MEETING THE EXPECTATIONS OF FUNDERS AND OTHERS – SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT EVALUATION

Trish C. Manfredi, GNF Project Evaluator.

One of the responses to an earlier evaluation article was the challenge of quantifying the diverse qualitative responses that come from goal free questions, or other qualitative questions. Funders, in the writer's opinion, want statistics. Here is the comment:

"One of the related things I would like to hear more from you on (and from others) is how we can best quantify the diverse kinds of responses that result from goals free questions. In the past I have done this with comment sheets using extracted sentences from participants. But, given what I said earlier about the realities of funders, the most acceptable reporting methods are usually weighted toward responses which can yield statistics. And it is best if the resulting statistics are easily understood in the common vision of legislators, lenders, insurers and regular business advisors. Therein lies the rub - the circle repeats."

Here's my response to this important question. None of it is radically new thinking.

First, how clear are you on what your funders want? Has it been spelled out in your contract? Was it in the Request for Proposals (RFP)? Have you talked directly to the sponsors, lenders or legislators for clarification? Perhaps you could provide some examples and ask if these are acceptable.

Second, be realistic about the size (quantity) of your potential outcomes. You may be too tough on yourself. If you are working with only 15 farmers, with average crop acreage is 35 acres, then your outcomes will be very different than if you are working with 250 farmers with acreage in the range of 50-150.

Third, and related to number two above, is the stage of each participant. Using IPM as an example, if 50 percent of your target farmers have already adopted the practice you're promoting, then you have more of a challenge to convince the remaining 50 percent than the first 50 percent to adopt IPM for a particular crop. One adoption theory has several stages of adoption: Innovators, Early Adopters, Late Majority and Laggards. These descriptive names speak for themselves. Thus, setting your goals and intended outcomes in relation to the stage of your potential clientele is critical. You will have to work harder, and probably longer, to convince the 'laggards' to adopt a new practice.

Fourth, the time period is a critical component of having 'statistical outcomes.' Unfortunately, funders often are unrealistic in what can be accomplished in a funding time period. In your effort to have quantitative (stats) outcome, you need to be very realistic in how long it will take to accomplish your intended outcome. For example, a year may not be enough time for farmers to implement a new farming practice, depending on when the project starts, the growing and the harvest seasons. You need to really understand the decision process (and timing) that farmers make in changing practices. Can your stated outcomes be achieved in your funders' time period?

Fifth, can you work backwards from the intended outcomes, and identify intermediate behaviors that pre-sage the outcome? For example, what are the steps in growing strawberries using IPM? While not an IPM expert, I might think choosing a variety that is resistant to certain diseases, designing fields or beds in a certain way, installing monitoring systems, etc. could be possible steps to an IPM crop. These are intermediate outcomes that can be counted.

Sixth, when one has a number of responses to goal free questions (what happened, versus did you do X), you have an opportunity to quantify those responses. You can, of course, put the responses into categories yourself, count them, and use the results as your 'statistics'. For example, you have 40 responses to the question, "What changes did you make this year?" You can them list all the responses, then sort them by whatever categories make sense, and tally them. You might then say: Of the 40 responses (73% of 55 participants), 25 reported that they did X (62.5%) and 15 said they did Y (37.5%). Then you can add a quote from the responses, to make the numbers meaningful to the reader. 'For example, Mr. Z noted that he did " xxxxxxxxxxx".'

The problem with this method is that you, as the project director, are also the evaluator. There is a possible conflict of interest. One way to avoid this is to compile all the responses – either in hard copy or digital – and ask three individuals not involved with the project to place the responses into categories. You can designate the categories or let the 'judges' do it. For your final report, two of the three must agree on a response. You may be pleased at the results, since others may see outcomes that you didn't. Their categories may be more meaningful to your funders than your own. In evaluation jargon, this is known as quantifying qualitative data.

Seventh, try including simple graphs, such as pie charts, to illustrate your work. Consider also using a photo of before and after to add meaning to numbers and text.

Your comments and thoughts are welcome. Please share via the listserv –

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ptmanfredi@rcn.com