something we know is not accurate in reality.

Evaluating anything, whether the national economy or your local community organization, starts with your goals. Then you develop certain indicators which, when measured over time, show progress towards those goals. What if our goals are suspect? What if these indicators measure only a fraction of what is happening? Are the indicators we use to measure our progress obsolete or even the right ones? How does this effect the quality of our decisions?

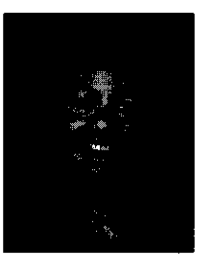
Let's use an example at the macro level—the national economy with the goal of economic growth, measured by indicators called the Gross Domestic Product. A recent article, "If the GDP Is Up, Why Is America Down?" in *The Atlantic Monthly* presents a compelling case that if all the indicators we use to measure progress indicate success (as equated with economic growth), why are people so pessimistic about the future. On the surface, it must mean that more growth is needed, but the article takes a closer look at the GDP as the main indicator or measurement of progress. It is at this closer level that we find that the GDP "makes no distinction between the desirable and the undesirable... only looks at the portion of reality economists acknowledge...masks the breakdown of the social structure and the natural habitat upon which the economy—and life itself—ultimately depend; worse, it actually portrays such breakdowns as economic gain."

This is overwhelming when taken to the level of work each one of us does in our communities to combat the social, environmental, and economic problems we face daily. Consider that the costs all contribute to the GDP: to clean-up pollution; to treat additions of divorce in terms of lawyers bills, a second household, child care; of crime prevention and security services and devices. All that we do to address deteriorating social conditions, pollution, health problems is nothing compared to what their "growth" contributes to "economic growth" as measured by the GDP.

I use this example to demonstrate how important it is to start with goals that more accurately reflect the values of your community and to develop better indicators to measure your progress towards those goals.

My organization, First Nations Development Institute, works with Native American tribes and communities to develop sustainable economies that reflect and enhance the culture. Over the past 15 years, we have learned that the goals of tribes and Native American people may not be the same as the general population, owing to different cultures and circumstances. As part of our work, we try to build those differing goals and indicators of success on the values of the groups with whom we work. The result is an evolving development paradigm represented by the sacred circle which considers "elements of development" valued by native peoples. This paradigm attempts to incorporate the surrounding ecology and environmental balance, kinship systems, spirituality, assets, individual, family and community roles and responsibilities, consideration of future generations, along with other elements in planning and measuring progress towards those goals.

We have long recognized that "economic growth" as defined by others does not take into consideration other elements of equal or more importance to our people. If enough people at the community and local level begin defining their own goals, including their own definition of what is "economic growth" and the indicators to measure progress, then at some point, perhaps we can change the abstract picture used by government to determine progress into the reality of the people. ■



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Evaluating a Pilot Program

By Rennie Golec and Lee Berg

Recently, The Points of Light Foundation worked with the Catholic Knights Insurance Society, a fraternal benefit society, to determine how Volunteer Centers can help develop volunteer activities for branch members. (A local group of society members is called a branch.) Catholic Knights hoped that collaboration of branches and Volunteer Centers would help the fraternals become more active and more visible within their communities.

Four communities where there is both an active Catholic Knights branch and a Volunteer Center member of the Foundation were identified, to participate in a pilot study. Working together in a brainstorming meeting, these four communities developed a vision for the Catholic Knights service activities: "Catholic Knights—working together to strengthen our families and the communities in which we live." And three goals were identified for the pilot: to raise the visibility of Catholic Knights in local communities; to shift emphasis from mainly social activities to a combination of social/volunteer activities within the branches; and, to document the process of collaboration to help other Centers and branches work together.

Key Questions

It was clear from the outset that we needed to document the process of this collaboration. Further, Catholic Knights would need to develop a system to assist its branches in recording, evaluating and reporting the results of their service-related programs and activities. And our findings would need to be communicated to a wide range of interested parties, or stakeholders. Four questions relating to evaluation were discussed:

■ Who are the stakeholders? People who would want information about the event included: Catholic Knights (board, management and branches); Volunteer Centers with their respective boards and funders, and The Points of Light Foundation; participating branch communities—the volunteers, service recipients and the community itself. Stakeholders that are external to the process include the press, other fraternals and legislators.

■ What information was realistically available that could be reported? Since this was a pilot study, we wanted to collect data that were easy to obtain: hours of volunteer service, number of volunteers engaged, actual service performed, out-of-pocket costs and value given back to the community, and when and where service activities took place. We needed to track how events and activities were identified and carried out, and in recording that information to discover recommendations or improvements that would also be noted. Identifying collaborations and partnerships would allow us to give full credit where it was due; and finally, collecting anecdotes, photos and thank-you letters would provide the colorful and personal touches that are needed for reporting the most important human element of service activities.

■ When should reporting be done? Some stakeholders would want to know about project goals in advance; others would want reports as soon as possible at the end of the activity; and still others would want reports at established reporting times.

■ How would reporting be accomplished? While most reports would be written, in some cases there might be an oral report. Standard press releases would be used for events and given to churches for inclusion in their bulletins.

Once we answered these four questions, our evaluation plan began to take shape.

Reporting Results

You might be curious about the outcome of our planning. Three events were planned across Wisconsin for Make A Difference Day in October. LaCrosse assisted with a safe trick-or-treat activity at a nursing home. Green Bay provided volunteers to perform yard work and home winterizing activities for individuals in need of assistance. Milwaukee volunteers winterized homes for the elderly. Madison plans to provide volunteers to take phone pledges at the spring fund drive for its local public television station and a spring clean-up activity for children and teens.

As reports of these activities are made public, word is spreading through the branch system with new locations asking how they too can get involved. Future evaluation activities will move from publicity and documenting process to an assessment of the positive impact Catholic Knights members and their families are making in strengthening the communities in which they live. ■

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