EVALUATION METHODS

Although indicators identify what you will look at to determine whether evaluation criteria are met, they do not specify how indicator data will be collected. You must still decide which evaluation method(s) to use. For example, if we are interested in knowing whether a community campaign was successful in influencing how community members view their relationship with the environment, we may select attitudes toward recycling as the indicator of change. But how can we measure attitudes toward the environment? Could we use a questionnaire? Might personal interviews be appropriate? What other methods could we use?

Just as a carpenter has many tools in his toolbox, evaluators also must have numerous tools at their disposal. The carpenter may have a saw, hammer, chisel, square, and drill. An evaluator's toolbox may contain questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and observation. Evaluators select the method best suited for the job.

Selecting the right method involves many factors. Some methods are better for gathering quantitative data, others for qualitative data. Some are better for particular audiences than others. Some methods gather richer, deeper data than others do.

When designing evaluation tools and selecting evaluation methods, it is useful to consider the cultural contexts of the communities in which programs operate. Here are some guiding questions to consider to ensure that evaluation methods and tools are culturally appropriate:

- Are data collection methods relevant and culturally sensitive to the population being evaluated?
- Have you considered how different methods may or may not work in various cultures? Have you explored how different groups prefer to share information (e.g., orally, in writing, one-on-one, in groups, through the arts)?
- Do the instruments consider potential language barriers that may inhibit some people from understanding the evaluation questions?
- Do the instruments consider the cultural context of the respondents?
- Are multiple methods being used, so that information can be analyzed in a variety of ways?

Tips for Involving Youth as Partners

Young people may have a number of fresh ideas for gathering evaluation data. Be open to their ideas and suggestions. Their ideas frequently result in more user-friendly evaluation tools and methods and, thus, better data. Don't be afraid to try new methods.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires are simple and effective tools for collecting information from a large number of people. Compared with other ways of collecting information, questionnaires are relatively inexpensive to administer. They can be used to gather information about the community-building process itself (process evaluation) or the results it produced (outcome evaluation).

Utility of Questionnaires

When using questionnaires to evaluate your community-building *process,* you typically ask questions about how the work of the team was accomplished. For example, you could ask participants in a community event to provide ideas for how the event could be improved in the future. An end-of-event questionnaire could be used to gather such information.

Questionnaires can also be used to collect information about the *outcomes* of a community-building effort. Questions would focus on how the community is different as a result of what was done. For example, a questionnaire might be used to find out whether community members have changed their opinions about a particular issue as a result of the team's efforts. Questionnaires can also be used to find out what community members are doing differently as a result of the community-building efforts.

Types of Questions

Questionnaires can contain either *forced-choice* or *open-ended* questions. Forced-choice questions have a limited number of responses from which a respondent may choose. Respondents are frequently asked to check or circle their desired responses. One advantage of forced-choice questions is that they are typically easier to analyze than open-ended questions.

Example of Forced-Choice Question

Which of the following best describes the degree to which young people were involved in making decisions about the project?

____ No involvement
____ Little involvement
____ Moderate involvement
____ Extensive involvement

An open-ended question does not require a respondent to choose from a set of possible responses. Instead, respondents are free to answer as they choose. Open-ended questions typically provide more in-depth information than forced-choice questions do. They also help solicit unanticipated responses.

Example of Open-Ended Question

What are some of the challenges young people face when working in partnership with adults?

Hints for Constructing Questionnaires

First, revisit the evaluation questions you developed earlier and decide whether a questionnaire is the best way to gather the information you need. If so, decide on the specific group of people to whom the questionnaire will be administered.

Next, referring to the evaluation questions, begin developing items for the questionnaire. Evaluation questions tend to be more general than the items or individual questions that may appear on a questionnaire. Therefore, it may take more than one item to answer a particular evaluation question.

Group the questions by topic or format. (For example, you may want to put all the forced-choice questions together.) Put demographic questions about where participants live, their age, or gender at the end.

Leave lots of “white space” in the margins and between questions. The goal is to make the questionnaire look like it is easy to complete. Also, strive to achieve a vertical flow in how the respondent must answer the questions. That is, minimize left-to-right movement of a pen or pencil across the page (Rennekamp, 1999).

Administering Questionnaires

Questionnaires can be administered via mail, telephone, or computer; in face-to-face interviews; or in a group. Each method has distinct advantages and disadvantages. For example, mail administration allows for broad reach but often produces low response rates. Web-based questionnaires can be programmed to automatically summarize the results but can only be completed by people who have access to the Internet. Face-to-face or telephone interviews often produce more complete information, but they are time consuming to conduct. Administering paper-and-pencil questionnaires in a group setting often results in high response rates, but respondents often hurry through the questionnaire and provide less detailed information.

Analyzing the Responses

Analyze forced-choice questions by calculating the percentage of respondents who selected a particular response. Means are also appropriate for some numeric data. Open-ended questions are best analyzed by looking for themes in the information provided by respondents.

Focus Groups

Group interviews are another way to collect information from many people. Most people are familiar with focus groups.

A focus group is a small-group gathering conducted specifically to collect information from the group members. During a focus group discussion, between 6 and 12 people, who are similar in one or more ways, are guided through a facilitated discussion on a clearly defined topic (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

The goal of any focus group is to promote self-disclosure among participants. Because a group, rather than an individual, is asked to respond to questions, dialogue tends to take on a life of its own. Participants “piggy-back” on the comments of others and add a richness to the dialogue that could not be achieved through a one-on-one interview.

Clarifying Expectations

The first step in planning a focus group is to clarify its purpose. What kind of information do you hope to gain from your focus group discussion? Do you want input about how an activity or event could be improved, or are you more interested in the activity’s impact on the community? What specific information is needed? Your answers to these questions will help you decide whom to invite to participate in the focus group discussion.

Selecting Participants

Members of a focus group should have some characteristic in common. For example, the information you need to collect might suggest that you need to conduct a focus group composed of middle-school girls. Even though participants in a focus group are similar in one or two desired characteristics, the group must also include enough diversity in other characteristics to provide an accurate portrayal of the group’s collective opinion. For example, the group might be composed of middle-school girls who represent the racial, ethnic, and economic diversity of the middle school’s population.

Getting People to Attend

Occasionally, people avoid using focus groups because they are afraid that the people they invite won’t show up. To ensure high attendance rates, begin by making personal contact with the people you wish to invite. This is often done through a telephone call or personal visit. For those who agree to attend, send a personal letter that confirms their participation and communicates the relevant details of the event. Then make a reminder phone contact the day before the event.

What Happens at the Focus Group Interview?

Focus group interviews typically last no longer than 90 minutes and often take less time. In many instances, the actual "interview" is preceded by a snack or light meal. Focus groups can be conducted around a large table or with participants seated in a circle of chairs. Participants are typically given name tags. A moderator welcomes the group and asks a series of 6 to 10 open-ended questions, and an assistant moderator or recorder takes notes. The discussion is often tape recorded for later playback or transcription. It is important, however, to let participants know that they are being recorded.

Developing Questions for Focus Groups

An important step in preparing for the focus group interview is the development of a set of questions that encourage participants to respond and collect the information needed. Good questions sound conversational and natural. They are usually short, open-ended, and one-dimensional (i.e., they ask for only one piece of information at a time). Begin with an introductory question that will get people talking and make them feel comfortable. Gradually move into the topic you want them to discuss with a transition question that is followed by several key questions covering the major areas of interest.

The specific order in which the questions are asked is called the *questioning route*. A good questioning route has an easy beginning, flows logically and naturally from one question to another, and moves from the general to the specific. It is important to estimate the time required to exhaust the discussion on each question. These time estimates can be used to help manage the focus group discussion.

Moderating Focus Groups

Effective moderating requires preparation, mental discipline, and skill in facilitating group interaction. But first, moderators must believe that all participants have something to contribute to the discussion regardless of their education level, experience, or background. Moderators must listen attentively, with sensitivity, and try to understand the perspective of each participant. Lack of respect is quickly transmitted to participants and results in reduced contributions.

Tips for Conducting Good Interviews

- Use active listening skills—listen more, talk less.
- Maintain eye contact and use body language that says you are interested and nonjudgmental.
- Keep a neutral demeanor and try not to let your own opinions show.
- Probe when appropriate. Follow up with "Why? Say more about this" ... or "Please elaborate."

Data Analysis

Data analysis consists of indexing, managing, and interpreting the pieces of information that are collected during the interview. Begin by coding or labeling the notes (or transcripts) of the session according to content. For example, all references to the publicity surrounding a community event could be labeled with the same code. Next, use scissors or word-processing software to collate the coded text into each category. Each category should be in a separate pile or section of the document. Finally, write a summary statement that is true of each extract or piece of text in the pile or group. These statements often become key themes that are communicated in your evaluation report.

Key-Informant Interviews

A key informant is someone who, because of his or her unique position in a community, can provide you with important information about your community-building effort. Some key informants have first-hand knowledge of the community-building effort and can provide you with their own assessment of what is occurring. Others have access to information that would be difficult for you to obtain without their participation. In such cases, key informants pass along that information to you, often with an interpretation of what the data might mean. The use of key informants is a relatively simple and inexpensive means of collecting information.

Identifying Key Informants

Every community-building effort has a unique set of key informants. Key informants can be teachers, elected officials, youth, community leaders, agency staff, parents, and even funders. Begin by asking the question, “Who in my community is in a position to provide me with information about how the community-building effort is working?” Then make a list of the key informants relevant to your community-building effort.

Next, decide who among the members of your project team would be the most appropriate person (or persons) to interview the key informants. Some members of the team might have better access to particular informants than others. Those team members should then make an appointment to conduct a face-to-face or telephone interview with each key informant assigned to them. If the key informant will need to gather any information from his or her records before the interview, it is good to state that in advance.

Questions

Before the interview, know what type of information you want from the key informant you are interviewing. Take some time before the interview to write down the questions you plan to ask. One approach is to write some key questions to cover each of the important topics, then a couple of potential follow-up questions for each key question. Ask factual questions about a particular topic first, then the opinion questions. Be sure to write open-ended rather than “yes–no” questions.

The goal is to be specific with questioning while allowing enough flexibility for open discussion.

Interviewing

Interviews should be structured, yet conversational. Begin by making the key informant comfortable. Tell him or her the purpose of the interview and provide assurance that the information will only be used for making judgments about the community-building effort. Because of the nature of the information key informants provide, it is often difficult to ensure their anonymity. In many cases, the key informant is the only person who could have provided a particular piece of information. (That is why they are key informants!) Make sure the key informant is comfortable with the way you plan to use the information you collect.

Maintain a neutral attitude throughout the interview. Don’t try to defend your community-building project or argue with the key informant’s assessment of a situation. Be prepared to probe or use follow-up questions to gather additional information that might clarify why the key informant sees the situation as he or she does. Be sure to take detailed notes—they are essential to accurate analysis.

Data Analysis

Responses from the key informants are typically reviewed and analyzed to identify key themes as well as divergent viewpoints. This analysis may be best accomplished by a meeting of all interviewers in which everyone shares information from his or her interview(s).

Observation

The aim of observation is to document behavior through watching and listening. Through observation it is possible to see *what* people are doing, *when* they do it, *where* they do it, and *how* they are doing it. You can use observation to gather information about the community-building process itself (i.e., process evaluation) or the results it produced (i.e., outcome evaluation).

Although the benefits of observations are multifold, the presence of the observer may influence the behavior of those being observed. The consistency of data collected can also vary if more than one observer is gathering data.

Observing Process

Using observation to evaluate your community-building *process* might be as simple as having an impartial observer sit in on a planning meeting of your community-building group. In such a role, the observer may simply take notes about how the group goes about its work. Results are then used to improve how the planning group functions.

Observing Outcomes

When the goal of an evaluation project is to document *results* of a community-building effort, observation is frequently used to determine whether people have changed their behavior as a direct consequence of the group’s actions. In such cases, observation has some clear and distinct advantages over asking people to self-report their behavior through questionnaires or interviews. First, people tend to overestimate how frequently they perform good behaviors. Second, they may provide you with information that they think you want to hear. Direct observation eliminates those problems.

Unstructured Versus Structured Observation

Observation can be either unstructured or structured in nature. In unstructured observation, observers are generally not asked to look for specific things, nor are they asked to record their observations in any particular manner.

Structured observation involves the systematic collection of specific pieces of information. Structured observation frequently involves the use of checklists, forms, or observation schedules upon which observers record what they see. Observers receive training on how to recognize what they are looking for as well as how to record what they observe.

Behaviors Versus Traces

Sometime observers can record the presence of an actual behavior. For example, an observer may be asked to record how many different active-listening techniques are used in a mock peer counseling session. Other times, observers look for something called *traces* of behavior, such as graffiti or litter on the roadside.

Guidelines for Observing Events

Identify the Purpose of the Observation

Determine the focus of the observation, including who will be observed, what will be observed, and the duration of the observation. For example, an observation of a racism workshop could include documentation of the number of youth present, which youth participated, how the youth participated, and the methods the facilitator used to solicit equal participation.

Design an Observation Guide

Once you identify the purpose of the observation, the observation guide should be developed to address key observation questions and goals. These goals can include interactions between individuals or groups of people, activities, and topics discussed. See the Sample Observation Guide on page 77.

Train Observers

Determine what type of documentation is appropriate for each component of the observation form. If possible, have all observers observe the same situation and fill out their forms separately, then compare their responses. Discuss the observers' differences in level of detail and content. This analysis will help create a common understanding of what level and type of information should be collected.

What to Observe

- **The setting:** What is the physical environment like? What kinds of behavior does the setting encourage, permit, discourage, or prevent?
- **The participants:** Who is in the scene? How many people are there, and what are their roles? What brings these people together? Who is allowed there?
- **Activities and interactions:** What is going on? Is there a definable sequence of activities? How do people interact with the activity and one another?
- **Frequency and duration:** When did the activity begin? How long does it last? Is the activity recurring or unique? How typical of such situations is the one being observed?

SAMPLE OBSERVATION GUIDE

Name of observer______________________________ Date__________

Event____

Location____

Number of youth present _________________________________

Number of adults present ________________________________

Number of staff present _________________________________

General

Take note of the following general dimensions.

GENERAL DIMENSIONS	YES	NO	COMMENTS AND DETAILS
Do youth lead the activity?			
Does the session structure allow for broad group input?			
Is the space comfortable and well lit?			
Do youth feel comfortable in the space?			
Are the walls or space decorated in any way?			
Is information presented in a variety of modes (visual, oral, discussion based)?			

Youth–Adult Interaction

Please check one box for the following qualities of youth–adult interaction.

QUALITIES OF INTERACTION	YES	NO	UNEVEN	COMMENTS
Guidelines or ground rules are set at the beginning of activity.				
Youth ask questions.				
Staff or adults avoid the use of jargon or technical terms and stop to explain when youth don't understand.				
Youth share from their own experiences.				
Staff and/or adults share from their own experiences.				

QUALITIES OF INTERACTION	YES	NO	UNEVEN	COMMENTS
All youth participate in discussion.				
Adults and youth appear to respect each other's opinions and perspectives.				
Efforts are made to equalize input (i.e., adults or other youth solicit the participation of quiet youth and adults).				
Body language of youth seems engaged and energized.				
Participation crosses racial, cultural, and gender boundaries.				

Describe an interesting comment or exchange that occurred during the observation.

How would you describe the climate of the activity (informal, structured, friendly, etc.)?

Other comments