Basic Guide to Outcomes-Based Evaluation for Nonprofit Organizations with Very Limited Resources

http://managementhelp.org/evaluatn/outcomes.htm

Được cho phép dịch sang tiếng Việt bởi:

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Adapted from the Field Guide to Nonprofit Program Design, Marketing and Evaluation.

Applies to nonprofits.

Description

This document provides guidance toward basic planning and implementation of an outcomes-based evaluation process (also called outcomes evaluation) in nonprofit organizations. This document provides basic guidance -- particularly to small nonprofits with very limited resources.

NOTE: This free, basic, online guide makes occasional references to certain pages in the United Way of America's book, *Measuring Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach* (1996). That United Way book is an excellent resource! However, it can be somewhat overwhelming for nonprofits that have very limited resources. This free online guide (that are reading now) can help nonprofits carry out their own basic outcomes evaluation planning. This online guide can also help small nonprofits to make the most of that United Way book -- however, you *do not* have to have that United Way book in order to carry out your own basic outcomes evaluation plan by using this online guide. (Still, small nonprofits are encouraged to get the United Way book, for example, to later round out basic evaluation plans developed from this online guide and/or to learn more than provided in this basic guide about outcomes evaluation. To get the United Way book, call 703-212-6300 and ask about item #0989.)

NOTE: Outcomes-based evaluation is but one type of evaluation -- there are many types of evaluations. The reader would gain deeper understanding about outcomes-based evaluation by reading about the broader topic of evaluation. To do so, read Basic Guide to Program Evaluation. This online basic guide about outcomes-based evaluation was designed by modified the Basic Guide to Program Evaluation.

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Reasons for Priority on Implementing Outcomes-Based Evaluation

- There are decreasing funds for nonprofits
- Yet there are increasing community needs
- Thus, there is more focus on whether nonprofit programs are really making a difference -- and outcomes evaluation focuses on whether programs are really making a difference for clients
- Previous evaluation measures were on, for example, how much money spent, number of people served and on client satisfaction -- these measures don't really assess impacts on clients
- Outcomes evaluation looks at impacts/benefits to clients during and after participation in your programs

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Basic Principles for Small Nonprofits to Remember Before Starting

Nonprofit personnel do not have to be experts in outcomes-based evaluation in order to carry out a useful outcomes evaluation plan.

- In most major activities in life and work, there is a "20% of effort that generates 80% of the results". This basic guide will give you the direction to accomplish that 20% needed to develop an outcomes evaluation plan for your organization.
- Once you've carried out the guidelines in this basic guide, you can probably let experience and funders help you with the rest of your outcomes evaluation planning, particularly as you implement your evaluation plan during its first year.
- In life (particularly for us adults), problems exist often because we're making things far too complex, not because we're making things far too simple. Often, people who are new to evaluation get "mindcramp", that is, they think too hard about evaluation. It's actually a fairly simple notion -- just don't think so hard about it!
- Start small, start now and grow as you're able.
- Ready, fire, aim!

What is Outcomes-Based Evaluation?

A Basic Definition

As noted above, outcomes evaluation looks at impacts/benefits/changes to your clients (as a result of your program(s) efforts) during and/or after their participation in your programs. Outcomes evaluation can examine these changes in the short-term, intermediate term and long-term (we'll talk more about this later on below.)

Basic Components and Key Terms in Outcomes Evaluation

Outcomes evaluation is often described first by looking at its basic components. Outcomes evaluation looks at programs as systems that have inputs, activities/processes, outputs and outcomes -- this system's view is useful in examining any program!

- **Inputs** –
  These are materials and resources that the program uses in its activities, or processes, to serve clients, eg, equipment, staff, volunteers, facilities, money, etc. These are often easy to identify and many of the inputs seem common to many organizations and programs.
- **Activities** –
  These are the activities, or processes, that the program undertakes with/to the client in order to meet the clients' needs, for example, teaching, counseling, sheltering, feeding, clothing, etc. Note that when identifying

the activities in a program, the focus is still pretty much on the organization or program itself, and still is not so much on actual changes in the client.

- **Outputs** –
These are the units of service regarding your program, for example, the number of people taught, counseled, sheltered, fed, clothed, etc. The number of clients served, books published, etc., very often indicates nothing at all about the actual impacts/benefits/changes in your clients who went through the program -- the number of clients served merely indicates the numerical number of clients who went through your program.
- **Outcomes** –
These are actual impacts/benefits/changes for participants during or after your program
-- for example, for a smoking cessation program, an outcome might be "participants quit smoking" (notice that this outcome is quite different than outputs, such as the "number of clients who went through the cessation program")
-- These changes, or outcomes, are usually expressed in terms of:
-- -- knowledge and skills (these are often considered to be rather short-term outcomes)
-- -- behaviors (these are often considered to be rather intermediate-term outcomes)
-- -- values, conditions and status (these are often considered to be rather long-term outcomes)
- **Outcome targets** –
These are the number and percent of participants that you want to achieve the outcome, for example, an outcome goal of 5,000 teens (10% of teens in Indianapolis) who quit smoking over the next year
- **Outcome indicators** –
These are observable and measurable "milestones" toward an outcome target. These are what you'd see, hear, read, etc., that would indicate to you whether you're making any progress toward your outcome target or not, for example, the number and percent of teen participants who quit smoking right after the program and six months after the program -- these indicators give you a strong impression as to whether 5,000 teens will quit or not over the next year from completing your program.

NOTE: Take a few minutes and really notice the differences between:
-- Outputs (which indicate hardly anything about the changes in clients -- they're usually just numbers)
-- Outcomes (which indicate true changes in your clients)
-- Outcome targets (which specify how much of your outcome you hope to achieve)
-- Outcome indicators (which you can see, hear, read, etc. and suggest that you're making progress toward your outcome target or not)

Common Myths to Get Out of the Way Before You Start Planning

Myth: Evaluation is a complex science. I don't have time to learn it!

No! It's a practical activity. If you can run an organization, you can surely implement an evaluation process!

Myth: It's an event to get over with and then move on!

No! Outcomes evaluation is an ongoing process. It takes months to develop, test and polish -- *however,* many of the activities required to carry out outcomes evaluation are activities that you're either already doing or you should be doing. Read on ...

Myth: Evaluation is a whole new set of activities – we don't have the resources

No! Most of these activities in the outcomes evaluation process are normal management activities that need to be carried out anyway in order to evolve your organization to the next level.

Myth: There's a "right" way to do outcomes evaluation. What if I don't get it right?

No! Each outcomes evaluation process is somewhat different, depending on the needs and nature of the nonprofit organization and its programs. Consequently, each nonprofit is the "expert" at their outcomes plan. Therefore, start simple, but start and learn as you go along in your outcomes planning and implementation.

Myth: Funders will accept or reject my outcomes plan

No! Enlightened funders will (at least, should?) work with you, for example, to polish your outcomes, indicators and outcomes targets. Especially if your's is a new nonprofit and/or new program, then you very likely will need some help -- and time -- to develop and polish your outcomes plan.

Myth: I always know what my clients need – I don't need outcomes evaluation to tell me if I'm really meeting the needs of my clients or not

You don’t always know what you don’t know about the needs of your clients – outcomes evaluation helps ensure that you always know the needs of your clients. Outcomes evaluation sets up structures in your organization so that you and your organization are very likely *always* focused on the current needs of your clients. Also, you won’t always be around – outcomes help ensure that your organization is always focused on the most appropriate, current needs of clients even after you've left your organization.

Planning Any Type of Evaluation Includes Answers to These Very Basic Questions

Evaluation often seems like a "heavy", complex activity to those who are not familiar with the real nature of evaluation. Actually, planning any kind of evaluation often requires answers to some very basic questions, including:

- What decisions do you want to be able to make as a result of your evaluation?
- Who are primary audiences for the results?
- What kinds of info are needed?
- When is info needed?
- Where get that info and how?
- What resources are available to get the info, analyze it and report it?
- How report that info in useful fashion?

Planning Your Outcomes Evaluation -- Step 1: Getting Ready

- Read Step 1 (Chapter 1) of UW book *Measuring Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach* (1996) if you have it (otherwise, you'll still benefit from this section on this web page)
- You can very likely draft your own version of most of your outcomes evaluation plan and then have others review your drafts of those sections of the plan. (This "short-cut" approach to outcomes evaluation planning might be questioned by some experts on outcomes -- but then small nonprofits rarely have the resources to fully carry out the comprehensive and detailed steps often recommended by outcomes evaluation resources.)
- Remember that you don’t have to be an expert to start the planning process -- each plan is different -- ultimately, you're the expert at your process and your plan
- Do consider getting a grant to support development of your plan, eg, maybe $3,000 to $5,000, particularly to have evaluation expertise to review your plans and your methods of data collection -- if you can't get this grant, you still can proceed with your plan
- DO tap the many resources available to help you (useful online resources are listed below)
- Now pick one program to evaluate that has a reasonably clear group of clients and clear methods to provide services to them -- in other words, make sure that you have a program to evaluate!
- NOTE: Soon, you should train at least one board member and staff member about outcomes -- consider using this very basic online guide

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Planning Your Outcomes Evaluation -- Step 2: Choosing Outcomes

Preparation

- Note that a logic model for your program is depiction of inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes (short-term, intermediate and long-term) regarding your program. Take a look at the information in Introduction to Program Logic Model
- Reread the myths listed above – don't worry about competing the "perfect" logic model – ultimately, you're the expert here

Now Identify Your Outcomes (including short-term, intermediate and long-term)

- Now fill in a logic model for the program to which you want to apply outcomes-based evaluation -- see the example logic model and framework -- BUT first read the next several bullets below in this section:
- To identify outcomes, consider: "enhanced …", "increased …", "more …", "new …", "altered …", etc.
- Note that it can be quite a challenge to identify outcomes for some types of programs, including those that are preventative (health programs, etc.), developmental (educational, etc.), or "one-time" or anonymous (food shelves, etc.) in nature. In these cases, it's fair to give your best shot to outcomes planning and then learn more as you actually apply your outcomes evaluation plan. Also seek help and ideas about outcomes from other nonprofits that provide services similar to yours. Programs that are remedial in nature (that is, that are geared to address current and observable problems, such as teen delinquency, etc.) are often easier to associate with outcomes.
- Start with short-term outcomes
- Regarding identifying short-term outcomes, think 0-6 months:
  -- Imagine your client in the program or a day after leaving the program
  -- What knowledge and skills do you prefer? Actually see?
- Regarding identifying intermediate outcomes, think 3-9 months:
  -- Imagine your client 3-9 months after leaving the program
  -- What behaviors do you prefer? Actually see?
- Regarding long-term outcomes, think 6-12 months:
  -- Imagine your client 6-12 months after leaving the program
  -- What values, attitudes, status would you prefer to be the fullest extent of benefit for the client? Actually see?
- Now "chain" the short-term, intermediate- and long-term outcomes by applying the following sentence to them:
  -- "if this short-term occurs, then the intermediate occurs, and if this intermediate occurs, then this long-term occurs -- AGAIN, don't worry about getting it perfect -- trust your intuition

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Planning Your Outcomes Evaluation -- Step 3: Selecting Indicators

Preparation

- Read Step 3 in UW book *Measuring Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach* (1996) if you have it (otherwise, you'll still benefit from this section on this web page) – especially look at examples on pages 66-67.
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- Identify at least one indicator per outcome (note that sometimes indicators are called performance standards)
- When selecting indicators, ask:
  -- What would I see, hear, read about clients that means progress toward the outcome?
  -- Include numbers and percent regarding the client's behavior , eg, "2,000 of the participants (50%) of our participants will quick smoking by the end of the program" and "3,000 of the participants (75%) of our

participants will quick smoking one month after the program"
-- If is your first outcomes plan that you've ever done or the program is just getting started, then don't spend a great deal of time trying to find the perfect numbers and percentages for your indicators

- Fill in your indicators in the Framework for a Basic Outcomes-Based Evaluation Plan. Also, carry over the outcomes you identified from the example logic model to the basic evaluation plan.

Planning Your Outcomes Evaluation -- Step 4: Getting Data/Information

Preparation

- Read Step 4 in UW book *Measuring Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach* (1996) if you have it (otherwise, you'll still benefit from this section on this web page) -- especially look at
  -- Page 86 (+/-'s of data sources)
  -- Page 88 (major data collection methods)
  -- Pages 90-93
- A useful resource at this point might be Overview of Useful Methods to Collect Information
- Now might be the best time to get some evaluation expertise, for example, a consultant or utilize a local nonprofit service provider to help you review your drafted outcomes and indicators. The expert is also worth their "weight in gold" when reviewing methods to collect data.

Get Your Work Reviewed Now By Others

- If you've drafted outcomes and indicators yourself, get them reviewed by:
  -- Board members
  -- Staff
  -- Client in program? Finished with the program?
  -- Evaluation consultant?

Identify Data Sources and Methods to Collect Data

- For each indicator, identify what information you will need to collect/measure to assess that indicator. Consider:
  -- Current program records and data collection
  -- What you see during the program
  -- Ask staff for ideas
- Is it practical to get that data?
  -- What will it cost?
  -- Who will do it?
  -- How can you make the time?
- When to collect data?
  -- Depends on indicator
  -- Consider: before/after program, 6 months after, 12 months after
- Data collection methods:
  -- Questionnaires?
  -- Interviews?
  -- Surveys?
  -- Document review?
  -- Other(s)?
- Get evaluation consultant/expertise?
- Pretest your data collection methods (eg, have a few staff quickly answer the questionnaires to ensure the questions are understandable)
- Write a brief procedure to specify:
  -- What data is collected?
  -- Who collects it?

-- How they collect it?
-- When they collect it?
-- What do they do with it?

Planning Your Outcomes Evaluation -- Step 5: Piloting/Testing

- If your's is a small nonprofit, then it's very likely that you don't have nearly the resources to invest in applying your complete outcomes evaluation process in order to test it out.
- In that case, then the first year of applying your outcomes process is the same as piloting your process.
- During the first year, notice problems and improvements, etc.
- Document these in your evaluations plan.
- If something happens to you so that you leave the organization, the organization should not have to completely recreate an outcomes plan. Be sure that write down any suggestions to improve the plan.

Planning Your Outcomes Evaluation -- Step 6: Analyzing/Reporting

Preparation

- Strongly consider getting evaluation expertise now to review, not only your methods of data collection mentioned above, but also how you can analyze the data that you collect and how to report results of that analyses.
- Before you analyze your data, *always* make and retain copies of your data.

Analyzing Your Data

- For dealing with numerical data with numbers, rankings:
  -- Tabulate the information, i.e., add up the ratings, rankings, yes's, no's for each question.
  -- For ratings and rankings, consider computing a mean, or average, for each question.
  -- Consider conveying the range of answers, e.g., 20 people ranked "1", 30 ranked "2", and 20 people ranked "3".
- To analyze comments, etc. (that is, data that is not numerical in nature):
  -- Read through all the data
  -- Organize comments into similar categories, e.g., concerns, suggestions, strengths, etc.
  -- Label the categories or themes, e.g., concerns, suggestions, etc.
  -- Attempt to identify patterns, or associations and causal relationships in the themes

Reporting Your Evaluation Results

- Level and scope of information in report depends for whom the report is intended, e.g., funders, board, staff, clients, etc.
- Be sure employees have a chance to carefully review and discuss the report before sent out
- Funders will likely require a report that includes executive summary – the summary should highlight key points from the evaluation, and not be a Table of Contents

Example of Evaluation Report Contents

- Title Page (name of the organization that is being, or has a product/service/program that is being, evaluated; date)

- Table of Contents
- Executive Summary (one-page, concise overview of findings and recommendations)
- Purpose of the Report (what type of evaluation(s) was conducted, what decisions are being aided by the findings of the evaluation, who is making the decision, etc.)
- Background About Organization and Product/Service/Program that is being evaluated
  -- a) Organization Description/History
  -- b) Product/Service/Program Description (that is being evaluated)
  -- -- i) Problem Statement (in the case of nonprofits, description of the community need that is being met by the product/service/program)
  -- -- ii) Overall Goal(s) of Product/Service/Program
  -- -- iii) Outcomes (or client/customer impacts) and Performance Measures (that can be measured as indicators toward the outcomes)
  -- -- iv) Activities/Technologies of the Product/Service/Program (general description of how the product/service/program is developed and delivered)
  -- -- v) Staffing (description of the number of personnel and roles in the organization that are relevant to developing and delivering the product/service/program)
- Overall Evaluation Goals (eg, what questions are being answered by the evaluation)
- Methodology
  -- a) Types of data/information that were collected
  -- b) How data/information were collected (what instruments were used, etc.)
  -- c) How data/information were analyzed
  -- d) Limitations of the evaluation (eg, cautions about findings/conclusions and how to use the findings/conclusions, etc.)
- Interpretations and Conclusions (from analysis of the data/information)
- Recommendations (regarding the decisions that must be made about the product/service/program)
- Appendices: content of the appendices depends on the goals of the evaluation report, eg.:
  -- a) Instruments used to collect data/information
  -- b) Data, eg, in tabular format, etc.
  -- c) Testimonials, comments made by users of the product/service/program
  -- d) Case studies of users of the product/service/program
  -- e) Logic model
  -- f) Evaluation plan with specified outcomes, sources to collect data, data collection methods, who will collect data, etc.

Useful Online Resources

Note that specific online resources are listed above in the sections in which those resources are most appropriate.

General Resources

Outcome Measurement Resource Network (lots of useful links from the United Way)
What is a Program Logic Model? (logic model captures inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes)
Economic Outcomes Evaluation Methodology (a little advanced?)
- - - Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation
- - - Analytical Methods in Maternal and Child Health