

# Making Use of Evaluation Data

## STEP 7

Step 6 provided basic techniques for handling and analyzing the raw data after it was collected, through simple quantitative and qualitative methods.

Step 7 looks at what happens after the evaluation, when program leaders are faced with questions about how best to use the results. The final stage should be a catalyst for action and an opportunity to re-engage with the community.

Review results with staff and volunteers  
Responding to the results  
Share lessons learned with stakeholders  
Support your staff to act as program ambassadors  
Closing the evaluation circle

## 7.1 Review results with staff and volunteers

The sequence of planning and conducting a self-evaluation is an opportunity for program managers to either set the agenda of discovery or play a major role in doing so. It is natural for managers, staff and stakeholders to expect that evaluation results will be immediately relevant to their work, since the framework of topics and questions was built upon fundamental program concerns. At first glance, however, some results may seem puzzling, ambiguous or counter-intuitive, while other results may seem obvious and trite.

Unfortunately, research teaches us that,

- a) thinking something is not the same as having data to support it,
- b) results may engender alternative possibilities of interpretation,
- c) sometimes results provide only partial answers and raise additional questions.

To gain additional value from evaluation, program managers share analyzed data with staff and volunteers familiar with day-to-day program operations—utilizing their knowledge and experience to help interpret patterns in the data and what they say about programming. Such consultation may vary from informal one-on-one meetings to group workshops or presentations, depending on the size and structure of the program.

An in-house review of results prior to any public disclosure:

- allows staff and volunteers to see the culmination of the evaluation process
  - how their input can influence decision-making and program direction
  - how their roles may influence program effectiveness
- provides an in-house opportunity to air all viewpoints
- ensures that staff know how results are being interpreted by peers and supervisors
- helps staff/volunteers understand what effort is expected of them and why it is important
- helps build an in-house culture receptive to follow-up evaluation
- helps to make program leadership responsive to concerns and accountable for taking action
- provides an opportunity to explain factors allowing or preventing program change

## 7.2 Responding to the results

After in-house review and input into interpretation of results, managers respond and give the whole exercise meaning by:

- Absorbing lessons
- Supporting promising practices
- Developing approaches to overcome problems
- Formulating new questions
- Taking action
- Communicating results

**Dream big**

**Start small**

**Act now**

Evaluation is no different from other projects embraced by community programmers. It is a process that begins from a broad perspective. It can engender big dreams to improve the overall concept and operation of activities. Yet, to succeed, it should be focused first on particular, immediate and manageable issues. Otherwise, limitations in resources can discourage and bog down community groups overloaded with information. Sometimes, making even limited changes in reaction to evaluation results can have long-lasting impact.

### **Need an example?**

Evaluation results in a tutored literacy program described earlier turned up an unexpected effect: children who had been engaged in the program and benefited from it were disappointed and unhappy when the tutors left at the end of the academic session. Since tutors were university students who would not be returning to the program, there was an abrupt break in all the fledgling relationships that had developed. A procedure was immediately added to soften this parting so that children's attitudes towards the reading experience were not coloured by it. Each tutor wrote a special goodbye letter that explained why the tutor was leaving, talked in detail about what they had done together, praised the child's effort and accomplishments and set out a plan for the future, e.g., 'I hope you keep practising what we have done together and read before bedtime every night.' Tutors also shared their reading strategies with parents to enable them to continue what the children enjoyed. That small change improved attitudes toward the program, left children happier and more motivated to continue their efforts and increased communication between parents, teachers and tutors.

## **7.3 Share lessons learned with stakeholders**

Evaluation results can be categorized according to their relevance and importance for:

- 1) program operation (programming, procedures, staffing),
- 2) interaction with the 'program community' (participants, family, partners),
- 3) broader community (funders, supporters, potential for both.)

Managers can tailor how they will deliver evaluation results to the various stakeholders. Not all stakeholders need or will want the same information or level of detail but will want information about questions they raised initially.

### **Engaging the community**

The final stage of evaluation creates an opportunity to re-involve participants and families, letting them see the connection between their participation in providing data and the overall picture. By promoting and explaining evaluation results, programs can build links in the community, acknowledge what is working and why, and ask for both new ideas and assistance to overcome challenges.

## Methods of information-sharing

A variety of existing opportunities can be used to share evaluation results, e.g., presentations, annual general meetings, volunteer recognition ceremonies. Varied formats can reach different segments of the community: newsletters, flyers, reports, web sites, community newspapers. As with other communication, information should be accessible in tone, vocabulary and language to those it is meant to inform.

## Community responsibility

Bad news will leak out eventually, especially if the evaluation is in response to some public criticism. It is beneficial for community relations if programs seize the initiative from a potentially disheartening review to examine how problems can be addressed and solved. Community residents and youth programmers have the same basic aims—to help the community's children. This can provide the impetus for the support, goodwill and compromise needed to move forward with a strengthened program.

# 7.4 Support your staff to act as program ambassadors

A tactic of successful community groups is to empower and encourage staff and volunteers to spread a positive vision of their community programs, acting as informal ambassadors wherever they go.

Publicize positive findings, both inside and outside the organization, e.g.,

- promising effects of programs on children's skills, knowledge, behaviour and attitudes and
- success in recruiting and helping specially targeted children in the community.

An evaluation can also be a mechanism for advocacy, for publicizing a program, widening community support and targeting funding.

# 7.5 Closing the evaluation circle

## Evaluation as process

The results of an evaluation process lead back to its original purpose. If those results satisfy the original questions, program managers and staff have a direction charted for future program operations. Evaluation can be extremely satisfying. It can show that basic assumptions are sound and can confirm a theory of change. Sufficient

documentation of procedures allows consistent duplication of the program in another setting or with another population. However, a promising evaluation is not the final word on a community program's effectiveness.

Community programs contend with change in every session: different participants, often different personnel, which means that the same level of effectiveness is not guaranteed another time.

Programmers need to repeat the same questions and pose new ones. They need to be ready to adjust programs—look for new solutions to unforeseen challenges—capitalize on unexpected bonuses—learn from lessons—and expand elements that seem most promising.

## Rethinking evaluation

Results may not satisfy the questions you originally posed. Results occasionally find that programs are counter-productive or ineffective in meeting their original objectives.

Factors can relate to the program itself, the theory behind it or the quality of the evaluation.

- Changes might be too subtle to be readily observed or respondents might not have adequate knowledge of either the child or circumstances where some change is noticeable.
- Learning happens in small increments and may not be evident in the early stages or when there are small numbers of participants and informants.

Results may raise other questions about longer-term or delayed effects that demand some follow-up or refinement of the evaluation methods— more data from another session, more children, different sources, closer observation, different questions. The evaluation process is iterative, leading back on itself, engendering more questions and the need for deeper understanding.

## Learning from others' evaluations

Programmers can learn from others' evaluation results as well as from their own. More community groups are engaging in some form of systematic evaluation and posting results on websites and in databases of research associations. Programmers can compare their methods and evaluation results. Following these or similar guidelines—asking appropriate questions, carefully collecting and analyzing data, and filtering it through experience— will enable community programs to build up a bank of knowledge, with realistic solutions to help both programs and children succeed.

Results, for instance, can be influenced by an indicator that is unsuited to capturing the anticipated change because the measurement timeframe is inappropriate, i.e. either program effects build slowly over a longer period after the program ends or were short-lived and are no longer evident.

