

Evaluation for Better Planning and Management Outcomes

Organizations and their managements are familiar with program development and implementation, including budgeting and operations. These initiatives are often addressed individually and may leave considerations related to program inter-relationships outside the scope of the planning and implementation work. Strategic planning exercises are often undertaken without a good understanding of stakeholder needs or the outcomes of established programs and activities. Without reliable objective information about the value and effectiveness of an organization's programs and initiatives, strategic plans, budgets, and operational plans can fail to address organizational requirements and, consequently, be unable to achieve stated goals and objectives.

Program evaluation is an often overlooked tool that can help associations to better plan, manage, and monitor their programs and activities. Evaluations among other things can be undertaken to determine the value of existing or planned programs, to aid in developing new programs and activities, and, to monitor programs for quality and cost-effectiveness.

Organizations may shy away from program evaluation simply because of the resistance that evaluations often meet. Despite the recognition that an evaluation provides organization-wide benefits a variety of concerns often prevent organizations from undertaking them. These include the time it takes to undertake evaluations; the fear of change that an evaluation may bring on; the lack of understanding of its purpose; and cost. This last consideration is a particular concern for smaller associations who feel that program evaluation is beyond their means.

This, however does not have to be the case. Program evaluations can be undertaken by organizations large and small, provided that certain steps are taken at the onset to ensure that one can be done as cost-effectively as possible. Program evaluation experts are able to surmount all these obstacles in a variety of ways.

In order to be successful in undertaking program evaluation, association management must be committed to the process. Program evaluations must be tailored to the needs and resources available. Methodologies used must be appropriate for addressing evaluation concerns and only information necessary to the evaluation process should be collected.

In conducting evaluations several steps are considered essential and critical to achieving success.

To ensure quality evaluation given limited resources, questions must be precise and targeted to very specific concerns. Evaluation questions should be prioritized and those that are not essential should be eliminated.

Most important, is the involvement of stakeholders throughout the process. First, relevant stakeholders need to be identified. This includes not only staff but also volunteers and external stakeholders as may be required. Questions that require answers must be specified clearly. It is essential that the evaluation be narrowly focused to identify only those areas that are being evaluated. A data collection and analysis plan needs to be formulated and appropriate information collected in order to undertake meaningful analysis.

It is also important to develop a communication plan that will keep all stakeholders involved and informed of the evaluation process, and more importantly, of the outcomes. Finally, an overall management plan for the evaluation needs to be established including specific time lines and the resources needed, including financial and staff requirements.

Evaluation Success Factors

- Commitment to the process
- Clear and precise questions
- Current and reliable data
- Stakeholder involvement
- Effective communication plan
- Solid management plan
- Appropriate resources

Program evaluation may be undertaken to address any number of organizational questions and concerns. In particular, program evaluation is often undertaken for such things as planning, including strategic planning in the development of new programs and activities; determining the cost-effectiveness and or efficiency of existing programs and activities; a quality control measure for accountability and audit purposes; and outcomes focused evaluations that look at the impact programs are having on target audiences and whether the outcomes represent good value for money.

Evaluations of strategic and operational planning initiatives aim to ensure that such exercises are well grounded and that the organization has asked and answered the appropriate questions relative to where it is and where it wants to be. Such evaluations may take place in advance of planning exercises to ensure that they achieve the expected results. These evaluations can also be undertaken to review existing strategic or operational plans to determine whether or not they have been properly crafted to achieve stated objectives. If found wanting, an evaluation can provide recommendations to address any shortcomings.

Process evaluations examine how programs are being implemented, in order to assess whether program outputs are being achieved efficiently. In order to do so, these evaluations consider the form and the function of the programs to see if they are well matched. Process evaluations look at the program delivery chain from its point of origin to the end user level in order to determine if the programs are accessible, appropriate, and satisfying to both the program provider and stakeholders.

Accountability and monitoring evaluations are undertaken when an organization wants to find out if it's programs are being properly managed and generating the expected outputs. Further, such evaluations will address program resources and how they are being utilized. This provides an effective quality control tool and facilitates the revision of policies and standards and the

introduction of any new controls as may be required. The aim of such evaluations is to improve program delivery; the way resources are used, and to generally improve the quality of programs. This is different from evaluations that focus on program outcomes and impacts on stakeholders relative to expectations.

Outcome focused evaluations examine programs from a goal oriented perspective. They aim to discover if programs have had the expected results, what have been the unanticipated results, and whether the outcomes have been seen as positive by all stakeholders. This type of

Evaluation Informs:

- Strategic Planning
- Governance review
- Policy development
- Program implementation
- Effectiveness/Efficiency reviews
- Process analysis
- Quality control
- Outcomes and impact assessment
- Value for money audits

evaluation also provides a control measure and valuable input to the planning cycle during which management reviews and revises goals and objectives, and adjusts programs accordingly.

Program evaluation can be undertaken using a variety of approaches, techniques, and tools. They need to be properly implemented by appropriately trained program evaluators. Among the techniques used in evaluation are needs assessment, focus group interview technique, Delphi technique, nominal group technique, the use of management information systems, and consumer satisfaction surveys.

Depending on the type, the evaluation process usually involves a number of steps beginning with a needs assessment, considered to be the pre-evaluation stage of the process. It involves surveying stakeholders through a variety of means including surveys, focus groups, etc.

For many associations, undertaking a needs assessment is possibly the most important step in any program evaluation. A needs assessment will identify the type and depth of need within the organization stakeholder community, along with the programs and activities currently available to stakeholders. Needs assessment looks at the availability of programs, accessibility of programs, awareness of programs, the level of service integration, and the level of resources and distribution of available resources. These assessments are often undertaken when an organization is developing new programs or where existing programs are being questioned with respect to their validity and effectiveness.

An often overlooked step in the evaluation process is the evaluability assessment which determines what parts of the program are ready to be evaluated and which methodology would be most appropriate. An evaluability assessment may involve reviewing and analyzing program components and activities, the objectives and goals of the program, and an analysis of the cost of assumptions that link program activities to goals. This should follow the needs assessment.

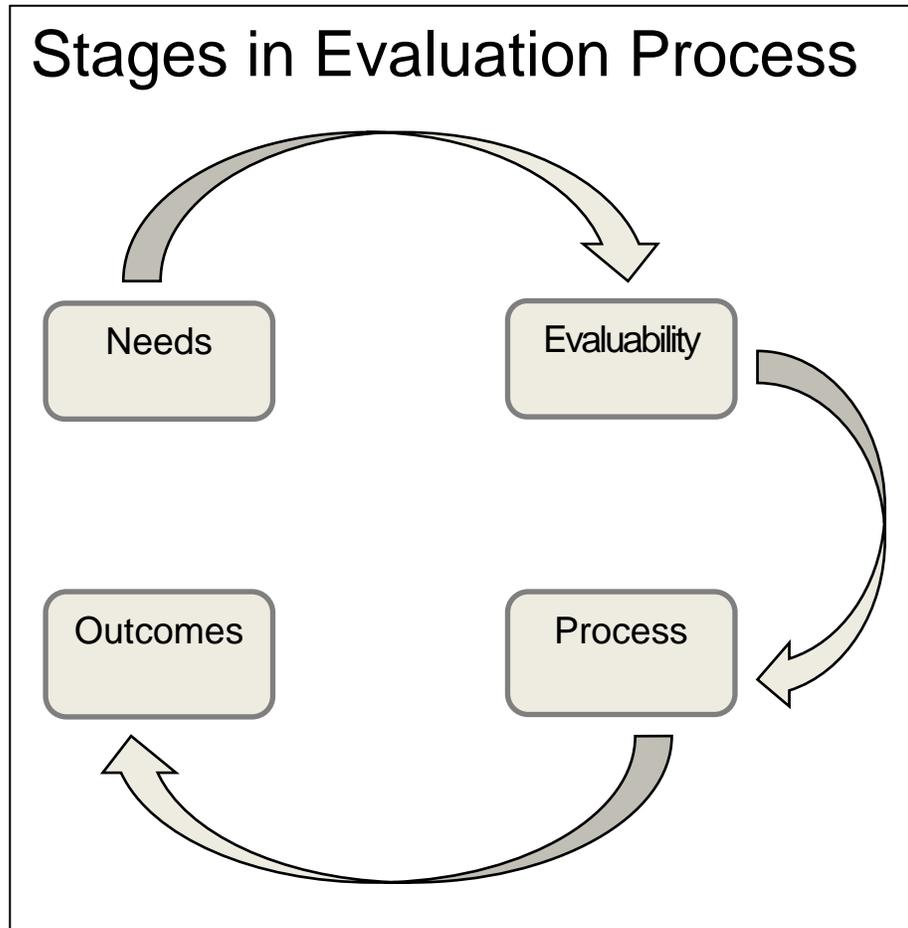
The third step may involve such elements as program monitoring through a review of management information systems, program surveys, and tracking of activities undertaken and

their cost. If the objective of the exercise is limited to an evaluation of the processes leading to program delivery, this may be the last step. If the evaluation is more extensive, then the final step usually involves an evaluation of the outputs and outcomes. This can be achieved through survey techniques, case analysis, cost-benefit analysis, cost effectiveness assessments, and comparisons of expected results against observed outcomes.

Overall, program evaluation is an important part of organizational development and management and

should be undertaken regularly to ensure that an organization's goals are being met, that supporting programs are achieving their intended results and are being delivered cost-effectively. Program evaluation may be performed internally by knowledgeable personnel but may be best undertaken externally by qualified evaluation consultants.

Program evaluation is not reserved to large organizations. They should be considered by organizations large and small as an indispensable element of good governance. The cost of program evaluation need not be onerous and different techniques and approaches can be used to address the requirements of organizations of all types and sizes.



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