National Indian Health Board

"Umm… Evaluator is Not in My Job Title":
Risk Management Lessons from the Field

Question: Why do I have to do the evaluation?

Answer: Evaluation is the practice of examining your project and your activities to ensure you are doing what you said you were going to do and if what you are doing is really working. People tend to roll their eyes when they think of evaluation because they do not see it as necessary or as part of project implementation. We have drawn an imaginary line between evaluation activities and project activities, when in reality, there one should not exist. Evaluation and project implementation should run parallel and if it is done correctly should not be burdensome and should become routine practice.

From the perspective of risk management, evaluation is one of the most important practices. Evaluation tells project managers and directors how well the project is performing. It is better for the project staff to know if things are not working first and have a chance to resolve any issues before Tribal leadership or funders find out. Often, by the time word reaches those higher up, poor practices are so ingrained, poor outcomes are expected, and staff morale is so low that it is triply difficult to climb out of the hole. So consistent and reliable evaluation data can help project staff from expending their valuable time and energy on activities that are not working, from getting frustrated, and use resources most effectively. Should evaluation results show positive performance or growth, then it is reason for celebration and praise among the team.

Question: If I have to do it, please help me understand what it is I am supposed to be doing?

Answer: Evaluation is often times a matter of proper documentation. A sign-in sheet is an evaluation instrument, just as much as a focus group or survey. Every activity should be evaluated – from a group session to a health fair booth. The extent and type of evaluation as well as the instruments used will vary, but all will capture information on one of the following areas:

1.) How the activities were performed/delivered and to whom?
2.) Did the activities align with what we intended to do?
3.) What was the result of the activities we performed/delivered?
4.) Were the results we saw directly attributable to the activities we performed/conducted?

So creating evaluation activities that will collect information on one or more of these at all of your events will provide you with information that you can use to: improve project activities, enhance outreach and recruitment efforts, identify gaps in staff knowledge and skills, improve data collection, and identify any areas where participants may need further resources. All evaluation data should be collected, treated confidentially, and entered into a central database or spreadsheet. This information has to be analyzed in order to understand it (which sometime is just a matter of reading it), and shared with the whole team. Evaluation does nobody any good if it just sits on a shelf collecting dust. Honor the time and effort it took to collect the information by using it. Evaluation is about continuous project improvement, and what better risk management strategy is there than to ensure that the project continues to get better.

Question: We don't do our own evaluation, so how can we manage it?

If your project hires an external evaluator or consultant, then be sure that you and the entire team are thoroughly briefed on what the evaluator is doing at all times. Do not let them operate in a bubble. They are a part of the project team and should attend meetings and work alongside the implementation staff. Having clear responsibilities for your evaluator is important. They should have deliverables and timelines just like implementation staff does. If they do not meet them, then it is not unreasonable to withhold payment of invoices. External evaluators should not be paid on a regular basis, rather they should receive payment when invoices representing completed work are submitted.

Question: We want to use Facebook for our project, but we are having problems deciding the best way to use social media.

Answer: Most departments and Tribes have guidelines that govern how employees can communicate with the media (even a Tribal newspaper). It is important that project staff understand these restrictions and adhere to them. Such guidelines should contain talking points and common messaging that is approved to share with all parties at any time. These guidelines may or may not include the use of social media (including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), and if they do not, then project team may consider creating regulations on the use of social media by project staff (especially if the project is going to have its own social media presence). Some guidelines to consider include:

- Not using or posting any pictures without written consent of the people in the picture
- Not using names in social media postings
- Considering the confidentiality of participants when posting information on project activities and meetings.
- Instituting an internal review process for all social media posting and activity
- Allowing only two people access to usernames and logins for any one social media account
- Regularly logging into the account to monitor external posts and activities
- Setting benchmarks for how many daily/weekly/monthly posts
- Setting timelines for responding to comments
- Setting percentages to govern the amount of posts of a certain nature appear on your page (e.g., 50% educational posts or links, 30% questions or interactive posts, 10% event listing or announcements, 10% community news)

Social media is a powerful tool, but as such an open and uncontrollable interface with the community, it inherently creates many opportunities to risk.

Question: It seems like we plan great activities, but they just never take off. The staff is getting frustrated with the lack of response from community members. We aren't sure what to do.

Answer: The will and the climate of the community will ultimately decide if a project will be successful, accepted, and sustainable. A community has values as a whole, and these values drive many attitudes and behaviors – oftentimes without people knowing it. For example, a project may seek to promote condom use as an effective means of birth control. But if the community as a whole holds procreation and the family sacred, then any messaging about contraception (no matter how sound or well-documented) may appear contradictory to the community values, and stands a diminished chance of success. As another example, a project is holding discussion forums on meth in the community, and they are ordering in pizza for each forum. However, people are not attending the forums because in that community it is seen as an insult to serve guests food that has not been personally prepared. We have seen other programs plan wonderful events with great and dynamic speakers, but nobody comes because it is in the middle of hunting or fishing season. It is critical for any project team to seek to understand the climate of the community through direct communication with community members and stakeholders. This is an opportunity to learn:

- Language to use
- Timing and nature of activities to put forth
- Kinds of food to bring or prepare
- How to communicate with the community
- What topics of off limits
- Predominant viewpoints on relevant issues

Projects should allocate time (preferably early on in a project lifecycle) to liaise with the community members and leadership directly to construct activities that meet both the needs of the community and the project. Staff can also hold focus groups right now and simply ask people why they aren't coming or what can be done differently to make activities more appealing. Making it increasingly important to understand the climate of the community is the fact that Tribal leaders are often times, as elected officials, beholden to the climate and will of community members, and a project can quickly lose favor with leadership if they are seen as violating some of the values of the community.

Additional Resources

For more help with conducting and using evaluation, please feel to look at these additional resources:

- http://ctb.ku.edu/en/evaluating-initiative
- http://www.dmeforpeace.org/learn/what-program-evaluation-beginners-guide

And for help with using social media, check out the following resources:

- http://nonprofit.about.com/od/socialmedia/tp/Tipsstartsocialnetworking.htm
- http://www.cdc.gov/socialmedia/tools/guidelines/pdf/socialmediatoolkit_bm.pdf