



EVALUATIVE THINKING

3. BOARD MEMBERS AND EVALUATION

Many years of participatory evaluation practice show that involvement of multiple stakeholders is beneficial. It is our steadfast belief that evaluators, funders, program providers and their board members can all be meaningfully engaged in program evaluation, but all parties need to be on the same page about the following.

1. Evaluations are partly social (because they involve human beings), partly political (because knowledge is power), and only partly technical (Herman, Morris, Fitz-Gibbons, 1996). All three of these evaluation features, not just technical design, should be considered when stakeholders discuss evaluation.
2. Evaluation data can be collected using **qualitative** methods (e.g., observations, interviews) and/or **quantitative** methods (e.g., surveys, practical testing of subjects). Although there has been much debate about which strategies and types of data are best, current thinking indicates that **both are valuable, can be collected and analyzed rigorously, and can be combined** to address key evaluation questions.
3. There are multiple ways to address most evaluation needs. Different evaluation needs call for different designs, types of data and data collection strategies.

Program evaluations can be conducted from an accountability perspective, but that is not the only reason. They are typically conducted to accomplish one, two or all of the following: to render judgments, to facilitate improvements or to generate new knowledge about a program area. It is critical to carefully specify what program (or program component) is to be evaluated and why the evaluation is being conducted.

Why involve board members or any other stakeholders in evaluation? Because involvement can . . .

- increase the quality of evaluation
- provide opportunities for them to be heard and for them to hear others
- reduce fears and suspicions about the program or evaluation if an environment of openness is established
- help them become sensitized to the multiple perspectives that exist around any program
- contribute to a sense of shared responsibility for the program and the evaluation
help build a momentum that reduces delays, counters roadblocks, and results in lasting involvement

What must board members understand about evaluation?

It is not necessary for all members of the board to have comprehensive knowledge about evaluation. The following are requisites. Board members must understand:

- the working definition for evaluation,
- reasonable outcomes,
- how to commission and pay for evaluation,
- how to report about evaluation findings and what to do with them,
- why evaluative thinking is important, how it can be enhanced, and what they can do to support and inspire it.

This bulletin was developed by Anita Baker with Beth Bruner to help organizations integrate evaluative thinking into their organizational practice. After a successful effort to help organizations build evaluation capacity (see www.brunerfoundation.org for more information about REP 1996-2003), the Bruner Foundation has been working to help organizations use that capacity in other management areas. The Foundation continues pursuing its strong belief that using evaluation skills, specifically identifying key questions of substance, determining what data are needed to answer questions, gathering appropriate data in systematic ways, analyzing data, sharing results, and developing strategies to act on evaluation findings, is valuable in everyday work of organizations. The contents of this bulletin were influenced by the non-profit organizations in Rochester that are former REP partners and ongoing consumers of these efforts, as well as by the work of Michael Quinn Patton, Paul Connolly, Paul Licht, and Peter York, and the many others who thoughtfully add to the evaluation and organizational capacity-building literature.

When and how can board members be involved in evaluation?

Board members can be part of a group that helps focus and conceptualize the evaluation, interpret data and develop action steps, and communicate about evaluation and evaluation results.

During evaluation project initiation, board members can help:

- ⇒ Clarify the evaluation questions and purpose for the evaluation.
- ⇒ Review/refine program logic model including outcomes clarification, indicator identification, target setting.
- ⇒ Select data collection strategies, and specify timelines, products, and evaluation consultants.
- ⇒ Review data collection instruments, administration and analysis plans, and report outlines.

While the evaluation is being conducted, board members can help:

- ⇒ Hear updates on evaluation progress/ preliminary findings, begin to think about communications plans.
- ⇒ Help generate solutions/acquire help for those directly involved in data collection and analysis (if needed).

When the evaluation is completed, board members can help:

- ⇒ Hear presentations of summarized findings, discuss and interpret results and develop action steps.
- ⇒ Determine audiences and formats for evaluation reporting.

To facilitate meaningful involvement of board members, determine who from your board should be part of your stakeholder group while the evaluation is being conceived. Clarify specific roles and work plans that are in alignment with your evaluation timeframe & be clear about optimal and minimum required involvement.

Working With Your Board to Define Program Outcomes, Indicators and Targets

Clarifying which outcomes are expected for your program, and which should be evaluated is some of the hardest work of evaluation and a common focus of stakeholder (i.e., board member) involvement. **Keep the following in mind as you plan for outcomes evaluation.**

- Outcomes, especially long-term outcomes, should not go beyond the program's purpose (i.e., don't project educational outcomes for an employment and training program).
- Outcomes should not go beyond the scope of the target audience (i.e., don't project change throughout the county if you are only serving a small proportion of county residents in a particular neighborhood.)
- Avoid holding a program accountable for outcomes that are tracked and influenced largely by another system, unless there is meaningful interaction with that system regarding outcome change (e.g., don't hold an afterschool program accountable for the outcomes of students at school, unless the afterschool and day school programs are integrated).
- Do not assume that all subpopulations will have similar outcomes (e.g., outcomes may be very different for those with longer program experience; projected targets may have to factor in subgroup effects). Also, be sure to measure outcomes on a timetable that corresponds to logical projections of when outcomes could be accomplished.
- Many outcomes have more than one indicator and indicators may not capture all aspects of an outcome. Identify the set that is believed (or can be agreed) to adequately and accurately signal achievement of an outcome.
- To make judgments about a program (or facilitate improvement), you do not have to measure all indicators for all participants, sampling and snapshots for key indicators can provide ample data for decision-making.
- Set targets, in advance, based on: best professional hunches, external standards (when they are available), past performance (when baseline or initial data are available -- sometimes it's advisable to wait until it is). Do not agree to targets that are unrealistically high or embarrassingly low.

TIPS to Help Organizational Leaders and Board Members Initiate Evaluation

Questions to Ask Before Initiating an Evaluation Design

1) Program and Evaluation Purpose

What is the general purpose of the selected program and how does it contribute to the organization's mission? What are the specific reasons why this program was selected for evaluation? How does this project contribute to the broader field? What is the purpose for this evaluation and what are the possible lessons learned?

2) Implementation and Feasibility

Does the target population of the selected program know about and want to participate in the program? If applicable, have all necessary collaborative agreements been secured? How will the organization guard against implementation impediments such as insufficient recruitment or participation, staff turn over, insufficient program funds?

3) Program Design/Staging

What are the key components of the program, how do they fit together, and how are they expected to contribute to participant outcomes? Has a reasonable program logic model been developed? How will an evaluation project best be staged over time?

4) Outcomes

What program and participant outcomes are expected? How does the organization know when this happens? If applicable, how are program and participant data tracked? What other reporting is currently being conducted?

5) External Assistance and Finances

Will an evaluation consultant be needed to complete the evaluation? If so, how will the consultant be selected? How will the consultant's work be overseen? Will external funding be needed and available to support evaluation of this program? If so, how can that funding be acquired and how does the proposed evaluation fit into the mission of the proposed funder?

Things to Avoid When Working with Evaluation Consultants

- ⇒ Agreeing to a program evaluation design that you do not understand.
- ⇒ Agreeing to a program evaluation where fee payments are not attached to deliverables.
- ⇒ Commissioning a program evaluation on a timetable that is inappropriate for the program.
- ⇒ Commissioning an overly complicated evaluation design, or one for which there is insufficient stakeholder involvement.
- ⇒ Allowing evaluation consultants to conduct overly-complicated or onerous data collection strategies or to use only data collected for other purposes.
- ⇒ Assuming that an evaluation design must ALWAYS include measurement of outcomes. (Sometimes implementation assessment is all that can or should be done.)
- ⇒ Forcing evaluation of outcomes that are inappropriate or beyond the scope of the program.
- ⇒ Developing an unrealistic time-table for evaluation reporting. There will always be a lag between final data collection and reporting.

If you need help to conduct an evaluation, think about this:

Choosing data collection strategies (e.g., surveys, observations, record reviews) depends upon the purpose of the evaluation, the evaluation questions, the time frame, and the available resources. **Evaluation assistance can be obtained from independent technical assistance or evaluation consultants, evaluation or other technical assistance consulting firms, and sometimes universities with graduate programs that include training or projects in program evaluation.** Before you hire any consultant or organization be sure to find out whether they have: **experience with program evaluation, especially with non-profit organizations; basic knowledge of the substantive area being evaluated; good references (from sources you trust); a personal style that fits with your organization's working style.**



EVALUATIVE THINKING

What about governance and Evaluative Thinking?

An organization that regularly uses Evaluative Thinking will:

- have documentation that clearly describes the roles and responsibilities of board members
- insure board goals are in alignment with the strategic plan
- keep its Board apprised of the results of program evaluations
- insure its board uses evaluation data in goal setting and strategic planning
- develop written statements that outlines the ideal make-up (in terms of expertise) of the board
- use a systematic process and timeline for identifying, recruiting, and electing new board members
- identify gaps in expertise for which members should be recruited for the board
- state Board members' terms at the time of their election
- develop a written plan for board leadership succession
- insure that their board evaluates the executive director's performance regularly (e.g., annually)
- require that board members assess executive director performance based on the job description
- require that its board members assess and approve the personnel manual covering personnel policy
- require board members to receive fund raising training which details current grant fund-development and other organizational fund raising
- insure that its board assesses and approves fund raising policies
- require its board members to assess their own fund raising effectiveness
- require its board members to regularly (e.g., annually) evaluate their own work overall
- insure that the Organization's budget is presented, assessed and approved by the board
- involve the board members in evaluation of the organization's progress relative to goals in a long-term strategic plan

Most organizations do not integrate evaluative thinking in their work with their boards in all these ways – rather in many of them.



EVALUATIVE THINKING

How to Use These Bulletins

The *Integrating Evaluative Thinking Bulletins* were developed in response to the continuing need expressed by nonprofit partners to clarify **how** to enhance evaluative thinking and put enhanced evaluation capacity to work. The bulletins are intended to do the following:

- Clarify what evaluative thinking is, why it is important, and who can do it.
- Provide direction regarding the use of the Bruner Foundation's Evaluative Thinking Assessment Tool to inform action plans that will enhance evaluative thinking.
- Describe additional ways that evaluation strategies can be used internally to increase evaluative thinking (e.g., evaluating the effectiveness of staff development efforts or collaborative ventures).
- Help organizations think about creative ways to present and use evaluation findings.
- Provide practical advice on how to hone analytical skills, and use Evaluative Thinking when making decisions about standard organizational procedures including governance, mission development, strategic planning, fund development, leadership, technology, human relations, staff development, alliances and business ventures.

There are 11 individual *Integrating Evaluative Thinking Bulletins* including this edition. They cover the following topics: evaluation basics and definitions, evaluative thinking basics and assessment of evaluative thinking, evaluation and nonprofit boards, commissioning evaluation, collecting, analyzing and using evaluation data, communicating about evaluation, evaluation and technology, evaluation and HR, evaluation and alliances, increasing participation in evaluation and sustaining evaluative thinking. Each bulletin is brief and replete with practical suggestions made by nonprofit partners who reviewed the work (including some very specific pointers highlighted in yellow). A complete set of all Bulletins, as well as other complementary tools and resources are available via the Bruner Foundation website, www.brunerfoundation.org. We encourage all users of the bulletins to:

- Familiarize (or re-familiarize) yourself with basic information about evaluation capacity.
- Orient yourself regarding the Bruner Foundation's Evaluative Thinking Assessment Tool and conduct preliminary assessment in your organization.
- Develop action plans informed by the suggestions found in the bulletins.
- Implement action plans to enhance Evaluative Thinking in your organization.
- Use these specific bulletins as reference materials when needed.
- Visit the Bruner Foundation website Effectiveness Initiatives pages (www.Brunerfoundation.org), to familiarize yourself with the history behind this effort and to access the tools and resources available there.

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