

SOME THOUGHTS ON EVALUATION

Paul Holden & William Spicer

August 15, 2019

Here are Maryo's takeaways:

- Evaluation is first and foremost about clarity of thinking and asking the right questions. That's where you should spend a significant amount of your time!
- Evaluation is first and foremost for YOU. What do you want to learn in order to improve what you are doing? Some of the most important things will be what you find out that you aren't doing that well, or may guide you to examine things you didn't even know were problems. All this is good! Of course your funders and donors will want testimonials, stories, affirmations that their money is doing good. But remember, these are two distinct things (and the latter is not the focus of this workshop).
- The most vital part of evaluation is clear thinking up front. Your mission is broad, but as your strategic plan drills down and becomes more specific, you will be more able to evaluate – “did we do a good job at X?” For example, your mission may be to “serve the whole community,” but you can parse “the community” into specific groups and ask, “Which groups are not being served?” and then devise ways to serve them, and see whether anything changes for that group of people.
- In many, maybe most, cases, you probably can't know whether you are making a genuine long-term, life-changing impact. But you can collect “indicators” – short-term changes in behavior, condition, attitude, knowledge – that suggest that you're on the right track. There is also likely a good deal of research out there that ties what you are doing to long term change, so there may be places where you don't need to do a “quick and dirty” evaluation since, in effect, it has already been done for you. No need to reinvent that particular wheel! Look for research when relevant.
- It can be expensive to do. You can't evaluate everything. Decide where the most important places to put staff time, as well as money, are – to maximize your learning. Staff time can be a heavy cost, and nonprofits tend to pile more and more upon their staff, and boards or directors may want to show results for everything – and what they get is staff burnout. So recognize the costs and be strategic about the most important things you need to know.
- Recognize that “more” (which is often fairly easy to measure) is not always “better.” If what you need to do is consolidate your impact, deepen it, how can you measure that? How can you develop “indicators” that let you know that you are at capacity, for now at least?
- Be clear about the difference between “deepening impact for your current users” and “reaching everyone.” A survey of people who already attend your event may realistically be used to improve that experience for them (and people like them) next time. But if your intent is to reach people who are not already attending, a survey is not likely to be a good strategy. Reaching the broader population or groups you're not already serving often requires technical survey design. This is likely outside your staff's skillset and will start to cost you a good deal of money. So, be clear what you are trying to find out!
- Summary: Step 1: Feel comfortable in your strategic plan and the clear direction it gives your organization. Step 2: From the plan, identify measurable objectives and outcomes that can be evaluated. Step 3: Set up the “right” methodology with the “right” data system for what you're trying to measure. Step 4: Know how to interpret the data in a meaningful way that will prove to be both practical and informative.