

# Pausing, Reflecting, and Beginning Again: Using Results to Make Program Improvements



Learning from the results of on-going tracking and analysis of outcome indicators is part of the process of “self-evaluation.” It allows for timely adjustments in the delivery of services to improve outcomes for families. Changes could be made in the way the service is delivered, in the type and approach of staff, or in the intended participants. It may even be that not all of the intended outcomes were achieved. In fact, this should be expected, especially as the evaluation process is being learned. The expectations or performance targets may have been set too high; the target population may not have wanted the service; or the intensity or duration of the programming may have been too little or too much. Even some unexpected situation beyond your control (such as winter weather, or a protracted heat wave) may have caused poor attendance and weaker than expected results.

On the other hand, your program may have achieved all of the intended outcomes. If this was the case, goals may have been set too low and need to be adjusted higher in the future. As stated earlier, flexibility needs to be built into the outcome targets.

## **Steps in the process of making program improvements**

### **1. Presentation and planning with staff**

Decide when to do this planning session and how much time to set aside. A whole day might be considered a minimum for most programs. Determine the product that is expected to result from the session (such as a plan that specifies changes, with a time line and responsibility chart). Present and discuss the findings and recommendations with the staff in a working session that builds toward creating a plan for incorporating recommendations into the program. It would be advisable to involve all staff, not just those from the services that have gone through the evaluation process. There are several reasons for this. All your program services will likely be going through the process at some point in the near future. As such, it may be that the needed changes involve other parts of the program as well. This is especially true in small, local family support /child abuse prevention programs where everyone is responsible for maintaining a family-supportive environment. Involving participants in this session is important too, as affirmation of their partnership in making your program effective.

Frame this session as a learning experience. It is not a time to find fault but an opportunity to find solutions to problem areas that may have surfaced in the findings. If all the outcomes were achieved, it will be a time of congratulations. However, it is still important to carefully present and interpret the findings so that everyone will have the same information.

## 2. Reporting to the board

A presentation of the findings should be made at a regularly scheduled board meeting, with the findings sent to board members well in advance of the meeting. In small programs, the board may already have been involved in other meetings, but it is important that they receive this report as they are responsible for the overall program. Any changes in programming or budgeting would need their approval. If the staff planning session has already taken place, a report on the plan that was developed should be made and the board asked to give their approval. They would then need to be kept apprized of progress toward implementing the plans.

## 3. Scheduling a staff planning day

Some questions that can be used to frame the discussion and initiate the planning process follow. Use them for each outcome individually.

- What do the findings say about our work in general?
- Are the program goals realistic?
- Were the expected participant outcomes realistic?
- Which of the indicators should be kept? revised? or eliminated?
- Is the way the recruitment is carried out effective and appropriate for the target population? If not, why not?
- What do the findings show about the approach that staff is using with the target population? What do they say about the assumptions you work under?
- Do the findings show that the service activities or curriculum are meaningful and appropriate for the target population? How does this match with the assumptions/experience you used in choosing those activities or curriculum?
- Should the number of activities increase? decrease? stay the same?
- Do the findings indicate that program resources are adequate? If not, what should change to make them more adequate? (This could include the number of staff, number of staff hours devoted to the service, site, supplies, etc.)
- Is the training of staff sufficient to carry out this kind of service? What changes are needed in the way of training?
- Is the training of staff sufficient to carry out the data collection and data management portion of this process?

If the service is not meeting the intended outcomes, you need to ask the following questions:

- Do we need to change the intended target population? Are we doing the right things with the wrong people?
- Do we need to increase the intensity of the service? If a parent education program is provided for a certain number of weeks, is that too short a time for the participants to gain a significant level of knowledge of child development?
- Do we need to change the size of the group so that participants get more individual attention?
- Do we need to change the content of the service: the curriculum, the activities?
- Do we need to change the role the staff is playing? To change their approach? Or do we even need to change staff in order to have the needed expertise to carry out the service?
- Do we need to rethink the outcomes? Are there some that are a better fit for the target population, the services we provide, or the way we provide services?
- Did we measure the right indicators, and ask the right questions of the right people at the right time?

### **Revisiting the research**

It is also a good time to revisit any research you may have incorporated into the logic model, as the outcomes were being developed. What does the research have to tell us that would shed light on the results of our outcome accountability process? Would the research suggest needed changes?

### **Outcome Accountability and Program Planning**

Yearly planning is an activity that all family resource/child abuse prevention programs should engage in, no matter how small they are or how many staff they have. It involves the essential practice of looking back as the current year ends, assessing the effectiveness of each service, and projecting how the service might be improved in the coming year.

Routine evaluation of participant-focused outcomes, once adopted, becomes the starting point of any planning process. In fact, adapting the process from this toolkit into a shorter format would greatly enhance any yearly planning activity. At a bare minimum, the findings from the prior year should be reviewed and any recommendations for improvements that have not yet been implemented incorporated into planning for the next year.

### **Using data in the next phase of program planning**

In some ways, the biggest long-term pay-off from the findings of the evaluation process will be the use

that you make of them in continued program planning and building community support for program sustainability. This includes fund-raising, grant proposals, and system change activities. These findings will also form the basis for the next round in the outcome accountability process.

### **Planning for the next evaluation cycle**

The knowledge and experience you gain during the first cycle of the evaluation process will be invaluable to the next cycle. One obvious benefit is that the process itself will be followed more efficiently and, if necessary, adapted to better fit your particular program. The findings of the first year can serve as starting points (bench marks) in determining the outcome indicators and performance targets for the next cycle. You now have concrete information on what kinds of changes are likely to occur for whom, information you may not have had the first time. All levels of program personnel and essential stakeholders will have gained experience and confidence in the process, thus the implementation should go much more smoothly in succeeding cycles.

### **Using Results to Build Community Support**

The benefits of the evaluation process for building community support are considerable. First, having outcomes, measurement tools and processes in place can save much time in planning for and writing funding proposals. The availability of outcome data permits the writing of more substantial and convincing funding proposals. The program's history (in numbers and qualitative narrative) can chart a course to a more well-defined future. Foundations and public agencies are increasingly skeptical of grant applications requesting funding to perform vague good works, however well intended. Managed care philosophies are permeating all aspects of human service delivery and, increasingly, funders want to invest in outcomes, not just activities. The more grounded your proposal is in data and the more convincingly you can demonstrate the outcomes of your services, the more competitive your proposals will be. Including the outcome accountability report from the prior year with a funding proposal lends substantial credibility to your organization and demonstrates its ability to successfully carry out the activities that are proposed.

In addition, when you can document effectiveness in reaching outcomes, it is much easier to generate community support for your program. This can help ensure the long-term sustainability of your family support/child abuse prevention program as funders (both public and private) see the results of the dollars they invest. In the long run, it could also lead to stronger public policy emphasis on family support/child abuse prevention programs. Remember that many of these programs started out as poorly-funded grass-roots efforts in local communities. The fact that there is now a great deal of public and private support for these programs is a tribute to the groundwork laid by people like you who believed in the value of family support/child abuse prevention programs. Now that there is a growing body of evidence demonstrating the achievements of family support/child abuse prevention programs, public support should continue to grow.