

Program Evaluation: The Basics

At the end of this module, you will be able to:

- ▲ Describe the key aspects of program evaluation.
- ▲ Distinguish between different types of evaluation.
- ▲ Determine who should be involved in an evaluation.
- ▲ Explain the importance of planning evaluations early in a program's development.
- ▲ List the five steps in evaluating any program.

What is Program Evaluation?

A program is any series of activities, supported by a group of resources, intended to achieve specific outcomes among particular target groups. A program can be very big, very small or anywhere in between. This includes projects, special initiatives, pilots, campaigns, clinical services and so on.

As a manager, you are faced with decisions about your program all of the time. These decisions relate to ways to improve the program and how to best use resources. In order to make these decisions, you often use your professional judgment to informally assess your program. Your assessment may be based on what staff or program participants tell you, what you yourself actually observe about the program, or what you know from previous experience with similar types of programs. Most managers, however, recognize that their judgment is subjective. Bias can be reduced and decisions can be improved by more *structured* data gathering. Program evaluation is a more structured approach to assessing programs.

Program evaluation is the systematic gathering, analysis and reporting of data about a program to assist in decision-making. Evaluation responds to specific management decision-making needs and is all about:

- describing the intended program;
- documenting what was actually implemented;
- describing participant characteristics; and
- demonstrating the impact of the program.

Three Key Points

- 1 Evaluation is a systematic, step-by-step process.
- 2 Evaluation can examine all aspects of a program — activities, target groups, and outcomes.
- 3 Evaluation produces data to support decision-making about ways to improve programs and how to best use resources.

Are There Different Types of Evaluation?

Yes, there are. Program evaluation is always tied to decision-making, and managers are faced with different types of decisions during different stages in a program's development. There are two main stages in the program development cycle: planning and implementation. Different decision-making needs during these stages determine the type of evaluation to be conducted.

Program Planning

Needs Assessment	The very first decision confronting managers responsible for new programs is "Should a program be implemented?" If so, "What type of program is required?" To answer these questions, managers must assess the need for a program. This type of evaluation activity is called needs assessment.
Feasibility Analysis	Once the needs of particular groups in the community are well established, various program concepts may emerge. Next, managers must ask "Is our program idea feasible?" This is often called feasibility analysis.

Program Implementation

Process Evaluation	Early in the implementation phase, managers need information to answer questions such as: "Is implementation consistent with the way the program was planned? How can the program be improved?" This type of evaluation examines how the program is operating. This is often called process evaluation. This type of evaluation focuses on <i>what</i> the program does and for <i>whom</i> .
Outcome Evaluation	Once a program is established and early evaluation activities have indicated that implementation is running smoothly, managers often need to assess the impact the program is having. This is called outcome evaluation. This type of evaluation examines the <i>changes</i> that occurred as a <i>result</i> of your program and whether it is having the intended <i>effect</i> .

The table below gives a couple of examples of the reasons for process and outcome evaluation. Process and outcome evaluation are the focus of the *Tool Kit*. Although needs assessment and feasibility analysis are not explicitly addressed, many sections of the *Tool Kit* contain relevant information for these types of evaluation activity.

Purpose of Evaluation	Type of Evaluation	Examples from the Field
To improve the operation of an existing program	Process evaluation	"Implementation just isn't going smoothly. My team and I are not exactly sure what the problem is. I'd like to be able to pinpoint the problem in order to correct it and get things back on track."
To assess the impact of a program	Outcome evaluation	"The effectiveness of our program is being questioned. We're sure our program is important and it is already beginning to show results — at least it will if it's given enough time. The community is telling us that it's having an impact and staff believe the program is really building momentum. I'd like to demonstrate the results our program is having on its participants and the community as a whole."

Who Should Be Involved?

When considering who should work on the evaluation, it's helpful to include a variety of people who have knowledge of the program and experience with program evaluation. Different types of people may contribute different strengths to the process (as indicated below).

Type of Person

program manager

program staff

health unit evaluator

Possible Contribution

understands the purpose of the program and the evaluation, plus knows of the resources available

have experience with the program's activities and their target groups

knows the evaluation process and has expertise with specific methodological and technical issues

For most process evaluations, both the manager and program staff should be involved. For any outcome evaluations, be sure to include the person in your health unit who is responsible for program evaluation, such as the program evaluation specialist or epidemiologist. It is crucial to consult this person early in the planning phase of your evaluation. Although it is sometimes difficult to anticipate the type of evaluation support you might require, as a safeguard always touch base with the evaluator or epidemiologist early on.

In principle, it is also a good idea to encourage other stakeholders to become involved in the evaluation of your program. In practice, this might not always be possible. The extent of stakeholder involvement often depends on the purpose of the evaluation.

Regardless of who is involved, be sure to agree upon each person's responsibilities up front. One person should assume the role of project manager and have overall responsibility for planning and conducting the evaluation.



When Should Evaluations be Planned?

Program evaluation is an integral part of program management. The plan for process and outcome evaluation should be built into your overall program plan, prior to its actual launch. Although it is never too late to evaluate a program, you should plan your evaluation as early as you can. Early planning ensures that you will be able to gather the right data at the right time. This is especially important for outcome evaluation. To see whether your program made a difference or not, you often need to know something about how things were before you implemented your program.

How Are Programs Evaluated?

The *Tool Kit* describes a five-step approach to evaluating public health programs.

- 1 **Focus** the evaluation by determining exactly what you need to know about your program.
- 2 Choose appropriate **methods** for answering the evaluation questions.
- 3 Develop or modify data collection **tools**.
- 4 Gather and analyse the **data**.
- 5 Use the answers to your evaluation questions to help make **decisions** about your program.

Key Points

- ▲ Evaluation involves the systematic collection and use of program information to support decision-making.
- ▲ Different decision-making needs require different types of evaluation.
- ▲ People with knowledge of the program and people with evaluation expertise should be involved in planning and doing an evaluation.
- ▲ It is never too late to evaluate a program, but start as early as you can.

Quiz Yourself

- ▲ List three characteristics of program evaluation.
- ▲ Describe two reasons for evaluating an existing program.
- ▲ Identify when the evaluation plan for a program should be developed.
- ▲ List the five steps in program evaluation.

References:

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