

PLANNING A RESPONSIVE EVALUATION: ESTABLISHING SOLID PARTNERSHIPS BY CLARIFYING EXPECTATIONS AND PURPOSE, PART 2

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For evaluation to be worth the resources it consumes, it must enable decision makers to make sound decisions based on relevant, reliable, and valid data that lead to improved performance. It is from here that all evaluation efforts stem. All components of the evaluation must be aligned with the objectives and expectations that the organization and its stakeholders value and the decisions that will have to be made as a result of the evaluation findings. These decisions should be concerned with how to measurably improve performance at all levels of the organization. This article, the second of a two-part series on evaluation (see Guerra-López, 2007b, for part 1), describes how to create a responsive evaluation through the identification of stakeholders and expectations as a first and fundamental step.

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The first article of this two-part series (Guerra-López, 2007b), provided general guidance for conducting useful evaluations that produce action-based recommendations for improving performance. In this article, we focus on establishing solid partnerships with stakeholders as a first and preliminary step in conducting a responsive evaluation.

STAKEHOLDERS: WHO ARE THEY, AND WHERE DO YOU FIND THEM?

A *stake* is essentially a claim, an interest, or a share in some endeavor. Although the traditional view of stake used to be limited to the financial realm (for example, stockholders), these claims, or interests, can be financial, legal, or moral (Carroll, 2000). In this sense, a stakeholder is any individual or group who has a stake in an endeavor and can either affect or be affected by the decisions and actions of the organization.

Not every individual within each stakeholder group has to participate in the evaluation directly, but it is important that those who participate be seen as representative by their group members. This will give all affected a sense of involvement, even if through a vicarious experience. The greater the sense of stakeholder involvement and influence, the less resistance there will be to the evaluation process, its findings, and the implementation of action-based recommendations.

Ideally, we evaluators want to select stakeholders who will help us define useful evaluation expectations, questions, and criteria; however, we will realistically be faced with stakeholders who have their own special interests or represent a powerful lobby. Although it is not particularly unusual for human beings to have their own special interests, we want to neutralize as much as possible the evaluation from becoming a manipulation tool for the special interests of one—or some—at the expense of others.

One significant challenge is to keep stakeholders focused on results and consequences rather than the politics of means. Single-issue politics from both within and outside organizations have a tremendous impact on defining objectives and selecting the best means. It is essential to learn enough about that political climate to understand how it will affect the evaluation and the implementation of recommendations. Remember that if evaluation recommendations are not implemented, or implemented improperly, performance will not improve, and then the evaluation will have been conducted in vain. Keep in mind that the ultimate value of an evaluation is measured through the successful implementation of appropriate recommendations that measurably improve performance.

Stakeholders could be broadly categorized as internal (such as owners, employees, and management) and external (such as customers, the customers' customers, the community, suppliers, competitors, the government, and the media), and both categories could be subdivided into various groups. The following is a subset of potential stakeholders (Guerra-López, 2007a):

- The direct client (the person paying for the services)
- The client's clients, which vary according to industry; for example, the clients of an educational enterprise would be the students, and potentially the parents as well as employers, community members, and the shared larger society
- Employees
- Management
- The client's community, perhaps as represented by a task force or city or regional chamber of commerce and beyond
- Professional communities
- Governing boards
- Stockholders
- Partners
- Taxpayers
- Vendors
- Donors

- Policymakers
- Communities and society

STAKEHOLDER: EXPECTATIONS

Consistent with their own special interests, each stakeholder group has its own set of expectations. This is not necessarily a stumbling block for the evaluation, as long as there is one guiding set of expectations that all agree on. The key is to meet these sets of expectations while also addressing individual concerns where possible, feasible, and, not least of all, useful.

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It is critical to understand how a successful evaluation will be judged by the stakeholders, as well as how they will judge your performance as the evaluator. Here are some general questions that should be answered before proceeding:

- What decisions do they wish to make as a result of the final deliverables?
- What is expected of the evaluator?
- What is expected of the evaluation project?
- How will your performance as an evaluator be judged?
- What will the communication process be? With whom? How often? Through what medium?
- What will be expected of stakeholders? For example, what type of support will they provide to you: feedback, data collection assistance, administrative, or something else?
- What will be the impact of applying the evaluation results or not applying them?

Also critical is aligning stakeholder expectations with external societal demands. Although not all stakeholders might see the link as easily, it is the evaluator's responsibility to clarify those linkages. It is not a matter of whether such linkages exist for this particular organization; instead it is how well you can together clarify and communicate

those linkages and consequences. This is the only way all of you can see clearly where you are headed, how the solutions you are evaluating affect that journey, and what results are to be delivered.

These expectations are the basis for your contract, whether verbal or written, and should explicitly articulate what is expected of you (as well as of the stakeholders). If you feel they are unreasonable, now (not after you have completed what in your own mind you think is a successful evaluation) is the time to discuss, educate, discuss again, educate again, and come to a consensus.

If you do not have the specific stakeholder expectations clearly defined from the start, it is nearly impossible to align your efforts to such expectations without sheer luck. And if you do not align your efforts with stakeholder expectations from the start, it is very unlikely that you will ever meet those expectations.

If you believe that stakeholder expectations are unreasonable or that due to political or other factors the evaluation project will not be successful, either postpone it until the conditions are more favorable or turn down the project. While understandably this is difficult for some to consider and might be even more complex for an internal evaluator, consider this: regardless of what factors affect the evaluation, you are ultimately responsible for its success or its failure. If you know that the likelihood of failure is greater than that of success, do you still want to be accountable for factors beyond your control? Always consider the entire performance system when agreeing on expectations about future value-added. Be specific and be clear, and use performance data from a needs assessment as the basis for helping stakeholders define their expectations.

KEY DECISIONS AND OBJECTIVES

Evaluation Purpose

Before you start to plan, and certainly before you collect data, you must determine why you are faced with conducting an evaluation. Is this your initiative, or were you directed to evaluate? What is the motivation for the study? What are you looking to accomplish and contribute as a result of this evaluation? Here are some general reasons for conducting an evaluation:

- Determine if a solution to a problem is working and if the means used deliver valued ends
- Discover the cause of a problem
- Provide feedback as part of a continual monitoring and revision process
- Provide feedback for future funding of initiatives
- Confirm compliance with a mandate

- Satisfy the requirements of law
- Sort out a mess
- Determine if value was added to all stakeholders

If there is careful attention to detailed planning, each of these purposes can be made to fit a data-driven and results-oriented action approach to evaluation. But if taken too narrowly—in isolation and without proper context—each of these reasons has its own narrow set of problems, blind spots, and special data generation and collection troubles. The way you perceive the evaluation purpose can shape and limit the data that are observed or not observed, collected or not collected, or interpreted or ignored. Thus, you and your stakeholders must begin the planning process with clarity about what decisions will be made with the results of your findings.

The evaluator will not always start out with a clear purpose. Sometimes the decisions that have to be made are more prominent (for example, whether to continue to fund a program), and sometimes they start out with specific questions (for example, what impact is this program having on employee retention? What is the return on investment of this program?). Whatever the form the initial information is in, the evaluation will be more effective and efficient (not to mention that you will minimize headaches down the road) if you clarify the purpose before moving ahead.

Decisions

Whatever decisions you are facing in your organization, it is worth making them in a deliberate fashion—unless, of course, you have an endless supply of time, money, and other resources to risk by making decisions based solely on a hunch, rumors, experience, what others are doing, or however else decisions usually are made in your organization.

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Sound decisions should be primarily driven by relevant (related to results of interest), reliable (trustworthy), and valid (a true measure of what you want to measure) data. These data should come from measurable indicators of the results you want to accomplish, which in turn are related to the questions you want to answer (Guerra, 2003a).

Evaluation questions come from various perspectives and stakeholder groups. Each stakeholder group represents a unique point of view based on where in (or out of) the organization they view the issues. It is important that you identify a comprehensive and representative list of questions. However, there is a chance that not all questions will be within the scope of this particular evaluation effort. The key is to obtain consensus among the stakeholders (or the individuals representing them) as to what the most critical questions are and, thus, what this evaluation study commits to deliver. If you cannot obtain consensus as to what these questions are, it is doubtful that you will obtain consensus about the usefulness of your evaluation report.

Part of your job as the evaluator is to help create the linkages between the initial questions and the results to which they are inherently (and sometimes covertly) related.

Whatever the case, data collection should be systematic and designed to answer specific questions that can be used to improve performance. Useful data allow you to prove the value of the solution without simply relying on opinions about what seems to be working and what is not. Whether you are conducting an evaluation or a less formal gathering-the-facts type of project, you are essentially trying to find answers to pressing questions such as these (Guerra, 2003b):

- Should we continue to invest in this program?
- How well are we meeting the needs (not just wants) of our clients?
- Are we complying with the requirements of the law, citizens, or other stakeholders?
- To what intended and unintended impact is the solution contributing?
- Are we achieving what we expected?
- Are we meeting the established criteria for reaching those results?
- How has the nature of what we do and deliver changed as a result of this solution?

Different perspectives lead to different questions, and different questions lead to different findings. Be sure that your list of questions is comprehensive. This does not imply that you must have a long list of questions, but instead that your questions come from a systemic perspective. You must consider the entire performance system, including its ultimate purpose, its subsystems, and their interactions.

Ultimately, all of the questions we ask are related to the results we want to achieve, whether they are stated in those terms from the outset or not. Part of your job as the evaluator is to help create the linkages between the initial questions and the results to which they are inherently (and sometimes covertly) related. All organizations have an ultimate result that they want to reach, and to make that possible, numerous building-block results have to be accomplished en route. Everything else that we do or use within the organization must contribute to those; otherwise, we are wasting valuable and limited resources without any benefit.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Every performance improvement project depends on an authentic, collaborative, and productive partnership with stakeholders. Evaluation is no different, and as you can see from Figure 1, it is the foundation from which other evaluation steps stem. If you do not establish a solid relationship with stakeholders from the beginning, your entire project will be on shaky ground and your chances of adding value to the client organization are significantly reduced. 🏔

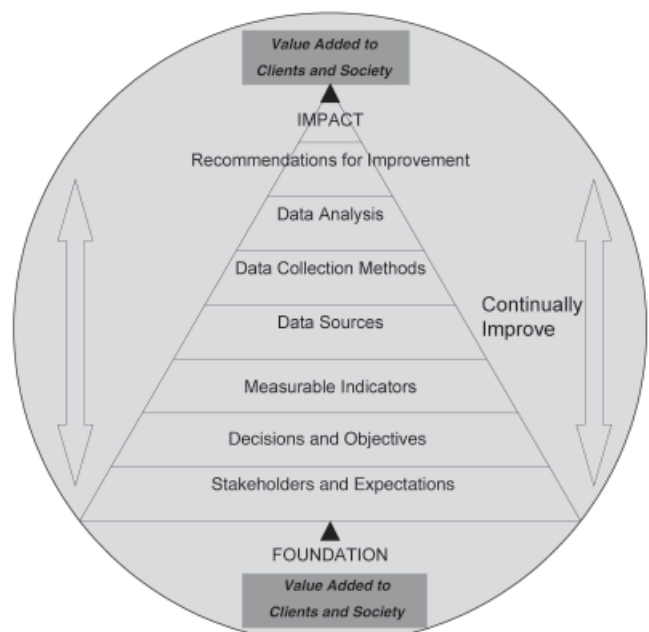


FIGURE 1. IMPACT EVALUATION PROCESS

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