Improving Your Program Through Evaluation

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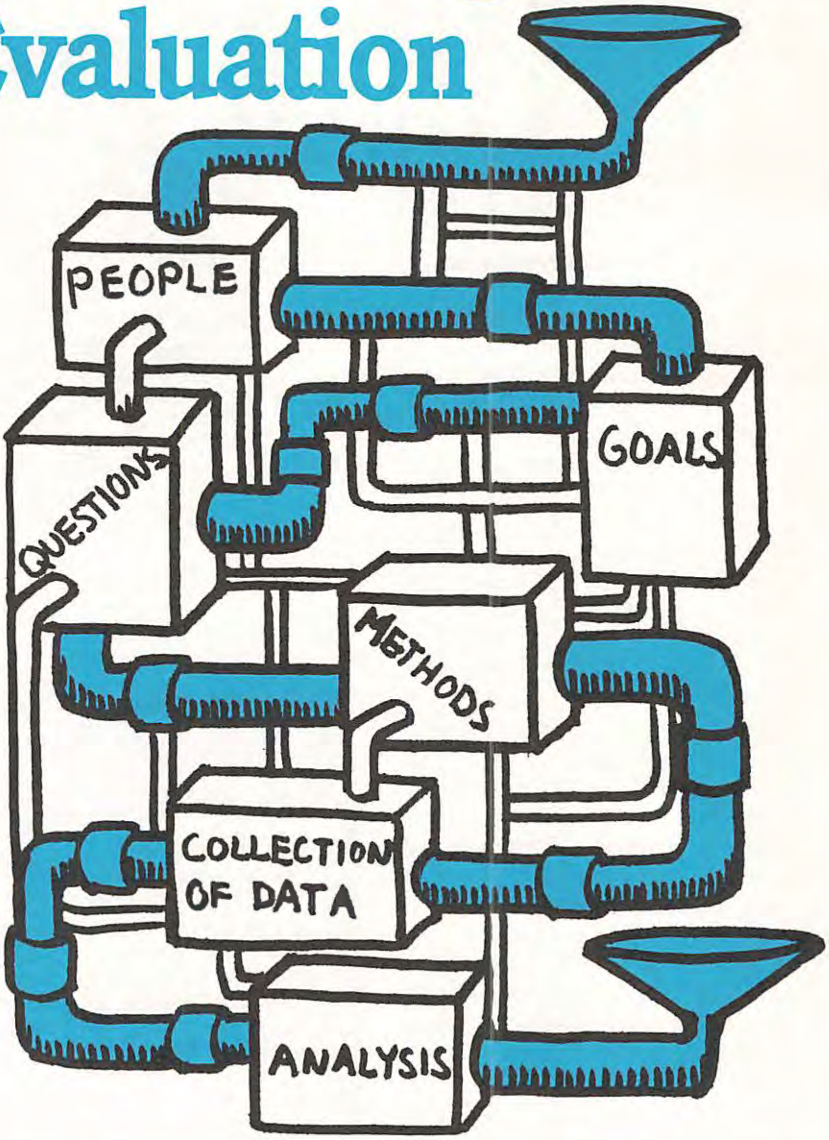

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The following article is based on the authors' work as members of the Social Services Committee of the Volunteer Bureau/Voluntary Action Center, United Way of Lincoln and Lancaster County, Nebraska. The committee developed a set of "Guidelines for Evaluation of Volunteer Programs," which can be obtained for $5 + .71 postage ($5.71) from the Lincoln/Lancaster VAC, 215 Centennial Mall South, Suite 217, Lincoln, NB 68508, (402) 474-6218.

VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS CONtinue to be viewed by many as the most expendable parts of agencies. Although evaluation has become synonymous with the administration of human service programs, volunteer programs often are left out of evaluations. While more and more volunteer coordinators are looking to program evaluation for support, they neglect one of its most beneficial uses. Besides the politics of program justification, evaluation research can be used to provide information to help improve volunteer programs.

It is often difficult, if not impossible, for those involved with volunteer programs to know what needs to be done to improve their program without devoting some special attention to information gathering and analysis. This article provides a brief introduction to the process of program evaluation for program improvement.

Program Evaluation

Evaluation is an expression of multiple meanings and even more misuses. The most common misconception is that evaluation is some sort of magic exercise that, when done, gives one the absolute worth of a program. That is, it tells one of the inevitable goodness or badness of what is being or has been done. With this kind of conception it is easy to see why evaluation is often feared, called for by the powers that be, and used either as a weapon or a crutch.

Evaluation is not divine judgment; it is the systematic provision of information

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that can be used in decision-making. From this perspective, the goal of evaluation is to produce useful information for decision-makers—*not* to produce decisions. The only thing that evaluation can do—and this is a lot—is to provide information to be taken into account when making decisions. It is these decisions that have to do with program improvement where evaluation research often makes its greatest contribution.

There are two basic ways in which one could go about the evaluation of a volunteer program: "cookbook" or "tailored." The cookbook approach is simply to find one of the many evaluation manuals produced by human service agencies, federal programs, or private concerns and just follow along. Collect the information they specify, analyze it the way they say, and use their scheme to reveal what it means. The tailored approach is a process whereby you create an evaluation design that addresses specifically the questions you want answered, in ways that are meaningful to those who will use the information, and with methods fitted to the program under analysis. The following guidelines are based on the "tailored" approach.

The Evaluation Process

The main purpose of evaluation research is to provide useful information—that is, information that will be used. The creation of a *useful* evaluation design involves a series of decisions about what you want to know, how you can best get information about that, and how you will use it once you get it. The most scientific, elegantly created and implemented evaluation design is not worth doing if it does not address the questions that are important in a way that people feel is appropriate.

The process of evaluation research involves several stages:

1. Getting the right people involved. For an evaluation to be useful, it must involve all potential users of the information and those who may be affected by it. This is important for two basic reasons—proper perspective and politics. First, with persons involved representing a number of aspects of the program to be evaluated, it is much more likely that the evaluation will be on target. Things are less likely to be overlooked and the methods chosen are more likely to produce valid results. Second, persons participating in the evaluation are more likely to accept and make use of results even if those results do not conform to their prejudices. Also, staff members and volunteers who have been represented in the evaluation process are much more likely to implement changes indicated as needed by the evaluation.

We suggest that you form an advisory or steering committee representative of the potential users of the evaluation results. This committee should be involved in all the major decisions in the creation and implementation of the evaluation design from the initial selection of questions to the interpretation of the results. This committee should be small enough to be workable—not much more than ten and preferably less. Its members should be willing to put in the necessary time to make the decisions.

Consideration should be given to developing a committee that represents the following areas: agency administration, advisory and/or administrative boards, agency staff, funding sources, volunteers, volunteer supervisors, agency clients and the community. The representation will vary in terms of the type of volunteer program and the purpose of the evaluation.

2. Determining what you want to know. One of the biggest mistakes made in evaluation research is to just start gathering data without specific questions to be answered. One of the most important and most difficult tasks in the creation of an evaluation design is deciding *specifically* what you want to know. Research questions should be ones that people do not already know the answers to. In formulating evaluation questions, there are four general questions to keep in mind:

—What is the purpose of the evaluation?

—How will the information be used?

—What will we learn after the evaluation is completed?

—What will be done on the basis of this new information?

The steering committee should be the forum where these questions are formulated and refined. The following are some examples of questions members of an evaluation committee might want to consider.

—How do recruitment efforts contribute to the success or failure of volunteer placements?

—Is the volunteer program meeting the volunteer's needs as well as the objectives of the program?

—Are clients and their families pleased with volunteer involvement?

—What contributions do volunteers make to agency services?

—Why isn't the volunteer program working the way we think it should?

—What would happen if the volunteer program were terminated?

3. Focusing the questions. Once you have some idea about what you want to know, these questions must be focused to the point where they are clear, concise, manageable and researchable. It is important both to be clear about what you want to know and to address questions that can be answered within the limits of your resources. According to Patton (1978), there are several characteristics of good evaluation questions:

—It is possible to obtain information to answer the questions.

—There is more than one possible answer to the question, i.e., the answer is not determined by the phrasing of the question.

—The identified decision-makers are open to information to help them answer the question and feel the answer would be relevant to program decision-making.

—The decision-makers can indicate how they would use the answer to the question, i.e., they can specify the relevance of an answer to the question for future action.

In summary, the fundamental question in terms of focusing and ranking the evaluation questions is: What difference would it make to have this information?

4. Deciding how to get the answers. Once you have the questions, the next task is to figure out ways to get the answers to your questions. Often the information necessary to answer the evaluation questions is available in program records and just needs to be organized in a different way or analyzed more carefully. However, there are usually evaluation questions that require the collection of more information or the conducting of special research.

There are a number of factors that must be taken into consideration in selecting particular approaches to collecting information. One does not have to choose a single method; a variety of approaches may be used. Here are some issues to consider in selecting research methods:

—*Appropriateness:* Research methods should be appropriate to both the questions under investigation and the research settings.

—*Acceptability:* Research methods should be as acceptable as possible to all those involved (staff, clients, volunteers, administration, etc.).

—*Usability:* Results must be understandable by those who will use them.

—*Believability:* Research should be designed so that its results are believable to those who are to make use of them.

—*Cost:* Besides staff time, materials, data analysis, etc., the cost of research includes the time and resources taken away from other agency activities.

—*Time:* Benefits of particular methods should be weighed against the time frame within which results are needed.

5. Getting the information. Even the most well-thought-out and planned evaluation design needs special care in its implementation. The first consideration is the cooperation of all persons who will be involved. Thoroughly inform all persons involved well in advance of beginning the research. Try to minimize disruptions of staff work by limiting demands. Provide regular feedback on the progress of the research to those involved.

A second concern is aggressive follow-up. Always keep in touch with how the research and data collection are going and make sure things are going according to plan. It is very easy for data collection to become misdirected or neglected.

A final note of caution is to be sure to keep adequate records during the evaluation process. Information regarding problems experienced during the evaluation may be important in the interpretation of the evaluation results and can be helpful when planning the next evaluation. Recording information at the time it is pertinent will avoid having to depend solely on your memory.

6. Making sense of the information. Once the data are collected, your next step is to try to make sense out of it. If you have given a lot of thought to focusing your questions and designing the research, the analysis should be a rather directed next step. Failure, however, to think through the research design often leaves one with limitless possibilities for data analysis and no clear direction. Therefore, the general framework of data analysis should be dealt with in developing the research design.

One of the most common problems is developing a context within which to interpret the data. For example, what does it mean to know that your volunteers contribute an average of ten hours per week? Without some standard, expectation or comparison, it is difficult to make sense of ten hours per week.

Analysis of data should be kept as simple as possible. The best rule is to analyze data in small, discrete bits in the simplest way possible.

Use of the Results

A great deal of care should go into the decision on how to use the results of an evaluation. There are no clear rules as to what is the "proper" way to use evaluation results, but there are some issues that must be dealt with.

The first issue is when to give feedback. Often, important information is discovered before the evaluation is complete. It may be useful to provide the committee and staff with ongoing feedback about what is being found as the evaluation proceeds. This allows a feeling of participation and slowly introduces potentially threatening information.

The second issue is whether to write it all up and how. Remember, evaluation results are not neutral; they can be used against you. The use of evaluation results is a political question that must be decided in light of your particular circumstances. It is often useful to write up an evaluation report for internal use and then use it as a basis for the dissemination of selected aspects of the evaluation results. In dealing with funding boards, governing boards, the press, etc., it is often better to provide them with only the evaluation results that address their particular concerns and not the whole report.

Conclusions

These guidelines have set forth the process by which volunteer programs can use program evaluation for program improvement. They can be useful for something as simple as self-assessment done by a volunteer coordinator or as complex as a total program evaluation.

Many will have found the above discussion new and, perhaps, confusing. Do not be discouraged! It takes time and effort to understand the evaluation process. The best thing to do is to go ahead and get involved. All evaluations are imperfect and most involve a number of false starts and mistakes. Remember, the purpose of an evaluation is to learn and *anything* you do will undoubtedly give you a better understanding of your program.

We have confidence that you can do a worthwhile evaluation of your program. Do not be afraid to try.

The Value of a Volunteer Questionnaire

How a hospital auxiliary surveyed its volunteers and 'got its priorities straight'

By Sandy Heywood

WHO ARE YOUR VOLUNTEERS? Why do they volunteer? How do they feel about your institution? How do they perceive their role? Do the newer volunteers view aspects of the program differently from the old-timers? How do the leaders feel? Which aspects of your program are contributing to volunteer satisfaction and which are not? Are the things that are important to your volunteers being provided in your program? What expectations are being met? What should your management priorities be?

Wouldn't it be advantageous to have the answers to all of these questions about your volunteer group? Those listed above and many more were answered recently by Auxilians at the Tucson (Arizona) Medical Center through an ambitious questionnaire process.

This enormously successful project produced over 450 responses and a wealth of information for program planners. Although the survey was the basis for my master's thesis (University of Phoenix), it really was a departmental project all of the way. As a matter of fact, the Auxiliary's ownership of the project was a major factor in its success. Through their involvement in the planning, the Auxilians had the opportunity to survey their own membership to find out things they wanted to know about themselves. This created a different tone for the project than if someone from the outside had conducted the survey. I think the unusually high percentage of responses was a result of this approach.

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Designing the Survey

The questionnaire was designed to deal with issues raised by hospital administration, Auxiliary leadership, hospital staff and volunteers. Everyone was invited to submit questions, which I then classified according to the area/topic of concern. I prepared a draft and pretested it, using a questionnaire committee that had been appointed by the Auxiliary president. This committee included a broad cross-section of Auxiliary members. The president tried to include both recent and long-term members, as well as people we knew to be supportive of the project and some who were not certain of its merits.

The questionnaire committee suggested changes in both format and content before the final questionnaire was prepared. I studied the volunteer literature as well as prior research to choose areas for investigation that would yield the most valuable information to the group.

In addition to questions to classify the volunteer as to level of activity, degree of satisfaction, length of service, etc., we decided to investigate several areas in detail. For example, under the *public relations* heading, we asked the volunteers how comfortable they feel with their ability to get answers that can help with their work. We also tried to determine their comfort level in serving as spokespersons for the hospital in the community. We asked them to rate how well employees exhibit the attitudes included in the hospital's goals. We tried to find out whether the volunteers are apt to mention their volunteer work in social situations and whether they would encourage others to join.

A major section of the questionnaire was devoted to the volunteers' *motivation*. Another section asked them to rate all aspects of their *training* and to indicate their interest in various other available training opportunities. An entire group of questions was designed to obtain a picture of how the volunteers feel about their *individual service* assignments. They were asked not only to rate their satisfaction but also to give a scaled response, in degrees of importance, to ten different aspects of their job. They were then asked to rate their individual assignments as to each of these aspects.

The sixth main area asked a group of questions about the volunteers' perception of the Auxiliary's *leadership*. This section also included a rating of the various opportunities for interaction with fellow Auxilians. The section on *recognition* measured the volunteers' feeling of being appreciated in their various interactions and provided space for suggestions on how to improve recognition. The eighth section consisted of a number of open-ended questions to collect suggestions for program improvement. The final section was devoted to demographics.

Although initially I searched for instruments to adapt, it turned out to be better that none was found. Developing a questionnaire especially for the group under study not only provides a more meaningful customized instrument, but also helps create the "ownership" so necessary for good participation. It is by far the most effective way to get the information you need, and a lot is learned in going through the process.

Marketing the Survey

Once the questionnaire was finished, the committee turned its attention to developing a marketing strategy to insure a good response rate. We made plans to increase the number of responses in the event that the early return was disappointing. If a goal of 300 responses by a chosen date was not met, then we would activate a telephone committee to encourage participation.

In order to know who had answered the questionnaire without violating its promised confidentiality, we asked respondents to mail an enclosed postcard to another office at the same time they mailed back the completed questionnaire to our office. The postcard, which contained a mailing label with the respondents' names and addresses, would let us know who had sent in their questionnaires. The phone committee would call only those who had not participated.

This system, however, did not have to be used. By the second day after the 1,000+ questionnaires were mailed, over 180 were back in our office. The goal of 300 was reached on the eighth day and over 450 had been returned by the cutoff date.

Analyzing the Results

The questionnaires were sent to Stanford University for analysis, in conjunction with my university program. One of the most time-consuming parts of the entire project was deciding what analyses to ask for and setting up the evaluation questions. I learned the capabilities of the "Statistical Package for Social Sciences," which is the most common computer software package used for such studies. This made it relatively easy for a novice to use the computer to get the analysis done. Without such capability, the results of a project like this would be limited to frequency distributions (i.e., how many volunteers chose each response). Using the computer allows one to perform all kinds of cross tabulations and explore different relationships among the various questions and individual variables.

Ultimately, with help from the questionnaire committee members, I decided on 15 evaluation questions, in addition to the simple reporting of numbers and percentages in each category. These evaluation questions are the instructions to the computer of what analyses of data are desired. For instance, I wanted a comparison of all sub-groups (active volunteers, recently inactive, inactive, junior volunteers) on each question. I wanted correlations performed to see if there is a relationship between how long volunteers have been in the program and their overall satisfaction or stated motivations in joining. I investigated simple relationships, such as one between age and motivation, and complex ones, such as the "degree of responsibility accepted by the volunteers and their feelings about opportunities for leadership." A local university student, who may well be looking for such research experience, could help with this aspect of the evaluation.

About two weeks later, three large notebooks full of print-out were back in my office. The questionnaire committee met to hear preliminary findings, which were then reported at a general Auxiliary meeting and in the monthly newsletter. First reports were published the month after the deadline for turning in the completed questionnaire. All of us felt that looping back information this quickly was essential.

The questionnaire committee met again to interpret the statistical analyses. I completed charts and graphs to display the important findings and held sessions to show these results to the officers and interested volunteers. Some group discussion took place about the meaning of certain data. Real excitement was produced when findings in our group strongly supported published literature, especially the theories of Frederick Herzberg.

Herzberg, you may recall, differentiated between factors on a job that "motivate" (such as challenging work, recognition and growth) and things that are "expected" and therefore do not motivate (such as good working conditions, salary, job security and interpersonal relations). He said that "hygiene factors," the second group, were important in that their *absence* would cause dissatisfaction, but in themselves would not produce satisfaction. In other words, it is the intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, rewards that relate with satisfaction.

The computer selected all the people who rated certain factors as "very important" on the job. Then, the statistical test was applied to search for the correlation of each factor with overall satisfaction. Our group showed a noteworthy correlation between satisfaction and *only those factors* such as challenge, feelings of importance, receiving recognition, etc., that would be considered Herzberg's "motivators." This was in spite of the fact that certain "hygiene factors," such as "understanding what is expected of me" and "supportive employees," placed higher in rank order than the "motivators" mentioned above.

What We Learned

Our most important overall finding centered on the importance of "having challenging work." It was the only factor with a meaningful positive correlation to "satisfaction" in our entire group. We learned that most people in this Auxiliary volunteer "to use time productively, keep busy, be useful." This reason was chosen with increasing frequency as the age of the respondent increased. We looked for and found a lot of internal consistency in our program between the importance volunteers attach to such factors as "a chance for social contacts" and how their present services rank in that regard.

In short, we learned a lot by surveying our group. We found out the most common reasons people come to our hospital to volunteer and how they feel about the program once they get here. We learned that many of the assumptions we make about the group or organization are not true. We learned that there are some aspects of the program that we can leave alone, either because we rate very high in these areas or because people attach little importance to them.

Other areas emerged as priorities needing our time and attention. For instance, we learned that in addition to establishing more challenging services, we still have work to do in developing better staff relations, and in giving volunteers a clearer understanding of their public relations role and current information to help them fulfill it. Our efforts in the area of recognition should focus mostly on community. We learned what functions the volunteers feel best fill their social needs.

We feel good about numbers like the 95.4 percent who either are satisfied or very satisfied with our volunteer program. We feel that by following the priorities that emerged from the study, we can do even better!