KELD

Kentucky Extension Leadership Development

Evaluation

Everyone Has a Role

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Do you ever wonder why the term "evaluation" is such a common word among so many organizations these days? This is due in part to the heightened level of accountability that has moved beyond expectation to obligation. Believing that evaluation focuses solely on a large number of people simply participating in a program is a thing of the past. Most programs are now interested in more meaningful outcomes—not just who showed up, but what did they learn and do as a result of participating?

Everyone, from grant funders to taxpayers, wants to know if programs are worth the investment. One way to begin showing outcomes is to make sure the word gets out about the positive things an organization can offer and how its programs are changing lives. While employees may accept this responsibility, there may also be a need to ask for help from key volunteers who can share information about the success of the organization and seek support from other potential partners.

Evaluation is a critical component of program planning that can be used to review how a process is coming along or to provide the final results of a project. However, despite its benefits, evaluation often causes some anxiety among staff and volunteers. Employees often compare it to research, while some volunteers may believe that the evaluation will be used to critique their (unpaid) role and performance!

Evaluations can also be time consuming. A thorough evaluation usually contains a number of steps, and deciding on the best way to communicate results may present challenges. Nevertheless, there are ways for staff and volunteers to work together to adequately tell success stories resulting from effective programming. While staff members are essential to organizing the pieces that strengthen an evaluation, participants may be able to serve as volunteers who can help communicate a message that promotes the value of an organization.

What Is Evaluation?

Although there are a number of definitions for "evaluation," in basic terms, it is simply the process of determining whether a program is producing desired results. To meet the requirements of reporting and accountability, businesses, organizations and agencies must understand how to best measure the success of a program. If not communicated through written reports or by word of mouth, people may not know what a difference a program made in the lives of local residents.

One way to achieve evaluation goals is to involve those directly affected by a program in providing solutions to community concerns and issues. An organization's strategic plan or plan of work can be a prime example of involving community leaders throughout the evaluation process. This process is very much a part of most programming models. However, it does require careful planning in order to obtain useful data and for volunteers to fully engage and see the value of their own contributions.

In the beginning, the right questions must be asked to gather desired data on the needs of an organization or community.

> *"True genius resides in the capacity for evaluation of uncertain, hazardous, and conflicting information"*
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> *Winston Churchill*

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With an effective evaluation, volunteers can provide valuable insight that may enhance a program. Involving volunteers in the evaluation process serves a worthy purpose in that it allows the staff to tap into the resources of a community. Getting feedback from volunteers can allow staff to make critical changes if needed, even before an evaluation is completed.

Below are a few key ways volunteers can assist staff with evaluation in any organization:

- **Assist in gathering adequate background knowledge of the situation** (among program participants, within communities, etc.). It's always important to examine what needs to change and why. Whether trying to implement a program that will be of interest to teens or to promote a useful project for homeowners, volunteers may assist in determining what an organization or community needs at the grassroots level.

- **Help identify additional volunteers.** Volunteers with specific professional skills can be critical in scouting out new talent. In general, local residents are very familiar with the people in the community and can assist in identifying individuals that can help perpetuate an organization's mission and goals. There is always the need to consider people with diverse backgrounds. Regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, class, or abilities, everyone can contribute to the expansion of an organization's reach for broader audiences. It is also important for these individuals to work with staff to determine the needs of diverse audiences and to help outline ways to successfully create programs that can promote change in their lives.

- **Understand the volunteer's role as a contributor to the evaluation process.** Just as staff should provide explicit roles for volunteers, volunteers should take a lead in letting others know how their skills can best be utilized. Are certain volunteers good at coming up with ideas? Then perhaps they can help determine what type of program to implement. Are there volunteers with great people skills? They may be best suited to follow up with former participants to gather information on how they benefited from past programs. In addition, the awareness of those volunteers who are long-time residents would be helpful in determining how to make adequate conclusions about certain results. Keep in mind that part of the evaluation process includes staff and volunteers striving for ways to build connections between a given organization and the community.

- **Assist with interpreting the findings.** It is quite common for staff to be new to an area and not familiar with the needs of the community. And there are times when more experienced staff may gather data, but it might not be clear to them. Both of these scenarios present cases in which volunteers are critical in helping interpret the findings or results of an evaluation process. This approach can allow staff access to the expertise of volunteers who may be able to impart their wisdom on ways to strengthen communities. Asking for feedback from those outside the organization is a way to obtain buy-in from those who can serve as strong advocates.

Summary

In these changing times, organizations need to learn from those who live in the communities they serve. Empowering volunteers to have a voice in the evaluation process has proven that these individuals can assist in presenting results that can potentially make a difference. Volunteers, in turn, should see the value they bring to local organizations and seek out more opportunities to help with evaluation techniques that can move programs to the next level. These are productive ways to help people from all communities become self-sufficient and take a stake in improving their own lives.

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