Community-Centred Evaluation

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Summary

In the past, program funding was often continued or not depending on the results of only a final summative performance evaluation. However, ongoing formative evaluation allows necessary improvements to be made while a program is still in progress.

Evaluation planning should begin at the same time as program design. Baseline data should be collected before a program begins and initial documentation should describe the context (ex., socio-economic and demographic characteristics that may affect program implementation). This information can help to custom design a program that will best meet the specific needs of the appropriate target populations identified. Such needs assessments can also help justify a program to the community and potential funders.

Identified needs must then be used to define realistic overall goals and smaller objectives. These goals and objectives will in turn guide the development of appropriate evaluation questions. Formative evaluation should look for convincing intermediate indicators of success – ie, what is expected to be seen if you are progressing toward your objectives? Summative evaluation should look for evidence of final program outcomes - ie, changes expected to be seen if the program has actually achieved its goals.

Collecting quantitative data is not always possible since many outcomes cannot be counted or measured on scales. Qualitative data can describe outcomes in words rather than numbers. Evaluations are more convincing if they refer to more than one information source and method of data collection.

Introduction

Evaluation usually takes place because:

1) An organization wants information that will help improve its programs;

2) Or, funders want information about the quality and impact of the programs they fund;

3) Or, an evaluation plan is a funding requirement.

This type of evaluation is usually internal – that is, program evaluation conducted in-house by staff of a community-based organization. Internal evaluations have a lot of overlap with participatory evaluations, although these sometimes involve individuals external to the organization. This type of evaluation also has some insights into participatory evaluations that are external to the organization.

When you evaluate a program, you want to know how far the program went in achieving its goals and objectives. And when you evaluate an organization, you ask how well it operates to achieve its larger organizational mission. Evaluation involves the collection of information that helps you to make these judgments fairly.

Program evaluation

I will focus on program evaluation. Why is program evaluation so important?
1) It generates information that can help you to improve your programs.
2) It can demonstrate to funders and others the impact of your programs

There are two types of program evaluation: summative and formative.

In the past, evaluation was often used only to measure performance. Based on information gathered in a final summative evaluation, further funding decisions were made. Programs were continued or discounted depending on the results of the evaluation.

More recently, through ongoing formative evaluation, organizations and their sponsors can gain insight into how well a program is performing and what adjustments may be necessary to keep it on track.

Formative evaluation can help determine how your program is doing while it is in progress, or taking form. It can help identify changes that should be made and correct problems before it's too late. Formative evaluation can also help organizations identify issues of interest that you might not have thought about when planning a program. And, it can help shape and refine data collection activities.

Summative evaluation occurs when you are summing up what you have achieved. This can occur at the end of the program or, at appropriate "break points" during the implementation of an on-going or multi-year program. It helps to determine if the program achieved what organization and sponsor set out to do. To understand what your program achieves, however, you have to know where you began. This is why it helps to collect baseline information before or very soon after a program begins.

Baseline information

Baseline information might include:

1) How serious is a particular problem or need among individuals who will participate in your program?

2) What behaviours, interests or skills do the individuals have at the start of the program?

The amount of baseline information you collect will depend on your level of resource.

Collecting summative information allows you to find out how well the program achieved what it set out to do. Have individuals' skills or interest levels increased because of the program? What parts of the program appear to have contributed most (or least) to the participants' success? If you did not achieve what you intended, how do you account for this? What should you do differently next time?

While it is important to grasp the difference between formative and summative evaluation, it is equally important to think of these activities as part of an on-going evaluation process, not as distinct categories. Data collected while the program is in progress can be used in the summative evaluation to gauge impact. Similarly, information

collected at the end of a program can be used in a formative way for designing an improved or expanded program or new programs with similar goals.

Getting started on evaluation

Evaluation planning should begin at the same time you are thinking about the design of your program. Start by clarifying what needs you are trying to address, who your audience will be and the setting or context, in which your program will operate.

Documentation is an important piece of the evaluation puzzle. It involves describing (rather than assessing) conditions, events, or people to help gain a better understanding of the context in which a program occurs. For instance, what are the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the community and the targeted population? How might these factors and others, affect how you implement your program?

Initial documentation activities often focus on the identification of needs, or *needs assessment*. Information gathered before a program is planned or implemented can help staff to identify needs, identify appropriate target populations for program services, and customize their program design to meet specific needs. Collecting this kind of information can also help you justify your program to your community and to potential funders.

Now, in order to design a good evaluation plan, you need to start thinking like an evaluator. In order to do that, you must translate the needs you've identified into realistic *goals* and *objectives*.

A goal is what you hope to accomplish when your program is completed – it is broader than an objective. An objective refers to a more specific event or action that has to occur before you can achieve your goal. One way to identify possible objectives is to think about your goal as a problem to be solved. As you break the problem down, you can see that there are many possible objectives that must be achieved in order to truly accomplish your goal.

Working out an evaluation plan

Now that you have identified your goals and objectives, you can begin framing formative evaluation questions in terms of progress towards your objectives and summative evaluation questions in terms of impact on your goals.

MEASURING PROGRESS AND IMPACT

Thinking through your evaluation questions in terms of the goals and objectives you have defined provides the foundation for your evaluation plan. The next step is deciding what kinds of evidence will convince you and your funders that your program is a success. What do you expect to see, hear, or measure, if your program is successful at achieving your objectives and ultimately your goals.

In the formative evaluation stage we look for intermediate indicators – what you expect to see if you are progressing toward your objectives.

In the summative stage, we look for evidence of final program outcomes. These are the changes you expect to see if your program has actually achieved its goals.

It is appropriate to think of measuring progress and impact in terms of quantitative (number) and qualitative (quality) data.

Collecting both quantitative and qualitative data in your formative and summative evaluation is important, but not always possible. For example, many positive outcomes do not have tests or scales associated with them, so a number cannot be assigned to measure progress or success. In these cases, qualitative data may prove more useful, since they allow you to describe outcomes with words. Qualitative data can also be highly useful for clarifying what you think is important, and for discovering new issues that you might have overlooked in your initial evaluation design.

As a general rule, you will want to use the measures that are most feasible in terms of your skills and resources, and most convincing to you and your sponsors.

STRATEGIES FOR DATA COLLECTION

Be clear about what you want to find out. Sticking to these areas of interest and avoiding unnecessary data collection will keep your evaluation focused.

There are four basic ways to collect evaluation data: document review, observations, interviews, and surveys. Using a combination of these methods will help you to check your findings. And your evaluation will be more convincing if you can refer to more than one information source and method of data collection…

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