Measurement System and Results

EVALUATION

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Developing and executing evaluation efforts within a non-profit organization can be challenging. As with many areas of non-profit management (i.e., those that don't involve direct service provision), implementing evaluation processes and related infrastructure require some upfront investment of time and money, and may only make sense once an organization has reached a certain size and complexity. However, it is worth wrestling with this topic as expectations for evaluation within the non-profit sector continue to grow in response to greater emphasis on evidence-based programming and the need to demonstrate outcomes. Indeed, it may be that in the not too distant future, evaluation efforts, like finance and human resources, will simply become business as usual for non-profit organizations.

The six steps outlined below may be helpful for guiding non-profits toward implementation of evaluation efforts at the organizational level. Though fairly basic, each step can be implemented at different levels of complexity based on the organization's specific objectives and level of readiness.

1. BECOME FAMILIAR WITH BASIC EVALUATION TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Just as it is helpful to know something about the uses of financial statements and associated terminology when implementing financial processes, it is similarly helpful for agency leadership to become knowledgeable about the major terms and concepts used in the evaluation world. Here the focus should be breadth and not depth as it is generally unnecessary for organizational leaders to master the many technical aspects of evaluation practice including study design, instrument development and testing, data collection and management and of course, analysis. A good, basic book on program evaluation to help become familiar with general terms and concepts will support the early stages of this process and serve as a valuable reference for moving efforts forward. (See, for example, Michael Quinn Patton, Utilization Focused Evaluation.)

2. OUTLINE THE LARGER (PRELIMINARY) PURPOSE(S) OF THE EVALUATION EFFORT

Understanding and articulating the key questions you are trying to answer through your evaluation work is critical to developing an efficient and responsive approach. There are, of course, many possible questions, and some of the most common include:

> How many clients are served and what are their characteristics?
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> How much service do clients receive and are services provided uniformly?
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> How do clients perform on key outcomes?
>
> What is the relationship between clients, provided services and achieved outcomes?

It may be useful to view your organization's evaluation plan as functioning at two levels:

> First is the overall organization which will include evaluation questions and corresponding data elements that are shared across programs and services (e.g., specific descriptive variables for clients served).
>
> Second is for discrete programs which may have unique evaluation questions and, consequently, their own data requirements.

Developing evaluation questions at the organizational level and within program areas will directly inform efforts to identify data needs, step 3.

3. MAP OUT EVALUATION DATA ELEMENTS

In general, evaluation data elements fall into three basic categories: 1. those that describe who you serve (client information), 2. those that describe what you do (programs and services) and, 3. those that describe what you are trying to achieve (outcomes). Working through an exercise to specify data elements and their connection to key evaluation questions will ensure that you understand the role each element will play in later analyses. In completing this work, it may be useful to develop logic models or outline underlying theories of change for each program, as well as across the organization, to determine how specific data elements relate to assumptions about how programs are supposed to work individually and collectively. Completing this step might result in the development of a table that looks something like the following:

Data element	Data definition	Category*	Programs	How measured	Answers?
Gender	Reported gender of client	Client info	Agency level (all programs)	Intake form	Describes population served

*Category = client info, program or service, outcome

4. DETERMINE WHAT IS NEEDED FROM AN INFORMATION SYSTEM PERSPECTIVE

Mapping out data elements will also inform management information system needs. This may be achieved through the development of a basic system in something like MS Excel or Access, or given the organization's complexity, may require the purchase of a tailored system that is responsive to both agency and program level data collection and reporting needs. While investing in this area can be costly, information systems are getting less expensive and more user-friendly, allowing agencies to more easily build internal capacity and provide their own support. Still, unless there is considerable in-house expertise, it may be beneficial to seek out a high quality, reasonably priced external consultant who can provide information system services, since systems require ongoing development to keep pace with program changes and evolving reporting needs.

5. **CODIFY DATA COLLECTION AND MANAGEMENT PROCESSES**

Getting quality data into an information system requires that clear protocols be developed to guide data collection and management. There are two primary components of this work:

> Processes needed to collect and manage the data: how, when and who collects the different information we gather as a part of our program services (and what will be used to evaluate efforts).
>
> Ethics around data collection and management: issues related to consent and confidentiality, which then inform how we interact with clients when asking their permission to collect data. This will also influence the way in which we store data and to whom we provide access once it is collected.

Taken together, work in this area should result in the creation of clear data collection and management protocols that can be used with staff to ensure the implementation of consistent and ethical data collection processes.

6. **DETERMINE WHAT IS NEEDED FROM A STAFFING AND TRAINING STANDPOINT**

It will be important to outline staffing and training needs that support implementation and sustainability of your evaluation efforts. In thinking through these needs, it may be useful to divide functions into roughly three areas: data collection, data entry, and data management and analysis. To some degree, each of these areas can be assumed by existing staff. However, data entry is a place where efforts typically "bog down," and management and analysis usually requires someone with more professional training. In this step, it is important to determine what can be taken on by existing staff and where it may be necessary to add others with more specialized responsibilities. Finally, it will be critical to implement ongoing training efforts to support staff in this new work. At a minimum, this should include training on data collection and management protocols. However, it is also important to help staff see how they fit into evaluation work and the ways in which it is connected to improving client outcomes. Involving staff in the downstream uses of collected data will help them feel invested in evaluation efforts and further the development of an organizational culture around performance management.

The steps above provide a high level approach to building and implementing an evaluation system. In working through this process, agency leadership should think about how to execute these steps over the longer term so that evaluation efforts have the greatest opportunity to take root and be embraced by staff. Steps are likely to be tackled iteratively and at deepening levels, which will likely be impacted by the organization's own development. In the end, taking small steps in any of these areas will help the organization become stronger, more performance based and ultimately, more effective.

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