Getting the Most Out of Your Evaluation Report: Strategies for Success

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This tip sheet is designed to help you prepare for conversations with your evaluator to make sure you get the most out of your evaluation and the final report.

UNLOCKING INSIGHTS: WHAT AN EVALUATION REPORT CAN TELL YOU

A program evaluation uses data and analysis to systematically assess the effectiveness of your program, the extent to which your program is implemented as intended, and/or the cost-effectiveness of your program. In general, evaluations fall into three categories: process, impact, and cost-benefit. Exhibit 1 provides a description and example findings from each evaluation type.

Exhibit 1: Defining Process, Impact, and Cost-Benefit Evaluations

	Process Evaluation	**Impact Evaluation**	**Cost-Benefit Evaluation**
Definition	Examines the extent to which a program was implemented as intended. It focuses on the operational aspects of the program and challenges affecting the program's success, such as activities, stakeholder engagement, and facilitators.	Measures changes directly attributable to a program. It assesses outcomes such as changes in knowledge, behavior, skills, or conditions among participants. It aims to answer whether the program met its intended goals and what measurable effects it had on its target population.	Compares the costs of implementing a program with the benefits it generates. Helps determine whether the program's outcomes justify the investment. It examines both the tangible and intangible outcomes relative to the resources used.
Example findings	The program implemented peer support with 96 clients returning to their communities from incarceration. On average, clients received 3 months of recovery support.	Compared with reentering individuals who did not receive peer support services, program participants were less likely to be rearrested and more likely to have stable housing 6 months after being released from jail.	Peer recovery support services generated an estimated $1,000 in cost savings per participant.

To maximize the usefulness of an evaluation and disseminate findings, a final report about the evaluation, or evaluation report, is an important product resulting from an evaluation.

A good evaluation report provides detailed information that helps decision-makers understand the value of the program and make informed decisions. Your evaluation report should document how your program works, its core components, and the findings from the evaluation, which may include outcomes, implementation processes, and cost-effectiveness, depending on the evaluation type. The specific types of information included in the report may vary based on the type of evaluation you are doing. An evaluation report should also translate findings for a broad audience, including people who may have no background knowledge of your program. In addition, it can provide detailed information about your program and evaluation methods, allowing interested researchers to replicate the study or practitioners to implement similar programs or interventions.

"An evaluation report is a useful way to document accountability and transparent use of funds, because it can show what activities were implemented, the number of participants served, and any outcomes the program achieved."

Maximizing Impact: Ways to Leverage an Evaluation Report. As Exhibit 2 shows, you can use your evaluation report to support program planning and improvement, share findings and success, and promote program sustainability. Telling your evaluator how you plan to use the report can help them to craft it in such a way that you and your team can easily translate findings into action steps.

Exhibit 2. Leveraging an Evaluation Report for Program Planning, Improvement, Dissemination Efforts, and Sustainability

Engage in Program Planning and Improvement

- Track progress towards program objectives.
- Update the program logic model.
- Make strategic changes to the program as needed.
- Identify training and technical assistance needs.

Share Findings and Succeses

- Share and celebrate your achievements with stakeholders including your clients, staff, funders, and partners.
- Early wins (they can be small!) help to promote engagement and commitment to the program.
- Document challenges so other programs serving your clients can benefit from your lessons learned.

Promote Program Sustainability

- Use data to demonstrate the need for continued support.
- Make data-informed decisions about resource allocation.
- Document how program funding translates to activities and outputs, as well as cost savings.
- Document program impacts, including how they are addressing client needs and program goals.

STRATEGIZING FOR A POWERFUL EVALUATION REPORT

The ideal time to begin planning for the evaluation report is before evaluation activities start. Work with your evaluation team to do the following:

1. Identify your evaluation design and select your evaluation questions.
2. Determine your key audience(s) for the evaluation report.
3. Outline report sections, format, and other deliverables.
4. Set expectations for ongoing communication.

1. Identify Your Evaluation Design and Select Your Evaluation Questions

First, work with your evaluator to figure out what type of evaluation you are going to do. It might help to think about the questions that you are most interested in answering in your evaluation (e.g., is the program effective for all participants or only some? If only some, for whom is it effective?). See which type of evaluation design in Exhibit 1 aligns with your most pressing questions.

Second, once you have decided whether you are going to do a process, impact, or cost-benefit evaluation (you could do more than one!), think about the specific evaluation questions you want answered. Developing clear and specific **evaluation questions** is a foundational step toward producing an impactful evaluation report. Program staff members and the evaluation partner should collaborate to ensure that the questions are meaningful, relevant, and aligned with the program's objectives. Focus on questions that you are most interested in answering about your program (e.g., is the program effective for all participants or only some? If only some, for whom is it effective?).

You and your evaluator should agree on evaluation questions that are:

- Clear, specific, well-defined

Make evaluation questions unambiguous and focused, leaving no room for misinterpretation. The questions need to be specific enough to guide the evaluation team in collecting the right data and drawing appropriate conclusions.

> Example: Instead of asking, *"Did the program work?"* a clear and specific question would be, *"Did the program decrease fatal drug overdoses by at least 10 percent among adults in the participating counties within 2 years?"*

- Aligned to the program logic model

Directly link evaluation questions to the program's logic model, which outlines the program's resources, activities, outputs, and desired outcomes. This ensures that the questions focus on what the program is trying to achieve. See Logic Model Tip Sheet and Template for more information about developing logic models.

> Example: If the program aims to support individuals in recovery from substance use disorders, an aligned evaluation question might be, *"To what extent did the recovery support program improve participants' stability in housing and employment within 6 months of program completion?"*

- Focused on a specific aspect or component of the program

Develop evaluation questions that ask about specific aspects of the program (e.g., service provided) or one component (e.g., a specific activity, target population, or time frame). This narrows the scope of the evaluation.

> Example: If evaluating a substance misuse recovery program that focuses on nutrition, exercise, and peer coaching, a question focused on a component might be, *"How effective were weekly exercise sessions in helping participants establish exercise routines as part of their recovery plans?"*

- Measurable

Frame evaluation questions in a way that allows for the collection of data and measurement of outcomes. The questions must focus on observable or quantifiable elements that can be tracked and analyzed.

> Example: A measurable question could be, *"What percentage of participants in the recovery support program maintained stable housing and reported improved life skills within 6 months of program completion?"*

Once you have determined your evaluation questions, identify data sources or methods that will be used to address those evaluation questions, in partnership with your evaluation. This is not an easy step, but there is some guidance in *Selecting Outcome Measures to Evaluate Substance Misuse Prevention, Education, Treatment, and Recovery Support Programs*.

Set Clear Expectations About What Evaluation Findings Can Say

It is important to have clear expectations about what evaluation findings can reveal. The evaluation questions you can address in an evaluation will depend on the type of evaluation (process, impact, cost) and its design. Different designs offer varying levels of evidence, with more rigorous designs often requiring complex data collection methods, which can increase costs. For instance, demonstrating impact may require having a comparison or control group to determine whether changes are due to the program or would have happened for everyone anyway. Engaging with the evaluator early on to clarify what conclusions can be drawn will set realistic expectations and prevent misunderstandings later.

2. Determine Your Key Audiences for Your Evaluation Report(s)

Determine the key audiences for your evaluation and evaluation report by identifying who will be reading the report and how they will be using the information. Then tailor the report to the needs of these stakeholders (e.g., funders, policymakers, and program managers) by adjusting the level of detail, technical language, and focus of the findings.

Tailoring Findings for Different Audiences

Talk to evaluators during the planning phase to set clear expectations for how to present findings, recognizing that different stakeholders need different types of information. This will help ensure that the report meets the needs of multiple stakeholders. Consider the following ideas:

- **Executive summary for broader audiences**: Create a clear, standalone executive summary that captures the key findings and recommendations, especially for stakeholders who may not have the time to read the full report. This could include an infographic or other visuals.
- **Detailed findings for technical audiences:** Create a full report with in-depth findings, data analysis, and methodology for those who require a comprehensive understanding, such as evaluators or funders.
- **Other ways to present findings, such as briefings, presentations, or infographics:** Create other products describing interim and final findings, if these products are of interest. For instance, you might create a detailed technical report for those interested in the evaluation design or tailored briefs or presentations for funders, policymakers, and program staff members. This approach ensures that the information reaches all relevant audiences in a manner that suits their needs.

3. Outline Report Sections and Format

At this stage, you have collaborated with an evaluator, developed a plan to answer your key evaluation questions, and obtained a clear understanding of what your evaluation will be able to tell you. Now, you are ready to move into discussing details of the final product and whether you are developing one or multiple reports**.**

A comprehensive evaluation report should include the following sections:

- **Executive Summary**: A concise overview of key findings and recommendations accessible to all.
- **Introduction**: A background on the program and the objectives of the evaluation.
- **Methodology and Limitations**: A clear explanation of how the evaluation was conducted, the data collected, analysis approaches, and any limitations of the methodology used.
- **Findings**: A detailed presentation of what was found, highlighting successes, challenges, and areas for improvement.
- **Recommendations:**
    - **Actionable Next Steps and Recommendations:** Specific, practical recommendations based on findings that aim to improve program performance or organizational policies (e.g., how the program is staffed), and/or suggest directions for future evaluations. Recommendations can be ranked by priority (how strongly the evaluation findings supported the recommendation) and feasibility (how easy or hard they are to do).
    - **Cost-Benefit Insights:** Where applicable, insights from a cost-benefit analysis to identify for improvement and suggest strategies that maximize resource use and demonstrate value for stakeholders.
- **Conclusion**: Key takeaways and implications for the program or organization.

Make the report accessible to different stakeholders by ensuring that it is written in **plain language,** is free of jargon, and can be understood by nonexperts.

Assessment of Findings and Evaluation Rigor: Discuss with your evaluator how the strengths and limitations of the selected evaluation design will be described, and outline the ways the evaluator will confirm that the report's findings and conclusions are supported by data. Consider how the generalizability of the findings to other programs and participant types will be assessed. In addition, ensure that actionable next steps and recommendations included in the report address implications for practice, policy, and future evaluations. If there are specific recommendations you want included (e.g., strategies for staff preparation), be sure to discuss these early in the evaluation planning process.

Data Presentation and Visuals: Discuss how the data will be presented**.** Will the report provide charts, graphs, and other visuals to make the data more accessible and easier to interpret? If so, ensure that these visuals clearly and accurately represent the key findings and are included within the section where the finding is presented. Visuals should simplify complex data and make it easier to interpret patterns or results. Exhibit 3 outlines best practices for data visualizations in a report.

Exhibit 3. Best Practices for Data Visualization in Reports

Clarity

Ensure that visuals are clear, well-labeled, and free from clutter. Use descriptive labels, legends, and titles that help users understand the data at a glance.

Relevance

Use data visualizations that directly relate to the evaluation's findings. Avoid unnecessary visuals that do not add value to the report's insights.

Consistency

Use consistent colors, fonts, and styles throughout the report to maintain a professional look and make visuals easily comparable.

Accessibility

Design visuals with accessibility in mind, ensuring that a broad audience, including those with limited technical expertise, can understand them.

There are different ways to include data visuals in an evaluation report, for example:

- **Bar charts:** To compare program outcomes across different groups or time periods.
- **Line graphs:** To show trends over time, such as improvements in participant performance.
- **Heat maps:** To visualize geographic data, such as the distribution of program participants across regions.

Important Consideration—Attention to Equity

Consider whether and how you are presenting data that show differences by types of participants, based on demographic or other characteristics. It' is important to show how different types of participants are engaging with and benefiting (or not benefiting) from your program, especially if a program goal is to address disparities.

4. Set Expectations for Ongoing Communication With the Evaluator

To make sure you and your evaluator are on the same page, check in regularly during your study. At the beginning of the project, discuss how frequently you will meet with the evaluator and the timeline for receiving different stages of the final report such as the outline, first draft, second draft, and final product.

By working closely with your evaluator from the start, you can ensure that the evaluation report and other agreed-upon products meet your needs. This process ensures that all parties agree on the content, format, and style of the report and that the findings are communicated in a way that supports program improvement and decision-making.

EVALUATING REPORT QUALITY: ESSENTIAL CHECKLIST FOR PRACTITIONERS

This checklist should serve as a tool to assess the quality of the report and ensure that expectations set during conversations with the evaluator were met.

BEFORE THE EVALUATION

ASK YOUR EVALUATOR:

Identify Your Evaluation Design and Select Your Evaluation Questions

Collaborate to develop meaningful, relevant evaluation questions aligned to your program goals.

- [ ] What type of evaluation design will help me to answer my most pressing questions?
- [ ] Are these questions clear and specific enough to guide the evaluation? How do these questions align
- [ ] with the program logic model? Can the questions be transformed into measurable outcomes?
- [ ] Will our evaluation questions tell us information that we want to learn about the whole program, specific components, or something else?
- [ ] What data sources or methods will be used to answer the evaluation questions, and are these methods feasible given the resources and timeline?
- [ ] How will the evaluation and, more specifically, answers to these evaluation questions, inform decision-making or future actions?
- [ ] Do the evaluation questions and analysis approaches capture potential variations in outcomes across different types of program participants and contexts?

Determine Key Audiences

Identify the different groups that will receive the report (e.g., funders, program staff members, policymakers) and discuss their specific needs.

- [ ] What are the key groups with which we want to share evaluation findings. and how will we communicate findings to each group?
- [ ] What information will be most relevant for each group of stakeholders?
- [ ] How can we ensure that all stakeholders understand and can act on the findings?

Set Expectations for Ongoing Communication

Create a timeline with your evaluator for when sections of the report will be delivered.

- [ ] What is the timeline during which sections of the report will be delivered?
- [ ] How often will we receive updates or progress reports, and what format will these updates take (e.g., written reports, meetings)?
- [ ] Will draft reports be shared for review and feedback before the final report is completed? How much time will we have to provide input?

AFTER THE EVALUATION

ASK YOUR EVALUATOR:

Assessment of Findings and Evaluation Rigor

Ensure that report findings are backed by data and that actionable next steps describe implications for program, policy, and evaluation.

- [ ] How are claims made in the report supported by data?
- [ ] Does the report adequately explain any differences in outcomes across different types of program participants and contexts?
- [ ] What are the limitations of the evaluation design?
- [ ] To what extent are the findings generalizable to other similar programs?
- [ ] How can we best utilize the report findings to inform program, policy, and future evaluation efforts?

Outline Report Sections and Format

Ensure that the report contains all essential sections, such as Executive Summary, Introduction, Methodology and Limitations, Findings, Recommendations, and Conclusion.

- [ ] Does the report have a table of contents and appropriate headings and subheadings for easy navigation?
- [ ] Does the report cover all required sections including clearly explaining the methodology (i.e., evaluation design)?
- [ ] Are these sections presented in a clear, logical manner?
- [ ] Is the Executive Summary concise but still an accurate summary of the entire report?

Ensure Accessibility for All Stakeholders

Ensure that all stakeholders, regardless of technical background, can understand the findings.

- [ ] Is the writing clear and free of jargon, so that all stakeholders can understand it?
- [ ] Is the information presented clearly and logically?
- [ ] Are complex findings explained in plain language that nonexperts can access?

Data Visualization

Ensure that evaluation findings are effectively communicated through data visualizations, including charts, graphs, and infographics.

- [ ] Are charts, graphs, and infographics used appropriately to enhance understanding?
- [ ] Do visuals effectively support key findings, and are they clear and easy to interpret?
- [ ] Do the visualizations consider inclusivity, ensuring representation of diverse participant outcomes?

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