Go! Find the Value in Evaluation

Go forward.

78%

of grantmakers surveyed fund evaluations for others.

Evaluation – what is it?

In the simplest sense, evaluation is how you examine the value of something – a means for understanding what you do and the effects of your actions within the context of your world.

Evaluation is everywhere in the nonprofit sector. Grant applications include evaluation plan requirements while training manuals multiply. But do nonprofit executives really see the value in evaluation? When asked, many say:

- We don't have time to evaluate;
- Evaluations are too expensive and judgmental;
- It's just another hoop to jump through; or even
- Our program can't be measured.

So, struggling with basic skepticism about its practicality and value, you include evaluation in grant proposals, and ask:

- Why is everyone so interested in evaluation;
- What are the basic components and what's in it for us;
- How do we keep the evaluation "investment" manageable; and
- How do we start rethinking evaluation?

The answers to these questions can help you Go! find value in evaluation.

Why is everyone so interested in evaluation?

There are several answers to this question. One answer is that evaluation improves accountability. But its value to you reaches far beyond that. Evaluation matters because it leads to improvement and learning.

- **Improvement** – We all, funders included, want to know that the work we do is making a positive difference. Evaluation provides a means to objectively track and compare program results against the goals you set. This creates opportunities to improve.

- **Learning** – An ever-changing world requires you to learn from experience and become stronger. Evaluation provides a framework for learning and decision making.

What are the basic components and what's in it for us?

Every evaluation happens in four (sometimes overlapping) phases.

- **Planning** an evaluation means being clear, deliberate, and realistic about questions like: What does program success look like? How will we know if we get there? What tools do we need to measure actual results? [2 & 3]

- **Data Gathering** includes a wide variety of methods but is ultimately about collecting information to identify what has occurred as a result of your program or project. [4 & 5]

- **Data Analysis** is about making the data you gathered useful. Careful analysis reveals variations and trends in your data that can tell you what has happened. [6]

- **Reporting Findings** is telling your story for use in learning, making decisions, and — yes — providing accountability. Done right, evaluation offers multiple opportunities for learning:

  – **"Real Time" Access** to information can enhance understanding of your program, its effects, and system capabilities.

  – **Ongoing Evaluation** (versus one-time only) frees you to learn from success AND failure because you have time to adjust along the way.

How do we keep the cost of evaluation manageable?

- **Ask for targeted help.** Find a local professor to talk with or engage a consultant for a few hours to help shape the evaluation or review methods up front.

- **Use what you have.** You already have or are routinely collecting information. Tap it. Then find what already exists elsewhere. The Web contains an extraordinary amount of help, much of it free. Use it.

- **Focus on <u>your</u> needs.** Keep your methods simple, streamlined, and tailored to your needs. Don't become distracted by the "bigger evaluation" a colleague is doing.

- **Report in a way that helps you.** Reporting at regular intervals during a project, (by updating spreadsheets, or during staff briefings) lets you learn as you go.

How do we start rethinking evaluation?

- **First, get past ideas like** "**Our program can't be measured.**" There is always something to learn, room for improvement, a program assumption to examine, and deeper understanding to be gained.

- **Second, commit.** The hardest step is the initial commitment to start evaluating – to take the leap that says it is worth the time to learn how to make your program even better.

- **Third, talk with your funder.** If funding is a key reason for the evaluation, take time to understand the funder's concerns. Discuss what's important to you. Evaluation can be structured to serve your organization AND your funder.

- **Fourth, be realistic.** Keep an honest eye on your organization's time and money capabilities as you plan. Bigger and more complex doesn't necessarily yield better evaluation.

Most importantly, learn.

By setting program goals and measuring actual results, your organization can learn and improve. So the real value in evaluation is better service for your constituents and your community.[7]

78% of grantmakers surveyed fund evaluations for others,

64% of them also evaluate their own organizations, and

56% of these grantmakers say they've changed as a result.[1]

Go! Endnotes and General Resources

For your convenience, all materials listed below are also located under "**Go! Guides**" in the **Nonprofit Resource Center** section of the Allen County Public Library Web site: *www.acpl.lib.in.us/nrc/index.html*

Hard copies may also be picked up at the Library's **Nonprofit Resource Center** located at the Main Branch, 200 E. Berry St.

The original links below will connect you to helpful Web sites and provide additional related information.

Endnotes

[1] Grantmakers for Effective Organizations 2003 Member Survey *www.geofunders.org/ _uploads/documents/live/MemberSurvey_2003 FINAL.pdf* will give you more on these statistics.

[2] For help **planning** your evaluation see "Taking Stock: A Practical Guide to Evaluating Your Own Programs" at: *www.horizon-research.com/reports/1997/stock.pdf*

[3] Or for help planning your evaluation through **logic models** see: *www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub3669.pdf*

[4] For help with **data gathering** see the links at: *www.innonet.org/resources/data_collection.cfm#dataGen*

[5] But for actual **sources of data** see: *www.stats.indiana.edu, www.stateline.org, www.fedstats.gov/* or arts statistics at: *www.cpanda.org/*

[6] For help with **analysis** and **reporting** see the links at: *www.innonet.org/resources/data_analysis.cfm*

[7] For more discussion of **learning** from evaluation see "Learning As We Go" at: *www.consco.com/pdfs/LearningAsWeGo.pdf*

General Resources

- For "**Quick Tips**" and worksheets (under "Evaluation Publications") see: *www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/*

- For a "**Basic Guide** to Outcomes-Based Evaluation for Nonprofit Organizations with Limited Resources" see: *www.mapnp.org/library/evaluatn/outcomes.htm*

- For a **general handbook** on evaluation see: *www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub770.pdf*

- For **other information** on evaluation from funders see "Content Search" under the "Learn" tab of: *www.geofunders.org*