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# An Unorthodox Perspective on Evaluation:

*Some Do's, Don'ts and  
Cautionary Tales*





# **An Unorthodox Perspective on Evaluation: Some Do's, Don'ts and Cautionary Tales**

*Remarks made at the  
National Network of Grantmakers*

*by:*  
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## **Introduction**

Today I'll be discussing with you the ten most important things I want you to know about evaluation. As an evaluation practitioner who works for both funders and grantees, I will offer perspectives from both sides of the fence, drawing on experiences from my time in the field. These are hard-learned lessons that have challenged me to think differently about the evaluation work I do and caused me to depart from the orthodox stance of the social sciences. I hope to challenge you to think about roles of evaluation for your foundations and grantees.

When speaking of evaluation, I use the term in its broadest sense - looking in a systematic way at the value, utility or merits of a human endeavor.

The first questions we have to ask ourselves about evaluation are:

- Why am I doing an evaluation?
- What do I want to know?
- What will I do with the information?
- Who has a stake in what we learn?

Evaluation is a practical, applied enterprise. If you do not have some immediate, relevant use for the information, do not collect it. Also, if you do not have a good sense of what it is you want to know, do not go hunting.

For grantmakers, I offer the indoctrination - "physician, heal thyself." Rather than thinking narrowly about evaluation for assessing the merits of funded programs, for making funding decisions, or holding a grantee accountable for results, turn the lens on your own organizations and practices.

Legitimate subjects for evaluation/examination might include:

- Are our internal practices consistent with our vision and mission?
- Do we have an appropriate focus for our funding?
- Have our funds been distributed to areas and projects identified in our strategic plan?
- Has our funding had an impact on the community?
- Are we, in our structure, policy and practices, an inclusive organization?

Whether to evaluate yourselves, or the efforts of your grantees, I cannot stress enough how important it is to have a clear purpose in view and a sense of the knowledge you wish to gain. If you do not have this clarity, you will have undertaken an expensive exercise that wastes people's time, dashes their hopes and generates cynicism. If the information is left unused it poisons the well for any subsequent serious research. People participate in good faith that something will be better for their trouble.

Another cynical downside of the business is a preconceived conclusion. The worst case example is the grantmaker who has concluded what the results are before any evaluation has occurred. It becomes then the evaluator's assignment to officially confirm these conclusions, bestowing the blessings of scientific objectivity. If it is window dressing for decisions already made, do not bother with the expense.

Let me give you a real case experience from early in my career. The legislature in the state where I was employed as an evaluator had made a major commitment to community corrections and wanted findings that would justify their decision. Unfortunately, they decided that recidivism was how they would measure program effectiveness, with the expectation that recidivism rates would be lower for those offenders leaving community corrections than for those leaving prison, parole or probation. In the evaluation, I found no significant difference, even though community corrections participants were often first-time felons and property offenders. The legislature dismissed my findings and over the next decade repeated the study two more times. Each time the outcome was the same.

I recommend that judgment be suspended until the research is completed. While we all have and are entitled to our hunches, hypotheses and biases, set these aside long enough to discover what can be learned. Allow evaluation to be a process of uncovering and disclosing the unexpected and the unanticipated--for good or ill. Benefits of tremendous value may be found where not expected. On the other hand we may be surprised by well-intentioned efforts that backfire.

## **Funding Decisions**

Accountability underlies any discussion of evaluation and funding. As grantmakers you are legally and ethically obliged to commit your funds as prescribed in your by-laws and policies and as directed by your trustees. You are obligated to use the money for some public good and you will be called upon to account for how the money was spent.

Tying funding to evaluation takes accountability a step further. As grantmakers, you may want to be certain that not only was the grant spent for the intended purposes (output), but also that some desirable end has been accomplished (outcome).

Today, we would be hard pressed to find a set of management standards and guidelines, or a list of best practices that did not tout evaluation.

One of the risks is to reduce evaluation to a pro forma exercise, a ritual that gives the appearance of accountability - the sizzle without the steak. We start with a check-off list:

- |  |             |
|--|-------------|
| Project submitted report on time       | ✓           |
| Project has measurable results         | ✓           |
| Results meet targets                   | ✓           |
| Results submitted on time              | ✓           |
| Project has fulfilled all requirements | close file. |

Evaluation can help you make an informed funding decision, giving you greater confidence in your judgments. Many of you have probably used evaluation data without thinking about it. For example, you have probably asked about:

- Activity and outputs: are programs carrying out the agreed upon activities, at agreed upon levels, to the targeted groups and populations?
- Finances: are your grant dollars being spent efficiently for the intended purposes?

Some of you are probably ready to delve deeper to see what, if any, difference any of this has made for the individuals, families or communities involved and why this is so. I urge you to be flexible and judicious in asking these deeper questions - you need not impose the same requirements on all your grantees.

Relative to the size of a grant, project, or sophistication of the grantee, it may be too costly, too time consuming and perhaps pointless to ask for anything more than some simple financial accounting. Typically, the expense for a good evaluation will run at about 10-20% of what has been budgeted for the program. Imposing an inordinate data burden in exchange for a small grant is more than the traffic can bear for most grassroots or fledgling organizations.

In funding decisions, evaluation is not a substitute for judgment. If our choices were grounded solely on measurement, we would not need human intelligence to make our decisions. Instead we could crank up the enigma machine, the proverbial little black box

with algorithms that could make our decisions for us, or we could create some simple point system or decision grid. Results exceed targets by 40%, automatic refunding or 10% increase. Unfortunately, funders and grantmakers have behaved like this. The problem is not with the evaluation, per se - it is how the information is being utilized.

I grimace when I hear people say the data tells me to do this or that. Data is dumb. Data does not tell us anything. We imbue it with meaning based on our values, theories, hypotheses and inferences. Least of all, it tells us how to behave. We cannot hide behind numbers to justify what we do.

On the other hand, let's not hide behind data to avoid decisions and put off the inevitable. When people disagree on a course of action, to put off the hour of reckoning and to avoid conflict (here we refer to this as "Minnesota nice"), they may conclude that a study will quickly settle the matter. I can assure you that in a house divided evaluation probably will not settle the matter. You will end up shooting the messenger, defiling his/her credentials and challenging the validity of the methodology. Very likely another, more credible search for the unvarnished truth is waiting in the wings for the next evaluator.

Today the watchword for funders is results. Outcome-based funding is enjoying a renaissance, now in its third incarnation during my professional career of three decades. It has surfaced in the 70's, 80's and 90's as the way to rationalize funding decisions. Outcome information, used judiciously in conjunction with other information, is just another tool in our tool kit. In each generation however, we have had to relearn some hard lessons.

Missing outcome targets is not necessarily indicative of program failure, nor is meeting targets necessarily indicative of success.

Programs need to find their level. If unrealistic targets are set a priori they will probably be missed. We also know that there are extenuating circumstances, i.e., changes in staff, program design and clientele that can adversely affect outcomes, as well as environmental factors such as a downturn in the business cycle, or at a neighborhood level, the closing of a major employer.

Conversely, we also know that programs can select unambitious targets that are easily met or can cream the client population, serving those most likely to benefit and even those who might have succeeded without some programmatic intervention. This produces nominal results, but none that any of us are after.

Grantmakers will abet and promote such counterproductive behaviors if funding increases are mechanically contingent on meeting or exceeding outcome targets. This generates cynicism among grantees and turns the evaluation exercise into a shell game.

Good or bad outcomes, we need to have a context for understanding them. The numbers alone do not tell the story. Qualitative information based on field interviews, focus groups, case records and observation can yield important information and insight that quantitative methods alone cannot. This is a point I will return to later.

There will always be attribution problems. The most desirable outcomes occur at some

distant time well beyond the life of most grants. These are the most difficult to study for reasons such as sample mortality - when you cannot find many of the post-program participants. Often times, other factors intervene in ways unknown - there is no way to gauge if the achieved outcomes are a result of the program, or some other unidentified factors.

Pressure to produce results leads to a focus on short-term outcomes, which may not be attainable during the first round of funding, or may lead us to look at the wrong things or things of little consequence. There is not enough time to test the reliability of the indicators and to collect data routinely. In short, if you want to ground a funding decision on evaluation data, especially for a program with no history, you will want to look at a different type of evaluation.

As foundations, you know that the nonprofit world looks to you as their resource for experimentation and risk taking. To put all of the resources into outcome-based funding closes an important door. It is difficult to expect success and positive outcomes from every endeavor. Let's agree that failure is OK--and that negative findings can be meaningful. We can learn from mistakes by abandoning or modifying unproductive avenues - we do not need to hide or bury them. These are important lessons to be learned and they need support and study. When funding is contingent on success and attaining positive outcomes our society loses out on some tremendous learning opportunities that inform better, improved practice.

A final note on outcomes - measurement tools are far from perfect. At best, the indicators used vary considerably in their reliability and validity. Most of the time foundations are willing to give grantees the benefit of the doubt that a change in the desired direction is a real one and that some variance is attributable to the program.

As a way to avoid some of the conundrums I have mentioned, and as a way to promote continuous improvement, let me commend the novel approach taken up by my friends at one United Way. Rather than rewarding programs that meet their targets and sanctioning programs that do not, continued funding is instead contingent on how the information was used for program improvement. If one of our aims is truly better performance, my United Way friends have put their money where their mouth is.

## **Participant Stakeholders**

As primary stakeholders, grantmakers and grantees are at center stage in any evaluation. Unfortunately, in many evaluations the forgotten stakeholder is the research subject: the individuals, groups, families, organizations and communities that are intended beneficiaries of the project. If your focus is exclusively on the funding decision, the interests of the participant may be overlooked. In truth, these are not passive subjects, but the very actors to whom we ought to be accountable.

In any evaluation effort I suggest that the participants a) be given an equal voice in planning and executing the evaluation, b) have a role to play in interpreting and sharing the findings, c) be empowered to use the findings to their best advantage and d) be fully informed about how the information will be used. Also, the methodologies used should respect and reflect the participants' unique cultures and abilities.

What does success or progress look like to the participants and how would they know and recognize it? What is the quid pro quo, the rewards and benefits of participation? Does the information and knowledge gained contribute to greater equity, social justice, empowerment and personal fulfillment, or more social control, conformity and compliance? At the very least, will people be compensated for the information they provide and will they be paid for gathering it?

In addition, are we adding value by building capacity, leaving behind not just a report but new data-gathering and analysis competencies that are portable and useful for other purposes? What is the best method to gather the information in their respective communities in respectful and competent ways? How can we best communicate results to them and to other stakeholders in ways other than a written report, and what role do they want to play in this?

I cannot impress upon you how important it is to close the loop by informing participants what has become of the findings and how that information has been used. Too often people feel ripped off, ignored, or forgotten. They see no benefits or results from their involvement because they were never informed, even if results exist. A piece of paper or a report is not enough. In addition to the project or service, evaluation can leave behind the capacity to collect, interpret and use information. Partnership with participants is a distinguishing feature of Rainbow's practice. I am now engaged in several projects where I am as much the teacher, coach, and facilitator as I am the evaluator/consultant. Working side by side with our partners is one of the true joys of this work. It is a tremendous learning experience for me.

Qualitative methodologies such as interviews, focus groups, case histories, analysis of records, letters, journals and logs, photos, videos and audio recordings of, for example, oral histories are all powerful and important ways to document and air what our participant stakeholders have to tell us. These methods feature prominently in Rainbow's practice as important avenues for giving stakeholders voice.

## **Reporting and Communicating Findings**

There is nothing more lifeless, bloodless and sterile than another report. Overwhelmed by the information overload streaming to us through more and more channels, we may want more than paper to effectively communicate our findings.

With some imagination there are other ways. Presentations can be an engaging method of relaying information, especially with lively presenters equipped with the full array of AV gizmos, overheads, cartoons, magic tricks and jokes. Twenty years ago, a friend of mine created an evaluation handbook for a youth emergency hotline with a board game, taking participants through the loops, hoops and hurdles of finding services.

At Rainbow, two of our associates used drama to good effect, while giving voice to our participant stakeholders. In a study to learn why young women and young people of color were not enrolling in advanced math and science classes, my associates, in cooperation with the young people whom they had interviewed, prepared skits based on the findings. At a conference of secondary school science and math teachers the students then performed the skits, demonstrating what it was like to have teachers who provide no examples, offer no hands-on experience, do not review or do not stop to answer questions. It was a powerful message and confirmed the importance of giving voice to stakeholders.

## **Benefits of Evaluation**

Beyond providing information for making decisions evaluation offers a variety of benefits, such as:

- Building capacity
- Discovery
- Continuous improvement

### **Building Capacity**

If we want to institutionalize evaluation as practice for continuous improvement; if we want groups and organizations to collect reliable and valid information; if we want information gathering that is appropriate and ethical; if we want people to report, understand and use the information, then we can't leave it to the realm of experts using arcane methods and formulas that only the sorcerers of social science can conjure and behold. We have to build capacity of individuals, organizations and communities to do this work for themselves.

Training is key. Since staff turnover in nonprofit organizations is high, one-time training is not enough. Sustained evaluation efforts require training on a regular, periodic schedule. To the extent possible, evaluation needs to become a part of each organization's institutional knowledge - understood, shared and supported by several staff. Information systems are vulnerable and can fail if assigned to the one and only research or computer literate member of an organization and that individual leaves.

PCs are now ubiquitous and information systems easier to establish and maintain. In building capacity you may want to assist your grantees in securing the hardware and software that gives them the tools they need to collect, store, manipulate and exchange information with you and others. It is less and less cost prohibitive with new equipment available at under \$1,000 - what a new IBM Selectric typewriter cost a little over 20 years ago in 1980 dollars (those of you old enough to remember typewriters).

It is also important to build systems that are well documented and simple. Building capacity means designing systems that are easy to learn, that require collecting only the data that is necessary and, if possible, are easy to maintain because they are automated. It makes the work less tedious, more efficient and allows even a small staff to keep on task. Keep it simple and make it minimal.

Building capacity to do evaluation leaves behind skills, practice and knowledge that can have long-lasting benefit. Knowledge and knowledge-gathering techniques are power. The probability is also far higher that people will own and use information that they have helped to collect, analyze and report on. Allowing people to take control of information and knowledge that they can use on their own behalf enables them to stand up to institutions.

While assisting in the analysis of data collected by farmers on the economic, health and environmental impact of power lines crossing their property, I saw how these skills were used, with some success, to challenge the power company's experts. Some of their findings were later independently corroborated by academic and state experts.

To close this section, I recommend that you build your own capacity in this area as well as the capacity of your trustees, particularly in understanding, interpreting and using the reports they receive. It will increase your capacity to provide technical assistance, evaluate the research component of proposals, improve your ability to select evaluators and consultants, and give you the skills needed to evaluate and improve your own practice. You will also be better equipped to understand and use the information you receive.

## **Discovery**

Evaluation is part of the discovery process, where we take a step back from what we do every day, hold a mirror up to ourselves and ask, why are we doing this? What are we trying to accomplish? How will we know that? Can it be accomplished through the methods we are employing? For me, that decisive moment in any consultation is when someone in the process says "aha". It is that moment of understanding and self awareness that makes the undertaking worthwhile.

For this reason, I find construction of a logic model an important part of evaluation and a prerequisite to achieving results. By logic model, I mean looking at what activity is doable through available resources, what the outputs of that activity are and what might be different/attained through those outputs, i.e., outcomes. It is that internal/too often implicit logic that you look for in your review of grants. By reflecting on this logic, and making it explicit, stakeholders get the opportunity to develop shared understandings across staff, participants, board and management, about what a program or a project can reasonably hope to accomplish.

The model is the road map. If staff and managers can agree on where they are going and how to get there, they have a much better chance of arriving at their destination and recognizing it when they see it. People aligned for a common purpose can focus their energies on the same end.

Developing a logic model is, I believe, consciousness-raising and motivating for program staff. Aligning resources and activities to achieve measurable results challenges us to be self-conscious and deliberate about what we are doing. It also allows for reflection on why we are doing it, as well as testing the validity of our assumptions against hard reality. Seeing results and having some empirical evidence indicating that what we do makes a difference builds confidence and motivates us to continue.

## **Continuous Improvement**

Most importantly, evaluation is a tool for continuous organizational improvement. It is part of the feedback loop that informs staff and managers about their own practices that opens the window to change.

For example, if an alternative school program gets better educational outcomes for young men than young women, or a pregnancy prevention program gets better outcomes for white teens than black teens, outcome assessment has set the stage for asking why. Evaluation gives the opportunity to explore ways of making programs effective for all participants, regardless of their attributes or heritage. With knowledge about differential outcomes, the focus may be deliberately narrowed to only those participants for whom the program makes a difference.

Michael Patton, a leading authority on evaluation, has often said that evaluation is a leadership function that must become imbedded in an organization's culture. Unless those who lead or govern organizations become committed to evaluation and see the benefit of ongoing gathering of information for improving what is done, there is little incentive or enthusiasm to sustain the effort. Evaluation has to be supported throughout an organization, starting at the top, and has to assume a life of its own as standard, everyday practice. It is just another part of what is done.

When evaluation is viewed as something to satisfy a funder's requirement, I have observed the quality of information systems erode quickly, then wither and quietly but mercifully disappear. If it becomes menial busy work to get the money, management will assign these tasks to low level, unproductive, or new employees. As a result, it will get low priority and, at best, perfunctory attention. In a worst-case scenario it is garbage in/garbage out. As funders, you will never know if the numbers you have are reliable and valid.

Nothing succeeds like success, and achieving results can also have self-fulfilling consequences. If we believe in what we are doing and see we are making a difference, we will behave in ways that continue to get us the desired results. Clients, who sense our enthusiasm and our commitment to and our belief in them, may rise to meet our expectations for change and achievement, irrespective of treatment modality or intervention.

## **Advice and Suggestions**

### **Be Flexible and Practical**

Start by being kind to yourselves and to your grantees in your approach to evaluation. We do not necessarily want to treat every project evaluation in the same way and we may not want to evaluate every project. Imposing the same evaluation and reporting requirements on everyone is not necessarily fair, prudent, economical, or useful.

For example, reporting on outcomes may not be appropriate for every program, and information being reported need not always be quantitative. In some spheres, given the nature of the activity or the cost of outcome assessment, you may decide to settle for output or activity measures. For small, new and innovative projects, outcome assessment may be impractical. You may be more interested in their progress in getting off the ground and reaching some point where they can start generating some outputs or outcomes. Some types of programs defy a quantitative approach or beg for a thorough in-depth look behind the numbers. Be open to qualitative methodologies for all the reasons I described.

When looking for an evaluation consultant, be sure to find one who is flexible, willing to draw from a variety of designs and tools suited to your questions and conditions. Beware of the hammer looking for a nail and the one-trick pony. The easiest thing for any consultant is to use the same and only approach they know.

For projects with large numbers of participants, an indication of performance based on sample data is as valid as data on every individual or entity.

Please also be flexible about reporting formats. Does everyone need to report to you on paper and does it have to be one format? If grantees must report to you on paper, please pay less attention to format than content, as long as they submit the evaluation information required. If they are reporting the same or similar information to another funder, consider accepting someone else's format.

Please be flexible about your reporting schedule, ensuring that it reflects the exigencies of the real world, not your own bureaucratic demands and routines.

Surely most entities and endeavors that you fund have multiple funders. Harried executives and administrators often tell me about how much time and resources they commit to being accountable to multiple funders with different reporting requirements. It is a cost of doing business, but one that could be significantly reduced if the multiple funders can come to terms on one evaluation, one report and a common reporting schedule. If a grantee is already submitting outcomes and reports to someone else, you can unilaterally consider accepting it in lieu of your own, even if these deviate somewhat from your practice. You will receive as much acclaim and goodwill for this attention to practicality and common sense as you will for the grants that you make. It will truly add value.

Recognize that the results a grantee is pursuing may be unknown for some time. Especially for new and small entities, the likelihood of seeing measurable, reportable results after a year or two are small. Also recognize that projects will be highly variable in what they can accomplish over different time frames, and depending on the entity you're dealing with, operate on a variety of different calendars and cycles (for example, the school calendar.)

Recognize that over time, in intervals of variable length, your grantees may be able to report on short-term, intermediate and long-term outcomes. For most of you, the relationship probably will not extend beyond the short, and at best, the intermediate terms.

**Short-term or initial outcomes** are the first benefits or changes participants experience - the ones most closely related to, or influenced by, the program's outputs. For example, changes in knowledge, attitudes and skills, which are not necessarily ends in themselves, but necessary steps to the desired ends.

**Intermediate outcomes** link a program's initial outcomes to the longer-term outcomes it desires for participants, for example, the desired behavior changes.

**Longer-term outcomes** are the ultimate outcomes a program wants to achieve for its participants. These are meaningful changes, often in the participant's condition or status. They are also the most removed benefits a program can reasonably hope to influence and often the most difficult to attribute to the program's activities and outputs because of the intervening time and variables involving other multiple unknown factors.

A sample case: a short-term outcome might be the learning of a new occupation or job-finding skills, i.e., new knowledge. The intermediate outcome is whether the individual secures and sustains employment, i.e., a change in behavior - they are working. Long-term - did they improve their standard of living and rise out of poverty, i.e., a change in status.

## **Share**

In closing, I cannot impress upon you how important it is to share evaluation information - not just with grantees and participants, but widely in the sector. Let me quote some boiler plate from Rainbow's standard letter of agreement.

The mission of Rainbow Research is to promote the increased effectiveness of socially concerned organizations in the performance of their mission, through activities designed to promote and strengthen program impact and organizational capacity. One of its objectives is to provide information, expertise and support to socially concerned organizations and systems so that they can increase their effectiveness and respond more appropriately to community problems.

Rainbow Research is allowed to announce publicly that it has been awarded

this grant and to disseminate generic findings stemming from this project as appropriate with Rainbow's mission.

More foundations are doing a better job of summarizing best practices and lessons learned. As the cost of creating and supporting websites goes down, an increasing amount of this information is available on the Internet. We have all seen some lovely, thoughtful reports looking at the best practice of multiple programs. I laud these efforts as a tremendous contribution to the sector.

If something can be learned and emulated, or if mistakes can be avoided, why bury the information in an unmarked grave, or warehouse it in some archive to be discovered at a later, probably irrelevant, time. Let people mine value out of it now. If you agree at the outset with all concerned that the information will be for all to see, confidentiality issues can be resolved up front.

Certainly we can imagine other ways of sharing and partnering that offer economies to all concerned. You may, this morning, want to give examples of best practices you have initiated and lessons learned that you can share with the others present.

There are tremendous economies to be achieved for everyone that may include, but are not limited to:

- jointly sponsoring training and sharing of training materials
- publishing best practices or making cash awards for best practices in evaluation
- agreeing to use the same outcomes, indicators and/or reports for any entities funded in common
- working together with grantees in the same programmatic area to identify the best outcomes and indicators for what they do
- promoting shared data collection methods, database software information systems and approaches to reporting.

I believe in the value of evaluation and endorse your foray into the world of research. Go to it, eyes open with a clear purpose in mind, being practical and flexible, working to build the capacity of your grantees to be effective at what they do and improve upon it. I also encourage you to build your own capacity in this arena and turn the mirror on yourselves, examining and improving your own practices. Share what you learn and help us build the capacity of the sector.

I very much enjoyed this opportunity to share my thoughts with you and, on behalf of Rainbow Research, am pleased that you invited us.