There is greater emphasis on accountability and evaluation today than ever before. Funders and donors are increasingly asking organisations to determine the outcomes of their programs and to prove their cost effectiveness.

Program evaluations use a research-related process which help organisations assess a program's value. Evaluations are important for many reasons, such as:

1 To verify if a program is meeting its aims and objectives.

2 To help program staff understand, confirm or increase the impact of a program.

3 To support an organisation make strategic decisions about a program.

4 To help an organisation plan how to spend funds and resources effectively.

5 To motivate program staff and give them direction.

6 To promote best practice.

Evaluations do not have to be a standalone project. In fact, the best evaluations occur when program staff recognise the evaluation process as an important element of program delivery. When program staff regularly collect a wide variety of information about a program, they soon gain a systematic and critical approach to program evaluation, thus fostering a mindset of accountability and transparency.

> The most serious mistakes are not being made as a result of wrong answers. The truly dangerous thing is asking the wrong question.
> Peter Drucker

Designing an Evaluation

The evaluation process should ideally start in the program planning phase. Developing a 'program logic' should be part of the planning process and clearly state why a program is being delivered, what issue it is addressing and what outcomes are expected. The logic model can then be used to establish an evaluation framework and methodology, depending on what you want to learn about the program.

Evaluations can either be formative or summative. Formative evaluations pay special attention to the process, or implementation of a program. These evaluations often identify how the program is operating, whether it is being implemented the way it was planned, and whether problems or challenges have emerged.

Formative evaluations are most useful to organisations already delivering a program and wanting to ensure they are running it effectively and efficiently. The results can provide program staff with useful information about how to improve the program. This evaluation approach is used when feedback from staff or participants helps the organisation make decisions about whether to continue a program, change it or discontinue it.

Summative evaluations focus on the quality of the program. These evaluations usually study the program's impact or outcomes. Summative evaluations can also be used to assess the cost-effectiveness of the program. This is done by determining how efficiently the program was delivered and what the outcomes were in relation to the cost of running the program.

Once it has been determined whether you are doing a formative or summative evaluation, or components of both, the next few steps involve determining what information you need to collect,

when you need to collect it and how you are going to report the findings.

A useful analogy is to think of an evaluation like a criminal trial.

1 Collect all the evidence. This may be in verbal, written and visual form and may include research, statistics, documents or reports.

2 Call on informants and witnesses. You might want to collect evidence and feedback from program staff, participants and other key stakeholders.

3 Present the evidence to the jury. The final analysis should sum up the evidence and describe the conclusions that you have arrived at.

You should present the findings of your evaluation by organising the information you have collected, analysing it, and then describing the results accurately and objectively. How you do this will depend on the purpose of the evaluation and the needs of your primary audience.

If you decide to include recommendations in your final report, then there should be a clear relationship between the findings and your recommendations. Recommendations should draw directly on what you have learned in your evaluation and what you know about the program. The findings and recommendations are often the key information to assist organisations in making future decisions about a program.

Program evaluation involves

1 Deciding what you want to find out
2 Determining what information to gather
3 Gathering that information
4 Providing the information to stakeholders
5 Stakeholders using the information to make decisions

How comprehensive should it be?

The size of the evaluation depends on your aims, skills, resources, budget and time. If you work in an organisation that does not have the time or budget to engage a consultant, you will need to upskill your program staff so they can conduct the evaluation themselves. Small evaluations conducted by program staff are sometimes the most useful.

If you work in an organisation needing to collect a large amount of data and utilise interviews or surveys to collect information, you can either choose to conduct the evaluation yourself, if you have the time and skills, or engage an independent consultant to conduct the evaluation for you.

The evaluation process does take time and commitment, but the investment required to gather information and analyse the evidence is clearly worth it. There are many benefits for organisations, staff and program participants. Most importantly, evaluations encourage program staff to understand, monitor and improve program outcomes for their clients.

REFLECT

Have I allocated time and resources to conduct a program evaluation?

Have I planned the evaluation process as early as possible, ideally in the planning stages of the program?

Will the evidence I collect help me understand, verify or increase the impact of the program?

Do I need to upskill staff to conduct the evaluation, or do I need to engage a consultant?