



COMING LATE TO THE PARTY: Considerations for Starting Evaluation after a Program has Begun

ARRIVING LATE TO THE EVALUATION PARTY

Most organizations agree evaluation plays an important role in developing, implementing, improving, and drawing conclusions about programs. Evaluation has many purposes. For example, it can be used to assess whether programs are reaching their targeted audiences and providing the types of support they need. It supports innovation by identifying unmet needs, as well as uncovering what does and does not work in different contexts. Evaluation is also essential in determining if stated goals and objectives are being met; results provide organizations and funders information to guide decisions about where to target resources to maximize impact. Thus, findings can and should ultimately inform organizations' strategic planning, investment decisions, and sustainability efforts.

While most organizations value evaluation, many are simply not able to incorporate it at the beginning of a program. There are a variety of practical reasons why organizations might delay evaluation. Funding concerns, lack of capacity, and the initial need to focus on program development and implementation are common reasons. Awareness that a program is likely to evolve can also lead organizations to postpone evaluation. As a result, many evaluations are initiated after a program is already in place, and in some cases, when the program is concluding.

From the evaluator's perspective, it is preferable to be engaged as early as possible – ideally during program planning and before implementation begins. This is because an early start offers the most flexibility related to design and data collection. However, this ideal scenario seldom occurs and many evaluations begin post-implementation. Evaluators must therefore be adept at operating within these realities and meeting organizations wherever they are in their programming cycle.

YOU CAN BE LATE TO THE PARTY: JUST DON'T MISS IT

Engaging in post-implementation evaluation does not mean the opportunity to conduct a rigorous and useful program evaluation has passed you by. While post-implementation evaluation can be limited in what it can accomplish, we see more possibilities than limitations. Some evaluation designs cannot be used (e.g., a wait-list control or a randomized control trial) in this context. However, evaluators can still apply the majority of designs and use tools that offer the evaluative rigor and richness your program deserves.

Evaluation Specialists, a public health evaluation firm, did just that in its recent evaluation of The Orfalea Fund's complex community-wide initiative to improve school food and school food systems. Here we describe strategies that we have found to be important to maximize success, and the stages your evaluator will likely take you through, if you engage in this kind of evaluation. As evaluators, we believe these are relevant in all evaluations but have equal, and in some cases greater, relevance when conducting a post-implementation evaluation. These strategies and practices are informed by our experience conducting post-implementation evaluations and a rich literature that details applicable evaluation frameworks, methods, tools and analytic designs.

Neither scientific rigor nor programmatic usefulness needs to be sacrificed merely because you arrived at the evaluation party late.

STRATEGIES FOR POST-IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION SUCCESS

In our experience, embracing and adhering to these strategies maximizes the success of any evaluation, and has particular value in post-implementation evaluations.

Don't worry: it's never too late to properly evaluate.

Evaluation is possible regardless of where you are in your program cycle. You do not have to sacrifice rigor even if you initiate program evaluation late.

Choose wisely. Choose your evaluator based on the ways in which her palette of expertise and your evaluation needs align. This is particularly important in post-implementation evaluations, as these designs necessitate creativity, resourcefulness, and a diversity of skills.

Evaluators well-suited to this kind of evaluation will bring expertise in an assortment of evaluation frameworks, and traditional as well as emergent data collection and analysis techniques. It is often helpful to engage with an evaluation consultant to understand the full range of options before committing to a course of action and evaluation design. This may also help you identify the types of expertise you will need in your evaluator.

Show your cards. Evaluating the efforts of your program or organization can be intimidating. But the most effective post-implementation evaluations hinge on trust, transparency and active participation from program staff. Disclose all of your programmatic intentions, shifts and challenges in the spirit of candor.

Make an investment. Collaboration between organization staff and evaluators is critical in post-implementation evaluation. If possible, assign a staff member to be a liaison to your evaluator to streamline efforts and make communication efficient. Importantly, your evaluator will need your help in connecting with people who can be sources of information, such as front-line staff and community stakeholders. Dedicate the necessary time and energy to assist with these efforts and communicate your program context, goals, evaluation needs, and lessons learned.

Unleash creativity. Whether you realize it or not, you almost certainly have existing data and information about your program that can inform your evaluation. Brainstorm with your staff and evaluator; this positions your evaluator to be creative in her approach. Magic happens when an organization's knowledge and ideas are merged with an evaluator's understanding of and expertise in evaluation strategies.

Share context. Community politics, programmatic resources, and program stage are important considerations in the evaluation design, implementation, and reporting. Your evaluator will need guidance on whose perspectives are important, which relationships matter, the programmatic structure, and how best to define the evaluation boundaries. She will fold this context into all phases of the evaluation design.

Ask the big questions. Do not settle for simple lists of descriptive statistics and outcome statements. Rather, ask your evaluator to go to the next level and get answers to the important questions about program value and impact. Be sure to pay attention to the possibility of unintended outcomes, both positive and negative.



PRACTICES OF POST-IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION

Because post-implementation evaluation occurs later in the program evolution cycle, it necessitates a process of working backwards. It involves reconstructing events starting at the point where the program began. Below, we present some of the activities that you can expect your evaluator to lead you through in this type of evaluation. The evaluation will benefit from the above-referenced strategies being woven into each of these practices.

Establish evaluation goals. An important first step is to work with your evaluator to pinpoint what you really want to learn, and who your target audience is. This involves identifying the questions the evaluation should and can answer. Doing so ensures the evaluation design fits your precise needs.

Choose your lens. The selection of an evaluative lens or framework will be done as you identify your evaluation goals. Evaluation frameworks (also called models or theories) inform decisions about the evaluation focus, boundaries, design, participants, methods as well as interpretation and reporting of findings. Examples include Utilization-Focused Evaluation (Patton, 2008), Participatory Evaluation (Zukoski and Luluquisen, 2002), and Empowerment Evaluation (Fetterman, 1994).

Document program purpose and evolution. Post-implementation evaluation involves looking backward and charting the program goals, as well as the evolution of the program. Your evaluator can do this by developing, confirming, or refining your program logic model. She will work closely with you to ensure that she fully understands the program's intentions, and - if the model shifted - how, why, and when it did so.

Align the design to the purpose. Post-implementation evaluation, despite some misconceptions, can utilize the vast majority of common and sophisticated designs (multiple time-series design, pre-post design, interrupted time-series design, case studies) and data collection methods (qualitative and quantitative). Your evaluator will suggest the best design available that meets the evaluation purposes and avoids engaging in too little or too much evaluation.

Harvest existing information. Useful information is typically readily available for the taking. Existing information can come from interviews with staff and from data already collected during the course of the program; program staff may have gathered valuable data but not recognized its utility for evaluation. While this information may not be as complete or reliable as ideal, or need to be formatted for analysis, it should not be overlooked.

Additionally, relevant secondary data (e.g., community data, national data) may exist that can provide contextual information or illustrate change in program-related outcomes over time. Your evaluator can work with your team to understand how to interpret relationships between your work and these secondary data, as it is unlikely she will be able to draw direct causal lines between these data and the program's efforts.

Collect new data. An often overlooked source of information is staff knowledge. Staff can generate new data to support the evaluation, such as ratings of implementation efforts or measures of funding contributions. Staff knowledge is instrumental in all evaluation designs, though particularly important in post-implementation evaluation. This is because information must often be recreated by those familiar with the program design or implementation, and could not be produced otherwise.

Additional data can be gathered from program participants and other stakeholders using a variety of common and innovative data collection techniques. Such information may be retrospective (recall) or point in time (current perspective), and data can be qualitative or quantitative in nature. Some methods of data collection have demonstrated validity and particular usefulness in post-implementation evaluations. These include retrospectively collecting pretest and post test information and asking participants to estimate what their outcome would have been had they not participated in a program (Mueller & Gas, 2015).

Answer the big-picture questions. Going beyond simple lists of descriptive statistics and outcome statements is possible and desirable, even when engaging in evaluation late in the program cycle. An "evaluative rubric" is an evaluation tool that enables evaluators to do just this. A rubric integrates multiple sources of information to codify a single, descriptive, easy to understand ranking of program value and impact (Davidson, 2005). Your evaluator will work closely with you to define and apply rubrics that can transparently communicate answers to these important overarching questions of program merit.

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

You can engage in evaluation late in the programmatic cycle and still conduct a high-quality and robust evaluation of your program. Evaluation is an important element in organizations' missions to address important social problems, and need not be bypassed merely because the evaluation did not begin at program inception. To maximize the success of post implementation evaluation, organizations will benefit by combining these strategies and practices in working with evaluators.

References

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ABOUT



EVALUATION SPECIALISTS

(www.evaluationspecialists.com) is a woman-owned small business that specializes in evaluation of prevention, health promotion, education, and social service programs. Our skilled and multidisciplinary team has many years' experience conducting research and evaluation, combined with substantive and clinical expertise. We provide our clients with a range of cutting-edge methods to answer real world questions in community settings, and gain a rich understanding of program outcomes. We partner with our clients to design and implement evaluation plans that provide timely, contextual, and actionable results that benefit the communities they serve. Contact us at Info@EvaluationSpecialists.com to explore how we can help you evaluate your program.



THE ORFALEA FAMILY FOUNDATION

(<http://www.orfaleafoundation.org>) was founded in 2000 and sunset in 2015. The Foundation brought together dedicated partners to help the community's families, educators, and policy-makers raise their expectations for what is possible. Across the Orfalea Fund's (2003-2015) range of focus areas, including early childhood education, school food reform, scholarships, university partnerships, learning differences, youth development, critical community needs, and community enrichment, the foundation leveraged its founders' and coworkers' entrepreneurial experience to strengthen communities by empowering individuals.