Advancing Nonprofit Programs Through Evaluation

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Advancing Nonprofit Programs Through Evaluation

Nonprofits are under an increasing level of pressure from their boards and funders to provide information about the success of their organization and programs they operate. When looking at the success levels, organizations typically want to know if their goals were reached, how to repeat accomplishments and how to improve performance. These answers can typically be found by developing an evaluation program. An evaluation program enables nonprofits to understand the success and determine the value of their programs, uncover new ways to increase impact on the communities they serve and better communicate their worth to their constituents.

This white paper provides tips for implementing an evaluation program and how it may help ensure organizations are doing all they can to meet their objectives.

Begin with the End in Mind

Creating an evaluation program may seem daunting but it’s an important step in understanding the success of an organization or program. The first step in evaluating a program is to visualize the end. In other words, what does success look like? This could be in the form of specific goals such as the number of clients served, the depth of impact to the community, the degree to which the program serves those who are eligible and the extent to which the program is the sole provider of a specific service(s) in the area. By describing success in simple terms, organizations can be confident their goals are tangible, measurable and easy to communicate to others.

Naturally, a program’s financial stability is important to its success and a necessary part of the evaluation process. Points to consider include the diversity of funding sources, the willingness of the community to donate, the ability of the program to inspire potential and recurring donor contributions to the organization, the likelihood and extent of continued government funding, how well the media supports the program’s cause and the cost of running the program.

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Once a nonprofit establishes parameters for success, it can begin to construct a meaningful evaluation program.

Choosing an Evaluation Model

Organizations have a wide range of choices to consider when looking at how to evaluate their programs. When deciding which method to use, nonprofits should consider one that offers the most value in determining program success for their organization.

Three Common Evaluation Methods

- **Goals-Based Evaluation** – This evaluation method measures the success of a program in terms of meeting its statistical goals or outcomes, enabling nonprofits to learn if their programs are reaching the number of intended clients or other tangible goals, and if progress is needed.

- **Process-Based Evaluation** – The process-based method helps organizations communicate how their programs work to people in the community and the media. This form of evaluation does not analyze results, but rather helps explain how and why programs produce their results. Being able to clearly interpret program results helps stakeholders better understand how...
outcomes were achieved by focusing on the forms and amount of services delivered, how the clients were treated and the resources used to provide services. It also may reveal any challenges that were encountered and how they were overcome.

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• **Outcome-Based Evaluation** – Through this evaluation method, organizations can assess whether and how programs made a significant improvement in achieving the nonprofit’s mission. Outcome-based evaluation determines a correlation between program activities and their desired outcomes. This information is becoming more critical as nonprofits often have to accomplish more with fewer resources and demonstrate positive outcomes when conducting fundraising efforts. The outcome-based evaluation method is one of the more common methods used by nonprofits to help them better understand their success and is explored further in the next section.

### Assessing Programs Using Outcome-Based Evaluation

Measuring the impact and benefits to those who are served, as well as to the community at large, enables nonprofits to more accurately gain a true sense of their effectiveness. The outcome-based evaluation method demonstrates a program’s impact, which provides hard data points that can assist organizations with gathering the information needed to apply for grants and potential funding, as many applications require program impact results. To perform an outcome-based evaluation, it’s important to understand the following components:

- **Inputs** – The necessary program resources and materials such as equipment, volunteers, staff, facilities and funding.

- **Activities** – Actions a program implements such as teaching, counseling, sheltering, feeding and clothing to achieve client needs.

- **Outputs** – Achievements in numerical form which may represent the amount of people taught, sheltered and fed, or the number of trees planted, or pets adopted. Outputs do not represent the impact or the benefit clients experience, instead they express the volume of activities.

- **Outcomes** – Genuine impacts, benefits or changes that clients experienced by participating in the program. For instance, the outcome of a job training program would be the number of participants who are now employed compared to the total number of participants (who may or may not have since found a job). In the case of a conservation program, the outcome could be an increase in the number of salmon spawning in a specific location.

- **Outcome targets** – The desired amount or percentage of participants who achieve success through the program.

- **Outcome indicators** – Observable and measurable events that can lead to a lasting target outcome. They are measured just before clients complete a program as well as at later stages in order to determine long-term success.

Evaluations can also contain formative assessments, which seek to verify performance while the program or activities are still in progress, or summative assessments, which seek to ascertain outcomes after the program or activities have concluded.
With these components in mind, nonprofits should choose which outcome best demonstrates program success and then select the indicators that can signal positive change. A variety of methods can be used to collect outcome target and indicator data including questionnaires, surveys, checklists, interviews, documentation reviews, observations, focus groups and case studies. Not all of these methods may be practical for every nonprofit, so an organization may need to enlist an expert to either offer advice or oversee the collection and evaluation of data.

Margaret MacLeod, vice president, quality management and prevention services at Morrison Child & Family Services, a nonprofit in Portland, Ore. that provides services to children and families coping with a wide range of traumas, recommends giving staff and volunteers clear, simple instructions about collecting data. Complex procedures can get in the way of serving clients and can lower the quality and documentation of the data collected.

**The Analyzation Process**

Once data has been collected, an organization must tabulate, rank and graph information and ratings in order to evaluate the program. Since many nonprofits rely on volunteers, consider starting an internship program and recruiting a local college student who’s interested in statistics. Many students are enthusiastic about using their knowledge to benefit their community, and such an individual can assist in collecting, analyzing and interpreting program data that demonstrates program success as well as mapping potential steps needed for improvement.

**Evaluation Tools and Technology**

Today, organizations have greater access to tools, dashboards and applications that enable easier and more accurate ways to measure program effectiveness. FOOD for Lane County (FFLC), a Eugene, Ore.-based food bank, uses Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping to create maps of neighborhoods that historically possess high rates of poverty and combines them with census data to determine the number of eligible people in the area. FFLC then compares the information with program participation data to measure success.

**Improving Programs through Evaluations**

For many nonprofits, evaluation has led to program improvement. At Morrison Child & Family Services, one of the critical steps to success is ensuring that families keep their first appointment so treatment can begin. To ensure prompt care, the nonprofit sought to limit the time between the first call received and the first scheduled appointment to 14 days, but data showed this was not always taking place. To increase the likelihood of kept appointments within a two-week window, the organization added staff and improved the questions asked by its call center. Prospective clients are now asked if there are barriers that could prevent them from making their appointment and if other dates and times are more convenient. By evaluating and tracking appointment information, Morrison Child & Family Services improved its methods in order to help increase the rate and availability of what may be the most important service it offers: the client’s first appointment in getting the help they need.
It's important to keep in mind that not all data is numerical and can or should be reduced to numbers. Comments from clients, volunteers, staff and donors should be organized by categories such as suggestions and concerns, as well as strengths and weaknesses in order to identify patterns and themes. Karen Edmonds, programs and services director at FOOD for Lane County says there are things that can’t be graphed, like whether people were served with dignity and respect. It’s important to keep the big picture in mind while executing on the statistical goals.

**Changing a Nonprofit’s Mission**

The evaluation process can offer insight into more than just program effectiveness; it can help nonprofits evolve to meet the ever-changing needs of society and those they serve. This has been the case for The Arc of King County, which was founded in 1936 and is one of the oldest nonprofit organizations serving individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The Arc’s original mission was to encourage public interest and raise the standard of care for children with mental and physical handicaps primarily living in state institutions. Today, The Arc’s mission is to advocate for the rights of individuals of all ages with intellectual and developmental disabilities to support their full inclusion and participation in the community. Being open to recognizing important changes discovered through evaluation programs can help nonprofits redefine their mission, enabling them to grow and expand.

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**Conclusion**

An enormous amount of effort goes into ensuring a nonprofit serves the needs of the community and its mission on a daily basis. The time and resources devoted to evaluating the effectiveness of a program can help validate those efforts. By setting aside a portion of the program budget for evaluation, a nonprofit can give their organization the same kind of support and care they show clients. This in turn enables the nonprofit and its volunteers, staff and donors to accomplish the mission set out to achieve.
Sources:


About Pacific Continental Bank

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Pacific Continental Bank maintains a strong connection to the communities where we operate. The bank empowers its employees to actively engage in fostering an environment where all community members can flourish. We endeavor to work with local nonprofit organizations and community-based businesses, ensuring more dollars stay close to home. The bank supports hundreds of nonprofit organizations in achieving their missions — both philanthropically and through direct participation.

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