Planning a Program Evaluation

Description:

This tool provides guidelines on planning a program evaluation, descriptions of the types of evaluations, methods for collecting data, and a table of contents for a sample evaluation plan.

How it can be used:

Program evaluation is essentially collecting information about your program in order to make necessary decisions. An effective evaluation can tell you:

- if activities or services are functioning effectively
- if goals are being reached
- if your program achieved the intended outcomes

This information can demonstrate the value of your program to your community, your leadership, and your funders. It also helps answer the questions 'How can the program be improved?' and 'Should this program be continued?'

Review the questions and guidelines to determine the type of evaluation that is relevant for your program and the most appropriate methods for collecting important data.

Before beginning, consider the following key questions:

1. Why is the evaluation being done? What decisions will be made as a result of the evaluation?
2. Who is the audience for information from the evaluation? (e.g., funders, board, management, staff, community, clients, etc.)
3. What kinds of information do we need to provide to the audience? (e.g., clarity on the program, client experiences, strengths and challenges, community outcomes, etc.)
4. From what sources should we collect the information? (e.g., clients, employees, community, stakeholders, etc.)
5. How can we collect the information? (e.g., questionnaires, interviews, documentation, focus groups, etc.)
6. What is the timeline for the evaluation? (i.e., deadlines for beginning and completing?)
7. What resources are available to collect the information? (i.e., human and financial)

The type of evaluation you undertake depends on what you want to learn. Do you want to know whether your program is meeting its goals, how your program is progressing, or the impact of your programs on your community?

When designing your evaluation approach, consider which of the following three types of evaluations would most effectively answer your evaluation needs.

1. **Goals-based evaluations** assess the extent to which programs are meeting predetermined goals or objectives. Questions would relate to:
   - How were the program goals or objectives established? Was the process effective?
   - What is the status of the program's progress toward achieving the goals?
   - Will the goals be achieved according to the timelines specified in the program implementation or operations plan? If not, why?
   - Do staff have resources (funds, equipment, facilities, training, etc.) to achieve the goals?
   - What were facilitators and barriers to achieving the goals?

Source: First Nations Health Managers Association. *Knowledge Circle*. www.fnhma.ca.

- How should goals be established in the future?

2. **Process-based evaluations** help to understand how a program functions and produces results. These evaluations can be useful for a long-standing program that may require a review and a 'refresh'. Questions would relate to:
   - How do we know this program is still necessary? Are there alternatives?
   - How are employees trained to deliver the program?
   - How do participants enter the program?
   - What is the participant experience in the program?
   - What do participants consider to be strengths and the challenges about the program?
   - What would participants suggest to improve the program?

3. **Outcomes-based evaluations** ask if the right program activities are bringing about the outcomes you need. Questions would relate to:
   - What were the expected outcomes of this program?
   - What are the measurable indicators that demonstrate whether or not the program is achieving the outcomes?
   - How broad was the reach of the outcome expected to be (i.e., 80% of all youth aged 12-18)
   - What was the uptake of the program? (i.e., how many of the target group participated)

Methods to Collect Information

The overall goal in selecting evaluation method(s) is to get the most useful information to key decision-makers in the most cost-effective and realistic fashion. Consider the following questions:
1. What information is needed to make current decisions about a product or program?
2. Of this information, how much can be collected and analyzed in a low-cost and practical manner (e.g., using questionnaires, surveys and checklists)?
3. How accurate will the information be (reference the above table for disadvantages of methods)?
4. Will the methods get all of the needed information?
5. What additional methods should and could be used if additional information is needed?
6. Will the information appear as credible to decision makers (e.g., to funders or top management)?
7. Will the nature of the audience conform to the methods (e.g., will they fill out questionnaires carefully, engage in interviews or focus groups, let you examine their documentations, etc.)?
8. Is there someone who can administer the methods now, or is training required?
9. How can the information be analyzed?

The evaluator ideally uses a combination of methods, for example, a questionnaire to quickly collect a great deal of information from a lot of people, and then interviews to get more in-depth information from certain respondents to the questionnaires. Perhaps case studies could then be used for more in-depth analysis of unique and notable cases, e.g., those who benefited or did not benefit from the program, those who quit the program, etc.

This table provides an overview of the key methods used in collecting data as part of an evaluation. Choose one or more based on the kind of evaluation you are conducting, the type of information you intend to collect, and the methods that you are able to use.

METHOD	PURPOSE	ADVANTAGES	CHALLENGES
Questionnaires, surveys, checklists	Provides lots of information from people in a non-threatening way	anonymous inexpensive to administer easy to compare and analyze administer to many people can get lots of data	some inaccurate feedback wording can bias responses impersonal may need sampling expert does not get the full story
Interviews	Can better understand experiences, or learn more about their answers to questionnaires	gets full range and depth of information develops relationship with client can be flexible with client	can take too much time can be hard to analyze can be costly interviewer may bias clients' responses
Documentation review	Provides an impression of how program operates without interrupting the program	gets comprehensive and historical information doesn't interrupt information already exists few biases about information	often takes a long time info may be incomplete need to be clear about what info is being sought only collects existing data
Observation	Gathers accurate information about how a program actually operates	views operations of a program as they are actually occurring can adapt to events as they occur	can be difficult to interpret and categorize observations can influence behaviours of program participants can be expensive
Focus groups	Explores a topic in depth through group discussion	quick and reliable information can be efficient to get a much larger range of information can convey key information about programs	can be hard to analyze responses need good facilitator difficult to schedule 6-8 people together
Case studies	Fully understands or depicts clients' experiences and compares cases	fully depicts clients' experiences in program input, process and results powerful means to portray program to outsiders	usually time consuming to collect, organize and describe represents depth of information, rather than breadth

Pitfalls to Avoid

- There is no 'perfect' evaluation design. It is far more important to do something, than to wait until every last detail has been tested.
- Be sure to include interviews in your evaluation methods as questionnaires do not capture 'the story'.
- Do not interview just the successes. You will learn a great deal about the program by understanding its failures, dropouts, etc.
- Do not throw away evaluation results once a report has been generated. Results can provide precious information later when trying to understand changes in the program.
- Ensure you have permission. Have participants review and sign an 'Informed Consent Form'. They should understand how any information associated with them will be reported. Clearly convey information regarding access to evaluation results.

Contents of an Evaluation Plan

Develop an Evaluation Plan to ensure your program evaluations are carried out efficiently. Record enough information in the plan so that someone outside the organization can understand what you are evaluating and how. Consider the following format for your report:

Source: First Nations Health Managers Association. *Knowledge Circle*. www.fnhma.ca.

1. Title Page (name of the organization that is being evaluated, date)
2. Table of Contents
3. Executive Summary (one-page, concise overview of findings and recommendations)
4. Purpose of the evaluation report (what type of evaluation was conducted, what decisions will be helped by the findings of the evaluation, who is making the decision, etc.)
5. Background about the organization and program that is being evaluated
    a. Organization description/history
    b. Program description
    c. Problem statement (description of the community need that is being met by the program)
    d. Overall goal(s) of program
    e. Outcomes (or client impacts) and performance measures (that can be measured as indicators toward the outcomes)
    f. Activities/technologies of the program (general description of how the program is developed and delivered)
    g. Staffing (description of the number of personnel and roles in the organization that are relevant to developing and delivering the program)
6. Overall evaluation goals (e.g., what questions are being answered by the evaluation)
7. 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 (e.g., cautions about findings/conclusions and how to use the findings/conclusions, etc.)
8. Interpretations and conclusions (from analysis of the data/information)
9. Recommendations (regarding decisions that must be made about the program)
10. Appendices: content of the appendices depends on the goals of the evaluation report, examples are:
    a) Instruments used to collect data/information
    b) Data, in tabular format, etc.
    c) Testimonials, comments made by users of the program
    d) Case studies of users of the program
    e) Any related literature
    f) Copies of 'Informed Consent Form'