

Why Evaluate?

- To determine the need to continue existing programs or the need to create new programs.
- To be sure you are prepared to start new work.
- To ensure that programs are meeting the needs of your constituents.
- To demonstrate the value of your work.
- To enhance program effectiveness and efficiency.
- To define your goals and see if your programs are effective at meeting them.
- To measure what matters.

What is Program Evaluation?

How do you know that there is a need for your programs? How do you know that your programs are successful - that they really do protect the environment and inspire people to take action? You evaluate them! Through program evaluation you collect information to help you determine the need for, and impact of, your programs. Evaluation can also help you find ways to enhance your programs.

Program evaluation is not about how good you are at running your programs, but instead about how good your programs are at fulfilling your mission and goals. Demonstrating that a specific program is the best strategy, and that it is achieving the results you want it to, has many benefits. It reinforces the importance of your work, shows donors that their money is being used wisely, and demonstrates to the public and your constituents that your work is worthy of their support and participation.

Things to Consider

Evaluation is valuable, no matter how much or how little of it you do. You don't have to evaluate everything to get great input about your programs, but it is worthwhile to incorporate a few elements of evaluation into your work.

When thinking about evaluation, here are some factors to consider:

- **Timing:** When do you conduct evaluations and how often? Timing is critical in creating a thorough, yet realistic, evaluation process.
- **Resources:** How much time, funding, and other resources do you have available? This will impact the extensiveness of your evaluations.
- **Expertise:** Who will conduct the evaluation? Staff and board members may be able to conduct the evaluation. However, if time or skills are limited, consider asking an experienced volunteer to assist or hiring an impartial and experienced consultant.
- **Definitions:** What does that word mean again? Different people may use different terms to mean the same thing, or similar terms to mean different things. Focus on the concepts of evaluation, not the terminology.
- **Level of detail:** How in depth do you want to be? Do you plan to evaluate one program or several programs? This depends on your organization's needs and available resources.
- **Type of evaluation:** What method best meets your needs? The evaluation methods used for one program or audience may not work well for another.

- Participants: Who should be involved in the evaluation and at what stages? Potential participants include program managers, organizational board and staff members, constituents, donors, volunteers, and other stakeholders.
- Information sharing: With whom do you want to share the evaluation results? The results are not only useful internally, but may be beneficial to share with constituents, donors, and other organizations.

When Do I Evaluate?

It is important to conduct evaluation throughout a program, from program planning through program conclusion. There are three main times to conduct evaluation:

- Before you start: If you are thinking of starting a new program, or are about to launch into a new year of an existing program, be sure to gather information before you start. This pre-program evaluation enables you to learn about the existing conditions, such as water quality or the public's current knowledge of, and attitude towards, your issue of focus. This will help you to decide if there is even a need for a program and what type of program will have the greatest impact. It also gives you a baseline to compare future data against.
- While planning and running the program: Conduct evaluation while planning, piloting, and implementing your program. By gathering data during program implementation, you are able to assess your impact along the way and make changes as you go.
- At the end: Collect information about conditions after your program. By comparing this data with your pre-program evaluation, you will be able to determine the impact your program had.

As an example, consider how you could incorporate evaluation into these three phases of a classroom lesson. Before you go into the classroom, or at the very beginning of the lesson, you could have students complete a pre-quiz, allowing you to gauge their current knowledge of the subject and adapt your lesson if needed. During the lesson, you could observe the level of student interaction/participation; if students are not engaged, you could make some small changes as you go. Then, at the end of the lesson, you could have the students complete a post-quiz, potentially using the same questions as the pre-quiz, to see how their knowledge changed as a result of the lesson. This could also be adapted for a series of classroom lessons done with the same class.

It is best to evaluate on an ongoing basis. If you do not have the resources to do so, consider conducting evaluations when you are developing a new program, when you have been running the same program for an extended period of time, and when organizational direction changes.

What Do I Evaluate?

What you evaluate, or measure, will depend on your program, program purpose, audience, and resources. For example, if you are conducting a stream buffer planting, you may have a variety of goals, including improving water quality, enhancing wildlife habitat, and bringing in new volunteers. Measurements for those goals could include reduction of nutrients in the stream, plant survival over time, and the presence of new volunteers participating in the planting, respectively. You may also want to set specific objectives for each measure, such as 80% plant survivability over 3 years. However, if you are conducting an educational program, you could measure program interest and attendance, future engagement of the participants in your programming, and the impact the program had on both the overall knowledge and the long-term behavior of the attendees.

There are various tools to assist you in determining what to measure. Two such tools are logic models and rubrics.

Logic Models

A logic model is like a flow chart representing how you can accomplish your goals through programs: the resources needed, the actions to be taken (programs you will run), and the results expected. It is called a logic model because it is meant to show logical if/then scenarios. You start with a goal, such as improving the water quality of an impaired stream, and work backwards from there, defining what it means to improve water quality (e.g. if data show that the stream meets nutrient water quality standards after programming, then water quality has improved), what needs to happen to get there (e.g. if there is a reduction in excess fertilizer use, then streams may meet nutrient water quality standards), what program you can run to create that change (e.g. if you conduct a public outreach campaign about proper fertilizer use, then there may be a reduction in excess fertilizer use), and what resources you need to run the program (e.g. outreach materials, staff/volunteers, website, conference room for talks, etc.).

The logic model provides a road map for conducting the program and enables you to identify what you are measuring. Once you have created your logic model, you can use it to develop a plan for collecting your data and measuring program effectiveness. You decide what questions you need to ask (e.g. did water quality change, have people changed how they use fertilizer, etc.) and how you will find answers to those questions.

Rubrics

Rubrics can be used to both identify what you are measuring and to make the measurements themselves. When using rubrics, you first decide what criteria you are looking at, for example plant survivability for a stream buffer planting. Then, you develop a ranking scale for the criteria based on the qualities you anticipate, from weakest performance to strongest. For example, one end of the scale for a buffer planting could be that no plants have survived after 3 years, while the other end of the scale could be 100% survivability after 3 years. Then you determine where your results fall on the scale. When using a rubric, be sure to be as objective as possible in your criteria and rankings.

How Do I Measure Effectiveness?

After deciding what you want to measure and when to measure it, you need to decide how to collect the data. Before choosing your data collection methods, first consider the level of rigor you are looking for. Would anecdotal data suffice or do you need quantitative information? In addition, you need to consider your audience or issue; an evaluation tool that is effective for adults may not work well for children or wildlife. Each evaluation tool has strengths and weaknesses. You will need to find the best tool, or combination of tools, for your program, audience, or issue.

Data collection methods include, but are not limited to:

- Focus groups
- Habitat assessment
- Interviews
- Observation
- Products (e.g. nature journals, etc.)
- Rubrics
- Surveys
- Tests/Quizzes
- Water quality monitoring

I've Collected Data, Now What Do I Do?

Now that you've collected data, you should review it and figure out what it is telling you. Refer back to your logic model or rubric to determine whether or not you met your expectations. If you did, is there still a need for your program, or is it time to move on to a new program? If the program did not fulfill your objectives, what could have prevented that? How could you make the program more effective? What other programs could lead to better results?

Consider sharing your data. Let those involved in the evaluation and program implementation processes know the results. Provide the results to your board, staff, and volunteers to help them in steering your work. Let your constituents know about your results, to encourage them to participate in programs that are effective or help them understand why you are no longer doing a program that wasn't effective. Use the results in your grant proposals to demonstrate the need for, and success of, your work to funders. Share your information with other organizations so that they can use your program and evaluation as a model for their own work.

Build on what you learned through the evaluation process and use it to move your organization forward. Remember, evaluation is a critical tool to assist your organization in learning and growing.

Resources

The following resources can help you to gain a more in-depth understanding of program evaluation.

Publications

Evaluating Capacity-Building Efforts for Nonprofit Organizations
Connolly, Paul and Peter York, The Conservation Company, 2002.
<http://tccgrp.com/pubs/evaluation.php>

Introduction to Conducting Focus Groups
NOAA Coastal Services Center, 2009.
http://www.csc.noaa.gov/focus_groups

Introduction to Survey Design and Delivery
NOAA Coastal Services Center, 2007.
<http://www.csc.noaa.gov/surveydesign/>

Learning As We Go: Making Evaluation Work for Everyone
Peter J. York, TCC Group, 2003.
<http://tccgrp.com/pubs/evaluation.php>

Logic Model Development Guide
W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004.
<http://www.wkkf.org/knowledge-center/resources/2006/02/WK-Kellogg-Foundation-Logic-Model-Development-Guide.aspx>

State of Evaluation 2010: Evaluation Practice and Capacity in the Nonprofit Sector;
nnovation Network, Inc. 2010.
http://www.innonet.org/client_docs/innonet-state-of-evaluation-2010.pdf

Taking Stock: A Practical Guide to Evaluating Your Own Programs
Horizon Research, Inc., 1997.
<http://www.horizon-research.com/reports/1997/stock.pdf>

Whole Measures
Center for Whole Communities, 2007.
<http://www.measuresofhealth.net/>

Website Resources

Charity Channel.
<http://charitychannel.com/>

Free Management Library
<http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/evaluatn.htm>

Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation
<http://www.grdodge.org/learning/assessment/index.htm>

The Evaluation Center, Western Michigan University
<http://ec.wmich.edu/glossary/prog-glossary.htf>

The National Survey Indicators Database
<http://tarc.aecf.org/initiatives/mc/mcid/index.php>

University of Wisconsin Extension
<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/>

Organizations

NOAA Coastal Services Center
Provides resources and trainings on project design and evaluation.
<http://www.csc.noaa.gov/>

TCC Group
Provides evaluation consulting to nonprofits. Website has various papers and articles on evaluation.
<http://tccgrp.com/>

The Leadership Group
Provides training and consulting services to nonprofits.
<http://www.leadershipgroup.info/>

The Watershed Institute
Provides one-on-one assistance to New Jersey watershed groups. Also runs a small grant program that can fund program evaluation efforts.
<http://www.thewatershedinstitute.org>

Questions? Contact Us

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About Us



The purpose of the Watershed Institute is to provide New Jersey's watershed groups with the knowledge, skills and resources they need to be strong and sustainable organizations protecting their local environments, and to foster a unified watershed movement to ensure clean water and healthy habitats throughout the state. The Institute accomplishes this by holding workshops and idea sharing meetings; encouraging group coordination on state policy issues; administering a grant program; providing one-on-one assistance to groups; and distributing relevant information through publications, a listserv and a website.

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The Watershed Institute is a program of the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association. Since 1949, the Association has been protecting clean water and the environment in the 265-square mile region drained by the Stony Brook and the Millstone River. They pursue their mission through conservation, advocacy, science and education.