

Participatory Evaluation: Engaging Stakeholders in the Process

Kenneth Jones, Community and Leadership Development

In this age of accountability, organizations, agencies and individuals alike are held at higher standards to show their programs can make a difference. Hence, evaluation is a critical component of programming, whether it serves the development and implementation process or provides the results of a project funded by a grant. Evaluation is commonplace and should be an integral part of any Extension program. However, it is not always readily embraced by Extension professionals, with many shuddering at the thought of evaluation and the responsibilities therein. Oftentimes, this is not due to the lack of good intentions; many may be excellent programmers. It's the nature of serving as an evaluator that causes some anxiety.

In order to adhere to the requirements of reporting and accountability, Extension professionals must be of the mindset that if the success of a program is not communicated through proper documentation, it's almost as if that program did not even occur. Another major concern is the amount of time it takes to gather the data for a thorough evaluation. In addition, deciding on the best way to communicate results often presents equal challenges. Within Extension, there are ways to work effectively to gather the most important information available and to tell our story. One proven method is by engaging stakeholders (those with a vested interest and who are directly affected by programs) as participants in evaluation. No one can tell our story better than those who benefit from the work of Extension and the results achieved.

What is Participatory Evaluation?

Participatory Evaluation invokes qualitative and quantitative methods that allow those directly affected by a program (or the evaluation of a program) to be engaged in providing insight and answers to community concerns and issues. Stakeholders (e.g., program participants or clientele, employees of an organization/agency, funders, volunteers, etc.) are involved throughout the process and even for follow-ups to conclusions made known through the evaluation. In this process, an evaluator must be deliberate about asking the right questions to gather desired data. This can be done in the form of an interview or focus group discussions, allowing the evaluator and the stakeholders to engage in dialogue from the planning and design phase to the point where recommendations are presented. Participatory evaluation is often referred to as “real-world” or a hands-on approach in that it addresses the needs and issues of those that are seeking solutions (through the evaluation). It is a valuable technique because the results emerge while the stakeholders are participating. Therefore, they are more likely to understand the results and readily apply them within a given community setting. Lastly, this form of evaluation is not only helpful in determining process, but also provides implications for outcomes that can potentially change lives and communities.

Participatory evaluation serves a worthy purpose in that it allows the evaluator to tap into the resources of a community or organization. In most cases, the evaluator is the outsider with little knowledge of the

Evaluation is commonplace and should be an integral part of any Extension program.

One commonality that causes participatory evaluation to miss out on maximizing opportunities is when participants are only solicited from select groups.

inner workings, cultural dynamics, assets or deficits. In other instances, community capitals (e.g., financial wealth, social networks, etc.) that could resolve certain issues are not realized or shared if people are aware of them. Consequently, it avails an evaluator to be detail-oriented and skilled in observing multiple surroundings simultaneously. Soliciting the advice and opinions of those stakeholders can aid in easing this burden, thus affording the opportunity to learn first-hand what the needs are among a given organization or community. Asking the participants can allow the evaluator to make critical changes if needed, even before an evaluation is completed. In turn, stakeholders can also provide key insight on findings divulged at the end of an evaluation. There is no better way to interpret results than by asking those who have lived experiences that may speak to these new or apparent discoveries.

Participatory evaluation is a useful strategy, but it does require careful planning in order for the evaluator to obtain useful data and for stakeholders to fully engage and value their own contributions. Here are a few key steps toward engaging stakeholders in the evaluation process:

Obtain adequate background knowledge of the situation (among program participants, within communities, etc.). It's always important to take a thorough assessment of what needs to change and why. Whether you are trying to determine what type of program is best for teens or how to more effectively reach homeowners to educate them on new energy regulations, taking an inventory of the needs will allow an evaluator to more accurately address issues and involve participants.

Engage the right partners/stakeholders. Always strive to seek out a diverse group of individuals. One commonality that causes participatory evaluation to miss out on maximizing opportunities is when participants are only solicited from select groups. Once the need for the evaluation is determined, consider all parties that would have a vested interest in a positive outcome. From there, select representatives from various parts of the community and seek out those with unique skills. Also, be sure not to rule out groups or individuals because of perceived weaknesses. Although a person may not be a great public speaker, he/she may be meticulous

at handling and sorting through detailed pieces of data. A group may not be seen as a body of leaders within the community, but members may be well connected, knowing a lot of decision-makers personally. Look for expertise, not experts, meaning that most participants will not be experts in evaluation, but everyone has skills that could help improve situations, programs and lives.

Define the roles of stakeholders, including the role of the evaluator. When defining roles, have specific details on areas in which you will need stakeholder assistance, the amount of time it should take, and how the information will be used. Once individuals are ready and willing to contribute their time and efforts, an Extension professional serving as an evaluator should be prepared to operate as a facilitator through this process. Evaluators must meet them where they are and allow them to put their talents to work. In most cases, there is not enough time to train stakeholders on evaluation methods, but they can certainly assist through basic techniques. Consider the people that stakeholders come in contact with on a regular basis. They can help tremendously by simply asking individuals how they benefited from a program that took place several months ago. Oftentimes, the Extension professional may not come in regular contact with past clientele, but stakeholders may see them on a frequent basis. Therefore, they can serve as a liaison between agents and specialists with the purpose of gathering vital data. Defining these roles early sends a reminder that if we are inquiring of the opinions of others, then we must value their views, abilities and time.

Work together to interpret the findings. At times, the evaluator may be new to a community or unfamiliar with an organization. Once the findings are revealed, there could be data that may be unclear to the evaluator alone. This is where participatory evaluation can reach its full potential. The strength in participatory evaluation allows an evaluator to access the expertise of stakeholders to help interpret what is meant by specific findings that are revealed. For instance, if the results of an evaluation reveal conflicting information of what the evaluator expected or predicted, stakeholders could be consulted to help determine why a specific situation may be unique or contrary to the norm. Seeking out feedback could help the evaluator tap into information

that was not obvious prior to conducting the evaluation. Participants who live in the community or are familiar with an organization's culture can provide rich insight on the true meaning behind certain findings.

Established relationships are required. Participatory evaluation calls for others to buy in to the evaluation as a whole. A level of trust must exist between Extension staff and other stakeholders. The evaluator must feel comfortable approaching those viewed as creditable sources. On the other hand, stakeholders must also feel that the evaluator has their best interest at heart and is committed to adequately telling their story. From the very beginning, before a program is formed or an evaluation is conducted, these relationships must be developed and nurtured.

Summary

Extension's success has always been based on our impact on the lives of those we serve. In order to witness a more rapid change in communities, the individuals directly affected must be engaged in the process. This deviates from the traditional customs of evaluation, in which an evaluator arrives, gathers information via conversations, observations, and surveys from participants then draws conclusions based solely on one's own analyses. Participatory evaluation helps to minimize bias by involving the participant and allowing them to share their insight on where the program or project is and where they want it to go. Moreover, this strategy should promote the notion that evaluation belongs to everyone and each has a role.

When participants are included from the very beginning, they not only feel valued for their input, but empowered to share their voice, whether it's to improve a process, assess the outcome of a program or change an entire community. Engaging stakeholders offers a proven way of building upon traditional evaluation methods while striving to obtain higher level impact.

References

- Cohen, B.B. (2012). Advisory groups for evaluations in diverse cultural groups, communities and contexts. In R. VeLure Roholt & M.L. Baizerman (Eds.), *Evaluation advisory groups. New Directions for Evaluation*, 136, 49-65.
- Frantz, N. (2013). The data party: Involving stakeholders in meaningful data analysis. *Journal of Extension* 51(1). Available online at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2013february/pdf/JOE_v51_1iw2.pdf.
- Harvard Family Research Project (1995, Fall). Participatory evaluation. *The Evaluation Exchange*, 1(Numbers 3 & 4). Available online at: <http://www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/participatory-evaluation>.
- Morse, R.S., Brown, P.W., & Warning, J.E. (2006). Catalytic leadership: Reconsidering the nature of Extension's leadership role. *Journal of Extension*, 44(2). Available online at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2006april/a9.php>
- Whyte, W. F. (Ed.). (1991). *Participatory action research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.