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THE FRONT-END CHALLENGE: FIVE STEPS TO EFFECTIVE EVALUATION OF COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS

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Abstract: Evaluation research requires ample front-end work. Preparatory work is essential to establish an environment conducive to assessment and is likely to contribute to its success. This article discusses the front-end challenge of developing an evaluation for a community-based program. Highlights are provided of an evaluation protocol from one community support agency to illustrate the significance of front-end work. Five front-end challenges are considered: understanding the reasons for undertaking the evaluation, securing resources, establishing credibility and creating enthusiasm, developing consensus about goals and objectives, and observing and fine-tuning the program.

Résumé: La recherche d'évaluation requiert beaucoup de travail préalable. Le travail préparatoire du début est essentiel pour la création d'un environnement favorisant l'évaluation subséquente et contribuera très probablement à son succès. Cet article traite des difficultés initiales de mettre au point une évaluation pour un programme communautaire. Les grandes lignes d'un protocole d'évaluation d'un organisme d'aide communautaire sont indiquées pour expliquer la portée du travail initial. Cinq difficultés initiales sont prises en considération: comprendre les raisons pour effectuer l'évaluation, obtenir les ressources, établir la crédibilité et susciter l'enthousiasme, arriver à un consensus sur les objectifs et régler et surveiller le programme.

The ground work in developing an evaluation is crucial to understanding what is happening and what should be happening and may help to explain why it is happening (Rossi & Freeman, 1985, 1993; Wholey, 1977, 1981). Although most program managers are eager to demonstrate significant outcomes such as improved health status of a clientele population or increased benefits of a service, these positive outcomes are not likely to be forthcoming without much preparation. Without ample front-end work, efforts to produce outcomes are likely to be disappointing and costly.

As Rossi and Freeman (1993) suggest, if substantial results are to be expected the "kinks" of a program need to be worked out before an evaluation gets underway: "It bears emphasis that many programs fail because insufficient time and resources were invested in formative efforts either in the design phase or during early periods of operation" (p. 135). They suggest that evaluators become involved in program development and implementation in order to increase the probability of success.

This approach to evaluation research is advocated by those who view evaluation as serving the interests of program sponsors and stakeholders and as providing "maximally useful" information given the organizational political milieu and the resource constraints (Cronbach, 1982, Love, 1991; Rossi & Freeman, 1993). Cronbach (1982) considers evaluation research as an art that varies with the nature and the needs of the program. Philosophically, this pragmatic approach to evaluation contrasts with the logic of basic scientific investigation. Basic research predominates within the academic realm and is of great value depending upon the nature of the study question, but it is difficult to comprehend how such principles as "objectivity" can be maintained. Instead, researchers argue that evaluators should become immersed in the operation of programming activities, in order to achieve greater understanding and thus aid in avoiding potential pitfalls and obstacles (Love, 1991). From this perspective, to design a useful evaluation evaluators need to obtain a careful understanding of the organization.

This article considers an evaluation project undertaken by a community-based agency involved in day support programming for older adults with physical and psychological limitations. The agency is located in a midwest Canadian city with an approximate population of 800,000. The city has a continuum of health and social service organizations providing care to older adults. The mission of the agency studied is to assist in meeting the social, psychological, and physical needs of older adults. Following a health promotion model, the agency's focus is on providing a therapeutic, holistic environment and on maximizing and maintaining an individual's level of functioning. The agency's program offers participants the opportunity to experience stimulating activities and provides care-givers with relief. In the program, participants in need of medical care are referred to other, appropriate agencies. Although some participants require ongoing supervision and assistance with the activities of daily living, they are not considered at "high risk" or in need of daily medical or nursing attention. At the time of the review, the agency had existed for seven years. On the basis of our examination, we identify five critical issues that should be considered at the outset of a program evaluation:

- understanding the reasons for undertaking the evaluation
- securing resources
- establishing credibility and enthusiasm
- developing consensus about goals and objectives
- observing and fine-tuning the program

These issues must be addressed by those involved in the process prior to the implementation of a full-scale study in order to conduct an effective evaluation. Each issue will be discussed in terms of its importance and how it affected the evaluation experience.

THE FRONT-END CHALLENGES

Understanding the Reasons for Undertaking the Evaluation

There are likely to be multiple and interrelated reasons for conducting an evaluation and many stakeholders interested in its process and outcome (Green & Lewis, 1986; Love, 1991; Rossi & Freeman, 1993). It is important to be clear about the purpose and to be aware of the stakeholders — who is and is not interested in the evaluation (Kidder, 1981). Hegarty and Sporn (1988) suggest clarifying and including stakeholders early on in the process, as they are likely to have different perspectives and may adversely affect the evaluation if they feel threatened or ignored.

The evaluation undertaken here was developed in response to a variety of issues. Five of these were dominant:

1. Justification from the perspective of funding agencies
2. Defining organizational programs and goals
3. Program enhancement
4. Understanding participant and care-giver satisfaction
5. Justification in pragmatic terms

The day support program philosophy required *justification from the perspective of the funding agencies*. According to one of those agencies, if the program was not based on a medical model of care it could not be of significant benefit to older, frail and disabled adults. The program was perceived by some within the health community as a "social tea" program or, as one board member put it, as a "glorified babysitting service." Despite pressure from funding agencies to justify the social support component of the program, the board and staff were united in embracing this holistic, multidimensional approach to care. Consequently, although justifying the philosophy of the program was important, it was not considered a priority.

The agency's leadership recognized *defining organizational and program goals*, developing measurable objectives, and putting in place an action plan for their achievement as essential. The evaluation was encouraged because it was perceived as facilitating the board's strategic planning process and as enabling a macro vision of the agency's development, instead of maintaining operations from one year to the next on an ad hoc basis. Essentially, the evaluation was supported because it was identified as a tool to develop the agency. As it turned out, this start-up work was more important in setting the agency on course than the actual outcome of the evaluation.

The program needed *enhancement* from the standpoint of management. The evaluation offered an opportunity to implement and test new ideas. For example, were participants receiving adequate stimulation as intended by the program's conceptualization? Capitman (1993) and Wan and Ferraro (1991) indicate that day program evaluations often fail to detect any real effect. One major problem with these studies is the lack of clear documentation of the service components and the absence of a defined intervention. It is often not clear what is happening in the program. From the management's perspective, more information was required to know what was occurring in the program and what types of "treatment" participants were receiving. Improving programming quality and developing staffing expertise were supported by the board and management as a priority reason for conducting the evaluation.

Understanding participant and care-giver satisfaction was another important reason for the evaluation. External funders were interested in how satisfied care-givers and participants were with the program and whether or not the program provided adequate respite. Internally, management required more information about how participants and care-givers viewed the service being offered and what they saw as being helpful to meeting their needs. Although management saw an evaluation as necessary, they also recognized that care-givers required support immediately, not years after a comprehensive evaluation was complete. As a result, a participant/care giver satisfaction survey was conducted at two points.

The program was obligated to *justify itself in pragmatic terms*. The board and management understood the agency's accountability to participants, their families, and funders. As well, funding agencies had long requested greater demonstration of the cost effectiveness of delivering day support programs. As the agency was operating on a shoestring budget, the evaluation was seen by some members as a way to gain greater financial stability. However, the researchers were reluctant to focus exclusively on this reason, as it appeared unlikely to produce a desirable outcome except in conjunction with other aspects of the program.

All five reasons were important in different ways, at different times, and to different groups of people within and outside the organization. It is often difficult to predict which reasons will be considered important and which are likely to emerge in the course of the study, but it is beneficial to understand the potential range of reasons at the outset. It is important to be clear about these multiple purposes and to be aware of the stakeholders in each instance.

Although the reasons for the evaluation were not priorized at the outset, defining the goals and objectives and enhancing the program became important early on in the study. Both reasons received strong support from the board of directors and management.

Securing Resources

As a community-based nonprofit program, the agency was struggling for financial resources in order to maintain operations. The agency had been faced with closure at various times in its short history but managed to remain operational, in part, through increased public awareness, personal contacts with bureaucrats and politicians, and letter-writing campaigns. Like many small organizations, it lacked a research budget and technical resources. Further, there was neither the in-house expertise nor the time to produce a scientifically sound evaluation design. It is difficult for small agencies to invest energy in evaluative work when there are few incentives to do so, but in this case the enthusiasm required to initiate the process was evident.

The National Health Research and Development Program (NHRDP), Health and Welfare Canada, which provides formulation grants to community organizations, offered an opportunity to start the groundwork. The authors, working with the organization's board and a committee of community and university consultants, were successful in securing a formulation grant. Beyond the initial funding for the evaluation, additional resources were required to update and improve the program. In the process of monitoring and fine-tuning a program, inevitably changes and improvements would be needed — and these were not without financial cost.

As Rossi and Freeman (1993) note, improvements are part of an evaluation strategy and a necessary prelude to any further evaluation. Funding was scraped together to computerize the administrative system, to enhance the volunteer component and improve public relations, and to recruit a part-time temporary recreational therapist and other temporary workers. However, no additional funding existed to employ new staffing specialities on a permanent basis. Although some resources and funding became available through grants, these were short-term stopgaps; there was no increase in the general operating revenue. Although the agency board and management and the evaluators hoped new funds would be available to upgrade the program, they understood that the prospects were slim. They recognized that without additional funds for program enhancement, even a well-prepared design and good intentions were not sufficient to generate positive impacts.

Establishing Credibility and Creating Enthusiasm

"Evaluators must understand the formal and informal organizational arrangements of the environments in which they work … in order to maximize their influence on the design and implementation of programs," according to Rossi and Freeman (1993, p. 107). As Love (1991) points out, most staff mistrust evaluation: either they have experienced negative evaluations in the past, or they link program evaluation with personnel evaluation (Green & Lewis, 1986). Green and Lewis (1986, p. 31) note that "Formative evaluation provides feedback on the level of knowledge, skill, and attitudinal performance of the various professional and nonprofessionals who deliver the health education program. Staff members' actual competencies are assessed rather than their past or expected competencies." For management the separation of program and personnel evaluation is not automatic, because when programs are assessed the competencies and skills of those who run the program come to the fore as well. Granted, staff need to be provided with ongoing support and training to perform their tasks and upgrade their skills, but it is not difficult to see why they are apprehensive about evaluation: it is not possible to separate a program from its personnel (Kidder, 1981).

Staff members, however, are vital members of the evaluation process. Practitioners as front-line workers are in a position to know what works in a program; their involvement is likely to ensure ease of access to program information. They can provide a wealth of information and are likely to be able to specify what type of outcomes may be expected, what type of record keeping is most useful for them, which activities work and which do not, and a host of other information (Green & Lewis, 1986). Developing rapport and establishing good relations with staff members is essential to ensuring the success of the project. Evaluation must be viewed as a cooperative endeavor that benefits all. Further, the possibility of change as a result of refining the program needs to be communicated in a positive light so that staff members take ownership of this change process. According to Love (1991), it is important to create enthusiasm for the evaluation. Establishing ownership and creating enthusiasm and cooperation are necessary in order to achieve the ends of evaluation.

From the outset, staff members were included in the evaluation planning that is the subject of this article. Staff meetings and individual meetings were held to discuss what was to happen and what could be expected to happen. Staff members were enthusiastic about the evaluation and provided insightful suggestions on how to improve the quality of the program. Initially, staff members wholeheartedly supported the evaluation efforts. They saw many benefits of the project, such as improved programming for clients, a potential increase in staffing, and an increased profile for, and funding to, the agency. For the most part, the project did not interfere in the day-to-day operation of the program.

As time went on, enthusiasm for the project waned in part because funding for the agency did not increase, recruiting new permanent staff was not possible, and the project began to highlight staff competencies. As noted earlier, it is difficult to separate the program from the personnel involved in operating it. For example, with the introduction of a temporary recreation therapist and another program worker, it appeared that programming could be enhanced fairly easily. Staff members endorsed the suggested recommendations for program improvement. Had there been sufficient funds to increase the already low staffing levels, existing staff members could have continued without altering their work patterns. However, funds were not available to increase staffing, and thus the responsibility for implementing the recommended improvements rested with current staff. Staff then became less enthusiastic about taking action to implement these changes and more interested in maintaining the status quo until further funds became available. Yet improvements had to be implemented not just on a short-term basis, but systematically, as part of the program's fine-tuning, if any substantial outcome was to be detected.

The difficulty for management lay in determining whether resources could be stretched further on an already shoestring budget. Could staff members take on new activities while continuing in what they were doing? Obtaining a satisfactory practical strategy proved challenging. To some degree, it was possible to rearrange work schedules by having staff take on more tasks and by delegating some responsibilities to volunteers. Even so, it was a trying time for staff members because their skill, motivation, and attitude toward their work became relevant. It seems inevitable, based on this project, that in the monitoring and examination of programs personnel competencies will come to light and be assessed. The benefit for staff is that personnel evaluation occurs in conjunction with a global assessment of the organization; performance is not an isolated issue. Thus, the assessment detects the areas staff excel at and, ideally, assists in providing ways to improve their performance.

Early in the evaluation process, the evaluators realized that establishing credibility and creating enthusiasm were not givens. There were many questions and skeptical comments about the value of the evaluation. It is imperative for evaluators to recognize subtle opposition that may begin filtering into the process. Based on this study, the researchers believe that evaluators should be prepared to tactfully nip in the bud resistance to the evaluation. This will bode well for future encounters because fostering credibility and enthusiasm is necessary not only in the beginning but throughout; it needs to be sustained.

Developing Consensus about Goals and Objectives

Another important front-end challenge is developing organizational consensus about goals and objectives. As described earlier, clarification of goals and objectives represents an important organizational undertaking and an exercise in strategic planning for the board. It enables staff and volunteers to focus on the agency's raison d'etre, but is also a necessary precursor to designing the evaluation protocol. Without the organization getting its "house in order," it is not possible to conduct a successful evaluation. Evaluators play an important role in ensuring the organization begins the process of re-examination. As Rossi and Freeman (1993, p. 106) note, "evaluators often are more like detectives than social researchers, trying to unearth and make sense out of the original reasons for the program." The following description provides an example of the steps taken within an organization to prepare for an evaluation.

As a first step in developing the evaluation strategy, management initiated a re-examination of organizational documentation. Existing information was updated, and a procedure for in-house activities was implemented. At the board level, the mission statement, philosophy, and goals were reviewed and strategic and long-range plans were revised. At the administrative level, all records were reviewed, modified, or developed in terms of their relationship to goals and objectives. This included organizational policy and procedures, personnel policy, staff patterns and qualifications, and financial records.

At the program level, this review included examining the goals and objectives for activity programming, daily procedures and regulations, participant caseload, participant forms (e.g., admission criteria, participant information, discharge), and inventory records. The daily activity programming was carefully examined by staff members in order to understand what was essential to a good program. This review addressed such issues as: What are participants doing during the day? Why are participants offering one activity over another? Are planned activities geared to an appropriate age and functioning level?

Information neeed to understand what was working and what was not was gathered from staff, volunteers, and participants. Questions such as these were asked: What are staff expectations of participants' activities? What do staff think participants should be doing all day, and what rationale is provided? What are the expectations of participants and care givers? Also, programming information was gathered from similar programs.

Although special attention was focused on the programming, basically every aspect of the organization underwent scrutiny, with both board and staff members involved in the process. This initial task was crucial in enabling the agency to redefine its purpose and in devising a business plan for action. This work provided board and staff with a description of the program that helped them visualize where it should be headed. This review was time-consuming but was well worth the effort. It was necessary to build a common framework and understand the perspectives of those working with the participant group in order to move toward a consensus on goals and objectives.

The following two examples highlight the importance of developing a consensus on goals and objectives. First, in terms of participant satisfaction, an earlier questionnaire indicated that participants enjoyed the pleasant contact with staff, the new friendships, and the companionship of the group. It was also evident that at some program locations clients appreciated the hot meals served at lunch. From contact with care-givers and participants, it appeared that both were glad to get a break regardless of the content of the programming. Knowing that there was “good food” and “good friends” was sufficient for most participants and their families. Yet, these reasons appeared far removed from the agency objectives of offering “therapeutic, rehabilitative programming.” More information was seen to be needed to understand what was happening and what should be happening during a program day.

Second, reviewing organizational philosophy, goals, and objectives was beneficial in revealing various perceptions of the program. Clearly, board, staff, and volunteers were dedicated to the philosophy and goals of the program and to serving the needs of the clientele. The board focused on developing a broad vision of the program; staff were helpful in identifying new objectives. Although evaluators did not notice the trend initially, in the course of developing the evaluation staff became more concerned with identifying what was seen as part of their job description and what was not. Volunteers, on the other hand, were more likely to question how goals were operationalized. Many older volunteers saw their role as serving the needs of the clients and saw the client’s role as “taking” what was offered. They were more likely to view the client as a passive recipient of care rather than an active partner in providing care. Because volunteers were an integral part of the program, additional training was provided in order to build a common framework with this group.

In both examples, working toward a consensus on the goals and objectives of the program was necessary to ensure staff and volunteers remained on track. It meant obtaining a description of the program — "what are we doing" and an outline of "what we intended and hoped to be doing." It meant priorizing what was to be achieved and deciding what was needed prior to conducting a full-scale evaluation. The task of conceptualizing and designing the program was an important front-end challenge (Wholey, 1977, 1981). In fact, the evaluators consider this challenge to be most significant for the further development of an evaluation. Based on the experience of this study, the evaluators strongly advocate that organizational goals be defined at the outset. In this research, too many questions were of interest to stakeholders; it was not realistic to address all questions. Instead, the researchers contend that for a small agency, focusing on a few strategic questions is far more useful than trying to capture a horizontal glimpse of the agency on a limited budget.

Observing and Fine-Tuning the Program

According to Rossi and Freeman (1993), prior to assessing the impact or outcome of a program, careful observation is required. Systematic monitoring of the program is essential to determine whether it is being executed according to its design and is reaching its specified target population.

Rossi and Freeman (1985, pp. 39–49) suggest addressing the following three questions as part of a program-monitoring phase of evaluation. (1) Are the people being served meeting the program's criteria for admission? (2) Are the service components being carried out as specified in the program design? and (3) Has program implementation maximized chances of successful delivery? These predesign activities should be undertaken right from the beginning, "before the detailed design phase is begun" (Rossi & Freeman, 1993, p. 106).

The advantage of applying a program-monitoring device is that it provides program managers with feedback on program operation and enables modifications to be made (Rossi & Freeman, 1993). For example, as a result of extensive initial program monitoring, modifications were made to the program that included hiring additional staff members, recruiting specialized volunteers, providing additional training to staff and volunteers, changing food services, and offering new programming. As well, priorities were established to accomplish new objectives and accommodate the modifications. One programming objective recognized at the outset was the need to recruit a recreational therapist. This was seen as necessary to assess programming, identify resources, and assist staff members and volunteers in implementing new activities. Unfortunately, lack of funding prevented the continuation of this position beyond a six-month period. During this short period, however, new kinds of programming were implemented to enhance the program, staff were given guidance, and observational notes documented the "before, during, and after" changes.

Although monitoring must be considered an ongoing project, not just a start-up concern, in order to ensure objectives are implemented, evaluators must also recognize that there is no value in conducting an evaluation if established objectives have no chance of being achieved. As Rossi and Freeman (1993, p. 36) assert:

> There is no point in being concerned with the impact or outcome of a particular project unless it has indeed taken place and served the appropriate participants in the way intended. Many programs are not implemented and executed according to their original design … [and] some staff members may not have the motivation or know-how to carry out the program as it was originally envisioned.

Adequate documentation and ample time spent on this front-end task enable implementors to know whether the objectives can be achieved by program methods. Initial observation and assessment of the program is vital to ensuring further success.

Once these modifications are carried out and efforts to maximize the service delivery system are in place, evaluating the impact of the components is possible. The challenge, however, is to reach this stage in the evaluation process. The difficulty is to ensure consistency in implementing program activity. As Rossi and Freeman (1993, p. 107) caution, "no program is designed and implemented according to a set of rules or prescribed procedures. Rather, programs almost always emerge from a complex mixture of political considerations, the influences of key stakeholders, economic constraints, and the availability of necessary program staff and technology."

Many established organizations trying to implement change share a tendency to maintain the status quo. Staff involved in observing and fine-tuning the program considered here expressed such sentiments as "We've been here this long, we must be doing something right. People would stop coming if the program was not good." With regard to the program, the primary concern was not so much with what was being done as with what was *not* being done to enhance it. Enhancing the program meant time observing and monitoring to ensure new activities were part of a regular day. In fact, fine-tuning continued to occur a year later as new staff came aboard. A full-scale evaluation was not likely to achieve much without this front-end fine-tuning. Rossi and Freeman's charge that faulty implementation is likely to yield no impact bears serious consideration. A quick evaluation on the part of the day program would likely have produced a "no-impact study" with results difficult to interpret without sufficient knowledge of the initial work. Further, it would probably have cost the agency a great deal monetarily and in terms of staff time and energy. Initial work in observing and fine-tuning the program, although it is time consuming and requires board, staff, and volunteer commitment to the program's objectives, is the foundation of an effective evaluation.

CONCLUSION

Front-end work must be carried out prior to a full-scale evaluation if that evaluation is to be meaningful. This article has discussed five front-end challenges that require changes at the organizational level in preparation for the evaluation. This front-end work is important because it lays the groundwork for what is happening and what should be happening; it defines the purpose and goals. It helps to establish credibility and enthusiasm for the evaluation. It allows stakeholders to examine the merit of the evaluation and thus develops a practical evaluation that can be useful to all. Also, front-end work prepares stakeholders for the possibility of negative or no-impact findings, and reasons for this lack of impact. Further, ample front-end work is likely to produce better results and better interpretation of results, and consequently offers a better chance of implementing results.

Some additional observations can be made about the research. First, based on this research, the authors advocate an "insider's" view of evaluation. That is, following Merton's (1964, chap. 9) distinction between "insiders" and "outsiders," evaluators should be knowledgeable about an organization's culture and be willing to work to improve organizational effectiveness.

This distinction between insider and outsider addresses the methodological debate in the social sciences between those who adopt

Weber's notion of objective, value-free research (Weber, 1946, chap. 5) and those such as Gouldner (1970) who debunk this approach. One disadvantage of an insider view is that evaluators may become involved with vested interests and may not have the same objectivity and rigor as an outsider.

Second, this article adopts a consensus approach to organizations. Commitment to common goals and objectives is viewed as necessary for the well-being of the organization. However, organizational life may be quite turbulent. Recent organizational theory suggests that organizational life can be characterized as a play among power holders. That is, individuals within the organization are more likely to be concerned about their own interests than the interests of the broader organization (Mintzberg, 1983; Morgan, 1986; Pfeffer, 1992).

Thus a word of caution must be extended to evaluators who adopt a consensus-building model; this model is incomplete. Evaluators need to be aware not only of those who hold formal positions of authority, but also of others in the organization who may exercise power. Evaluators, to be effective, need to be familiar with the movers and shakers in an organization and their motivations. It is important to ask: Who holds the power in this organization? If evaluators fail to consider the power model in their assessments, they may find their efforts stymied.

Third, this article does not suggest that program evaluators should sit back as judges. Rather, we advocate that evaluators become involved in determining effectiveness. Evaluators should become involved as active participants in using their special knowledge and skill in order to build better programs, to provide feedback into program decision-making processes, and to find a link between what is happening in the program and the program's outcome. As Hetherington et al. (1974) found, emphasis on rigorously designed evaluation programs does not necessarily reveal significant program effects. In fact, rigorous designs may be premature. Most managers of social programs are not aware of what makes their program effective. Thus, evaluators need to use their special knowledge to help program managers find elements that are effective and to build on them.

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