

Insights

5 Reasons Why Evaluation Matters to Your Project

Updated May 16, 2022

Hosting a Department of Applied Research and Evaluation at NICHQ, we are huge proponents of evaluation. The reason is simple: projects may sound compelling and seem worthwhile, but it is hard to know if they actually achieve their goals without collecting data and conducting an evaluation. Evaluation data provides a window into whether, why and how programs achieve their goals. Evaluation is also essential to ensure that limited resources are utilized most efficiently for the greatest possible impact.

Still need convincing? Here are five reasons why evaluation matters to your project and how to get it done.

1. You learn how to optimize for success and discover the story behind the results.

Evaluators ask three overarching questions at the start, middle, and end of the project:

1. What happened?
2. Why? (the story behind what happened)
3. Why do these results matter and what's next?

During the planning phase, the evaluation focuses on understanding how to optimally design the project to best meet its goals. During the implementation phase, the evaluation seeks to understand how the initiative is taking shape, where there is early progress, and how to maximize the ongoing success of the project. At the close of a project, the evaluation assesses the extent to which project aims were met and identifies circumstances that led to high and low success levels. The evaluation also probes throughout for important unintended consequences of the work (e.g., a program designed to promote child car seat usage also motivates parents to use safety belts for themselves.) All of this together helps to tell the full project story.

2. Evaluation paves the way to project improvements.

In a typical learning collaborative, teams collect data to monitor progress and test change, which is critical for improvement. While improvement advisors for those projects consider the big

picture collaborative-wide, they don't typically focus on the underlying circumstances of what's happening and don't usually make recommendations for project enhancements. In contrast, evaluation is research to inform decisions—an opportunity to push for adaptations and mid-course corrections that will maximize success. Evaluation results benefit the immediate project as well as enhance future initiatives with lessons learned.

3. Every voice counts.

Each and every person's perspective is essential and can be very telling for the project as a whole. Participants' feedback highlights areas of traction and areas that warrant further attention and specifics of what they need for the greatest success. This input can directly lead to improved levels of communication, logistical support, access to experts, guidance for using project resources, webinar offerings, and much more. Also, the more people who respond to a survey, the more accurate the results will be. So, please answer the next survey that comes your way since every voice does matter!

4. One size does not fit all.

Evaluation can take many shapes. For example, evaluators may collect primary data from a variety of stakeholders via written surveys, individual interviews, and/or focus group discussions. Evaluators sometimes ask for written reflections in the form of a narrative or conduct in-depth case studies with select teams. In addition, evaluations often include analysis of secondary data such as written teamwork, the progress of data submission, and the extent of online activity. Evaluations frequently include both quantitative and qualitative data.

5. DIY evaluation is possible.

Although a full-blown evaluation may be complex, and external evaluators may not be in your budget, a project team can look for opportunities to weave evaluation into other activities. For example, consider adding a question or two to another survey you may be fielding for a different purpose. Or, if you are planning discussions about roles and responsibilities, consider adding a probe about what has worked well and what might work even better.

This blog post was originally written by Rachel Levine, a former senior analyst at NICHQ, and published on July 31, 2017.