

## Goal Based or Goal Free Evaluation? Trish C. Manfredi, GNF Project Evaluator

This is the third of a series of articles called Thinking about Evaluation. The purpose is to encourage thinking about, and the practice of, evaluation. Discussion via the gnf list-serve ([gnf@umassexextension.org](mailto:gnf@umassexextension.org)) is encouraged!

Many years ago, I had the opportunity to attend a workshop given by Michael Scriven, a noted evaluator. While I don't remember the specifics now, I do remember being really influenced by his approach to evaluation. When he wrote "Evaluation Thesaurus" (now 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Sage, 1991), I found the then little paperback book to be truly useful. Two of his concepts from that first book really made an impact on me, and I'd like to share them for your consideration.

They are "Goal Based Evaluation" (GBE) and "Goal Free Evaluation" (GFE). Yes, the second one sounds a bit funny! Goal Based Evaluation is just what it says – the evaluation seeks to determine if the stated goals (and objectives) of the program or project have been achieved. This is the typical evaluation with which most of us are familiar. We have a list of goals and objectives, and we design an evaluation to see how well we did with each. I hate to think of all the times I just rewrote the objectives as questions for a survey!

Scriven notes that the GBE approach can be flawed by false assumptions underlying the goals, changes in goals over time, and dealing with inconsistencies in them. An example of a false assumption comes from a Solar Energy workshop evaluation that showed that less than a third of people who attended incorporated solar energy into their homes. The evaluation had failed to ask if, based on the workshop information, participants had a home that could be retro-fitted. Thus, the program seemed to be more of a failure than it was. Side effects and other consequences are seldom addressed.

Goal Free Evaluation, according to Scriven, has the 'purpose of finding out what the program is actually DOING without being cued to what it is TRYING to do. That is, the evaluator doesn't know the purpose of the program.' If the program is doing what it is supposed to be doing, according to Scriven, 'then these achievements should show up (in observation of process and interviews with consumers not staff).'

Scriven says 'that evaluators who do not know what the program is supposed to be doing look more thoroughly for what it is doing.' Of course, this makes it a challenge for program staff to conduct the evaluation in a goal free manner.

However, I think that you, as program folks, can do GFE. It is a matter of how you ask the questions. For example, you can ask, "Since (date), what changes, if any, have you made to your farming practices?" Then, follow-up with, "What prompted you to make that change(s)? Hopefully, the response will be your program. And if the reply is "my neighbor, or a magazine, or another program", well, you will have learned something

useful. Contrast those questions to: “As a result of participating in ‘my program’, did you make the following changes: xxxxx, yyy, zzzz...?”

While GBE will continue as the main direction in most evaluations, see if you can find ways to ask goal free questions over the course of your project or program. You may be pleasantly surprised.

I’ll end with another story. An agency received funding to conduct family-day care training for mothers receiving public assistance and living in public housing. No one had checked to see if family day care as a business was allowed in public housing. It wasn’t. The evaluation showed that none of the participants who completed the extensive training started a family day care business (the stated goal). However, because the evaluation also asked what happened as a result of the training, it was discovered that two-thirds of the participants had found work in child care settings, and all said that their parenting skills were improving, neither of which were stated goals! You can draw your own conclusions about whether the funder’s money was well spent.

What do you think about goal free evaluation? Have you ever used it? What was the result? Would you try it? Share your thoughts at [gnf@umassextension.org](mailto:gnf@umassextension.org) If you would like a MS-Word format/file version of this article, e-mail me at [ptmanfredi@rcn.com](mailto:ptmanfredi@rcn.com). This article, along with the others, is available on the GNF website at [www.northeastnewfarmer.org](http://www.northeastnewfarmer.org).

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