

Program evaluation: Essential steps to doing it right

Tips from Wilder Research program evaluation workshop series

A well-thought out evaluation can benefit your program and the people who use your services in a number of ways. It provides you with objective information to identify what's working well and what is not, to make effective changes, to influence policymakers, and to raise funds.

Whether you are working with an outside evaluator, or conducting your own evaluation, the choices you make during the design process will determine the ultimate usefulness of the information you gather. It's important to take time to identify your priorities and to select the most appropriate strategies *before* you begin to gather information. The following steps can help you do this.

Identify your key stakeholders:

Who are they and what do they want to know

Make a list of stakeholders. Think about the specific types of information that will interest them most. What decisions or actions might they make based on the information we provide? What kind of information would be most useful in shaping these decisions or actions? Identify key stakeholders – those most critical to your success – and involve them in your evaluation process. This will help you ensure your evaluation meets their needs, and it will help them better understand the results.

Tips for effectively working with stakeholders:

- Involve stakeholders early and in a meaningful way.
- Give them some options about how to participate or provide feedback throughout the evaluation process.
- Work with stakeholders to shape your priorities and focus, understanding you will not be able to address all of their concerns or suggestions.

Determine and maximize your resources

Evaluation does not need to be expensive, but it does take some time and money to plan it, collect the right information, and use the results to strengthen your program. A rule of thumb is to allocate 5 to 10 percent of the total program budget to evaluation, including both staff time (salary and benefits) and out-of-pocket costs. If your agency staff do not have the training, skills, or time to manage the evaluation, consider hiring external help. While external evaluators often increase your out-of-pocket costs, they can also ensure that your resources are used to provide you with the most useful information as efficiently as possible.

Tips for maximizing resources:

- If your program collaborates with others, consider opportunities to conduct a shared evaluation.
- Use external evaluators strategically, focusing their efforts where you most need their expertise or assistance.
- Identify resources that you can use at little or no cost, such as volunteers and donated materials.
- Think strategically about your evaluation efforts, prioritizing the most important issues and selecting the most cost-effective data gathering techniques.

Develop your program theory and logic model

Your program theory explains your program goals and why you expect to achieve them. Spelling out that theory can be one of the most important things you can do for the success of your program. It provides a logical and reasonable description of why your activities should lead to the intended benefits. A clear program theory will help you make sure you are providing the best package of services to accomplish your goals. And when it comes to evaluating your results, a clear program theory makes it much easier to choose the most appropriate outcomes to measure.

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Once your program theory is developed, you will want to create a logic model. A logic model often looks like a flow chart, showing the connections between the resources needed by your program, the services you provide, and the impact of those services. The logic model can help you summarize your theory and make it understandable to others. If developed thoughtfully, you can use it to illustrate the important features of your program approach to stakeholders, train new program staff, keep your program on track, provide a basis for developing an evaluation design, and facilitate program management.

Tips for developing program theory and logic models

- Make sure your program theory is based on solid evidence about what makes programs successful. Look at research and evaluation studies and talk with colleagues to ensure that your theory has strong support.
- Use “if-then” statements to describe the linkages between your activities and the short-term and long-term benefits for participants (e.g., *If* participants receive services, *then* they will increase their knowledge and skills).
- Remember that changes in attitudes and knowledge typically precede changes in behavior.
- Keep your theory and logic model simple and focused on your most important strategies.
- Use the theory development process as an opportunity to explore and resolve disagreements and build consensus among stakeholders.

Prioritize the information most vital to have

Separating the “nice to know” from the “need to know” is a key to effective evaluation. To get the most from your evaluation, focus on the information that will actually influence the way you do things. Most evaluations focus on program impact (outcomes), implementation

(process), and stakeholder satisfaction. To make sure your evaluation will answer your most important questions, prioritize what you need to examine in each of these areas.

Tips for choosing the right questions

- Measure the outcomes that will best help you understand program success and guide improvements.
- Identify key questions about how you provide services and attempt to answer those questions.
- Measure the satisfaction of your most important stakeholders, such as program participants.
- Consider in advance how you will use the evaluation information after it is collected.

Select appropriate data collection strategies

You may already be collecting data that you can use for your evaluation, such as intake information or client satisfaction surveys. It is likely, however, that you will need to collect additional information for your evaluation. In that case, you need to develop a plan. A variety of data-collecting methods are appropriate for program evaluation, such as interviews, surveys, focus groups, and observation. Each has advantages and disadvantages, and depending on your needs, may be more or less useful.

Tips for developing a data collection plan

- Match your data collection strategies to each outcome, process, and satisfaction issue that you want to measure.
- Clearly identify the time frame for data collection and the person that is responsible for gathering the information.
- Carefully consider the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, and the needs of your program, before selecting an approach.

For more evaluation tips, go to www.wilderresearch.org and click on Tools for Effective Community Work (under Research Topics).

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