EVALUATION: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

What is the basic idea?

Evaluation is something you do, not for a funder, but for yourself. Did you use your scarce resources in a program that changes a situation for someone? You, as a responsible non-profit, need to answer "yes" to this question. Responsible funders want to invest in social change, so they seek applicants who not only do cool programs, but document the changes.

Change is the word to remember. You know how you want lives to be changed for the better. You presumably know how to recognize whether something changed or not.

Systematically collecting evidence of this change is the process of evaluation.

That's the single big idea.

But first, step back

The most important first step is to consider the "issue" that your organization was created to address (your mission), or that your program idea will be addressing. "Issue" refers to the "why." What is the situation that needs to be eliminated, remedied, enhanced – and why? Sometimes the "why" is obvious – people must have food and shelter. Sometimes it's not so obvious – why should kids have good, nutritious food? Sometimes it's even less obvious – why should people have access to world-class cultural experiences? Think through the "why" before you come up with the "what" – your program idea.

Evaluation refers to documenting a change that addresses the issue – the "why."

What are key elements?

Distinguishing between counting and evaluating:

A lot of people confuse "program monitoring" with evaluation. They are different.

- "Monitoring" refers to counting – number of people involved, number of performances or exhibits or sportsmeets, number of press releases, etc.   Of course you need to describe these things; you are spending your resources (and the funder's) on them, after all.
- "Evaluation" refers to changing -   just coming to a performance, exhibit or participating in a sport doesn't say anything about whether it changed anyone's life. And that's the meat of the evaluation process. How did being at the concert change:
  - A participant's knowledge?
  - A participant's behavior?
  - A participant's attitude?
  - A participant's skillset?
  - A participant's condition ("I didn't have a group of like-minded friends before, now I do")?

Distinguishing between end of grant period change and long-term change:

At the end of a workshop a participant may have acquired a certain skillset, but the real question is, did she use that skillset later in a way that made her life different? So there are short-term changes (at the end of the grant period) and long-term changes (later in life). That, of course, is what you really are all about.

Typically you are held accountable for the change that happens to people at the end of the grant period. But if you could link these changes to research that shows that these short-term changes really do lead to

long-term changes, you will get a ton of extra credit in the funder's eyes. Does learning about good nutrition when you are 13 correlate with a longer, healthier life…can you point to a study that shows this?

Being clear about what you want and what you will measure:

- What situation do you want to change for a given group of people?
- What is realistic to expect with your program: how many of the participants do you expect will change in what way?
- How will you collect information to show that the change has occurred?
- Can you correlate this short-term change to research that suggests that a long-term change (which is your real goal!) will happen?

Do you need an outside evaluator?

Collecting the information doesn't have to be rocket science. There are times when you want and maybe need an outside evaluator (make sure you involve them in the planning of the project) and you should budget accordingly. But often you can figure out a way that's not expensive to document your short-term changes. You want the best process, conducted by the right "expert."

- In a classic example, a children's museum asked its custodians to compare the scuffs, crumbs and messiness of an area in front of a new exhibit for toddlers with the scuffs and crumbs and messiness in front of an old exhibit – the idea being that the mess will correspond with the length of time kids spent there, with how excited they were, etc. Of course this isn't hard science! But in this case, daily observations by the janitor were a fine way to track the kids' interest in the exhibit.

- In a program about nutrition education for kids, the best "evaluator" might be parents. Parents could be asked to notice whether kids comment about food; offer to help cook; ask if they can build a garden; make different food choices.

- In an athletic program designed to help build character, program managers might describe – before the program starts – some behaviors which indicate stronger character, and then track whether they see these behaviors happening more after the program than before.

- In a museum program intended to broaden the museum's attendees to include high school kids, a simple comparison of number of high school students who came solo or with peers to the museum before the show, during the show, and – ideally – a year later, would be the obvious way to see if that program was attracting kids – and, once hooked, did the museu keep their interest?

How to put it all together?

The "logic model" – a term you are likely to encounter - is simply a way of systematic thinking, as above. Here it is, along with some of the vocabulary words used in the logic model lingo:

What is the Condition, Behavior, Knowledge, Attitude, or Skill that needs to be changed? [issue]*	Who will be doing this changing? ["target population"]	What activities will comprise our program idea ["outputs"]	What short-term change will we notice, and realistically how many of the people involved will make this change ["outcomes"]	What will we do to find out if this change has occurred? [methodology]	What long-term change do we desire? [often called "impacts"]	Can we link our short-term change with probable long-term change?

That's what CFGV wants to know: WHY you are doing the program at all (the issue), WHO will be changed, WHAT is the nature of the change, HOW you will measure the change, and WHETHER (optional, but terrific if you can!) you can link the end-of-grant change to some longer-term, life- or community- or environment- change.

Make sure you are identifying the REAL situation that needs changing. In other words, don't say that "the problem is that there isn't enough music education here." Music education is the solution to ….what? Or that "the problem is that there isn't a youth soccer league here." The creation of a soccer league is the solution to …what? Or that "the problem is that we don't have things in the museum well documented." Documentation is a solution to …what? Otherwise, you are just starting with the thing you already want to do, rather than starting with the issue and coming up with a program that responds to the issue!