
Program Evaluations that Matter

Introduction

We all know that evaluation is important and indeed, we are increasingly hearing statements like this one:

The current funding and political environment makes it more important than ever for nonprofit organizations to demonstrate the effectiveness of their work. Government leaders and the public express skepticism that social interventions have any discernible impact on the problems in our society; public and private funding sources are being eliminated or reduced, and the competition for funds means that nonprofit organizations must offer evidence of their effectiveness. To do so, nonprofit organizations must choose among various evaluation approaches and methods to assess their effectiveness, demonstrate their value to the community, provide useful and usable information, and meet the demands of funders and the public.¹

While we know that conducting program evaluation is important, many of us without training in program evaluation, find ourselves paralyzed at the thought of conducting a program because of many reasons such as:

- What we do know about evaluation terrifies us.
- We get lost in ferreting out the meaning of the terms and jargon.
- When we have muddled through evaluations before nothing happened as a result.
- We are simply struggling to keep up with all of our program requirements
- Other: (you fill in the blank) _____

As we try to close the gap between what we know we should be doing and what we actually are doing right now, we episodically read a book, visit an evaluation website or attend a 90-minute training session like this one. Unfortunately, as we all are so aware, such sporadic efforts rarely result in meaningful gains in understanding or practice related to program evaluation.



Recognizing this fact, the goal of this session is not to try to make you an expert in program evaluation but simply think about how you might design and implement an evaluation in a way that really makes a difference to improving programs and improving decisions about programs.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

1. Map the data collection and data flow that currently happens in your organization,
2. Name at least five characteristics of utilization-focused evaluation
3. Be able to broadly define at least four evaluation frameworks and roughly understand how they might be applied to your mentoring program.
4. Know the importance of framing and telling your story.

Session Roadmap

Exercise: Self-Assessment	5 Minutes
Micro Lecture: Utilization Focused Evaluations	10 Minutes
Exercise: Data Flow, Mapping and Reporting	15 Minutes
Micro Lecture: How To Build Your Story	10 Minutes
Exercise: Creating an Evaluation Design	30 Minutes
Micro Lecture: How To Tell Your Story	10 Minutes
Wrap-Up and Reiterations	10 Minutes

Self-Assessment Exercise



If you answer d to a question do not take a sticky. For all other answer combinations take only 1 sticky.

1. When buying a computer, digital camera, VCR or some other complex electronic equipment, I typically:
 - a. Research and compare products using the Internet, buyer's guides and/or visits to multiple stores.
 - b. Base my decision on sales advice from family, friends or the clerk at the store.
 - c. Purchase whatever is on sale at the store or Internet site.
 - d. Am almost incapacitated in this area and depend on a significant other to make the purchase for me.

2. In the last 4 months I have:
 - a. Organized a fairly simple event with multiple participants like a barbeque, camping trip or peace protest.
 - b. Written a progress report or grant application.
 - c. Preordered a copy of Harry Potter Book Five.
 - d. None of the above

3. If I had to present a large amount of data I would rather:
 - a. Tell a compelling story about some of the data.
 - b. Write a two page summary report.
 - c. Use pie charts and graphs.
 - d. Hand the assignment to someone else.

4. My primary attitude towards evaluation is
 - a. It is central and critical to the way I do business.
 - b. It is a necessary evil and important for funding.
 - c. Somewhat useful for program improvement.
 - d. Often a meaningless exercise I have to endure.

5. In self-assessing my evaluation knowledge and skills, I would say,
 - a. I am capable of creating and implementing an evaluation.
 - b. I do okay in evaluation as long as I have some more expert help.
 - c. If you held a gun to my head,* I think I might be able to do it.
 - d. I really, really am clueless.

* Pardon the politically incorrect metaphor

Exercise Debrief

Obviously, this exercise is not designed to be a terribly precise pre-test and is used more as a thought-generator and conversation starter. However, there are a few observations that should be made about the questions and answers.

- For the first three questions there is no right or wrong answers but in general, these questions assess a mind-set and skills that are transferable to evaluation. If you are the researcher-type when it comes to buying a computer, VCR or digital camera, you have basic research and evaluation skills, whether you know it or not. Likewise, if you are captivated enough by Harry Potter to have pre-ordered the next installment of the series it likely indicates that you are interested in compelling stories and compelling stories are the heart and soul of evaluation.
- If you answered “d” to questions 1-3 it might also indicate that you potentially are “evaluation-challenged,” because consistent “d’s” might suggest that you avoid your inner spirit of inquiry.
- The last two questions of this quiz do seek out real information. It is suggested that motivation is the function of two variables, *perceived value* and *self-confidence*.² If a person understands and values evaluation (i.e., it is critical) and has self-confidence (i.e., I am capable), s/he likely has the motivation to engage in evaluation. Conversely, if evaluation is perceived and meaningless and the person is really, really clueless, then evaluation will likely never be raised to the top of his/her “to-do” list.
- Finally, this exercise can be used in lots of ways as an illustration of evaluation principles such as:
 - Data collection does not have to be hard or even paper and pencil.
 - Survey instrument fidelity (i.e., question bias, ambiguity), can be discussed.
 - In bigger groups you could do a stand up exercise where people group together according to responses to illustrate distribution, means, bell curves etc.
 - You could also create an “evaluation report” based on the data collected illustrating what you could say and could not say based on the data.



Notes:

Utilization-Focused Evaluations

Introduction

The purpose of this section is to outline a set of principles that introduce the concept of utilization-focused evaluation. You will not be an expert as a result of this overview but it should give you enough of a framework for us to walk through a multi-step exercise in creating a mock evaluation process.

Definition

Michael Patton in his text *Utilization-focused evaluation*³ spends a 20-page chapter defining and illustrating the concept of utilization-focused evaluation. Clearly there are many inherent difficulties associated with reducing the concept down to a simple statement but with that caveat in mind it might be suggested that,

Utilization-focused evaluation is an evaluation that is driven by **broad participation of stakeholders** in the evaluation process and that **the ultimate use of the evaluation results** is perhaps the most critical component of the evaluation.

Stages of Evaluation

1. The important **opening stage** of evaluation, as suggested by a utilization-focused approach, does not focus on a method –that is a pre-post survey, focus group, or observation— but rather, starts with the questions
 - Who needs to know what and, more importantly, what part will these folks who need to know play in the evaluation?
 - Why do they need to know it and, more importantly, what will they do with the results?
2. The **stage that follows** the answers to these questions is the often pedestrian “mechanics” of design and implementation. This includes the stuff of identifying the sample, deciding on method, (pre-post survey, focus group, or observation), doing the data collection, analysis and drawing conclusions.⁴
3. The **final stage** is telling the story of the evaluation outcome and ensuring that you actually follow through with using the data.

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Utilization-Focused Evaluations, Continued

Principles of User Focused Evaluation

As we all know, every concept can be boiled down to a bulleted list. Here is a subjective and likely biased list related to the principles of utilization focused evaluation. *Disclaimer, the following ten principles should not be confused with any other list of ten including those of TV comedians or those of biblical proportions. The list is simply a framework.*

- ☑ The purpose of program evaluation is to create an objective and compelling story that can be used to a) judge the merit of the program, b) improve the program or c) generate new knowledge.
 - ☑ Since “cause and effect” are complex processes that occur in a large open system, program evaluation should rarely, if ever, try to focus on cause and effect.⁵
 - ☑ All evaluation is an iterative process of learning and all learning is an iterative process of evaluation.
 - ☑ Decisions drive evaluation and evaluation drive decisions.
 - ☑ The role of program evaluation is to, as best we can, strip out the “emotional content” of our personal biases, prejudices and preconceptions.⁶
 - ☑ High quality involvement of the stakeholders will result in high quality useful evaluations.
 - ☑ Use of evaluation results is different than reporting and disseminating evaluation results.
 - ☑ Inside every evaluation is a radical, political or community empowering “idea” that is struggling to get out.⁷
 - ☑ The stakeholders who own the evaluation need to be adequately prepared to do something once that radical, political or community empowering “idea” does get out.
 - ☑ Evaluation happens regardless of whether or not it is planned, purposeful or intentional.
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Current information data management practices



Data Mapping Exercise

The purpose of this exercise is to illustrate how much data and information collection your program is already doing. This exercise actually is a pretty good starting place if you are thinking about evaluation because it really is both an information and process audit of how your program works. .

Part I Directions: Think about the entire management of your mentoring program and all of the various types of data/information (contacts, mentor/mentee records, academic scores, fundraising data, referral contacts, etc) you collect then complete the grid below.

What is the Data?	How is it Collected	Who Cares About It?	What do you do with it?
<i>Volunteer Contact Data</i>	<i>Paper Form re-entered in a Excel Spreadsheet)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Project Coordinator</i> ▪ <i>Fund-raising manager</i> ▪ <i>XYZ Foundation</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Use it to communicate with volunteers.</i> ▪ <i>Report by zip code to XYZ Foundation</i>

Part II Directions: Draw a picture to represent your entire world of data/information collection listed in Part I (it could be a flow chart, Venn diagram, metaphor).

Part III Debriefing the Exercise:

**Key
Questions**

1. How seamless are all of your data/information collection strategies?
2. How well are you using data and, more importantly, how well are you reusing the data?
3. What are the challenges of your data collection and information management practices?
4. If you were to classify the data and information you currently collect which stuff fits your current understanding of evaluation data?



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Building your Story – Asking the Right Question

Evaluation Question Formulation

All evaluations are local and related to the context of your agency's need. In other words, evaluation questions are driven by the need to know in order to act and are a function of three variables:

1. What action is required?
2. What need to be known to take action?, and
3. Who are the stakeholders effected by the action?

Illustrations

Note: The columns are representative and not necessarily complete.

Action	Knowledge Need	Stakeholders
<i>Decrease number of failed matches</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does a typical successful match look like and what does a typical unsuccessful match look like? • Which characteristics can be reinforced or changed? • Can our program adapt to meet enhance success? • How do we know if the changes are working? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding Agency (wants more matches) • Mentors • Mentees • Program staff
<i>Increase ratio of mentor to number of program inquiries</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What characterizes the conversion of an interest to a mentor? • Do our different recruitment methods have different ratios? • How does our ratio compare to other volunteer or mentoring programs in our community? • Can our program adapt to meet enhance success? • How do we know if the changes are working? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • United Way (wants to distributed findings) • Youth Development Coalition • Mentors • Mentees • Program staff • Local University grad Student (Master's thesis)... Faculty chair wants to publish findings.
<i>Fill In...</i>	<i>Fill In...</i>	<i>Fill In...</i>

Building your Story – Design Choices

Design Possibilities

At risk of again oversimplifying a complex subject, there are basically three design approaches to program evaluation that include:

Quantitative Evaluation that typically collects data via written surveys, or written documents (like attendance records and test scores). The emphasis of this approach is on numbers and statistical significance. The JUMP National Evaluation is an example of this approach.⁸

Qualitative Evaluation that typically studies a few things more intently in order to tell a more complete and compelling story. The emphasis of this approach is depth, quality and how representative is the data. A case study is a typical example of a qualitative evaluation.⁹

Hybrid Evaluation that combines quantitative and qualitative methods.

None of these approaches are better or worse than another *as long as the evaluation represents as true of an objective picture as possible*. Remember, the goal of an evaluation design is to create a disciplined process that is capable of overriding our biases and prejudices.

Options for Data Collection

Unfortunately, whenever evaluation is mentioned, the default thinking is often that the evaluation design is that it must include some sort of written survey. Indeed, the most common evaluation question that comes up episodically on the National Mentoring Center's Mentor Exchange sounds like this:

- *“Does anyone else have a standardized way in which they gather evaluation data from their Mentors?”*
- *“I am looking for a basic evaluation that I could email my mentors for an end-of-program evaluation”*
- *“I also run a small rural program and am looking for an inexpensive assessment tool“*
- *“We are now beginning to address the issue of how we perform an evaluation of the program and are in desperate need of questionnaire that we can look at and modify.”*

However, if we limit ourselves to written surveys we artificially narrow our view of evaluation. Consider the following representative table of data collection methods:

Written Surveys	Not wanting to throw the baby out with the bath water, evaluations based on a survey are still an important tool.
Observations	Is it possible that the mentor can observe behaviors in the mentee or vice-versa? How about a teacher observing the student mentee?
Focus Groups	Interviewing several groups of mentors/mentees and doing content analysis of the conversation.
Use of written materials	What if mentors and mentees used structured goal setting tools or kept journals? Academic records?
Using Media	Can email be the source of data in an ementoring program? How about the use of tape or video recorders? What about photo-essays or art?

Resource Planning

Once you have developed your evaluation questions and selected an approach the next step is to figure out the resources that are needed to ensure that the evaluation results in a credible story. The resources needed to conduct an evaluation should be planned for and typically include: 1) evaluation expertise, 2) time, 3) money, 4) staffing, 5) access, and 6) infrastructure. While the scope and complexity of the evaluation will ultimately drive the costs associated with the evaluation, agencies need to recognize that the best rule of thumb is that the evaluation will likely cost as much and often more than you think it will. For those desperate for a rule of thumb that includes a number, many grant applications requiring an evaluation component will suggest allocating 10-15% of total program costs dedicated to evaluation.

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Creating an Evaluation design

The purpose of this exercise is to illustrate how the same evaluation would differ based upon the assumptions of a particular group of evaluators.

1. For this exercise break into groups of 4 or 5. Each person in the group needs to take on the role of a different stakeholder (mentor, mentee, high school principal, funding agency, program director, etc.)
2. Complete the action-knowledge-stakeholder table based on the following defined action:

Action	Knowledge Need	Stakeholders
Convince your funding agency that your mentoring program is increasing “mentee connectedness to school”		(according to roles you selected)

3. Describe a data collection procedure based on one of the following data collection methods so that each group has a different method: Written Surveys, Observations, Focus Groups, Use of written materials, or Using Media

4. Appoint someone to share your design with the rest of the groups.

Exercise
Debrief

1. How did the Knowledge required differ across groups?
2. If you (in your stakeholder role) had to vote for one of the designs which one would you pick and why?
3. How would you go about costing any of these evaluations?

Final Note on Evaluation Design



Before leaving the discussion of program design we would be negligent and reckless if we did not discuss the responsibilities and ethics of data collection. While the ethics of data collection is a subject unto itself, it is best to remind ourselves of what a good friend and mentor of mine once said to me:

“If you come into our community and start sounding like you want to use us as lab rats you best not come into our community at all.”

Packed into this one sentence is not only the most powerful reason to include all stakeholders in the design of the evaluation but it also conveys the tremendous charge that evaluators have to be ethical and responsible. Ethics of data collection matter.¹⁰



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How to Tell Your Story

Once you have collected data the final stage of the evaluation process is telling the story and starting to work on the sequel to the story –or, said another way, acting on the evaluation results.

A framework for telling the story

In Michael Patton's *Utilization-focused evaluation* text, he suggests a framework for reviewing data¹¹ that includes:

1. Describing and analyzing the findings in a way that organizes the data and reveals the patterns and represents the facts,
2. Interpreting the results in a simple, balanced and with credible boundaries,
3. Judging the merits and worth of the results, and
4. Making recommendations that are linked back to the action focus of the evaluation.

Formats

By thinking through these four steps, the format and structure of the evaluation report will likely emerge. In some cases the nature of the data collection might lend itself to a formal written report, however, reporting evaluation findings should not be constrained by written words. Evaluation reports can take the form of slides or overheads, stories, or even multi-media productions. Whatever the form of your evaluation report, it is important to truly consider the production value of the format. Remember:

The strength of an evaluation is not judged by the glossiness of the report but by the use of the findings.

Wrap Up



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End Notes

- ¹ Fine, A.H., Thayer, C.E., & Coghlan, A. (1998) *Program Evaluation Practice in the Nonprofit Sector* Innovation Network Inc., Washington DC, p. 1. Retrieved May 20, 2003 from http://www.nonprofitresearch.org/usr_doc/Fine.pdf
- ² For an excellent discussion of performance, including the factors of motivation see:
Rossett, A. (1999). *First Things Fast: A handbook for performance analysis*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- ³ Patton, M. (1997) *Utilization-focused evaluation: the new century text, 3rd edition*. Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- ⁴ For an excellent overview of methods see: Patton, M. (2001) *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods, 3rd edition* Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- ⁵ Earl, S., Carden, F., & Smutylo, T. (2001) *Outcome Mapping Building Learning and Reflection into Development Programs*. International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, ON. For an excellent discussion of this point see pages 5-10
- ⁶ Quoting from an interview with Michael Patton “*Our very processes of taking in information distort reality — all the evidence of social science indicates this. We have selective perception — some of us have rose-coloured glasses, some of us are gloom-and-doomers. We are not neutral; there is an emotional content to information. We need disciplined techniques to be able to stand back from that day-to-day world and really be able to see what is going on. We need approaches to help us stand back from our tendency to have biases, prejudices, and preconceptions.*” See In Conversation: Michael Quinn Patton
http://network.idrc.ca/ev.php?URL_ID=30442&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201&reload=1054943729
- ⁷ For a very interesting, albeit esoteric, discussion of this concept see: Patton, M. (2000) A vision of Evaluation that strengthens democracy. Retrieved on August 11, 2009, from http://www.stes-apes.med.ulg.ac.be/Documents_electroniques/EVA/EVA-GEN/ELE%20EVA-GEN%207558.pdf
- ⁸ Perhaps one of the better evaluation workbooks that you should add to your collection is W.K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook. The publication is available online at: <http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub770.pdf> Also, for those interested specifically in the Search Institute’s developmental assets approach, see: <http://www.search-institute.org>
- ⁹ For an excellent 20 page publication on case studies see: *Using Case Studies to do Program Evaluation* online at: <http://www.case.edu/affil/healthpromotion/ProgramEvaluation.pdf>
- ¹⁰ The U.S. Centers for Disease Control Evaluation working group website has a short list of links to websites related to Ethics, Principles, and Standards see: <http://www.cdc.gov/eval/resources.htm#ethics>
- ¹¹ Patton, M. (1997), pp. 307-332.