NO EVALUATIONS WITHOUT PARTICIPATION

"You will always need to know if the facts you've dredged up are accurate and truthful." – Discover Magazine

It's becoming cliché to joke about "fake news" but as a nonprofit leader, how do you know the information you are using to evaluate your programs is accurate?

One good way is to get the perspectives of program participants and other stakeholders at the beginning of the project and throughout the evaluation process. These individuals should be involved in discussions about what to evaluate, the determination of data collection methods, pre-testing those methods, and analyzing the results prior to completing the final report.

PREPARE FOR PARTICIPATION

A participatory evaluation is one in which the organization delivering the service/program includes potential program participants in the design of the evaluation. Ask the following questions to determine if your organization is ready to undertake a participatory evaluation:

1. Are we bringing in participants at the very beginning of the process? Too often, organizations wait until most of the decisions are made before involving the community. Avoid this by having community members on the evaluation team from the start.
2. Do we treat our participants as the experts they are about matters relating to their own lives? Organizational leaders need to be willing to drop their need to be seen as "experts" so they can learn from participants.
3. Have we built in enough resources to effectively involve participants in the evaluation? It's important to recognize that organizational staff are being paid to work on the evaluation. Community members should also be compensated for their time and knowledge.
4. Have we built in enough time to effectively involve participants in the evaluation? If this is your first attempt at doing participatory evaluation, be sure to build in the time needed to build trusting relationships with participants. [Hint: one icebreaker is not enough.]

Involving participants is particularly important if your organization serves a population that is culturally different from your staff or board composition. Never assume you can gauge the cultural appropriateness of your basic evaluation premise unless you get the perspective of the people you serve.

SHARE THE POWER

The process of evaluation is inherently about power. It is important to understand that power dynamics are present throughout the evaluation process. This is particularly true if there is a racial or cultural difference between the researchers and the people being studied. People of color are understandably tired of being used as research subjects in evaluation processes that produce benefits for the researchers but none for the participants.

From framing the evaluation questions, to deciding who to involve, to developing the study tools, to writing up the final report, power dynamics need to be addressed. Therefore, it is extremely important to make sure the community is represented equally in all evaluation design decisions.

To explicitly share the power and ownership of the evaluation process, you can:

- Be sure to communicate with the community members on your team in ways that are easy for them to access--be careful of having long conversations on Slack, other online platforms or in the "break room" if the community members aren't on that platform or present in those spaces.
- Recognize that the power dynamics between organization staff and community members may make community members cede ownership or stay in the background unless explicitly invited to step forward.
- Create documents that invite co-ownership of the research findings.
- Include members of the community as presenters any time the evaluation findings are discussed in public, or even in private.

BE FLEXIBLE

For participatory evaluation to truly work, organizations must be flexible and create an evaluation that will produce value for the community in addition to the organizations' evaluation goals. If your participants are going to put their time and energy into the evaluation, they must also get information from the results that will benefit them and their community.

SHARE THE RESULTS – BOTH GOOD AND BAD

This is perhaps the hardest part of participatory evaluations. They are open processes, with lots of eyes watching, and that means the results will be public. If the outcomes aren't as good as expected, leaders will need to own that and demonstrate a willingness to use that information to improve in the future. Remember, we often learn more from our mistakes than from our successes.

By all means, everyone involved needs to celebrate once the evaluation is complete. If done well, the participatory evaluation process should leave your organization with stronger programs as well as stronger ties to the community you serve.