WHO WANTS TO KNOW?

Tips for involving stakeholders in your program evaluation

Before you collect any information for your evaluation, think about the most important audiences for your evaluation and what they want to know. Taking the time at the outset to think through stakeholder interests can ensure that the evaluation actually provides the information they want.

Who are your stakeholders?

A stakeholder is any person or group that has an interest in your program or its evaluation results. They can be inside or outside your organization.

Typical stakeholder groups include:
- Your program's management and staff
- Your board of directors
- Your agency's executives
- Current or potential funders or donors

- Program participants
- Collaborators
- Advocacy groups
- Policy-makers

Which of these individuals or groups are stakeholders for your program? There may be others not on the list. For example, it may be important for the general public to understand the results of your program.

Who matters most for this particular purpose?

You may rightly feel that every group listed on that list is a valued stakeholder for your program.

However, it is likely that these groups will want to know very different things about your program. Your evaluation may not be able to fully meet the information needs of all of your stakeholders, although they all can get some value out of it. Here are some questions to help you prioritize:

- Do you have a contractual obligation to provide evaluation information to certain groups, such as funders or a board of directors? What exactly have you agreed to provide?
- Are there public policy decisions that strongly affect your program? If so, what evaluation information would be helpful to advocacy groups or policy-makers?
- Does your program face major decisions about the kind or amount of services you can provide? If so, what information would help you make these decisions?

■ Are there groups that can help to ensure that your program continues or grows? For example, are others in your agency going to make significant decisions about continuing your program? Do you need to seek funding from new sources? If so, what questions do you want to be able to answer?

■ Are you considering changing the way your program collaborates or partners with others? If so, what information could help you strategically select opportunities for collaboration? What would potential collaborators want to know about your program?

■ Is there feedback you would like to receive from participants, such as their views on the benefits of services, recommendations for improvements, or clarification of their needs?

■ Does your program address an issue that is important to the general public? If so, can you collect evaluation information that will help shape their perceptions of this issue or understand effective solutions?

Given your answers to these questions, which stakeholders do you feel are *most* important in shaping your evaluation? Talk with others in your organization about this, and you'll probably see some angles you would have missed on your own.

What do they want to know?

Once you have identified your core stakeholders, think about the specific types of information that will interest them. For each of your primary stakeholders, ask the following questions:

■ What decisions or actions might they make on the basis of the information we provide?

■ What kind of information would be most useful in shaping these decisions or actions?

You may find that you have difficulty answering these questions. It is not uncommon to realize that the expectations or interests of some stakeholders are unclear. Take the time to clarify their interests before you begin to firm up plans for the evaluation.

The way you do this will vary depending on their preferences and the nature of your current relationship. Formal methods might include a brief survey with community residents or a focused group discussion with current or past program participants.

However, typically an informal meeting or just a phone call is sufficient. Most people will feel comfortable describing the kind of information that would be most useful to them in understanding your program or making necessary decisions.

Now make a list of core stakeholders, along with your understanding of the evaluation questions or issues that interest them most. As you move ahead with your evaluation design, return periodically to this list to ensure that these information needs are reflected in your plan.

Beyond communicating: Involve stakeholders in the planning evaluation

In addition to understanding the specific information needs and interests of stakeholder groups, it might be important to directly involve some stakeholders in designing the evaluation. This can be especially important with stakeholders who are not clear on their needs, but who might benefit from participating in the process or who need to approve your evaluation plan.

Consider these questions:
■ Which stakeholders are *most* important to include the evaluation planning process? Why?
■ What steps can be taken to ensure that the interests of these key stakeholders are incorporated into the evaluation design? Should you actively include them as core members of the evaluation team, or provide opportunities for periodic review and feedback, or something in between?

How stakeholder involvement can help you

■ Their added perspectives can strengthen your evaluation design.
■ They might help you find resources to carry out the evaluation and act on the results.

■ They are likely to gain a new understanding and appreciation for your organization.
■ They will better understand what the evaluation results mean.

Tips for effectively working with stakeholders

■ Involve them early enough to have a meaningful influence.
■ Focus on a few key stakeholders. Research has found that deep involvement of core stakeholders is better than marginal involvement of many.
■ Give stakeholders some options about how to participate or provide feedback.
■ Ask stakeholders to bring in other stakeholders who should be involved.
■ Do not assume that people in leadership or decision-making roles are automatically the most important stakeholders.

■ Avoid giving stakeholders the impression that all questions about your program will be answered in the evaluation. Work with them to prioritize the questions to focus on.
■ Do not attempt to meet the information needs and interests of all your stakeholders; realistically, you cannot do it all.
■ Make certain you are not excluding any stakeholder because of gender, ethnicity, or language.
■ Throughout the evaluation process, remain alert to potential new stakeholders who should be involved.

Quick links to more advice on involving stakeholders

"What is stakeholder involvement?"
(Fact sheet from Building Partnerships for Youth)

http://msg.calsnet.arizona.edu/fcs/content.cfm?content=stakeholder

"Stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process"
(Summarizes many different books and reports)

http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/eval/reports/01/citizen_engagement/ce_3.html

In future tip sheets

Determining available resources and finding a compatible evaluator

Developing program theories to explain how your services affect participants

Logic models – what are they and why might you want one?

Developing a logic model

Find previous tip sheets on the web: www.ojp.state.mn.us/grants/index.htm