

WHY EVALUATE?

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This is the first in a series of monthly articles called Thinking about Evaluation. The purpose is to encourage thinking about, and the practice of, evaluation. At times, I will be expressing my opinion on evaluation. There is no right and wrong in evaluation—rather more appropriate and less appropriate evaluations. (my opinion) Hopefully, these ‘thoughts’ will prompt Consortium members to converse about the practice of evaluation, and will eventually lead to improved evaluations. The GNF list-serv is one way to share your opinions and experiences about evaluation.

Please suggest topics for future articles. Or if you have a question about evaluation, please e-mail me at ptmanfredi@rcn.com. If you would like to receive a formatted MS-WORD file of this article, e-mail me at ptmanfredi@rcn.com

For the first article, I want to focus on “Why Evaluate?” With so much emphasis on Outcome Evaluation in the past few years, we may be overlooking other reasons for evaluation. I think it’s worth reflecting on the purpose or the ‘why’ of your proposed evaluation. One of the first things that comes to mind is that Outcome Evaluation is very time-dependent. It takes time for people or organizations to make changes. Who wants or needs, and who will use the evaluation results are also important.

The list below is an attempt to answer, “Why evaluate?” Can you think of other answers? Which ‘answers’ have been reasons for your evaluations? **Who** might use each of the ‘answers’? **When** would it be appropriate to implement an ‘answer’? What information would be most useful at what point?

1. Learn to what extent program, educational or other objectives have been met.
2. Learn if teaching methods are effective.
3. Compare teaching or program delivery methods.
4. Learn if the audience, customers or participants changed or benefited from the program.
5. Learn what ‘works’ with this particular group of customers or participants.
6. Ascertain the planned outcomes and impacts of the program.
7. Ascertain the outcomes and impacts of the program.
8. Learn what customers or participants want or need next.
9. Learn whether or not the program should continue.
10. Determine level of customer or participant satisfaction
11. Assist decision-makers to understand the results of the program
12. Assist decision-makers to understand the value of the program.
13. Provide information for accountability to funders.
14. Personal and professional satisfaction.
15. Program improvement.
16. Answer questions asked by participants, funders or others about the program.

17. Learn what works in a particular situation.

What other reasons come to mind?

As you review the list, you may see overlaps with market research, customer satisfaction, needs assessment and applied research. These areas use many of the same techniques and methods used in evaluation: before and after or pre-post testing; surveys, observation, etc.

One way to start this conversation in your agency or organization is to ask the question “Why Evaluate?” at your next Staff or Board meeting. Give everyone present large index cards and ask them to think of as many answers as possible. Organize and tape the cards to the wall. Or, ask each person to give one idea, rotating around the room until there are no more unique answers, listing each on a flip chart or blackboard. Follow-up by asking people to indicate which reasons are more important to them. How similar or dissimilar are the results? What are the implications for your organization or agency?

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