

Measuring Influence: Advocacy Evaluation Challenges and Successes

***Note:** This document presents an overview of what we at Innovation Network have learned from our work in advocacy evaluation. Originally presented as a 5-part weekly series on GrantStation.com, "Measuring Influence" was written as an **introduction** to advocacy evaluation. Its intended audience was nonprofit staff with no evaluation expertise or experience.*

Measuring Influence: Advocacy Evaluation Challenges and Successes

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I. Defining Our Terms

Within the evaluation field, "advocacy evaluation" has only recently become a specialty. Advocacy evaluation is growing quickly, supported by lively conversation—not just among evaluators, but among nonprofit staff and funders as well.

Innovation Network (InnoNet) has been involved in advocacy evaluation since 2005. ([Learn more about our advocacy evaluation work on our website, at www.innonet.org/advocacy.](#)) As with any new discipline, the lines have yet to be clearly drawn, even around something as basic as what advocacy means.



InnoNet defines advocacy as “a wide range of activities conducted to influence decision makers at various levels.” In essence, advocacy is about influence: changing minds, reframing arguments, and inspiring social movements. We are interested in the evaluation of traditional advocacy work like litigation, lobbying, and public education. We are also intrigued by influence work that occurs in a less official milieu—the things that have to happen at the personal and community level before a framework for policy change can exist. Our expanded definition of advocacy includes these other kinds of influence work: network formation, relationship building, community organizing, communication, and leadership development, among others.

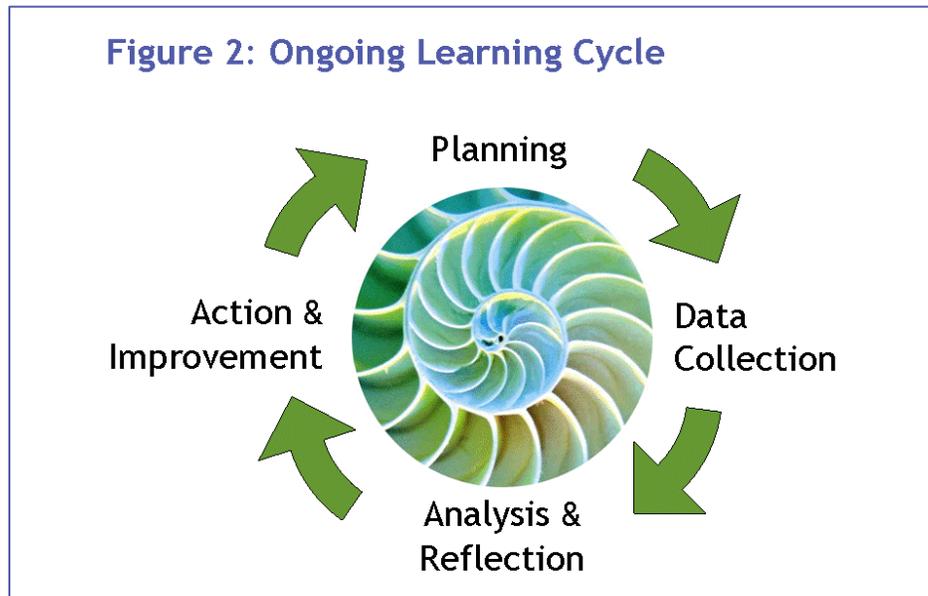
Though most nonprofits don't think of themselves as “advocacy organizations,” many of them are involved in advocacy as we define it. It may be useful to think of nonprofit work along a continuum. As shown in Figure 1, nonprofits tend to fall somewhere between “pure service” and “pure advocacy.”



An organization that devotes equal resources to its service and advocacy activities could be called a “service/advocacy hybrid.” A hybrid organization may slide back and forth between the extremes of this continuum throughout its lifespan. Nonprofits often expand or reduce their advocacy efforts in step with their own goals, available funding, and outside forces such as the political climate.

InnoNet defines evaluation as “The systematic collection of information about a program that enables stakeholders to better understand the program, improve its effectiveness, and/or make decisions about future programming.” Evaluation practices

and processes are integral to an organization's ability to learn about its own work (see Figure 2).



What makes evaluating advocacy work different from evaluating other kinds of activities? For one thing, there is a perception that advocacy work is “hard to measure.” This has discouraged many people from attempting advocacy evaluation. Rhonda Schlangen, Senior Evaluation Associate with the Planned Parenthood Federation of America's International Division, gives one perspective: “Coming at [evaluation] from my background [as an advocate], I was puzzled to see advocacy evaluation really wasn't being done. I was even told by a donor that it was impossible—that you could not establish a relationship between a vote and an advocacy effort.” In a recent interview with InnoNet, Lina Paredes, Director of Grantmaking at the Liberty Hill Foundation in Los Angeles, echoed this stance: “It is very hard to evaluate [advocacy] work.”

The perception of advocacy being hard to measure is now being broken down by evaluation practitioners and advocacy funders, who are calling for changes in evaluation emphasis. In her interview, Ms. Paredes elaborated:

As a funder we understand the long-term investment that social change requires. So as long as groups show progress towards their long-term goals, we will often provide repeat funding [...] Just because a grantee doesn't win a policy victory doesn't mean that they've been defeated or unsuccessful. We have to look at other

measures of success: skills built internally (knowledge, strategy), increased organizational capacity, base building, etc.

Julia Coffman, editor of the Harvard Family Research Project's *Evaluation Exchange*, adds another perspective:

Because the nature of advocacy work often differs in important ways from direct services and other programs, we need to examine how evaluation can be most useful in this context. This does not mean inventing a whole new way of doing evaluation; it means adjusting our approaches in ways that make evaluation relevant and useful within the advocacy and policy context.

As the conversation in the field grows, many articles and reports have enumerated differences between advocacy work and direct service programs. Recognizing and accounting for these differences is crucial to planning a successful advocacy evaluation. In this series, we will focus on three primary differences between advocacy and direct service: timeframes, organizational capacity, and the importance of relationship building.

Next week, we'll discuss timeframes and organizational capacity.

II. Advocacy Evaluation: What's the Difference?

In the first article in this series, we introduced the differences between the evaluation of advocacy work and direct service evaluation. In this article, we delve into the first two differences in more detail: **timeframes** and **organizational capacity**.

- **Timeframes**

The continually increasing speed of communication has strongly affected advocacy work. The rise of social media and instant communication (e.g., email, widespread cell phone use, blogging, and social networking sites like MySpace) has given advocates new tools for their efforts. It has also created new challenges in monitoring and evaluating results.

Using instant communications and social media can bolster an advocacy issue's visibility. Recent examples from the field include:

- Email and cell phone text-messaging contributed to the campaign for women's suffrage in Kuwait in 2005.
- The American Cancer Society has raised over \$150,000 in the three years of its "Relay for Life" campaign on the social website Second Life.
- In November 2007, an email campaign by ONE contributed to the International Monetary Fund's actions on debt relief in Liberia.

These successes are inspiring, and there are many others like them. But it's important to keep in mind that these new communications tools are just that: tools. They need to be used in a strategic context, and evaluated as part of a greater whole. If a cause does not have strong public support, or an organization doesn't have broad name recognition, setting up a MySpace page probably won't be very effective on its own.

Despite the speed of individual communications, effecting policy change and moving public opinion are long-term processes. Should a coalition call it quits because a piece of legislation does not pass? Was Susan B. Anthony a failure because she didn't live to see women's suffrage become a reality in the United States? Of course not. Incremental successes must be planned for and recognized. This is true in direct service evaluation as well, but for advocacy evaluation the incremental successes may be the only visible measures of progress within a grant period, a legislative session, or an election cycle. The fifth article in this series, "Defining Success," will discuss these incremental successes in more depth.

- **Organizational Capacity**

Advocacy and hybrid organizations need to be able to do things differently than direct service organizations. In more formal terms, their “capacity needs” are different. Two capacities that advocacy organizations need to be particularly strong in are Agility and Communications.

Agility: When a window of opportunity opens, an advocacy organization must be ready to act. This is true whether the opportunity is positive (e.g., build on the momentum of a victory) or negative (e.g., mitigate losses when circumstances favor the opposition). To maximize an opportunity, an organization needs to be flexible, learn from its own work, and keep a constant eye on outside forces. In the June 2006 report to the California Endowment, TCC Group summarized these qualities with the term “adaptive capacity,” which it described as “the ability of a nonprofit organization to monitor, assess, and respond to internal and external changes.” In other words, an organization must be agile.

“Advocacy tends to focus on **action**—advocacy work by nature is very nimble and fluid according to the external environment,” says Rhonda Schlangen. More than most direct service organizations, advocacy organizations need to have contingency plans in place, and be able to respond to events that affect their cause.

The processes and practices identified by TCC as supporting adaptive capacity—e.g., implementing systems for monitoring change, reflection on successes and failures, and making plans based on that reflection—are the same processes that support ongoing learning, as we discussed in the first article in this series (see Figure 2, above).

Communications: A sound communications plan will help almost any nonprofit perform better. For an advocacy organization, it is crucial. Visibility, branding, outreach, public education, and media relations make up advocacy's lifeblood.

For an advocacy *organization*, visibility is helpful. For an *issue*, it's imperative. This is where the media comes in. “Having a broad-based connection in terms of grassroots is important, but in terms of really moving things forward the media becomes critical,” notes TCC. Advocates need to establish themselves as credible sources—people the media will listen to. The ideal position is that of the “go-to person,” someone other key players will call to find out about what's going on with an issue.

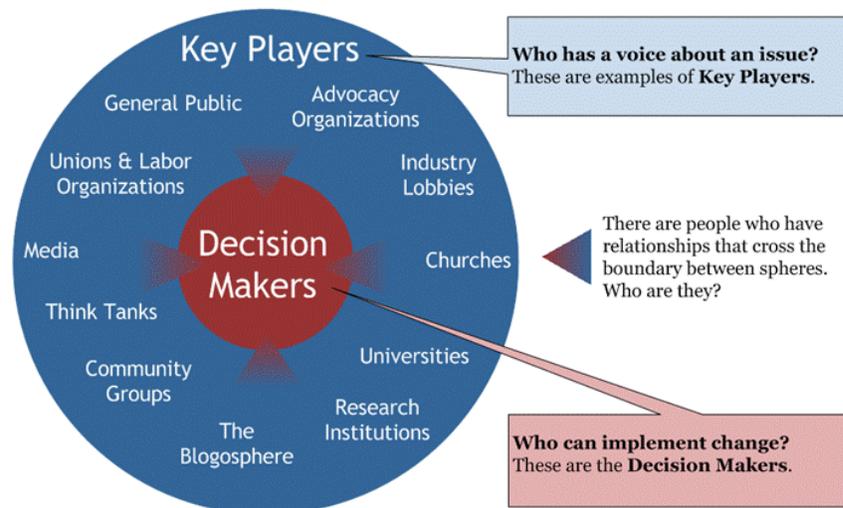
III. Influencing Decision Makers

In this article, we will examine the third difference between the evaluation of advocacy work and direct service evaluation: the importance of **relationship building**.

We established earlier in the series that advocacy is about **influence**: changing minds, reframing arguments, and inspiring social movements. All advocacy efforts share similar target audiences: a core of decision makers who have the power to bring about the desired change. These decision makers are often in government or the judiciary, but they can also be community leaders, corporate bigwigs, or other “movers and shakers.” Most of the time, an advocate doesn't have direct access to this sphere. So how does change happen?

In our advocacy evaluation work, we've found that effective advocacy happens through relationships with “**key players**.” An advocacy organization is a key player in its own campaign; other players include people and groups directly affected by the issue; the media; universities, think-tanks, and research institutions; churches and other faith communities; and labor organizations. Refer to Figure 3 for an example of who might be included in a sphere of influence. The list of key players will be different for each issue and for each advocacy group working on that issue.

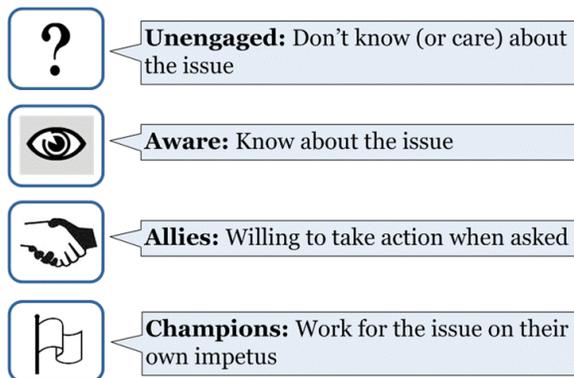
Figure 3: Spheres of Influence



Key players surround the core of decision makers. Again, the decision makers are the people with the power and influence to motivate change directly, whether through policy change, changes in trade or corporate practices, or other broad influence over public opinion and behavior. They are motivated by their own agendas, and are unlikely to be moved to action until a critical mass or undeniable volume of key players calls for change.

Across these spheres of influence, an advocacy organization builds relationships in stages: increasing awareness of an issue, gaining allies, and winning champions. In this relationship building process, it's helpful to think of people as falling into one of four categories:

Figure 4: Building Relationships

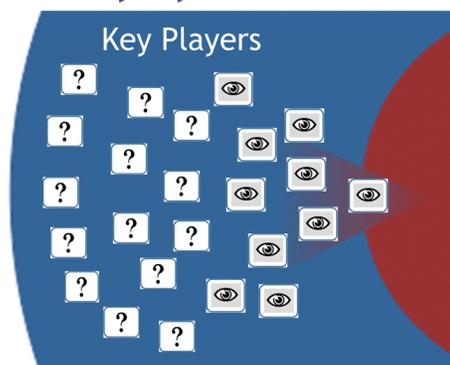
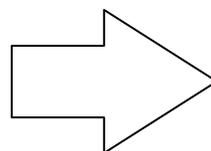


Before advocacy work begins, engagement on the issue in each of the spheres will probably be low. Most people won't be aware of the issue. Those who are aware of it may not feel strongly about it. So, the first necessary step in an advocacy campaign is to make people aware of the issue. The **framing of the issue** is important at this point: defining what sets an issue apart, why people should care about it, and what it means to them.

Figure 5-A:
Key Players are Unengaged



Figure 5-B:
Key Players Become Aware



Once an issue has reached a broad level of awareness, it's time to gain **allies**. In this context, allies are people who are aware of an issue and feel strongly about it. If they are asked to send an email, donate money, or contribute time to an advocacy effort, they will. The broader the base of allies, the stronger an advocacy campaign becomes.

When seeking allies, advocates need to think outside traditional circles. For example, during Innovation Network's evaluation of an advocacy coalition, the coalition engaged “non-traditional allies” within both Chambers of Commerce and labor unions—two groups that would not normally be found working happily together. Another excellent example is the American Stroke Association's work teaching beauticians to educate their clients about stroke warning signs.

After gaining allies, an advocacy organization needs to turn some of them into **champions**. Champions are people so engaged by an issue that they will work on their own to advance the movement. Advocates still need to talk to their champions—to keep them informed of developments, and encourage them to keep working—but the champions will work for the cause without needing to be asked.

Figure 5-C:
Gaining Key Allies

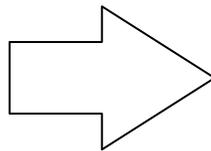
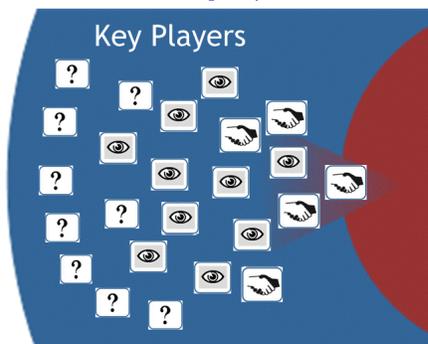
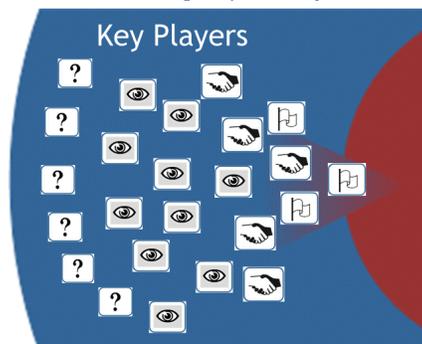


Figure 5-D:
Winning Key Champions



When an advocacy organization has high awareness, several allies, and a solid number of champions within the Key Players' sphere, it must then **repeat the relationship-building steps** within the Decision Makers sphere.

Figure 5-E:
Engaging Decision Makers

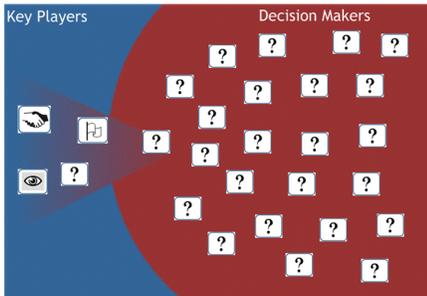


Figure 5-F:
Building Awareness among Decision Makers

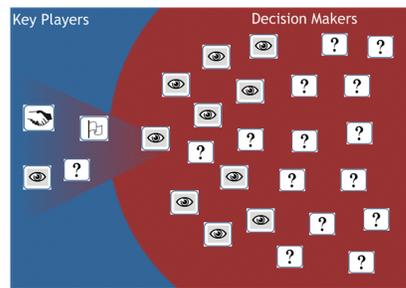


Figure 5-G:
Gaining Allies among Decision Makers

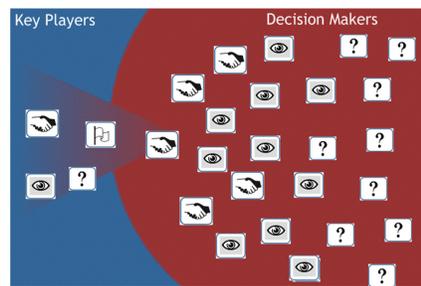
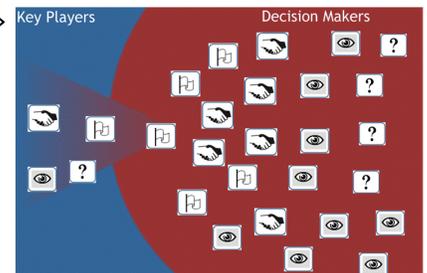
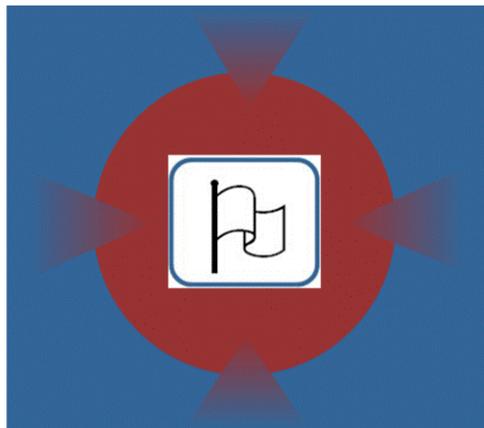


Figure 5-H:
Winning Champions among Decision Makers



Only when an issue has champions within this central core does the desired change becomes possible. Victory is still not certain: opponents still exist, and circumstances keep changing. But having champions within the Decision Makers' sphere is an excellent sign that a cause is likely to succeed.

**Figure 5-1:
Champions at the Core**



Next week, we'll review some additional evaluation tips and resources.

IV. Tools and Tips

Advocacy evaluation, as we've noted earlier, is a relatively new discipline, but the field is growing fast. Several resources are available for nonprofits and funders seeking to evaluate advocacy work. Innovation Network has collected nearly 100 free online resources for advocacy evaluation. Here are a few of our top picks; all of them are available at www.innonet.org/resources (free registration required).

- ***The Challenge of Assessing Advocacy and Advocacy Activities: Strategies for a Prospective Evaluation Approach:*** In this 2005 report prepared for The California Endowment, Blueprint Research & Design offers an overview of the advocacy evaluation field, noting challenges to evaluating advocacy, the current state of advocacy evaluation, and guiding principles for policy change evaluation. The report also discusses the benefits of “prospective” or forward-looking evaluation techniques for advocacy efforts.

- ***The Challenge of Assessing Policy and Advocacy Activities: Moving from Theory to Practice:*** In this companion piece to the report above, Blueprint presents recommendations and suggestions compiled from feedback to the original report. Particular emphasis is given to the process of developing a theory of change, defining benchmarks and indicators, collecting data, and using findings.
- ***The California Endowment Advocacy General Operating Support Evaluation: Summary of Expert Interview Findings:*** This report, to which we referred in Part Two of this series, is the TCC Group's summary of the particular characteristics and capacities common to successful advocacy organizations.
- ***The Advocacy & Policy Change Composite Logic Model:*** This tool addresses a common question about advocacy evaluation: What kinds of outcomes can or should be measured, other than achievement of a public policy goal? The Composite Logic Model offers a detailed menu of items for building a logic model relevant to a user's work. It was developed by Julia Coffman from Harvard Family Research Project, Astrid Hendricks and Barbara Masters from The California Endowment, Jackie Williams Kaye from The Atlantic Philanthropies, and Tom Kelly from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. More than 50 funders, evaluators, and advocates also lent their expertise to refine the Model.
- ***Continuous Progress: The Advocacy Progress Planner (APP):*** Based on the "Advocacy & Policy Change Composite Logic Model," above, this free online tool became available in September 2007 at www.continuousprogress.org. The APP gives advocates an at-a-glance look at the some of the building blocks of a campaign, such as goals and potential impacts, activities and tactics, and benchmarks. The end result is a tidy logic model that can be used as a planning document and as a basis for ongoing evaluation and learning.

- ***A Handbook of Data Collection Tools***: Organizational Research Services developed this handbook in connection with a report to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, “A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy”. The tools included in the handbook have been used in real-world advocacy evaluation efforts. They are applicable to advocacy work aiming for outcomes in six areas: Shifts in Social Norms, Strengthened Organizational Capacity, Strengthened Alliances, Strengthened Base of Support, Improved Policies, and Changes in Impact.

For more information about Innovation Network’s advocacy evaluation work, please visit www.innonet.org/advocacy.

Next week, in the final part of this series, we will discuss the particular challenges of defining what success means for advocates.

V. Defining Success

Social change is a long-term process, so how can short-term success be measured? Remember Susan B. Anthony: She didn't live to see women get the vote, but that doesn't mean she wasn't an effective advocate!

The previous article in this series provided several tools for successful advocacy evaluations, but some of you may be wondering how to get started. In Innovation Network's advocacy evaluation training, we discuss four basic steps necessary to defining and evaluating the incremental success of your advocacy campaign:

- Identify your scope
- Clarify your approach
- Make an “outcomes chain”
- Ask the right questions

Identify Your Scope: Your scope is the **change you want to achieve**. To define steps toward success, you need a clear vision of what long-term success looks like. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What impact are you trying to achieve? What is the “So what?” of why you do what you do?

- Where do you want change to take place (e.g., in a region, a community, or a sphere of influence)?
- Who are the key players for your issue?
- What changes are expected to occur?
- When will those changes take place?

Clarify Your Approach: Your approach describes how your organization will go about creating, or contributing to, the change identified in your scope.

- Who are your targets?
- How will you bring about desired changes?
- Why do you believe change should/will happen in this way?

These questions may seem basic, but they help ensure everyone in your organization or coalition is working toward the same change. Answering them clearly will give you a framework for monitoring and evaluating your work.

Make an Outcomes Chain: To make the “what” and “when” of your scope more concrete, it's helpful to place them in an Outcomes Chain (see Attachment 1). Incremental successes spring from your **shorter-term** and **intermediate outcomes**. See below for some samples.

Ask the Right Questions: Advocacy work isn't pass/fail. An evaluation of your work should not focus on your ultimate goal (“Did we achieve worldwide social justice?”), but on the here-and-now activities that move you toward that goal (“Did we help sway public opinion about affordable housing in Green County?”). You can identify incremental successes for many aspects of your organization's work: infrastructure, coalition and network building, communications and public education, research, community organizing, and more.

Samples and Resources

We have included links to some samples to help illustrate the methods you can use for evaluating your advocacy campaign.

Outcomes Chains:

- [A sample Outcomes Chain representing a fictional advocacy campaign](#)
- [Two real-life examples of Outcomes Chains](#)

Outcomes Categories:

- Organizational Research Service's report, "[A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy](#)," contains a section on outcomes categorization for advocacy efforts (pp. 17-19).

Data Collection:

- Organizational Research Service has developed the "[Handbook of Data Collection Tools](#)" as a companion to the above-referenced Guide.
- [The Intense Period Debrief](#) is a data collection tool developed by Innovation Network. The activity level of advocacy work tends to have strong peaks and lulls. Collecting data tends to fall to the bottom of the "to-do" list when activity is at its most intense—which can result in the loss of valuable program information. We designed the Intense Period Debrief to capture information from an activity peak without interfering with the work.

Sample Evaluation Questions: [These sample questions](#) can help you think about how to start measuring your advocacy efforts. Data collection to answer these kinds of questions can be as simple as:

- Counting your communications with Key Players (How often do you contact them? How often do they contact you?);
- Tracking the number of times your issue is mentioned in the news (Google Alerts can help with this) or in blogs (using an aggregator or a feed like the Bloglines Search); or,
- Comparing infrastructure documents (e.g., an old procedures manual vs. a new one).

Conclusion

Creating social change is an ongoing process, and takes place in a complex environment. It may not always be possible to say what causes a particular change. It is possible—and, we believe, crucial—to measure your work and use what you learn to adjust your approach. We hope this series will help you get started.

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