

## Program Evaluation: Igniting the Untapped Power

In our experience, program evaluation is the most maligned, most misunderstood, most “mysterious” function of nonprofit management. It’s also perhaps the most stress-producing wrench you can toss into your organizational machinery. Sending in the program evaluators raises your team’s blood pressure and lowers their morale.

The reason, of course, is that most evaluations are conducted by an outsider who doesn’t have a vested interest in a program’s success, but who does have a pipeline to the organization’s leadership or source of funding.

New, credible approaches to evaluation demonstrate that **it doesn’t have to be that way**. Evaluation can be the most potent tool in a nonprofit’s kit, empowering nonprofits to create lasting change in their communities. These new methods demystify both the purpose and process of evaluation, opening it up to include a broad array of “non-experts”, seeking the participation of program staff and stakeholders, and creating an atmosphere in which the focus of an evaluation effort is not on blaming and recrimination but on learning **how** and **why** programs are achieving results.

In addition to changing how and why evaluations are done, these approaches have also made evaluation more useful, creating feedback loops to continuously improve programs and organizations, and empowering the team member participants. They ensure that the evaluation is **not** just a research study for journals and bookshelves, but rather becomes a practical mechanism to better understand whether, and why, an organization is achieving what it set out to do. And they break down natural resistance to the evaluation onslaught.

All organizations want a better handle on what is happening in their programs, and to understand how those programs are affecting people and communities. After all, their fundamental business is to **make a difference**. Only program evaluation can measure that difference. So making program evaluation doable and practical is critical to the success of every nonprofit.



Innovation Network's approach to evaluation emphasizes that:

- Evaluation is a **core management function** that must be championed by key, senior management.
- For critical programs, evaluation should examine **both outcomes and process**. After all, what good does it do an organization to know what it did without knowing how it got there?
- Evaluation should not be a one-time study of where a program or an organization has been, but rather an **ongoing and continual process**. (For example, done at the beginning of an effort, an evaluation can inform program design, creating a continuous improvement model providing real-time feedback to help an organization organize and perform its services.)
- Those who best understand a program and are most invested in its continuous improvement are naturally **the best people to help collect data**. That means **insiders – staff and volunteers** – not an outsider.
- If everyone is invested in a process **focused on learning and improving** the program in a non-punitive atmosphere, then any incentive to fudge the data is removed.

That's not to say that all programs need to be—or should be—evaluated. Evaluation is time-consuming, intensive work that should be reserved for only a few of your organization's programs. But if you are ready to start thinking about an evaluation effort, here are some steps to follow:

1. **Determine who needs to be involved, and how.** It is important to get buy-in from the start by all those who affect and are affected by the evaluation effort. That means staff, volunteers, board members, funders, community representatives, etc. Find ways to involve representatives of those groups in the design and implementation of the evaluation. Prepare and send out information prior to any meetings; include information about the program, the organization, and the reasons for conducting the evaluation.

2. **Decide what you most want to learn.** Make sure that the questions asked are important, that the answers are not obvious, and that the answers will provide information that will enable you to improve your program and report to your board and funders. “Counting” questions and “yes/no” questions aren’t good evaluation questions.
3. **Assess how much energy you have to collect, input, and analyze data.** It’s very easy for your ambitions to outpace your resources when collecting data. A good guide is that for every data-collection instrument you put into place, you will need on average 100 hours of staff time to input and analyze the results. Be careful to collect the **least** amount of information you need to answer the evaluation questions.
4. **Understand why you want to launch a program evaluation now.** To help you focus your evaluation, think about **who** will use what evaluation results (executive director, board, funders, staff, members, clients, etc.), and **how** they will use those results. Also think in detail about what you want included in the final report—an explanation of the underlying academic principles used by the evaluators, or just conclusions and recommendations?
5. **Be specific about whether you’re more interested in evaluating outcomes or process—or both.** Process and outcomes are inextricably linked. A few years ago, with enormous input from various stakeholders, we put together a beautiful evaluation plan for a shelter that had designed an after-school computer program. Our plan included clear outcomes and laser-like evaluation questions and measures. We’d planned to evaluate what turned the kids on more as a result of the program—math, or science? But on opening day, no one showed up. We didn’t know why, because we hadn’t thought to evaluate the **process**. We were unprepared to collect any data about what was working and why. Even if the children had flocked to the program and indicated a clear preference for math or science, we wouldn’t know what elements of the program had made the difference, so the organization could improve on that success.

6. **Know how long the evaluation will last.** When you should have the final report? To whom are the evaluators accountable? Also know how your staff/board members/executive director/others will be involved in the evaluation effort, and how much time they'll spend.
  
7. **Do you have the necessary skills, resources, and funds for an evaluation?** You can access individual skills, contacts, in-kind donations, creativity, and other sources of funding and resources before turning to an outside evaluator. Make sure, if you do use an outside evaluator, that he or she has experience with organizations and programs like yours and produces useful reports.

*For more information about Innovation Network's evaluation services, please visit our website, [www.innonet.org](http://www.innonet.org), or contact us.*