

Quick Tips for Program Evaluation

If You Don't Know Where You Are Going, How Will You Know When You Get There?

A clear plan which defines the end goal is vital to any evaluation effort. Both non-profits and funders should take the time to articulate a Vision of Success for their organization long before they consider evaluating their work. The Vision of Success should describe how the world will be different if you are ultimately successful in your work and will be used as the point of reference for determining how and whether the work you are doing is successful. Social Impact Models can provide a comprehensive system to develop the key components of planning, communication, and evaluation activities.

Gather the Important Stuff: Client Satisfaction vs. Program Outcomes

Too often non-profits assume that if they survey their clients about their level of satisfaction, they've done their job in evaluating their services. While it's great to know your clients love the work you do and appreciate you, it's much more important to know whether the services accomplished your goals and to find out ways to improve your services. Simple modification of an on-going client satisfaction survey to include questions related to program outcomes can go a long way in developing the basis for program evaluation. For example, a rapid re-housing/homeless prevention program could ask questions such as: whether clients immediately went to permanent housing or required an interim step; the time it took clients to find permanent housing from when they first sought assistance; and the barriers they experienced in the service process. A few key questions related to expected outcomes will easily provide valuable evaluation data.

Take Advantage of Translational Research

Universities are increasingly offering evidence-based program research relevant to practitioners. By staying aware of and connected to these efforts, non-profits can take advantage of opportunities to be a "testing ground" for practical application of theories. Funders can be more assured their dollars are being spent on programming that is based on sound methodology and research and non-profits can develop or change their programming to be more effective and sustainable. Additionally researchers will have identified key indicators and may have validated questions and instruments they would be willing to share with non-profits to allow continued assessment of their programming.

Partner with Your Evaluation Consultant

Ask for an interactive approach with your evaluation consultant. You can reduce future evaluation costs by having a framework in place and building your organization's internal capacity for on-going evaluation efforts if you are engaged and involved with the process. While it's important to maintain the independence of the evaluator's findings, being involved with the development of key points of inquiry, survey instruments, and methods will enhance the evaluation process and ensure the important elements of your services are captured.