

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Getting Staff Buy-In

I have created many program evaluations over my 30+ year career in nonprofits. Most of these have been evaluations of youth-serving programs like environmental education, arts programs done during school hours, and after school tutoring. And in my experience, the aspect of evaluation that is most often forgotten is getting buy-in from front-line staff.

Think about it. You've spent weeks creating a logic model for your program. You've spent hours working on a survey tool. You get a gold star if you've involved participants in the whole process! Now it's time to deploy the survey or questionnaire. Someone, most likely someone from the leadership team, is invited to a meeting of the front-line staff to explain how the evaluation process is going to work.

But before you can get through your spiel about being a "learning organization," the front-line staff start bringing up objections:

- The environmental education staff roll their eyes at the thought of kids doing a paper and pencil survey in the middle of the woods.
- The staff of the in-school arts programs point out there is no time allocated in the curriculum for evaluation.
- The after-school tutoring staff object that the kids already get tested too much.

By not involving front-line staff from the very beginning, these evaluation efforts are doomed to failure.

HOW TO GET STAFF BUY-IN FOR YOUR EVALUATION

Which of the following do you think would be the most effective at getting front-line staff to enthusiastically support your program evaluation efforts?

- Because the board/executive director is telling us to do it.
- Because our funders asked us to do it.
- Because the information we get from this evaluation will help you do your job better.
- Because the evaluation results will help us understand what parts of our programs are helping our participants so we can improve our offerings in the future.

Answers: #1 is probably the worst reason for doing an evaluation. #2 is only slightly better, but unless you are a very small organization, oftentimes front-line staff don't feel much need to satisfy funder mandates. #3 is a better reason in that you are finally showing the staff how the evaluation relates specifically to them. #4 is the best reason, but it will only be effective if you've involved the front-line staff in the creation and development of the evaluation tools.

BENEFITS OF INVOLVING FRONT-LINE STAFF IN YOUR EVALUATION DESIGN

There are challenges to involving front-line staff in program evaluation design. The primary barriers I have seen tend to revolve around their limited availability (many are part-time, non-salaried staff) and the cost (as part-time staff, they need to be paid for the hours they spend on the evaluation design team). But the benefits of involving them in the process are invaluable:



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- They can ensure the evaluation design and tools are compatible with the way the program operates on the ground;
- They can suggest questions that really will help them do their jobs better;
- It will give them a window into the types of issues management deals with, building their own leadership skills;
- They can put the word out in the community about how important the evaluation is.

Front-line staff are the unsung heroes of every nonprofit. They are out there every day, interacting one-on-one with the participants. Best case scenario, they are also members of the same community that the participants come from. The success or failure of any evaluation is in their hands.

If you need help getting staff buy-in for your program evaluation, or are looking for general evaluation help, give us a call. We're here to help!



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