

Building Evaluation Capacity: Five Models for Funders

A Usable Knowledge White Paper

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BLENDED SOLUTIONS: WHAT ARE THEY

Providers of support and consulting services to the nonprofit community are increasingly combining a range of capacity building approaches to serve the management development needs of their not-for-profit clients. Termed blended solutions, these approaches provide organizations with more than just low impact training while costing substantially less than one shot consulting engagements. Also, unlike one shot consulting, blended solutions are set-up to provide significant knowledge transfer. Done properly, the nonprofit is left with new tools and the skills necessary to carry on the work after the consultant departs. This White Paper explains how blended solutions that combine training, coaching, and the customized services can help nonprofit organizations develop the capacity to manage an ongoing monitoring and evaluation program.

Blended solutions combine training, coaching and deliverables.

RATIONALE

People in the business of grantmaking want the organizations they support to achieve measurable success. Putting on programs and delivering services is no longer enough. Nonprofits are now asked to specify outcomes, develop strategies for assessing them, analyze their results and report findings back to their stakeholders. Beyond a strictly outcomes focus, many grantmakers now seek to work with their grantees on program improvement. But program improvement requires an on-the-ground understanding of how programs work— an understanding of what levers to pull and how much to pull them. This in turn requires systematically collected data, and the ability to analyze it in real time. It requires, in other words, program evaluation.

How have funders and nonprofits responded? Where resources are in place, organizations may outsource evaluation to a consultant. In most cases however, nonprofits cobble together a home grown approach based on program outputs or metrics like customer satisfaction. Often absent in the home grown approach however is an analysis of process— who benefited the most, who benefited the least, and under what circumstances. Yet without this kind of critical eye, nonprofits will have trouble improving their programs based on evaluation findings. Equally important, grantmakers don't get the kind of information they

need to better target their funding. Well done consultant-led evaluations don't usually suffer from these issues but can be very expensive to perform and are usually conceived as 'one-off' engagements focused on a single program. And for all they cost, they usually conclude with not much more than the usual report of findings and recommendations.

The kind of evaluation work that leads to organizational learning requires the sort of long term commitment that home grown efforts and one shot consultant led evaluations usually do not provide. In order to be effective, nonprofits need to develop the capacity to incorporate meaningful program evaluation as part of their routine management processes. In recent years Management Service Organizations (MSOs) and technical assistance providers have emerged to help nonprofits acquire the basic skills needed to do this. Sometimes this assistance is limited to one shot trainings held at grantee or sector conferences. In other instances, nonprofit staff may be asked to enroll in a program of trainings and even receive support from a coach. Unfortunately there is little evidence that such programs achieve much success. Evaluation is hard work, and since its benefits are often not immediately apparent, nonprofits are sometimes less than fully committed to it.

WHAT MAKES EVALUATION DIFFICULT

Program evaluation involves far more than creating tools for collecting data and protocols for analyzing it.

Appropriate tools and procedures are both prerequisites for a valid and credible evaluation project. Survey questions for example need to be drafted to reflect respondents' language skills and a workable sampling strategy has to be put into place in order to ensure that findings are representative. Interviews and focus groups need to be conducted in ways that ensure participant confidentiality. And analysis procedures capable of mining a dataset for the sometimes subtle relationships that reveal how a program is performing have to be formulated. Overlaying these tasks, is the necessity to take steps to ensure that new procedures and instruments are integrated into existing information gathering processes.

Yet nonprofit program evaluation involves far more than creating a set of tools for collecting program data and a set of protocols for analyzing it. Although both these tasks are challenging , the underlying work of defining evaluation

questions, identifying evaluation audiences and developing strategies for evaluation use, usually has more to do with success than research expertise.

Many of these tasks, such as developing survey instruments or integrating new procedures into existing data collection systems need to be done only once (of course it is wise to periodically review the system). Others such as data collection and analysis take place on an ongoing basis. For this reason, evaluation capacity building is particularly well suited to a blended approach. There are several models however to consider.

A VARIETY OF APPROACHES

Model I- Training only

Model I is a training only solution especially well suited for funders and nonprofits that want an introduction to evaluation. As pointed out earlier, it is unlikely that training alone will provide sufficient background for a nonprofit to build a comprehensive evaluation system. That said, a well designed curriculum should enable an organization to understand the outlines of such a system, recognize the value of evaluation and begin to take steps to systematize existing information gathering work. Funders with an existing evaluation template might also find a training only solution sufficient if the solution provider has the capacity to incorporate training on the template into the curriculum.

A funder opting for Model I should be sure that the content of the evaluation training meets its needs and the needs of its grantees (or can be customized to do so). This includes the scope of the curriculum (how much is covered), its mode of delivery (in-person, live online, asynchronous online, etc), and the particular aspects of evaluation that are covered (surveys, quasi-experiments, etc).

Model II- Training and Group Coaching

Model II has a training component similar to that of Model I but its content is more likely to feature a higher level of customization, more interactivity with the instructor and higher intensity. What really sets it apart however is the coaching component. Coaching in Model II revolves around facilitated group problem solving. Participants work with one another and with an evaluation consultant to

address the issues they have in common. In the lowest intensity version, this 'coaching' might take the form of extra time set aside at the end of formal training for questions and answers. More likely (and more effective), coaching sessions would be planned separately to follow training. Ideally, participating organizations would begin to utilize the knowledge provided in the training and then reconvene as a group to problem solve.

This kind of coaching is particularly valuable when the organizations receiving the training face similar issues and are geographically close to one another (or can be brought together at a conference). Coaching sessions however, could take place online either in real-time or via a bulletin board system.

Model III: Training and Individual Coaching

Model III, emphasizes individualized coaching with each participating nonprofit, although where there are likely to be benefits facilitated group coaching may take place as well. Training will likely be less intensive and focused mainly on the groundwork necessary for productive work with the coach. The level of coaching may vary from relatively low intensity work (answering questions, offering support and ensuring accountability) to higher intensity work such as the detailed review of evaluation plans, survey-instruments or evaluation reports.

Coaching may occur throughout the entire evaluation effort or it may be limited to just the start of the project. Alternatively, the coaching could be offered at discrete moments in the project; for example during planning, at the mid-point, when data has just been collected; and then finally as the reporting process begins. Such a structure places program participants in the driver's seat while assuring (through the process of expert review) the credibility of the evaluation product. Finally the consultant may be responsible for a deliverable such as an evaluation audit (to help the nonprofit focus its own efforts) at the start of a project or a concluding document to help the organization identify lessons learned.

Model III is appropriate in situations where the funder's emphasis is on institutionalizing evaluation among grantees (rather than simply introducing them to it) and where these grantees are truly ready to take on the full range of

evaluation tasks themselves. While the consulting arrangement can be structured such that the consultant remains available throughout the project, essential evaluation tasks such as instrument design, data collection, data analysis and reporting are largely carried by the non-profit. The consultant's role remains primarily that of a coach who offers support, expert advice, and feedback, while playing a role in driving each grantee's project forward.

Model IV- Shared Responsibility for Evaluation Deliverables

In Model IV, the consultant and nonprofit enter into a collaborative relationship characterized by shared responsibility for most evaluation deliverables. For example, the consultant might develop instrumentation and play a key role in data analysis, while leaving the nonprofit with primary responsibility for data collection. Both might work together to draft and present the evaluation report. From a capacity building standpoint, the goal of the collaboration is knowledge transfer. This focus differentiates Model IV from other collaborative models which promote participation and inclusion for their own sake.

Another distinguishing characteristic of Model IV is the degree to which it emphasizes joint accountability. Explicit responsibility for a subset of the project's deliverables compels both the consultant, and the organizations receiving the service, to work together to achieve the project's goals. No longer just an advisor, the consultant shares full responsibility for the project's outcomes with the nonprofit. The nonprofit in turn is no longer simply a passive recipient of training and coaching services but rather a partner in the success of an evaluation project.

Model IV is perhaps the most intensive approach of the five presented here in that it emphasizes knowledge transfer and deliverables equally. For this reason it may be less suitable to situations where there are many grantees or where their evaluation needs are substantially different. A team based approach might help somewhat here but then new issues about consultant quality, consistency and oversight enter the equation.

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Model V- Turnkey Evaluation System with Training

Model V is similar to Model IV in that it emphasizes consulting. In projects that adopt the Model V approach however, most of the heavy lifting will be done by the consultant, leaving only routine tasks such as producing consultant designed reports or administrating consultant designed instruments to the nonprofit. Under this approach the evaluation system is built by the consultant who then trains the nonprofit to operate it independently. The nonprofit gets a working system quickly but takes away less knowledge about evaluation than it would under a more collaborative model. Whatever knowledge transfer takes place is focused around evaluation implementation rather than evaluation design.

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In a sense this approach offers a different kind of capacity building, one analogous to certain kinds of technology projects. Take for example a situation in which a technology consultant is engaged to build an office network. In this case the consultant creates and configures the software that allows the network to operate and then trains office personnel on routine tasks such as system backup, adding new users, etc. As in Model V evaluation capacity building, the consultant creates the tools and then shows the nonprofit how to use them. He or she may subsequently check in with the nonprofit to see how the tools are working and perform periodic maintenance and training.

This kind of consultant focused approach may be particularly well suited to situations where grantees do not have the capacity to take on higher level evaluation tasks such as instrument design or data analysis. It may also be more efficient in circumstances where only one or two grantees will be receiving support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

All five capacity building models have their strengths. Model I is best suited where the goal of the project is to introduce evaluation to an organization. Compared with the others it is fairly low cost in terms of the project budget. Model II provides for greater customization of the training content, but more importantly builds a learning community through which a group of organizations are able to support one another around evaluation and other issues

of common interest. Model III introduces one-on-one coaching, and depending upon how the project is structured, is likely to lead to the implementation of a well thought out evaluation plan.

Model IV, with its emphasis on shared responsibility for evaluation deliverables, virtually guarantees the completion of a professional quality evaluation. Moreover, it is the model most likely to bring about knowledge transfer. In this way, the capacity that is built is more likely to remain with the organization long after the consultant departs. Model V takes a very different approach. It focuses less on empowerment and instead emphasizes efficiency and performance. At the end of the day, what is most important in an evaluation program is its utility, the degree to which it contributes to organizational advancement. If a system can be built by a consultant to do this, and the organization in question encouraged to use it in this way, then there may be no need to insist on an understanding of how the system works.

Choose an approach based on your organization's desired end-product

In selecting from these five approaches consider first the desired end product. Does it need to be a comprehensive evaluation program, or simply a greater appreciation of the value of evaluation and some tips about how to get started with it? Weigh these different end products taking into account the financial resources that can be committed to the project (these will be less than anticipated if the work is shared over several organizations) and the time and 'mind share' that participating organizations will need to contribute. Consider also your ability to put together a group of organizations all of which face similar evaluation challenges.

Finally, and perhaps most important, commit to monitoring and evaluating the project as it progresses. Require accountability from both the consultant and the nonprofits that are participating. This models evaluation use and keeps the project on track for success.

LAST WORDS

Usable Knowledge provides program evaluation and consulting services to organizations that need to understand how their work impacts those they serve. We exist to help non-profits improve results and maximize the impact of their work. Founded in 2001 by Eric Graig, we help grant makers and the

organizations they support better understand how their work affects those they aim to serve. Borrowing from both the field of program evaluation and management consulting, our approach is collaborative, data driven and action oriented. In every project we undertake, we aim to understand not only how a program functions but also the context within which it works. This enables us to present findings and make recommendations that are sensitive to clients' real world situation.

If you liked what you've just read, or have any comments or questions please drop us a line at egraig@usablellc.net. You can also check us out online at www.usablellc.net.