

WILL THIS EVALUATION ACTUALLY BE USEFUL?

A 10-MINUTE SELF-CHECK FOR LEADERS

The evaluation approach is matched to the program age.

Is this a brand new program? That's a good time to start documenting emergent outcomes. It's not worth doing a randomized control trial if implementation is still evolving. Why? Because if we're still figuring out what our program actually is, the model we're testing is unstable. If this is a mature program with consistent implementation, a rigorous impact design may be in order.

The evaluation purpose is clear.

Before starting, you and your team should be sure of what exactly this evaluation will achieve. A good evaluator can help you figure this out. If it's just about reporting to a funder, no need to invest extensively in a comprehensive evaluation; you may be able to handle this internally. If you're looking to capture rigorous evidence of impact, you may need to engage a qualified external evaluator.

The evaluation timeline is calibrated to the timing of key organizational decisions.

Make sure the evaluation timeline lines up with key decision points (such as an important board meeting, grant proposal deadline, legislative session etc). Nothing worse than finding great evidence of your program's effectiveness AFTER funding decisions have been made.



Evaluation results are interpreted with key stakeholders.

Gone are the days of the evaluation “expert” alone deciding what the relevant results are. While a good evaluator will facilitate this discussion, key stakeholders should be at the table to contextualize findings and identify where change can actually be made.



Ownership of next steps is clear.

Once the group has agreed on what is actionable about the evaluation results, consider who will be responsible for putting these insights into practice. If your evaluation reveals program participants are not taking advantage of your free GED courses, will you eliminate them? Change the timing to accommodate childcare needs? Or require participants to complete them as a key part of your program model? Nothing makes a report dustier than a meeting to debrief results that ends without actionable next steps.

(Note - IYKYK; in addition to my own experiences, these ideas of mine have no doubt been influenced by my study of major thinkers in the evaluation field, including Michael Quinn Patton’s work on encouraging evaluation utilization and Melvin Mark’s thoughts on group sensemaking).

