

Measuring Programmatic Success: Tips for Nonprofit Boards

Board members play a critical role in ensuring that program evaluations are focused and cost-effective. An engaged Board can help with “scaffolding,” shaping the broad goals and purpose of an evaluation effort. Staff should be charged with soliciting additional input from funders, clients, and other stakeholders as necessary; hiring an outside evaluator if adequate resources are available; and interpreting and responding to evaluation findings.

Before embarking on an evaluation effort, take note of two quick reminders that will make your life (and definitely the lives of your staff) much easier.

- 1) Ask ambiguous or unclear questions, and you'll get incomplete or vague answers!
- 2) Your goal is to collect the **least** amount of data to answer the **most** questions.

Here are a few questions that Board members can use to begin to think about program evaluation and ensure that their contribution is productive.

- What should be the Board's involvement in programming?
 - Do we have or need a Board committee on programs?
 - What level of involvement in program planning and performance do we want to have?
 - How can we ensure that staff doesn't feel that our program assessment efforts aren't being confused with personnel review?
- How should we, as Board members, prepare to engage in a conversation about program evaluation?
 - Would we like to receive written materials explaining the meaning and function of program evaluation?
 - Should we schedule a presentation by an evaluator for an upcoming board meeting to discuss the best ways to make our evaluation efforts cost effective and informative, and the potential pitfalls of engaging in program evaluation?



- How will we define success for our programs?
 - How many people will have been served, and for how long, to make us “successful” by our own definitions?
 - How do people and communities benefit, over the short term, as a result of receiving our services?
 - We should remember to measure success in both quantitative (how many people did we serve?) and qualitative (how do our clients feel about our organization and about their circumstances as a result of our services?) terms.

- What are the three most important things for us to try to learn about?

Reminder: Keep it as simple as possible. Since collecting data is a lot of work, the fewer questions you ask, the more effective staff will be in eliciting answers.

 - What do we want to know this time next year that we don't know today?
 - Are we interested in how our programs operate, what our program results are, or both?
 - The evaluation should focus on what is critically important to learn, not what is merely interesting.

- How will we use the information from the evaluation?
 - To support discussions about the strategic direction of the organization?
 - To help with fundraising, marketing and outreach?
 - To be accountable to outside funders and regulators?
 - Put the results to work for your organization! Make a plan for using the results for improving programs, strengthening fundraising, and bolstering accountability.

- How do we want to receive evaluation results?
 - Do we want progress reports quarterly, biannually, annually?
 - Should results be discussed only with a dedicated board committee, or with the entire organization?

All of Innovation Network's services are based on the principle that if evaluation is accessible to all, the nonprofit and philanthropic sector as a whole can be more effective, making a greater difference in the communities we serve.

To discuss how Innovation Network can serve you, please contact:

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