



# Introduction

## What is evaluation?

Evaluation can be defined as the systematic gathering of information to inform decision-making. Simply put, evaluation is about:

1. Asking good questions
2. Gathering and reviewing information
3. Sharing the information to foster good decision-making (Gray, 1998).<sup>1</sup>

Evaluation can help you learn from your experiences, be responsive to your community, and ensure that you are fulfilling your organizational mission.

*"For an organization to be more than the sum of its programs, it needs the ability to ask, listen, reflect and adapt" (Letts, Ryan and Grossman, 1999).<sup>2</sup>*

## Why do we need to do evaluation?

Is evaluation worth it to you as an organization? Evaluation, which essentially opens up a dialogue with your community, ensures that you are receiving feedback on the kind of work that you. Several examples of the benefits of evaluation are (see Mattessich, 2003):

### Learn about your successes

- Find out what aspects of your program are working effectively.
- Receive feedback from your target population and community partners about how you are doing.
- Increase job motivation among staff by allowing them to see how they are helping to achieve the organizational mission.

## Share Information with Key Audiences

- Use the opportunity to tell your 'story' to community partners and inform like-minded organizations.
- Boost support for your fundraising efforts by showing impact and demonstrating to funders that you have used funds well.
- Gain public recognition for your achievements.

## Improve Your Activities

- Monitor program implementation to see if modifications are necessary.
- Discover unexpected outcomes or unanticipated factors affecting your programs.
- Track changes in the needs and assets of your target population.

## Are we able to do evaluation ourselves?

When we hear the word 'evaluation', we tend to think of tests or report cards. Evaluation, however, can be more than about 'rating' your work or 'measuring' your accomplishments. Our approach to evaluation in this handbook is based on the following principles (see Patton, 1998):

- **Evaluation as ongoing**, built-in and integrated into the everyday activities of your organization.
- **Evaluation as learning**, helping you identify needed improvements rather than only making a final judgment of what you did or did not accomplish.
- **Evaluation as internal**, driven not only by external demands for accountability but primarily by your own need to hold yourself accountable.
- **Evaluation as participatory**, encouraging a process that is inclusive and involves your organizational stakeholders in the design and implementation of the evaluation.
- **Evaluation as empowering**, equipping your staff with the knowledge to understand and measure the impact of their work.

We recognize that a large number of nonprofit organizations are tackling difficult social problems where progress is both hard to make and challenging to measure. Furthermore, with time constraints and limited resources, there are numerous difficulties in defining and measuring outcomes of such work. We have therefore placed an emphasis on a pragmatic, participatory approach to evaluation that allows you to learn from your work and identify ways for improving your programs.

## Overview of the Handbook

Chapter One of this handbook addresses what we consider to be the basic components of an evaluative infrastructure:

- the documentation of evaluative information
- the articulation of a ‘program theory’ (your goals and desired results)
- an organizational ‘readiness’ to engage in the process of evaluation.

Chapter Two offers ideas for designing an evaluation strategy. Chapter Three reviews strategies for data collection and Chapter Four reflects on the process of analyzing, communicating and applying evaluation findings. Chapter Five outlines the process of various activities that can help you in carrying out evaluation practices within your organization. In the appendices, a hypothetical case of the evaluation process is described and sample data instruments and a sample evaluation report are presented as well.

What is the Infrastructure for an Evaluation?	Designing the Evaluation plan	Data Collection Strategies	Interpreting, Reporting and Applying Results	Facilitated Organizational Activities
Chapter 1	Chapter 2	Chapter 3	Chapter 4	Chapter 5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documenting essential types of evaluation information</li> <li>• Articulating a program theory</li> <li>• Ensuring organizational ‘readiness’ for evaluation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generating evaluation questions</li> <li>• Deciding how the needed information will be collected</li> <li>• Designing the evaluation plan</li> </ul>	<p>Overview of Data Collection Strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Document analysis</li> <li>• Collecting written responses</li> <li>• Observations</li> <li>• Talking to people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpreting data</li> <li>• Communicating the results</li> <li>• Applying the findings</li> </ul>	<p>Suggested activities for integrating evaluative processes</p>

This handbook draws from a variety of resources that will be cited throughout and can be used as a further reference to help you expand your knowledge and understanding of program evaluation. We tried to use resources accessible through the Internet, and the majority of the resources are drawn from the United States and Europe. As such, a large number of the references cited are in English.

## Key Questions to Consider in Designing Your Evaluation Strategy

As you begin to consider how to develop evaluative practices that enhance learning in your organization, it is worthwhile to reflect on the following questions:

1. **Who needs to be involved in the evaluation process and how?** From the beginning of the process, it is important to involve those who impact and are impacted by the evaluation process and results.
2. **What do we most want to learn?** In designing your evaluation process, carefully consider questions such as: *What information do we need? Why is this information important and what will we learn by collecting it?*
3. **What resources do we have to design and implement an evaluation plan?** Keep in mind what is both realistic and feasible for your organization.
4. **Are we designing an evaluation process that is sustainable? How will we utilize the evaluation process and findings?** You will want to make sure to use this opportunity to design an ongoing evaluation process that can enhance your organizational effectiveness over the long term.

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