In Search of Outcomes

Outcome evaluation is what tells an organization whether or not its programs are having a meaningful impact on the lives of clients. Social services providers may instinctively believe that certain strategies are working, but too often they fail to systematically measure and illustrate the impact of such strategies.

There are several reasons for this:

- If funders have failed to provide money for evaluation, it may not be budgeted.

- The program's objectives are process- or service-oriented, and an outcome evaluation is either extraneous or hard to perform.

- People are impatient to see results, and too brief an interval is set for outcomes to be achieved.

- Specific, measurable factors may be difficult to isolate.

The latter point can be particularly problematic. The Metropolitan Human Services Commission in Columbus, Ohio, cites the example of a local truancy prevention program. "It is difficult to isolate the program's impact from the multiple other factors that affect a child's school attendance," MHSC notes. "The role of a neighbor, teacher, minister or grandmother--or the fact that Mom got a job--may be responsible for changes in a child's truant behavior. While we can measure the changes in the behavior, we cannot be sure that it was the truancy program's strategy that brought about that change."

Even so, MHSC officials say, the fact that outcome evaluation is hard work should not become an excuse for avoiding it. "Outcome evaluation should be an intrinsic, funded, and expected part of the human services system," they argue.

"Not only is it the appropriate thing to do," MHSC points out, "it is also the politically expedient thing to do. In a time of shrinking federal resources, the call for documented accountability is heard clearly everywhere. And whether you are a public entity or a foundation that funds human services, you and the community can benefit from knowing if your efforts have improved people's conditions. Human services professionals can benefit from knowing that their day-to-day efforts do make a difference for people."

To that end, MHSC sponsored a symposium on May 8 in cooperation with The Columbus Foundation, United Way, and the Ohio State University College of Social Work. The conference, called "In Search of Outcomes," was led by Grantsmanship Center trainer Eve Berry and was attended by 180 representatives of Columbus-area human services agencies.

One goal of the conference was to reach some common understanding of just what is meant by the term outcomes. "People in human services use the term in a variety of different ways, referring to objectives, their results, and process measures all as 'outcomes'," MHSC found. "They also use terms such as 'goals,' 'visions,' 'objectives,' and 'measures,' almost interchangeably. And people frequently develop outcome measures first, without doing preliminary work, such as establishing goals and objectives that are linked to an organization's mission."

So what exactly are outcomes? "It makes sense that we understand outcomes as describing people and their conditions," MHSC says. "They indicate the extent to which methods and strategies result in the desired changes in people and the community. Outcomes do not measure inputs, processes, or methods. Instead, they measure the extent to which a strategy is reaching its objective."

To be useful, outcomes should tell...

- who (individual, neighborhood, target population)

- is doing what (change in condition, behavior)

- when (change occurs by this specific date)

- how that change is measured (what data shows changed condition or behavior).

Eve Berry adds that "most people fail to think about how they're going to integrate outcome evaluation into the planning process for a new program. To do that, you have to understand what your objectives are and how you're going to measure them. Unless you know where you want to go, you can't really decide what the right methods are for getting there."

Berry believes that the large number of people attending the symposium attests to a growing interest in outcome evaluation. "I doubt if anyone would have shown up for such an event during the mid- to late 1960s, during the

era of the federally funded Great Society social programs," she says. "Even as late as the 1980s, the concept of program evaluation was met with considerable resistance. But with growing competition for funding, shrinking dollars, and more public scrutiny, more people are becoming interested in outcome evaluation as a tool for both 'proving' impact and improving programs."

In addition to the changing funding climate, other factors have contributed to this new interest in and receptivity toward outcome measurement, Berry says. "Many organizations have adopted Total Quality Management practices, customer service training and other initiatives that focus on performance measurement," she points out.

The Columbus symposium addressed a number of negative perceptions about outcomes and evaluation practices. "This is a topic that simply mystifies most people," Berry says. "Our intent was not just to stimulate more interest in evaluation, but to make it understandable, and give people a chance to apply what they were learning on a practical program example. Since people, especially adults, learn best by doing, we structured the event around small group experiences, a case study, two content presentations, and group discussions. The day was very interactive and 'hand's on'."

Three central points dominated the discussions:

    1) that developing client-centered outcomes is a critical part of a logical program planning process;

    2) without clear, specific outcomes or program objectives, sound evaluation planning is difficult at best;

    3) programs should be people- or client-centered rather than agency-centered.

"One of the most important messages we wanted to get across was that outcome evaluation is one of the most effective means you have for building your organization's credibility," Berry says. "Too many agencies point to the number of people they serve, rather than identify the impact that their programs have had on those people's lives. When you're able to show that the services you provide are really changing people's conditions for the better, funders are much more likely to support your efforts in the future."