Evaluation Planning for Grant Applications

(This planning guide is designed primarily for those applying for a project, program or capacity building and who are new to evaluation. Capital Only requests are typically not required to submit this type of evaluation information, but still may find the exercise useful.)

Introduction:

Before applying for any grant, it is wise for a nonprofit to have a good understanding of their project or program, how well it aligns with the organization's mission and funder's priorities, what changes or improvements it will ultimately accomplish in the target audience, and how those changes will be measured. Since evaluation is not meant to be a solo sport - it is helpful to go through the worksheet with others who are also invested in the program/project, especially those who will be directly involved with measurement activities and evaluation use.

These questions will help you think through your evaluation plans well in advance of application deadlines:

1. **WHAT** results do you expect?
2. **WHO** do you expect will demonstrate the results?
3. **HOW MUCH** change do you expect to occur?
4. **WHEN** do you expect to see the results?
5. **HOW WILL YOU KNOW** that a change occurred?
6. **WHAT WILL YOU DO** with the results?

The following pages examine these questions in more detail.

1. WHAT results do you expect?

What is the big picture? What is the mission of your program/project and beyond that, your organization? What is it that you do? What is your reason for being? If you were able to do everything you wanted and had unlimited resources, what social conditions and problems in your community would be solved? Every organization should know the answer to these questions and should consider whether or not their programs are aligned with their mission. When you know your ultimate mission…developing a plan to measure progress is much easier.

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➡ *Does your program/project fit within the mission of your organization? Will it further your progress toward accomplishing the mission? It is tempting to "chase dollars", but clear alignment between an organization's mission and its programs and projects is necessary for maximum impact and social change. If there's a disconnect between your mission and your programming, this presents a great opportunity to discuss what changes need to be made – is it time to re-evaluate the mission? Are we chasing dollars as opposed to choosing programs that fit?*

…and Does your organization have the capacity for evaluation? What resources do you have at your disposal? Who will oversee evaluation activities? How will you collect data? Who will ensure that the lessons learned from evaluation are getting into the hands of those who need it? Learning is the goal of evaluation. Whether or not you have the resources to hire an outside evaluator, there should always be staff who are able to be a contact person for the funder, and who can ensure that evaluation planning, conducting, and understanding of results occurs. Costly research may be out of the budget, but there are many free tools and resources.

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➡ *If you have an outside evaluation consultant, it is tempting to put evaluation, "out of sight, out of mind." This thinking indicates that your organization may see evaluation as simply a chore instead of a strategic learning tool for program improvement and agency growth. Stay involved and know what's going on with the evaluation of your program.*

2. **WHO** do you expect will demonstrate the results? These changes can occur to individuals, groups, communities, policies, organizations and systems. What do you anticipate the change will look like?

Who is your target audience and how do you plan to reach them? You should know as much as you can about who it is you are trying to reach and how you will reach them. Is there an age range, income level, health condition, and set of shared characteristics that makes your target audience unique? How many of them will you reach and what are the things that YOU will do; products, goods or services that will be offered to your target audience, to try and bring about desired end results? These counts and amounts are called "outputs."

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➡ *Often applicants think that outputs are the same thing as outcomes. Outputs are the "important hoops to jump through", the numbers of your target audience you serve, the things you do and the activities you engage in, to bring about the outcomes.*

3. **HOW MUCH** change do you expect to occur? This section deals with outcomes. Outcomes are changes that we hope our target audience will achieve; skills, behaviors, life conditions, or knowledge that are changed or improved as a result of our activities. These changes can occur to individuals, groups, communities, policies, organizations and systems.

What are your intended outcomes in the short-term? None of us can climb a mountain in one leap. So, on your way to accomplishing your big picture goals, what will happen? What are some of the first changes or improvements you hope to see take place?

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➡ *Typically, the short-term is a matter of months or maybe a year, but will vary by issue.*

What are your intended outcomes in the mid-term? What will happen next, within perhaps a couple of years? This evaluation plan focuses on demonstrating results within a grant period, though short and mid-term outcome goals should always demonstrate a clear path to the long-range organization impact goals.

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➡ *Mid-term is variable depending on the issue. Issues such as poverty will likely take multiple years or even decades to turn around.*

4. **WHEN** do you expect to see the results?

Outcomes must be capable of being measured and must be realistic within the given time frame, e.g., it is not realistic to expect that obesity would be eradicated in a grant period of just one or two years; however, a local program may be able to show that participants have an increased level of physical activity or a reduced weight during the grant period. **Your outcomes must be written as measureable goals with numbers, percentages, etc.)**

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➡️ *Realistic outcomes are best. Don't undersell or oversell your expectations. While you will not bring about world peace, you still should want to strive for the best outcomes you can realistically achieve in the grant year that show progress towards world peace.*

5. **HOW WILL YOU KNOW** that a change occurred?

Indicators: If this program is working, how will we know? What are the signs that will tell us something is different? How will we know that we are making progress toward achieving our ultimate goals? Indicators are signs or observable evidence of changes taking place. They are measurable conditions from which we can assess our progress. When your gas gauge is on "E", this is an indicator that the gas tank is empty. From using this gauge, we can assess the performance and progress of our fuel consumption and determine when to stop for gas.

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➡️ *There are indicators all around us. Take time to consider obvious indicators first before deciding on ones that will require more elaborate measurement tools or greater costs.*

<u>Data Sources</u>: Information sources used to show changes in the target audience as a result of your program. These can be records, surveys, observations, etc., that you construct or you purchase for your use. As a first step, it is always wise to determine what data sources are already in existence and are easily accessible. *Key question: What will we use to show what happened to our audience? Are there any readily available and cost efficient data sources we can use? If not, what do we need to be able to collect the information we need?*

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➡️ *Many times grantees will think they need to construct a survey for their program, especially if it is not an evidence based program with tools already identified. Consider readily available and easily accessible data first before constructing something original. One can survey teachers about a child's progress in academics, but report card information may be just as effective at telling us what we need to know.*

6. **WHAT WILL YOU DO** with the results? Last, but in no way least, what will you do with the information that results from your evaluation? Your first answer may be, submit it to the funder. Who beyond the funder needs to know what you learned? The Executive Director, board of directors, key staff, direct service staff, the target audience, the community in general? We can make a case that all of these populations need to learn along with you. After all, why do we do this? Beyond to just satisfy a funder, we should measure our effectiveness and progress for continuous learning and improvement.

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➡️ *A culture of learning involves a cyclical pattern of measuring, reporting to stakeholders, making sense of the results, using the results to inform decisions, and tweaking the measurement process as well to continuously improve both program quality and quality of evaluation.*

Hopefully this guide has helped you think through some basic fundamentals regarding evaluation and planning for measurement. You should feel more prepared to submit thoughtful and meaningful responses to grant evaluation questions and have a better idea of what capacity you need to fully implement your plans.

You can find more tools and resources at **www.welbornfdn.org** in the Grant Process/Evaluation section.