

# Tips for Becoming Better Evaluators

Sue Giancola, author of **Program Evaluation: Embedding Evaluation into Program Design and Development**, offers five tips to become more effective evaluators and catalyze change.

**E**valuation matters. It really does. It has implications for just about everything we encounter in our daily lives. To what extent are the products we use effective? How can the programs our tax dollars fund be improved? In what ways does social media affect interpersonal communication? I'm sure you can think of many more examples. Evaluation, at its core, is about thinking critically...examining and understanding what works best, in what ways, and for whom.

It is true that an evaluator evaluates; however, more often than not, an evaluator has the opportunity to do more. An effective evaluator can be a facilitator of a continuous improvement mindset, an architect of processes to support the data collection necessary for informed decision-making, and a capacity builder of skills such that data can be used to empower people and catalyze change. As such, below are five tips when embarking upon an evaluation:

## 1 Be True Partners with Your Stakeholders: Approach evaluation as a partner, not simply an expert.

Why do we evaluate? Well, for me and my colleagues, it is to effect positive change. Yet, change cannot occur unless stakeholders use evaluation findings. Partnering with stakeholders throughout all phases of an evaluation helps to create a shared understanding of the program being evaluated, build commitment to program goals, strengthen the evaluation design, enable evaluation processes to be embedded within programs, ensure the data collected are useful to the program, foster investment in data collection, facilitate a continuous improvement mindset, and ultimately promote the ongoing use of evaluation findings to drive programmatic decisions. This, in turn, cultivates program success in order to improve the lives of people.

## 2 Know Your Program: Understand the program (or policy) you are evaluating.

A doctor cannot accurately diagnose without fully understanding a patient's symptoms. A teacher cannot create a valid test without understanding the knowledge that is to be assessed. And an evaluator cannot design an effective evaluation without understanding what is being evaluated. A responsible evaluator should have a clear understanding of what a program intends to accomplish, how program activities are implemented as part of the program, and why program leadership believes program activities will result in intended outcomes. Understanding the what, how, and why is the foundation of a good program evaluation.

## 3 Focus on Improvement: Evaluation is a process, not a destination.

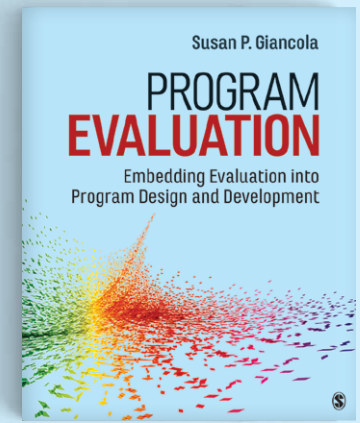
Evaluation is not about creating a product, report, or publication; it is the process through which that product is created and used. If an evaluation is seen as purely compliance or a race to report completion, you are missing an opportunity for program improvement based on data. Likewise, if evaluation findings are shared only in an annual report, this is also a missed opportunity for ongoing, continual improvement. Evaluation should not be superimposed upon a program, but rather integrated into a program. When evaluation is not used for continuous improvement, you are, albeit unintentionally, exposing people to programs that could be better.

## 4 Design with Use in Mind: Be deliberate when planning for use.

While focusing on improvement is important in evaluation design, just as important is the incorporation of strategies to foster use of evaluation findings. Evaluators can design sophisticated evaluations, but if the findings are not used, what is the point? While funders often expect that the evaluations they fund will be used, more often than not deliberate strategies to foster data use and decision-making are absent from planning.

## 5 Leave Something Behind: Leverage the opportunity of evaluation.

When conducting an evaluation, focus on the opportunity of evaluation, rather than the requirement of evaluation. Work to build evaluation processes that are not dependent upon you as the evaluator; rather, focus on building capacity among program staff to continue those processes once your role in the evaluation is complete. Building capacity can lead to ongoing improvement, as this well-known proverb reminds us: "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." Who knows...maybe a friend, family member, or even yourself will someday benefit from a program that someone with an evaluation mindset took the time to build on a foundation of data, critical-thinking, and continuous improvement.



## How Program Evaluation: Embedding Evaluation into Program Design and Development Implements These Tips

**Program Evaluation: Embedding Evaluation into Program Design and Development...**

- ← 1 ...shares strategies for involving stakeholders in all aspects of an evaluation.
- ← 2 ...presents a systematic process aimed at understanding the program, including delineating the program's theory and using logic modeling to build evaluation into this theory.
- ← 3 ...provides tools, such as the development of a logic model and its accompanying evaluation matrix, to aid in the design of an evaluation that includes indicators of progress during all phases of program implementation.
- ← 4 ...includes approaches to build stakeholder involvement and investment in the evaluation process, as well as methods to facilitate the use of evaluation findings.
- ← 5 ...provides ways to embed evaluation into program processes so that data-driven decision-making is at the core of a program's operations.