PATHFINDER

FUNDER EDITION

A PRACTICAL GUIDE
TO ADVOCACY EVALUATION

Innovation Network, Inc. | Commissioned by The Atlantic Philanthropies

Introduction

We define advocacy as "a wide range of activities conducted to influence decision makers at various levels."

This definition intentionally includes not only traditional advocacy work like litigation, lobbying, and public education, but also capacity building, network formation, relationship building, communication, and leadership development.

What is This Guide?

Advocacy is a hot topic in the philanthropic world. We hear of more and more funders and nonprofits embracing advocacy strategies to meet their missions. Advocacy—in its many forms—is well suited to address pervasive and systemic problems. Advocacy strategies hold the promise of dramatically enhancing results and advancing missions.

Just like any other work in the nonprofit sector, advocacy needs to be continually assessed, tweaked, and strengthened through a process of evaluation and learning.

This guide is an introduction to advocacy evaluation from the funder's perspective. It is not a detailed how-to. Reading it won't mean you can evaluate your grantees' advocacy work single-handedly. But it will give you a sense of what is involved in advocacy evaluation, and what the differences are between advocacy evaluation and other types of program evaluation.

Advocacy Evaluation: A Growing Field

The advocacy evaluation field is nascent, but has gathered strength over the past few years. For example, at the 2005 American Evaluation Association conference ("AEA"), there was only one session devoted specifically to advocacy evaluation. In 2007, an AEA Topical Interest Group formed around advocacy and policy change. At the 2009 AEA conference, there will be fourteen advocacy and policy change sessions.

Innovation Network has been involved in the advocacy evaluation field since 2005. We have worked with funders to evaluate advocacy programs, and we want to share what we have learned. We have found that our approach—learning-focused advocacy evaluation—results in an evaluation design that yields the type of information funders and advocates need. It helps funders identify effective advocacy strategies. It illuminates factors that contribute to success. It generates information to strengthen decision making. And all within a shorter timeline than traditional evaluation approaches.

Just like any other philanthropic endeavor, advocacy should be evaluated, too. But, compared to other work, advocacy presents unique challenges—in both its implementation and evaluation. Some examples of those challenges include:

- Time frame. Many advocacy campaigns—or even components of an advocacy campaign—take longer than the typical duration of a grant award to come to fruition. Since full-blown success may take decades, traditional grant reporting timelines are ill-equipped to capture the complete picture—especially if the grant period is only one year.
- Need for sustainability. Advocacy organizations need to be sustainable over the life of an issue, which, as noted above, can be decades or more. This kind of sustainability requires strong infrastructure and robust capacity—qualities that will keep an advocacy organization viable for as long as it takes to achieve its ends.
- Contribution, not attribution. Proving attribution can be costly and difficult. Instead, in the field of advocacy, understanding *contribution* yields useful information without alienating partners or unnecessarily depleting resources. Also, advocates may not want to be the one to "own" an advocacy win, as attributing wins holds the potential of damaging alliances with like-minded organizations.
- Documenting progress. Since advocacy's long-term goals are relatively far into the future, advocates need interim measures of success. These serve as milestones to show work is on track, informing advocates on progress and helping them share success stories on the way to the "big win."

Since advocacy work is different, it makes sense that the way we measure it differs, too. In advocacy, we need to focus more on the journey than on the final destination. Learning-focused advocacy evaluation helps funders assess strategies undertaken by grantees, gauge progress towards long-term goals, and accumulate advocacy knowledge. It also strengthens grantees by growing their evaluation capacity and generating valuable information for improved decision making.

Learning-focused advocacy evaluation helps funders assess strategies undertaken by grantees, gauge progress toward long-term goals, and accumulate advocacy knowledge.

Nine 9 Steps

to Learning-Focused Advocacy Evaluation

1 Evaluation Purpose

Why are you conducting the evaluation?

We have come across five major reasons that funders evaluate their advocacy work:

- Prove population impact. Funders have missions, and missions are usually tied to improving the quality or condition of life for a specific population. Evaluation enables funders to identify how they are meeting their missions—that is, how people's lives are improving because of philanthropic efforts.
- Accountability. We all seem to work under microscopes these days. This increased scrutiny is beneficial—it compels us to do our best work. Evaluation is closely tied to accountability; it creates data and information that can be shared with important audiences, like managers, boards of directors, the media, and the general public.
- Assess strategy success. In the journey to long-term advocacy change, there is usually more than one route, or advocacy strategy, that could get you there. Measuring the success of various strategies informs course corrections; if one strategy isn't working, you can employ another one that will.
- Understand progress. Successful strategies are great, but they exist to serve the journey's destination: ultimate advocacy victory. You need to know how close (or far) you are from your destination to accurately plan for the work. Is success five years away? Or 20 years?
- Gather learning. Funders are uniquely situated to enjoy a landscape view of the sector. They see across grantees, issue areas, and strategies. From this bird's eye view, funders can learn across the entire landscape and become trusted advocacy advisors to their partners.

Consider why you are interested in evaluating your advocacy work. It may be one or all of these reasons, or another reason altogether. Just be aware that it is difficult (if not impossible) to prove population impact during the course of a traditional grant timeframe. Instead, we suggest focusing evaluation efforts on assessing strategy success, understanding progress, and gathering learning. Prioritizing these three areas naturally leads to increased accountability, as well.

At which level of analysis will the evaluation focus (grantee, initiative/portfolio, foundation-wide, etc.)?

Who will be the audience(s) for the evaluation results?

Think about what level of analysis makes sense for your evaluation. You could start with one grantee or a group of grantees. We suggest starting small if it's your first foray into advocacy evaluation; don't try to evaluate a portfolio of 20 grantees if you have never tried with two or three. Also consider the evaluation audience: who will you share findings with, and why? These questions have to be answered before the evaluation begins.

2 Roles and Responsibilities

What role will you play?

We'll start with the assumption that you want your grantee(s) to benefit from the evaluation, too. We suggest working with your grantee(s) and evaluator (we'll talk more about that shortly) and forming an evaluation workgroup for the duration of the evaluation.

An evaluation workgroup is a great way to keep a group of people with complementary skills, experiences, and responsibilities focused on the evaluation. Set up a regular meeting schedule—every two weeks, once a month, or another time frame that makes sense for the pace and structure of the advocacy and evaluation work. The evaluation workgroup should be charged to use evaluation findings for course corrections. Empower the workgroup to use data—for decisions about activities and strategies, and changes to the evaluation as the advocacy work evolves.

Be actively involved in the evaluation. Develop trust and rapport with grantees, and build an advocacy knowledge base they can draw on.

Be actively involved in the evaluation. Develop trust and rapport with grantees, and an advocacy knowledge base they can draw on.

What is the grantee's role?

How will you ensure buy-in from participating grantees?

To get the most out of your evaluation, involve your grantees from the outset in a meaningful capacity. Form an evaluation workgroup constituted of grantees, evaluators, other important stakeholders, and yourself. Valuing their input will secure their support for the evaluation. Consider their capacity to participate in evaluation: will it require additional funding, resources, or technical assistance?

Who will be the evaluator?

Next, tackle the question of who will actually evaluate the work. Foundation evaluators, evaluation consultants, and internal evaluators (within the grantee organization) are all viable options.

In initial experiences with learning-focused advocacy evaluation, we recommend involving evaluation consultants. There are advantages of working with a consultant: their objectivity is less likely to be questioned; and since the funder/grantee is a client (i.e., it pays the consultant's bills), the work has top priority. As the grantee's capacity for advocacy evaluation grows, we recommend transitioning to internal evaluators as possible. Handing off responsibility from external evaluators to internal evaluators more deeply invests grantees in the learning-focused advocacy evaluation process.

Regardless of what type of evaluator you choose, establish an evaluation workgroup.

3 Theory of Change

What are the short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals of your grant making initiative?

What are your grantees' goals?

How do grantee advocacy goals map with your goals?

When we say "theory of change" we mean a description of how you're going to move from Point A (what the situation is right now) to Point B (the ideal situation you would like to get to), the strategies you plan to use, and the changes (or outcomes) that will happen along the way. In evaluation, sometimes the theory of change is from the funder's perspective, and sometimes it is from the grantee's perspective.

If you choose to create the theory of change from your perspective, involve your grantee(s). If you choose to ask grantees to develop the theory of change from their perspective, make sure there is alignment between their plans and yours.

A theory of change is a valuable tool, but the process of creating it is just as important. The process builds consensus about what you plan to do to move closer to Point B. Once you have a theory of change, you can use it to communicate and bring others on board with your idea.

It's important to revisit your theory of change; don't let it stagnate. Check back on it as your work progresses, and don't hesitate to revise the document to reflect changing strategies and anticipated goals.

A theory of change is a valuable tool, but the process of creating it is just as important. It's important to revisit your theory of change; don't let it stagnate.

4 What to Measure

Which external changes will the evaluation measure?

We've used the words "goals" and "success," but we haven't given a definition or examples. In the previous step we discussed how the theory of change process helps you describe what success looks like. In addition to those changes that you hope to effect, also think about these ways of talking about success:

- Build support/allies. Advocacy work is often grueling and long-term. Assess advocates' ability to gain strength by working with others. Do they enter into partnerships and coalitions if it makes sense? Are they developing new generations of leaders? Are they recruiting individuals and organizations with specialized skills, such as media strategy, web strategy, research, or grassroots organizing?
- Read/react to opponents. Sometimes, a cause has clear opponents—for example, environmental advocates versus industrial interests, or pro-life activists against pro-choice activists. But there are other kinds of opposition that are less obvious. For example, one organization may be working on public school reform, and another may be working on environmental reform, but they are both trying to get face time with the same legislator or donations from the same community. The environmentalists may ideologically support public school reform, but they need to put their issue first. Advocates need to be aware of all of their opponents, not just the obvious ones. They need to devote time to reading and reacting to their opponents' activities. Assess their ability to identify opponents, to anticipate their moves, and to minimize any negative effects.
- Read/react to the climate. The climate (in a political, social, and economic sense) influences advocates' ability to be successful. In a favorable climate, advocates can make larger strides. In an unfavorable climate, success may simply be maintaining the status quo, or limiting the impact of opponents' work. Assess advocates' awareness of the changing environment and readiness to take advantage of "opportunity windows"—periods in which the environment is aligned in their favor and they are more likely to achieve success.
- Make progress with decision makers. Once advocates have identified decision makers for their issue, assess their ability to attract support. Begin by working with advocates to define decision makers' current level of support for (or opposition to) the issue. Are decision makers unaware, opposed, neutral, supportive, or a champion? Encourage advocates to set targets for how they will grow their support base—such as informing people about an issue if they are unaware, or making a supporter into a champion.

Including an assessment of these types of changes as part of the evaluation will bring new strength to decision making and strategy.

Which internal changes will the evaluation measure?

All the changes discussed above are external changes—changes that happen outside of the advocacy organization. To be effective over the long term, advocates also need to build and measure their *internal* capacity. Learning-focused advocacy evaluation assesses internal changes such as increased staff capacity, lower staff turnover, and improved communications and knowledge sharing. These changes happen within the organization. Because of internal improvements in the organization's capacity, advocates can have the strength to see their cause through to the end.

What is the evaluation timeline through the next few months?

In addition to *what* you plan to measure, also think about *when* you should measure. Are there times that are better to gather information? Are there times like strategy meetings or board meetings when you will need specific data for decision making?

Work with the evaluator to combine all of this information—assessments against the theory of change, the external changes you plan to measure, the internal changes you plan to measure, and any important deadlines—into an evaluation plan.

5 Methodology and Data Collection

We recommend evaluation designs structured to collect and produce information *during* advocacy work.

What evaluation methodology will meet your needs?

The purpose of learning-focused evaluation is to have information at your fingertips. Then you can learn about your work, make informed decisions, and be more likely to achieve success. Evaluation designs such as summative, quasi-experimental, and experimental are less suited to this task. We recommend designs that collect and produce information during advocacy work. We have found that formative and developmental evaluation designs produce valuable information within acceptable timeframes.

- Formative evaluation is conducted as a program or effort is implemented. The evaluation assesses program results against a program plan agreed to at the outset. The purpose of formative evaluation is to evaluate actual versus expected: to inform future iterations of the work, or to know to adjust strategy to achieve expected results.
- Developmental evaluation holds particular promise for advocacy work. Coined by Michael Quinn Patton (1994), developmental evaluation seeks to "provide feedback and support developmental decision making and course corrections along the emergent path." ("Developmental Evaluation," Evaluation Practice 15 (4): 311-320). Developmental evaluation is distinguished by its flexibility in complex contexts. It is most suitable in contexts—like advocacy—that have many moving parts, and in which outcomes and pathways to success are unclear. It accepts that progress toward a goal may be the only measure of success, particularly in the short term.

What data collection approaches best fit the evaluation?

Once you have worked with an evaluator to choose an evaluation design, the next decision is how you will collect data. For the most part, this will be done by the evaluator. Identify data that grantees are already collecting, and strengthen those systems to make them more systematic and rigorous. Next, what new data will you need to collect as identified by the theory of change and evaluation plan? How much time and resources will it take to get the system up and running, and to maintain it?

We commonly describe evaluation data in two categories:

- Monitoring and Tracking refers to ongoing, systematic data collection, such as media tracking, meeting tracking, etc. This type of information is helpful for generating trend data to gauge progress over time. Most advocates are already collecting similar information, and the evaluation will seek to build on and strengthen existing systems.
- Telling the Story adds the context. If media tracking (as part of monitoring and tracking) reports that advocates are getting more earned media, the evaluation can assess a sample of media articles and tell the story: analyze the nuances and changes of the media portrayal over time. What has changed? What has remained the same? Telling the story and linking seemingly disparate pieces of information allows others to understand the complexities of the environment and work, and the choices made along the way.

Using these two types of information together paints a more vibrant and clear picture, illustrating not only the what, but the how and why of the advocacy work.

6 Analysis, Reflection, and Data Use

How often should you analyze and reflect on the data the evaluation has collected?

Who should be a part of the group that regularly reviews the data?

Which data is shared with which audience?

Collecting good data wins battles. Using that data for decision making wins campaigns.

It is important to be systematic when collecting data. It is just as important to be systematic when analyzing and using data. After all, data collection isn't the purpose of an evaluation. The purpose is what you do with the data after you have collected it—use it to guide strategy, allocate resources, or communicate.

Regularly convene the evaluation workgroup to review new evaluation findings, draw relationships and connections between the data and the advocacy work, and make course corrections.

The information generated by the evaluation also has another purpose. You can share evaluation findings with stakeholders, such as boards of directors, peers, the media, community members—anyone you want to keep informed about your work.

7 Communications and Reporting

Who should be involved in evaluation check-ins?

How often should the group convene?

There are often three groups involved in an evaluation: advocates, evaluators, and funders. More often than not, the three groups lack regular, meaningful venues for communication. CC-ing your grantees on an email to your evaluator is not enough. Ideally, an evaluation should convene representatives of all three groups regularly. What we're recommending are open (and often-used!) lines of communication between the three audiences. The easiest way to get started is to schedule regular check-in calls or meetings. A monthly or quarterly meeting to examine the evaluation data and review progress will let you improve the evaluation plan as it is implemented.

What evaluation reporting schedule best supports your work and that of your grantees?

Annual reports can be great communication tools, but they present information too late for many uses. Instead of limiting yourself to an annual or quarterly report, devise a reporting schedule that meets the needs of everyone involved. Formal evaluation reports might not be necessary at all—unless that is what makes sense to the entire group. Don't be afraid to suggest more frequent, informal methods and venues for sharing evaluation updates. You can still have accountability without annual reports. In fact, we think more frequent and meaningful sharing of information is even more likely to bring about real accountability.

8 Grant Making Decisions

Should you offer multi-year grants?

Should you offer general operating support?

Though it's not technically part of evaluation, how you structure your grant making has profound effects on the success of the advocacy work and what you can realistically learn from the evaluation. We've mentioned a few times the long-term nature of advocacy work. Why make a one-year grant for a social change effort that will take years, or decades, to accomplish? Consider multi-year grants. In addition to allowing grantees to make more ambitious work plans, you'll also be able to learn more from the evaluation, and therefore grow your advocacy expertise.

The type of support you offer also makes a difference. The environments that advocates operate in are wildly variable. Success can hinge on their being able to quickly switch from one approach to another. If you earmark grant funds for a particular strategy, advocates are less able to respond to changes in their environment. You want to support your grantees, not tie them down. Unrestricted or operating support gives grantees the maneuverability they need to be successful and eventually outrun their opponents.

9 Checking the Big Picture

Do your responses for Steps 1 – 8 support each other?

Once you've addressed each of these sections (Evaluation Purpose through Grant Making Decisions), go back and review your notes and thoughts. Reflect on the evaluation purpose you identified: Will your subsequent choices support that purpose? Is the theory of change logical and realistic? Are you striking a balance between ideal data collection—everything you'd like to collect—and the realistic—the most valuable and powerful data necessary for decision making and learning? Do you have a plan for how to analyze and use the data once it is collected?

If anything seems out of line, don't hesitate to modifying the evaluation. In fact, if anything seems awry during the course of the evaluation, bring it to the evaluation workgroup for consideration. The advocacy work will inevitably change over time, and so too should the evaluation.

How you structure your grantmaking has profound effects on the success of your grantees' advocacy work.

Learn More

Evaluating advocacy work is a challenge—we can't deny that. We hope this guide has shown you that it's a challenge you can meet. We are all working to change the world. Learning-focused evaluation gives us the knowledge we need to see that change through.

Read about Innovation Network's advocacy evaluation work:
www.innonet.org/advocacy

Innovation Network maintains an online database of evaluation tools and resources, including more than 130 resources for advocacy evaluation. Free registration is required.
www.innonet.org/resources

Pathfinder: A Practical Guide to Advocacy Evaluation

This is the Funder edition of the Pathfinder series. Tailored editions for advocates and evaluators are also available on our website.

The following Innovation Network staff contributed to the Pathfinder series:

Johanna Morariu
Ehren Reed
Kathy Brennan
Andy Stamp
Simone Parrish
Veena Pankaj
Lily Zandniapour

The Pathfinder series was designed by:
Lynne Smyers, SmyersDesign.com

innovation network

TRANSFORMING EVALUATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

INNOVATION NETWORK, INC.

202.728.0727 *phone* • 202.728.0136 *fax*

www.innonet.org • info@innonet.org