COMMUNITY RADIO SHOW

"Program Evaluation that Strengthens Communities"

Community Radio Show Text

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TODD: For the first 30 minutes or so, Ed Minter, Program Manager for the Columbia St. Mary's Family Medicine Residency Program, will share how to plan your program evaluation activities while maintaining an asset-based approach to community strengthening.

Prior to the Medical College, Ed served as a program consultant with the University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension, providing training and technical assistance to local health departments and volunteer-based advocacy groups with program evaluation design and implementation, strategic planning, and community organizing. Ed also served as the Director of Community Education for Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin where he oversaw the design and implementation of comprehensive programming for teenagers as well as developed and maintained relationships with community-based organizations throughout SE Wisconsin.

In 1994, Mr. Minter was hired as one of the founding employees for the Milwaukee office of Public Allies. He served as Program Manager for the Milwaukee office for four years. Ed possesses a B.S. in Psychology and Religious Studies and an MBA from Keller Graduate School of Business Management of DeVry University.

Ed, welcome to the show.

So Ed, what got you into this kind of work?

ED: I first became familiar with program evaluation in the mid nineties doing nonprofit work with an AmeriCorps agency. I learned the importance of gathering information to better strengthen internal systems and to determine the level of impact a nonprofit has on the larger community. Since then, my evaluation work led me to the University of Wisconsin-Cooperative extension where I was on the evaluation team for the statewide tobacco control project. This allowed me to work hands-on with grassroots coalitions throughout southeastern Wisconsin to design evaluation processes so they could track successes regarding tobacco control in their locales.

TODD: What definition of program evaluation have you developed through your work?

ED: Evaluation is a thoughtful process of focusing on questions and topics of concern, collecting appropriate information, and then analyzing and interpreting the information for a specific use and purpose.

COMMUNITY RADIO SHOW

TODD: Well, you know then that nonprofits sometimes talk about evaluation as something done to people and programs, but today we're focused on an asset-based method. Can you remind us quickly what we mean by such an asset-based community strengthening approach instead?

ED: Definitely. It means that we look at people as having something to offer instead of labeling them as needy clients. That everyone has gifts and talents. Inviting program participants, neighborhood residents and other stakeholders to be a part of your evaluation process from the start helps produce a higher degree of buy-in throughout the process. The more inclusive the evaluation process is from start to finish, the easier it is to apply the results and take recommended actions.

TODD: So you make sure that program evaluation will strengthen communities and not just provide interesting information?

ED: Yes. The needs-based and asset-based approaches are similar because there are general, basic steps that any good evaluation process should go through. The key difference is that an assets-based approach utilizes a more inclusive, collaborative process from initial planning to collecting, analyzing and reporting of the data obtained.

TODD: I've heard you talk about three broad steps in evaluation; can you share those and describe how to go about them in an asset-based way?

ED: Absolutely. First of all, it is important to understand that these steps are what any good evaluation process should go through. The three steps I will talk about is defining the purpose of your evaluation, collecting data and then using the data.

The first step is to define the purpose of the evaluation. This is the time to get focused. Part of getting focused is to establish a timeline and to identify your resources, including money, time, & expertise so that you know your evaluation process' scope.

To help ensure your evaluation process is asset-based, thinking about who, other than your agency's evaluation committee, should help with defining the purpose is critical. Some examples to consider are not just program participants or your funders, but others who may experience direct and/or indirect impacts of your program, like school teachers, parents and grandparents, program staff, and collaborators.

Here are a couple of things to think about as you define your purpose. Remember, fundamentally the purpose is to create a greater understanding; but of what? It is important to clearly articulate the purpose or it will lack direction and the resulting information may not be as valuable as you would like. Examples of evaluation purposes are improving the program, measuring impact on people's lives or the general community, determining if a program is worth the cost, or responding to specific questions that a funding source may require. You can also measure if others experience your program and/or organization as an assets-based one.

Including others in this step can really help you identify not only what is important to funders and your organization, but what your constituents think is important to them and the neighborhood in which they (and you) reside in.

Next, the development of questions occurs. This is tricky for any evaluation because the tendency is to ask questions that don't relate to the evaluation's stated purpose. It's really easy to add questions because someone thinks it would be interesting to know, but has nothing to due with the evaluation's purpose. When you are developing questions, a helpful hint is to brainstorm a list of all the possible questions and topics that your evaluation could address and then to whittle out the irrelevant questions with your extended evaluation committee.

Once your questions have been identified, you and the others involved can begin the creative task of identifying how to answer the questions. Some questions will be better addressed through more traditional quantitative scales, such as a Likert scale; while others may require a longer, qualitative response. This will ultimately help you decide what surveying tools are most appropriate, such as a questionnaire, pre/post test, interviews (both formal and informal) or a focus group.

TODD: So, we can say that while there is some highly technical data that needs to be collected in a lab environment at times, that the collection of most useful data for community strengthening can effectively be done with and by those you serve?

ED: Yes. Evaluation does not have to be research. Evaluation is done all the time at varying levels of sophistication. Even low-cost simple evaluation processes can provide meaningful and useful data. This first step is a big one. Let me briefly recap before I go to the second step. Defining the purpose of your assets-based evaluation includes including others to help get focused. Once the purpose is clearly articulated, questions are developed and lastly, you identify in what ways these questions will be asked. Let's move to the second step, collecting data.

This step can go hand-in-hand with an assets-based approach to your work. Depending on what methods you chose to utilize to collect the data, some of the people I mentioned earlier can easily be empowered to actively participate in the collection process.

The first point of collection is to use existing information sources which may already have answers to some of your questions such as agency records and previous evaluation reports. What can make existing data even more fruitful is if it was obtained with an assets-based approach, but regardless, it is important to seek existing information. Two additional sources of existing information that are often underutilized are direct observations of program activities and pictorial documentation such as videotapes and photographs. Some of this information you may be able to attain from not only program staff, but current and past participants, neighborhood residents, former staff and so on. These sources of information can add tremendous depth to your collected data. This type of information helps bring your numbers to life.

Second is identifying which method of collecting the data will be most useful. There are many ways that data collection occurs. When you think about the method, consider the following: what method is most likely to secure the information, what method is appropriate to the values and capabilities of those providing information, what method is least disruptive to your participants, and what methods can you afford? Other examples of evaluation methods are written testimonials, journaling, direct observation, formal tests and brainstorming sessions centered around one question at a time. Remember though, collecting data means just that. Some of the examples I have provided are not very useful unless something is documented, such as observations or testimonials.

Again, the difference between facilitating an evaluation with an asset-based manner instead of a needs-based manner is all about who gets to make choices regarding the purpose of the evaluation and who participates in the collection process. When the staff members of a nonprofit miss the opportunity to engage others in an evaluation process, they miss the opportunity to have their program have deeper long-term buy-in by those who are most effected by it.

TODD: It sounds natural then that the people who are affected by your program would have the most relevant experience with its results.

ED: Yes and no. That is a great comment because it reinforces that not only are those most affected by the program the ones with the most relevant experiences, but all of the other people we've used as examples do, too. This is a great reminder to look beyond those who are most obviously affected.
And with that allow me to discuss the third step, using the information. You will soon see how this step depends on the creative and hard work the first two steps accomplish. Who is going to use the evaluation results? If you want to collect relevant data and make use of limited resources, it is important to determine how we are going to use our resources from the start. Identifying potential users of your information first by finding out what they want to know and how they will use the information will focus your process. If you don't know, ask; don't guess. Knowing who will use the evaluation and how they will use it helps you clarify the purpose, design, questions, and result-reporting for it. Examples of people who will use your evaluation are program participants, neighborhood residents, elected officials, community leaders, and grantors. Knowing this in advance allows you to answer six questions in your planning that will help determine how well your collected data will be used:

1. How will the data be analyzed?
2. Who is responsible for completing the analysis?
3. How will the information be interpreted and by whom?
4. Who will write the summary?
5. How will the evaluation be communicated and shared?
6. To whom will the evaluation be shared with and when?

TODD: It sounds like it would be a nice idea to involve others in all this, but isn't it difficult to empower the community you serve in your work as decision makers? Doesn't this question the idea of an evaluator and client relationship?

ED: It directly questions that relationship. But, the relationship is a balancing act. There will be information that you need to acquire "on your own" so to speak. That's to be expected. Becoming cognizant that evaluation need not be done in a vacuum allows you to invite others to the table, making the process more asset-based. Your program interacts with the community that it serves in one way or another. How it interacts with the community is a question that can be asked to those who live in the community. You can keep doing your evaluation work in a needs-based way, but you're probably not going to see true sustainability, change, and buy-in from the people you are serving. Involving others in your evaluation processes is an excellent way to truly demonstrate your organization is invested in the neighborhood it resides in and those who live there. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised how willing others will be to assist.

TODD: Thanks for the three steps. Can you share a time when you moved from doing a more needs-based evaluation method to a more inclusive asset-based approach?

ED: Sure… it actually happened as a result of being introduced to assets-based community development back in 1994. Jody Kretzmann, one of the co-founders of the assets-based model spoke at one our trainings when I worked for the Milwaukee office of Public Allies. It was a very moving experience for me and those I worked with. At the time I was managing a team of Allies (AmeriCorps members) as they were preparing to work on their service project. At the time, our focus was really a lot more needs-based that I care to really admit…but no sooner than did Jody leave did the project change to an assets-based approach. The training happened at the organization we were partnering with and they, too, were equally moved and the process of engaging neighborhood residents in our project started immediately. This included not only what our service project was going to be, but how we were going to measure its impact. It was a very moving experience to work so closely with those who lived in the neighborhood where our service project took place. In the end, neighborhood residents along with employees of our partnering organization and the team of allies were able to develop the service project's evaluation component in a manner that clearly demonstrated the investment of those who live and work in the neighborhood.

TODD: Thank you. We're going to go to the audience for questions now. Remember, if you would like to ask Ed a question, to honor time, please ask a question about today's topic instead of sharing best practices from your work. Also, state your name, location, and organization.