



# Brighter Strategies

Better process Brighter results

## PROGRAM EVALUATIONS: NINE STEPS FOR REVIEWING AND IMPROVING PROGRAM QUALITY

How are we doing? What can we improve? What impact are we having on our community?

Successful organizations ask themselves these three questions periodically in order to evaluate their performance and continually improve the quality of their programs and organization as a whole.

Evaluating your programs is a useful process that focuses on reviewing, assessing, and analyzing the workings of a program or its components. The evaluation will answer the following questions:

- What is the impact of my program?
- What organization strengths can my program harness?
- What challenges does my program need to overcome?
- How do I manage my program more effectively?
- Is my program running as intended?
- Do program goals align with the outcomes that are being accomplished?
- What tangible proof do I have that my program is successful?

Follow these nine steps to implement your own program evaluation.

### 1. Assess Your Readiness

A gap analysis will help you compare your program's actual performance (where are we now?) with its potential performance (where do we want to be?).

To understand how ready you are to move into an actual evaluation, go through the following program components and rank each on a scale of 1-5 to determine how they perform now.

#### Planning

- The quality of your program planning and design
- The reliability of non-staff resources, such as funding sources, equipment, buildings, etc.
- The commitment and longevity of your staff

#### Process

- The extent to which the program aligns with best business practices
- The priority of staff training
- The extent to which continuous quality improvement is integral to program culture

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## People

- How well your staff articulates program purpose and activities
- How well your staff articulates the results or outcomes the program has on your clients

## Performance

- The extent to which client-based data is collected
- The extent to which that data is used to make decisions and manage the program

## 2. Identify Program Outcomes

Because there are three different types of program evaluations, you need to start with the end in mind. Once you know what you want your program to achieve, you can choose from a goal-based, process-based, or outcome-based evaluation.

To conduct a goal-based evaluation consider –

1. What are the characteristics, needs and priorities of the target population?
2. What are the potential program barriers?
3. What is the most important action to meet program goals?

To conduct a process-based evaluation consider –

1. How is the program implemented?
2. Are activities delivered as intended?
3. Are participants being reached as intended?

To conduct a outcome-based evaluation consider–

1. To what extent are desired changes occurring?
2. Who is benefiting/not benefiting?
3. What works/doesn't work?

## 3. Develop a Data Collection Plan

For a rich, well-rounded picture of your program, gather both qualitative and quantitative data.

Qualitative data sources include observation, surveys with open-ended questions (such as opinion questions), interviews, focus groups and case studies.

Quantitative data-gathering methods include surveys with close-ended questions (such as true/false and multiple choice), checklists, organizational statistics, or documentation.

Before you start, do a benefits and challenges chart for each method to help you decide which method to choose.

## 4. Identify Resources

Unfortunately, due to time, budget, and staff limitations, no organization can do everything it would like. Look carefully at the things you want to do and the resources required to do them.

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To help you prioritize, refer back to the gap analysis you conducted. Ask yourself:

Does my organization have access to the resources I plan to use, and can it support the program activities I want to implement?

This is time to brainstorm and dream big. Program evaluation is an important undertaking, and it is actually the perfect time to make the changes that can improve your services and organization as a whole. Ask the above two questions at every level of your organization to get a holistic picture of the resources you need or lack and find innovative solutions for your resource challenges.

## 5. Review and Analyze Data

You collected data in order to answer the original evaluation questions, so be sure to revisit those questions before conducting your analysis.

- For quantitative data, perform various statistical calculations such as ranking, mode, mean, and median.
- For qualitative data, group comments into categories and themes, highlighting program strengths and areas for improvement.

Keep the following tips in mind when conducting analysis:

- Archival data has a long lag time, so when faced with conflicting information between historic data and more recent data, rely on the recent information.
- Subjective data (such as from a focus group) lean toward the more current data.
- Be sure to ask a lot of “why” questions. Data points are not always related.
- Beware of numbers taken out of context. Make sure that you don’t draw erroneous conclusions based upon “cherry-picked” data results.
- Be careful when dealing with comparisons, as a correlation in data does not equate causation.

## 6. Create a Logic Model

A logic model is a systematic and visual way of presenting relationships between the following five program components:

- Need for a program’s existence
- Resources allocated to meet the need
- Day-to-day activities that make up the bulk of the program
- Program outputs (effectiveness metrics)
- Program outcomes (efficiency metrics)

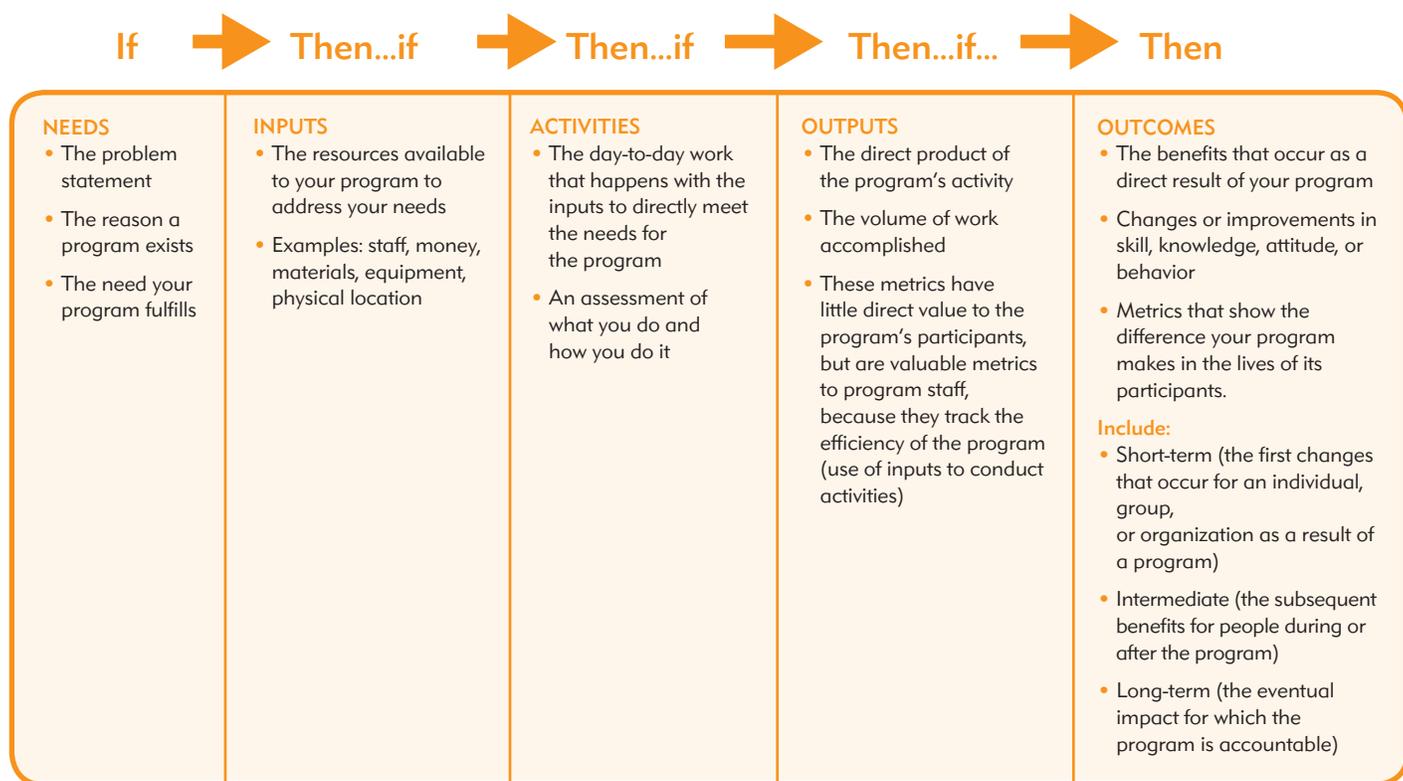
A logic model implies an “if-then relationship” between each of these five components. It connects the program need to inputs and activities to outputs and outcomes.

*For example:*

If a community not-for-profit needs to learn how to implement program evaluations (need)...then a group of 25 employees from this organization + a training facilitator + a workbook (inputs)...and teaching + discussion + writing in the workbook (activities)...will create three hours spent in training + 25 completed workbooks (outputs)...and an increase in participant knowledge about program evaluation + sharing of this knowledge in participants’ organizations (outcomes).

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Figure F: Elements of a Logic Model



## 8. Track and Use Outcome and Evaluation Results

The final element to include when putting together your evaluation will help you track program outcomes. Outcomes metrics track two things: the efficiency of the program (best use of resources) and the effectiveness of the program (impact on participants).

An outcomes measurement scorecard provides a succinct and standardized way to keep track of program outcomes and mark progress over time. It also allows for easy reporting.

An outcomes measurement scorecard consists of the following elements:

- Outcome statement
- Indicator: measures specific data that track a program's success on outcomes by describing observable, measurable characteristics or changes that represent achievement of an outcome.
- Target: the number that the outcome is aiming to reach

*For example:*

- Outcome: We want this program to result in increased participant satisfaction
- Indicator: Percentage of total participant satisfaction, based on written satisfaction surveys
- Target: 100% participant satisfaction

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## 9. Integrate Results Into Strategic Program Planning and Reporting

Now that you have evaluated your program, it's time to apply the results to your strategic management process. Both the evaluation and strategic management processes are designed with program improvement as the end goal and should be tied directly into your organization's broader strategic goals.

### Next Steps: Planning and Reporting

Your program evaluation is intended to produce action. You can use it to do improve your processes, allocate employees, and set timelines.

- Process planning starts with the results (outputs and outcomes) of your evaluation and requires working backwards to identify the processes needed to produce those results.
- Action planning generates a strategy for who is going to do what, by when, and in what order for your organization to meet its strategic goals.

Finally, report your findings to senior leadership and board members, as well as external stakeholders, such as funding sources and regulatory agencies.

Always keep in mind that program evaluation is not intended to be a stand-alone exercise but rather inform the strategic management of your organization. Evaluations are a cyclical, ongoing process that focuses on continuous quality improvement to help your organization more effectively impact your audience.

**Brighter Strategies regularly helps organizations evaluate and re-organize their programs so they can better meet their missions and organization goals. If you would like more information on how to develop an effective program evaluation, please contact us at [info@brighterstrategies.com](mailto:info@brighterstrategies.com) or call 703-224-8100.**