

# THE “WHO” OF EVALUATION

A good evaluation requires a mix of skills – internal, external, or both

by Pippa Rowcliffe & Greg Tolliday

**T**he tough decision is made: “We want an evaluation!” Now, who should we get to do it? Do we do it ourselves? Would it be better to hire someone to do it for us? And what about all this talk of “peer review”? Is that a better way to go?

The question of “who” should carry out an evaluation is one of the most important things a community group must get right. The consequences of a bad decision can be disastrous. It can be difficult to overcome the damage which can be done when an evaluation, undertaken by an inappropriate person, turns sour. People may point fingers. The effort to counteract incorrect impressions will waste resources. Some of the hard feelings may prove irreconcilable.



## EVALUATION, NOT AUDIT

In choosing to evaluate, we are working against a tide of contrary opinion. Until very recently, evaluations had a bad reputation, and deservedly so. Because their implementation tended to disempower and judge those being evaluated, evaluations contravened principles that we hold dear as CED practitioners.

A previous article in this magazine (see “Shaping the Future of Community Futures”; *Making Waves*, Vol. 6, No. 2, Summer 1995) raised the issue of evaluation with a number of Community Futures Development Cor-

porations (CFDCs) in British Columbia. The process focussed on evaluation as a component of the strategic planning process: a means to take stock and use past experience to improve future decisions.

Even so, the response from CFDCs at that time was overwhelmingly negative. Common experience among CFDCs was with externally generated, managed, and administered evaluations. In most cases, these had been undertaken by people with no understanding of or sympathy for the principles and practices of CED.

Part of the reason for this negative perception can be explained by “who” deci-

sions that were made without sufficient thought. Government departments and ministries contracted out evaluations without involving the people or programs they were evaluating. The companies carrying out evaluations tended to be large management consulting firms with little experience or skills in the CED field and with very standard ways of working. In many instances, these evaluations could be more accurately described as “audits.” They seemed wholly intended to find what the organizations were doing wrong, rather than to assess past actions and improve future performance.

But things are changing. It is clearer now than ever before that evaluation has a very important role to play in the work of CED practitioners. In some cases, it can fulfil the same function as a car's rear view mirror. When we know where we have been and what we have overcome to get where we are, we can plan and act more effec-

tively. In other cases, it can play a major role in our advocacy work by providing us with information that can demonstrate the effectiveness of CED.

So, increasingly, CED practitioners are initiating evaluations.

To make evaluation useful and non-threatening, however, we must make informed and forward-thinking decisions about who does them. This is especially true because when we evaluate CED practices, we want the evaluation (both the process and the framework) to remain consistent with our principles and values. Evaluation must be carried out by people with the necessary skills but also with an understanding of and agreement with CED principles.

“WHO” TO CHOOSE FROM

Who could do an evaluation for us? Our first option is to do it ourselves or use staff members from within our organization do it. We could also ask another organization with which we work closely to help us out. Alternatively, we could hire another objective person or company to come in. It all depends on what we are trying to achieve with the evaluation and what resources we can find to help us.

CED practitioners have a natural preference for approaches to evaluation that score high on the participatory scale. We want the evaluation process and results to build capacity in our organizations. We tend

to reject “external experts.” We also favour evaluation that is aimed at planning and improving what we do and how we do it. But even we need to be objective about the evaluation decisions we make, particularly when it comes to who we choose to do it.

The “who?” question is important at every stage and level of an evaluation.

We need to decide who will manage the evaluation: setting scope, responsibility for major decisions. In the large majority of cases, this must rest with the staff and board of the organization.

In addition we need to decide who will do the more specialized tasks of designing an evaluation framework, deciding on appropriate data collection approaches and design of tools, and analyzing data once it is collected. It is often useful to hire in people with expertise in these areas: this can save a lot of time and effort and can increase the quality of the results of the evaluation.

Two other tasks require less expertise: the collection of the data and then the communication of results. These could also be done by people external to the organization, although there are benefits to doing them internally.

## 7 KEY FUNCTIONS

There are some very distinct functions that need to be performed during an evaluation. Some of them are highly specialized. By using people who have experience in them, you can save yourself money, time, and heartache in the long run. Other functions require a more detailed knowledge of your organization and the purpose of the evaluation. These functions should be carried out by your organization even if you need help with facilitation. Still others are

administrative in nature. Depending on your resources and the time you have, you can choose the best person to do these functions for you.

Seven functions are essential to an evaluation:

### Setting Objectives

Evaluations must be clearly focussed on a single objective. Expecting an evaluation to answer many questions and solve a large number of issues is unrealistic. This function must be carried out by people invested with the responsibility and the authority to make decisions and who have a good sense of the purpose of the evaluation.

### Drafting Clear Evaluation Questions

A strong evaluation asks specific and focussed questions. These are very closely linked to the objective of the evaluation. Writing appropriate questions is key because they will determine how information is collected and how it is analyzed. This is a specialist function that requires knowledge of evaluation approaches and pitfalls.

### Designing a Research Approach

This includes deciding how information should be collected, where information should come from, and how it will be analyzed. It also involves designing forms, interview guides, or questionnaires. If the objectives of the evaluation are clear and questions have been well drafted, this step should be relatively easy. However, some specialist knowledge is useful here to avoid problems in research design.

### Doing the Research

This function involves carrying out the research plan whether that is doing telephone calls, reading literature, or administering a survey.

### Analyzing Results

The information you gather during the evaluation must be reviewed to understand

trends, key results, and issues. This task needs someone or a group of people to become very familiar with the information gathered, whether electronically or on paper. It can also help to have some specialist knowledge in analytical techniques, depending on how large your evaluation is.

### **Drawing Conclusions & Making Recommendations**

The results that the evaluation produces must be set in context. Given the issues that you are dealing with and the objectives of your evaluation, this process draws conclusions about what the major lessons are and how they can be acted on.

### **Communicating Results**

We do evaluations to gain understanding and knowledge. We need to share this with others both inside our organization and externally. The vehicles we use to do this will differ depending on who we are trying to reach. Internally, you might be able to use a newsletter or internal mail system. Externally, press releases, report summaries, presentations, and many other approaches could be used to convey information.

In many cases, it might be clear to you who should be responsible for each of these functions. At the same time, you might also feel that some assistance is needed to facilitate decision-making. In these cases, it is important that you make the distinction clear: between responsibility for a decision or some content, and assistance with process.

#### **GETTING READY TO CHOOSE "WHO?"**

To help you decide who should carry out each of the evaluation functions, consider these questions:

##### **1. What is the purpose of your evaluation?**

Is the intent of the evaluation to learn more about what was done, how it was done, and how it could be improved? Or

is the goal to use the information gathered to demonstrate success or communicate more effectively?

Getting very clear on purpose is critical to successful evaluations. Too many organizations do not end up with the results they hoped for because they ex-

Remember that more than one person or organization can play a role in your evaluation. A strategic selection of internal & external evaluators may even improve the result, because it levers in a variety of different perspectives.

pected their evaluation to do too much. We have also worked with organizations in which people have "settled" their differences over the purpose of an evaluation by increasing the scope of the process to an unmanageable size.

Getting clear on purpose will determine what kind of evaluation you do. A "formative" evaluation will focus on making improvements to the way that business is done. A "summative" evaluation will deal with results, outcomes, and impacts of a program or project.

Whatever your purpose, it can be valuable to have an outside, objective party involved to facilitate your discussions. Firstly, they may be able "to see the forest for the trees," which can be very difficult for people who are themselves "in the middle of the trees." Secondly, it is often useful to have someone outside the discussion itself to keep you on track and to ask difficult questions.

##### **2. Who needs to know the results of the evaluation?**

Will the evaluation information you gather feed into and inform internal planning and decision-making? Alternatively, is the information for external purposes: to communicate to potential funders or to demonstrate results to existing funders? These are two different needs and should be approached separately.

If your organization is going to use the

information to inform its internal decision-making, then more often than not, you can rely on staff or volunteers. They will have a more intimate understanding of the focus of the evaluation, the key decisions that hang on the results, and any sensitivities within the organization around the evaluation.

If, on the other hand, the information generated by an assessment is to be used to demonstrate to funders the value of your organization's work, there may be benefit in third-party involvement. The simple reason here is that funders may perceive an external assessor to have less bias in reviewing and presenting results than the group itself.

An example here is the work that the Bay State Skills Corporation did for the Human Resources Development Association in Halifax (*The HRDA Alternative Welfare Model: Analysis and Recommendations*, Boston, 1993). That evaluation estimated the financial savings generated by HRDA's various job development and training programs. HRDA likely had the skills required to estimate these savings itself. The fact that an external, well-known research firm completed the assessment gave added credibility to the evaluation findings, particularly in the eyes of funders.

It is important to note, however, that an external evaluator is not necessarily required. Credibility may not be an issue if there is a good relationship with the funder and the assessment process itself is transparent. For many years now, the Kentucky Highlands Investment Corporation (KHIC) has been assessing the financial impact of its work on the taxpayer. KHIC uses a return-on-taxpayers'-investment formula similar to that of Bay State Skills Corporation. KHIC's excellent documentation of the methodology it uses, combined with its good reputation among

fundere and policy groups, ensures that all stakeholders perceive the information as both accurate and trustworthy.

**3. What skills do you need to do the assessment?**

Evaluation requires a specific set of research and facilitation skills, coupled with a firm understanding of the type of CED work the organization is doing.

Do existing staff and volunteers have these skills? Does the organization need to look beyond to skilled individuals, companies, universities, or research groups able to provide them?

The skills issue often poses a real challenge to community groups, particularly smaller ones. Community groups generally excel at doing the work, but do not necessarily attract (or have the resources to hire) people with expertise or interest in evaluation. More often than not, therefore, community groups interested in undertaking substantial evaluation efforts are prompted to seek cash or in-kind resources to import the particular skills sets required.

**4. How much money can you spend on your evaluation?**

Do you have a budget specifically for assessment of your programs and processes? Is there an external source of funding for evaluation? Can evaluation costs be absorbed into existing operational costs?

Obviously cost is a major consideration in employing an external evaluator. Good evaluation facilitators can cost up to \$750/day. Companies that specialize in the technical aspects of collecting and analyzing information, such as management consulting firms, can run even higher. But it is also true that cutting corners and avoiding external assistance can, in some cases, reduce the quality of the results of the evaluation.

Remember that you can be strategic about how you spend your evaluation budget. You can maximize the quality of your evaluation while keeping costs down by employing a mix of external work for design and analysis and internal resources

for information-gathering and analysis. In recent years, universities and colleges have also provided untold, inexpensive assistance to groups that are lucky enough to have access to them and skilled enough to mobilize their support.

More important than anything else here is to predict at the beginning of the year what evaluation you need to do and to allocate resources to it. Some forethought can remove the excuse that “no resources are available for an evaluation.”

**5. Do you have a deadline for getting the results of the evaluation?**

Evaluations need not be expensive. They should ideally, however, be built into the operations of any organization or program like an audit would: to ensure that the best practices are in place and the most effective results possible are being achieved. In this way, you are more likely to have internal staff time and dollars to do evaluation work yourself.


An added bonus in this regard is that regular evaluation also puts up-to-date information at your finger tips, whether for planning or reporting. Otherwise, with staff already committed elsewhere, you may be obliged to hire an outsider to meet an unexpected need for information about your organization.

**CONCLUSION**

To constantly improve your programs and projects, you must learn from the past. So you need to assess the impact and results of your programs, your delivery approach, and your program policies. Any board of a CED organization that does not have a regular and effective means of evaluation is not building its capacity to make necessary adjustments and to achieve best results. Your choice about who carries out the functions of your evaluation can have a tremendous effect on the quality of those results.

The question “who should evaluate our work?” is not an easy one for a community

group to answer. Think very carefully before you embark on your evaluation: the time invested at the beginning can save you a lot down the line. In particular, remember that more than one person or organization can play a role in your evaluation. A strategic selection of internal and external evaluators may even improve the result, because it levers in a variety of different perspectives.

Long story short - do not be afraid to hire in people who can help you. Things can go much more smoothly and quickly with some experience added into the mix. At the same time, remember that the key decisions at every stage of the evaluation are yours. 



**GREG TOLLIDAY and PIPPA ROWCLIFFE** have worked in the field of CED for over ten years and have conducted or advised on evaluations for numerous organizations. They are directors of the Centre for Community Leadership (CCL) Ltd., a partnership they established to assist not-for-profit organizations, agencies, and governments in the achievement of excellence. CCL is

a friend of the Canadian CED Network (CCEDNet) and an affiliate of the Centre for Community Enterprise. Reach them by telephone at 604-685-1741. Pippa's and Greg's respective e-mail addresses are [phr@portal.ca](mailto:phr@portal.ca) and [gregt@intergate.ca](mailto:gregt@intergate.ca)