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Make Your Program Count - Preparing Programs for Evaluation

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PURPOSE

Program evaluation is a resource-intensive activity that can provide program managers with a great deal of information about how well their programs are operating. Unfortunately it is not uncommon for an evaluator to discover after an evaluation is underway that the program is not ready for it. A program may not be fully operational, for example, or may not be able to handle the data collection requirements of an evaluation. Determining whether a program is ready for an evaluation prior to beginning it can help ensure that precious evaluation resources are used at the most appropriate time.



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EA OBJECTIVES

Developed by Joseph Wholey in 1979, Evaluability Assessment (EA) is a process that -

- ❖ Determines whether a program meets the criteria for a meaningful evaluation to take place
- ❖ Increases the likelihood that evaluations will provide timely, relevant, and responsive evaluation findings for decision makers
- ❖ Acts as a stepping-stone toward any type of evaluation, whether it is a process or impact evaluation
- ❖ Clarify program goals by making them more realistic and meaningful for program staff, funding agencies, administrators, and participants
- ❖ Improve a future evaluation by formalizing what is important in the program, anticipating evaluation problems, and smoothing the overall process



WHEN IS A PROGRAM EVALUABLE

A formal program design or model is in place

- ❖ A program needs to have a design or model that lays out its goals and objectives, as well as their relationship to program activities. Without these elements, the program cannot be effectively assessed.
- ❖ A program model must be in place so that what is actually happening in the program can be compared to what the program was designed to achieve.

The program design or model is sound.

- ❖ Programs are designed to address specific needs or to solve specific problems. In order to address these needs or problems, programs must develop realistic and achievable goals, plausible objectives that can be measured, and activities related to those objectives.
- ❖ If goals or objectives are unrealistic or unattainable, or activities are unrelated to objectives, then the program cannot succeed, and the evaluation is a waste of time and resources. Unattainable goals and objectives might result from the program proposing to change an entire community's behavior, for example, while providing direct services to a relatively few in the community.
- ❖ Activities that are unrelated to goals and objectives might result from the program designers misunderstanding the causes of the behaviors they are targeting for change.
- ❖ Having an unsound program design renders the program unevaluable in much the same way as having no program design at all.

The program has the resources discussed in the program design

- ❖ In order for a program to function well, it requires resources, such as well-trained staff, equipment, and space.
- ❖ If any of the required resources are not present, problems with implementation arise. For example, if a program has an insufficient number of staff to run the program or if the staff members do not have the appropriate background qualifications and training, it will be difficult for the program to achieve its objectives.

Program activities are being implemented as designed

- ❖ Even though a program may be well designed, the design must be carried out as planned in order for the evaluation to be able to attribute outcomes to the program itself.
- ❖ An evaluation study will collect data based on the actual activities implemented, substantial differences between the stated design and the actual activities will mean that the evaluation will be assessing the program as implemented, not as planned.
- ❖ If the program activities being implemented are very different from those planned, then what is being evaluated is essentially a different program from the one that was initially proposed. Though the evaluation can assess the activities as implemented, it cannot assess the program itself, since the logical connection between activities and goals and objectives has been broken. In this case, the program design should be re-specified before the evaluation takes place.

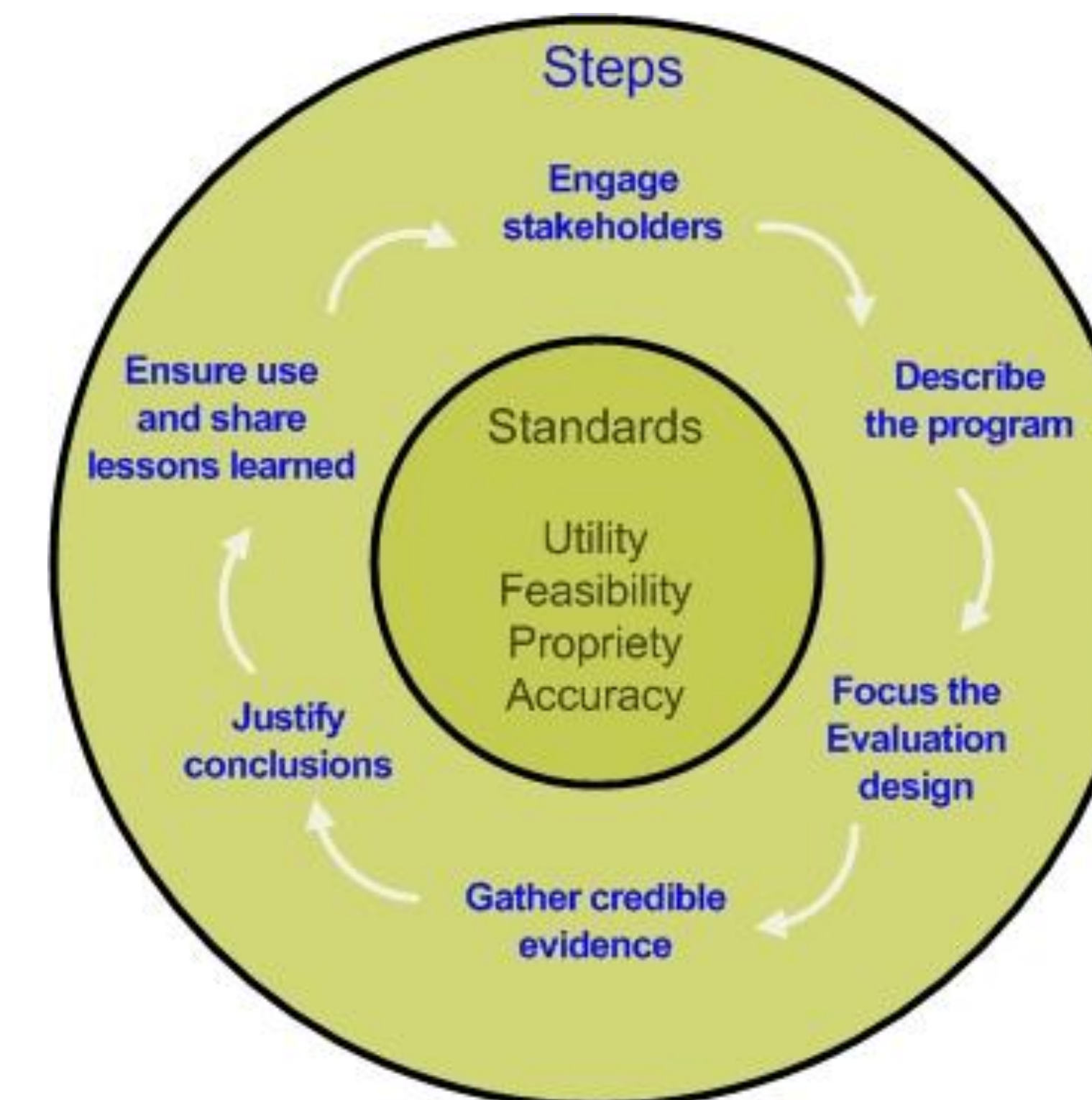
The program has the capacity to provide data for an evaluation

- ❖ It is crucial that programs document the activities of their clients and staff members and the services they provide using forms such as intake assessments, progress reports and other formal records.
- ❖ The program must have in place, or have the capacity to develop, procedures to generate the data that would be required for the evaluation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Wholey, J. (1979). *Evaluation: Promise and Performance*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
Wholey, J. (1994). *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

EVALUABILITY ASSESSMENT STEPS



1. Study the program history, design, and operation

What is the program's history?
What is the program's design?
How does the program actually operate?

2. Watch the program in action

How does the program in action to learn if the program "on paper" differs from the program in practice.?

3. Determine the program's capacity for data collection, management, and analysis

What data is collected, how is it entered/stored, and is it qualitative, quantitative, or both?
Will the evaluation require additional data collection?
How well are data collected? Are they reliable? Is the program capable of collecting and managing the data needed for an evaluation?
Who enters the data? What are their qualifications?

4. Assess the likelihood that the program will reach its goals and objectives

How likely will the program achieve its goals and objectives?

5. Show why an evaluation will or will not help the program and its stakeholders

Will an evaluation provide useful information to the program's managers and funders?

CONCLUSIONS

It is important for program managers ensure that their programs are evaluable. Each program should have a model that is clearly structured. Within the model, the goals and objectives should be measurable so that the degree to which they have been achieved can be assessed. Program managers must think objectively; that is, what data can be collected that will provide clear evidence that the goals and objectives have been met? Overall, program managers should ensure that their programs are collecting relevant data in an organized and consistent fashion, that they are staffed with people with the appropriate qualifications and knowledge, and that the program activities are being implemented as designed.