Q5

How will we communicate?

WHAT IT MEANS AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR USEFUL EVALUATION

Often, evaluation findings don't come to life until you sit down to talk about them. The potential for insight and innovation is even greater if the group that meets to talk is diverse and people with different points of view and different kinds of knowledge share their impressions in an honest, respectful way. Evaluation plans that have the potential to generate useful results sometimes don't lead to action simply because the stakeholders involved haven't put in place good communication channels. These channels are important at all stages of the process — not just at the beginning and the end. This question is designed to get people to think ahead and plan for good communication.

In many situations, improving communication is a relatively easy way to make evaluation more useful. It doesn't require a lot of time and no-one needs to change their priorities, evaluation policies, or methodologies. Although staff in nonprofits may not have a lot of experience with evaluation, they often have a great deal of experience bringing people together and fostering a sense of cohesion. This question may help people realize that those skills can help to make evaluation more useful.

HOW TO ASK IT

Compared to questions 3 and 4, this one is relatively simple. It is really about making the simple point that communication matters. Here are a few suggestions about how to approach it.

Here are some suggestions for other questions to ask
should you need further probes to get to
the information you are looking for:

How much input will I/we have
into how the evaluation is designed?
If I/we feel the methodology is too
intrusive, for example, would I have
an opportunity to get that
method changed?

How and
when will we
communicate about
this evaluation?
Who should we
call if we have
questions?

What should
we do if we face
challenges (like low
response rates)?

Could we
arrange to meet
half-way through
to discuss
preliminary
results?

Could you
come to one of
the meetings of
our evaluation
or program advisory
committee?

Would it be
possible to arrange
a meeting with
other similar
grant recipients
to discuss our
evaluation plans?

Who else should
be part of this
conversation?

Once we submit
our report, will we
have a chance to
meet with you to
discuss what
we learned?

How often will we communicate
during the evaluation process?
Will the people I serve be part
of this communication?
Will the evaluators be present
at these meetings?

How do we share
information about
things that didn't
work? Are you
comfortable
with that?

How did you think the last evaluation went?
What did you learn?

DISCUSSION STARTER

It's also important to consider the role and views of the community participants or service users. In other words, evaluation shouldn't only take information from these groups, but instead actively engage them. Here are a few suggestions about how to approach this.

How will we communicate with respondents/participants regarding the focus, process, status/update, results, and how the evaluation is being used? ▶ How will we communicate the findings back to the respondents/communities/participants? ▶ How will we help to make sure the evaluation is also useful to them?

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WHEN AND WHERE TO ASK IT

This is a good question to ask at the planning stage, especially in situations where an evaluation feels like it is being imposed from the outside without a lot of dialogue.

This question can also be helpful when a project is already underway. When projects encounter unexpected obstacles or evaluation starts to generate negative findings, talking these challenges through with partners can be very helpful. It can sometimes be helpful to consider where communication broke down when looking back on a challenging phase of the work.

KEEP in MIND

CHALLENGES THAT MIGHT COME UP
EVERYONE IS BUSY

Depending on the funder, your main contact person — the person you would want to communicate with about evaluation — may be responsible for dozens of grants in many different communities. They may not have time to attend lots of meetings. There are ways to improve communication in situations like these. Some nonprofits simply send periodic, unsolicited email updates on how the evaluation is proceeding. Some funders invite grant recipients to share videos or blogs every now and then. On the other hand, people who work for funders often crave communication as much as nonprofits do. Smaller, more local funders have told us that they enjoy being invited to discussions about evaluation or being included as a focus group participant or interviewee.

When working with large funders, it can sometimes be difficult to identify the best person to go to with your questions about evaluation. Questions like the following may help you decide who best to talk to and how to approach those people.

DISCUSSION STARTER

If others within your organization need to be consulted, will you take our concerns to your colleagues? ▶ Will you or one of your colleagues follow up with us about our concerns? ▶ Do you have any tips for us on how we can highlight our concerns with others in your organization or department? ▶ When is an appropriate time for us to discuss our next steps? Who will be responsible for arranging the follow up?

NO COMMUNICATION PLAN

Developing a communication plan can take time. It may be that you or your other evaluation stakeholders will not have answers to all these questions right away. Moreover, even if you have a communication plan, it may be the case that, as the evaluation project evolves, the level and type of communication may also evolve.

Allow for flexibility, but be clear on your own communication needs. Developing a simple, informal terms of reference that includes a few points on the above question can help to clarify expectations for each party.

ONN'S RESOURCE: 6 Simple Tips For Communicating About Impact may be helpful in developing a strategic approach to communicating about evaluation. *http://theonn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/6-Simple-Tips-For-Communicating-About-Impact.pdf/*