

## **Beyond the Black Box: Strengthening Performance Measurement through Implementation Evaluation**

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**Presentation to CES National Capital Chapter  
November 26, 2003**

This presentation was based on Arnold Love's book chapter on implementation evaluation that will appear early in 2004 in the new edition of Wholey, J. S., Hatry, H. P., and Newcomer, K. E. (Eds.), *The Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation (2nd ed.)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass .

### **What Is Implementation?**

- Implementation is an integral part of the program cycle, popularized by the management mantra: plan, implement, evaluate, improve.
- Implementation refers to all of the activities focused on the actual operation of a program, once it moves from drawing board into action

### **What Is Implementation Evaluation?**

- systematic data collection about the extent and form of program implementation, and
- analysis of that data to guide decisions about program implementation.

Evaluators must exercise care because there are numerous evaluation terms and approaches that address selected aspects of implementation evaluation, such as formative evaluation, process evaluation, descriptive evaluation, and monitoring.

### **Uses of Implementation Evaluation**

Implementation evaluation is now being using in a wide range of ways to strengthen programs and performance measurement. A few of these diverse applications includes:

- Actively aiding in the design of programs (both theoretical and operational)
- Achieving "ordinary excellence" by validating program models and providing information that clarifies attribution
- Generating ongoing information that ensures program implementation is successful
- Supplying rapid feedback about operations and outcomes that guide program evolution in an increasingly dynamic and turbulent environment

## **The Value of Implementation Evaluation**

In practical terms, implementation evaluation enables evaluators to be clearer about what does work and what does not work to produce the intended program outcomes in the actual practice setting.

### **“Black Box” and “Transparent Box” Paradigms**

“Black box” evaluations reveal little about the process of program delivery or how to improve programs. They do not adequately describe the programs provided or the associations between specific program components and outcomes. Instead, attention to treatment often is limited to a description of the program modalities, the number of contacts, or client’s length of participation in a program

In contrast, the “Transparent Box” paradigm of implementation evaluation encourages the careful study of program delivery, including an assessment of how well programs are implemented and an examination of the associations between program components and outcomes. Secondly, it explicitly considers factors outside of program delivery and how they influence program entry, program experiences and program outcome.

Program evaluations based on the expanded “Transparent Box” paradigm can produce valuable insights into the context, process and outcomes of a program. These evaluations can help program planners to strengthen programs, modify factors outside of programs to the client’s advantage, and change how people think about programs

### **When Is Implementation Evaluation Information Needed?**

Program planners and managers are now using information from implementation evaluation throughout the policy and program development cycle, including:

- Stage 1. Assess Needs and Feasibility
  
- Stage 2. Program Planning and Design
  
- Stage 3. Program Delivery
  
- Stage 4. Program Improvement
  
- Stage 5. Shorter-Term Outcomes
  
- Stage 6. Longer-Term Outcomes and Impact

Traditionally implementation evaluation is associated with Stage 3. Program Delivery. To give you a feel of implementation evaluation questions at other stages, let us look at Stage

1: Assess Needs and Feasibility. Some questions related to implementation evaluation include:

- What attempts have been made to implement solutions to this problem?
- What do implemented programs tell us about the best practice in this area?
- What issues/factors affect programs in this area?
- Among program alternatives, what are the best choices to make in the light of implementation issues?
- What resources are needed to implement the proposed program?

### **Selected Implementation Evaluation Methods**

There are a number of practical implementation evaluation methods that can be used by programs with limited time and resources. The following methods are matched to each stage of the program developmental cycle. The chapter in The Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation provides step-by-step guidance for each of these methods.

#### **Stage 1. Assess Needs and Feasibility of Program**

- Implementation Research Review
- Key Informant Interviews about Implementation Factors

#### **Stage 2. Plan and Design Program**

- Program Logic Models
- Program Templates
- Outcomes Hierarchies

#### **Stage 3. Deliver the Program**

- Coverage Analysis
- Component Analysis
- Program Records
- Case Studies

#### **Stage 4. Improve the Program**

- Service Delivery Pathways
- Client Feedback
- Springboard Stories

### **Using Implementation Evaluation to Foster Organizational Development and Learning**

Highly respected evaluators have identified Implementation evaluation as an essential part of a performance-based management process. As a result, it is important to involve managers and staff closely in the implementation evaluation process. Participation is necessary to transfer implicit information (applied creatively to specific problems) to foster organizational learning and development, such as:

- Coaching
- Training
- Team Building
- Process Consultation
- Workflow Planning

Implementation evaluation also provides the explicit knowledge that supports intergroup and total organization growth and learning, such as:

- Collaboration and Partnership Agreements
- Inter-Group Conflict Management
- Network Building
- Strategic Planning
- Structural and Cultural Change Initiatives

### **Concluding Comments**

In a results-based and performance-oriented culture that stresses organizational development and learning, implementation evaluation is making important contributions to understanding what works and what does not work within the context of each program's organizational setting. Implementation evaluation also opens up the "black box" to provide greater understanding of why programs work or do not work and the factors that contribute to program success. Taken together, implementation evaluation supplies important information not only to guide and monitor program implementation, but to design programs that work right from the start and that learn from their experiences how to achieve the desired outcomes.