

Self-Evaluation: A Response to Accountability*

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It is important to recognize the critical role that evaluation can play in enhancing the programs and services we provide. Evaluation can be a very powerful tool at the disposal of the practitioner. It provides a basis or rationale for reinforcing or reshaping and redefining the programs for which we are accountable. And like any tool, we are uncomfortable in using it until we become familiar with its functions, its strengths, and its limitations.

Introduction

Through the years Jewish community centers and other communal organizations have generally sought to find pragmatic approaches for anticipating needed changes in their existing programs and services. They have also sought to identify those needs and concerns of their constituencies which might have consequences for the development of new services. Self-evaluation has been the form of assessment very often selected by communal organizations for addressing these concerns.

The purpose of this article is to explore the self-evaluation approach and the steps necessary for carrying out successful assessments of this type. The context used for examining the self-evaluation process is the area of health, physical education and recreation, one of the primary service areas offered by Jewish community centers.

Although self-evaluation represents one kind of evaluation, the use of any evaluation process has characteristically been a heavily value laden one. Perhaps to some extent this has always been so in the human services since to evaluate means to "ascertain, judge, or fix the value or worth of."¹ For many practitioners any attempt to assess the worth of program and services is viewed as very threatening. This view is understandable.

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¹Peter Davies, Editor, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1970, p. 248.

Whether we initially want to or not, we tend to become heavily invested in the programs and services for which we are responsible. As a result, we make major commitments of our time and energy. We invest a part of our self in the process. When the product of this investment is then subjected to scrutiny we tend to feel that judgments about the value or worth of the program, no matter how arrived at, are also judgments of our own capabilities as individuals and as practitioners. In short, we tend to be reluctant or unwilling to risk ourselves in those situations which may result in potentially negative outcomes.

Recognizing the legitimacy of this feeling is important. At the same time it is equally important to recognize the critical role that evaluation can play in enhancing the programs and services we provide. Evaluation can be a very powerful tool at the disposal of the practitioner. It provides a basis or rationale for reinforcing or reshaping and redefining the programs for which we are accountable. And like any tool, we are uncomfortable in using it until we become familiar with its functions, its strengths, and its limitations.

Considered further in an increasing climate of accountability, (accountability refers to the responsibility of the Center and its staff to be answerable for the programs and services it provides to its membership and to the broader community), Centers and other communal agencies are asking harder questions about the cost, need for, and the worth of programs. Evaluation in one form or another is becoming an increasingly utilized means of supplying decision-makers with some of the necessary

answers to these questions. Therefore, whether we like it or not, if Centers do not take the responsibility and the leadership for evaluating their programs, it will likely be imposed upon them by pressures from sources outside the agencies, sources such as Federations and United Way. More importantly, if the burden of program evaluation is not shared by the professional or is left to others who may not understand the function as intimately as he/she does, the professional may well be asked to respond to a problem or set of problems which he/she might have defined or conceptualized differently.

Self-evaluation represents one useful form for developing the appropriate responses to these pressures. The term itself as we use it in the Center field refers to assessments initiated within the agency that are directed to particular programs, services, or departments, rather than to individuals. Generally, the actual evaluation is carried out by one or more of the agency's existing staff members, and many include a close working relationship with key lay leadership. Self-evaluation also means that conclusions are drawn and decisions made by the leaders and representatives who participate in the process.² Far more often than not it relies on offhand evaluation methods that are based on intuition, opinion, and professional perception. Far less often it is based on the evaluation method known as evaluation research which follows a more sharply prescribed set of rules and procedures. In the latter case, clear and explicit criteria for program success have to be established. Such criteria may include actual physical change such as an improved sense of well-being on the part of participants that is substantiated by stress tests or medical examinations, or participant satisfaction with program or segments of program, or changes in participant registration. Information is systematically collected from a representative sample of the individuals with whom we are concerned.

² Myron B. Blanchard, *Self-Evaluation of the Jewish Community Center*, New York: National Jewish Welfare Board, 1961, p.3.

The information is analyzed, and compared with the criteria established, and conclusions are drawn about the effectiveness, the merit, the success of the phenomenon under study.³

Evaluation research is also much more time consuming, and expensive. It requires an evaluator with the necessary technical skills, skills not usually found among the overwhelming majority of Center workers. Also because the research process provides for much greater strictness and objectivity, its most essential use is in those situations where "(1) the outcomes to be evaluated are complex, hard to observe, made up of many elements reacting in diverse ways; (2) the decisions that will follow are important and expensive; and (3) evidence is needed to convince other people about the validity of the conclusions."⁴

Although there are many Center situations which can be characterized by the above conditions, the relative complexity, cost, and time involved in undertaking evaluative research efforts has meant that in practice most Center evaluations, particularly on specific or service levels, have taken the form of self-evaluation.

Further rationale for Centers' selecting the self-evaluation route as the approach of choice includes:

1. The growing conviction that a periodic appraisal of the goals and effectiveness of the Center is essential for its healthy growth.
2. A self-evaluation provides the basis for Center adaptation to community conditions and is a necessary step in planning.
3. Not the least of the benefits of a self-evaluation is the heightened interest and participation by the Board, staff, and members in the Center's work, which come from a better understanding of its goals and problems.
4. The self-evaluation also helps to interpret the Center program to the Jewish and general community and to attain community acceptance and support.⁵

³ Carol H. Weiss, *Evaluation Research*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972, p. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Blanchard, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-4.

Beginning the Process

How then does one begin and successfully carry out a self-evaluation?

The first step requires that someone initiate the process. To the extent possible, this process should be built into the ongoing operations of a service area such as health, physical education and recreation (HPER) and failing an opportunity to do that to set the evaluation within some broader context of the Center. Such integration tends to diminish dramatically the burden or need to carry out such efforts at the last minute. Also if the evaluation can be scheduled on an annual basis, the results can be used as a planning tool for the next program year.

Evaluations can be initiated from many sources within and outside the Center. Most often, however, self-evaluations are initiated by staff, the executive, and board members of the Center. Less often, such evaluations are motivated by concerns of membership or funding sources such as the local Federation. Whatever the source of initiation, the beginning phase of the process should be concerned with the formation of an appropriate evaluation or study committee whose task is to define the purpose and scope of the evaluation.

The specific composition of the committee depends on the kind of evaluation that is projected. If the evaluation is to be used as a tool for in-service staff training, the committee might consist solely of the HPER professionals in the Center. If, however, the evaluation is to be used for agency planning which might ultimately require Board decision-making, the composition should consist primarily of Center Board members, including the service area chairperson. If possible, some representation of members or the community at large is highly desirable.

Defining Scope and Purpose

With the committee formed, the focus of attention should shift to determining the scope and purpose of the evaluation. Is the evaluation part of a broader agency evaluation or

just an examination of the health, physical education and recreation services? Is the effort to concern itself with all of the programs in HPER or only programs which are in a particular sub-program area such as those which have an explicit health focus?

Once the scope is determined, the purpose of the evaluation has to be further clarified. Is the evaluation concerned primarily with quantitative considerations, such as how many members register for programs; how much does it cost to provide programs per participant; how efficient are facilities utilized? Or is the concern primarily with qualitative considerations such as how satisfied are members with the programs in which they participate; how effective are the programs in achieving their stated objectives? In many cases the purposes encompass both considerations and it remains for the exact balance to be established.

Goals and Objectives

Scope and purpose are then translated into a more precise statement of goals and objectives. It is the development of this statement which represents one of the most critical aspects of the entire evaluation process. Like other considerations, goals and objectives can be specified on different levels. For example, they can be defined for an overall evaluation in the following way:

1. To compile a profile of the Center's services in HPER.
2. To gather information on current trends in Center HPER programs and the extent to which these trends are reflected in the Center's program.
3. To examine new developments in HPER theory and practice outside the Center field to determine the need for changes in the Center's HPER program.
4. To assess the extent to which the Center's HPER services are effective.
5. To determine the extent to which Center members are interested in participating in physical fitness programs.
6. To examine the extent to which different age groups use aquatic programming.

For some, the above illustrations of goals and objectives may be seen as an extension of the evaluation's scope and purpose. To an extent this would be true. Yet, the goals and objectives provided also make the purpose of the evaluation more explicit, a necessary step in carrying out any successful evaluation.

If, however, goal number four is examined more closely, the term "effective" may seem to make the goal ambiguous rather than explicit. It would, therefore, be important for the term to be defined in an operational or measurable way if the HPER services are to be assessed. At the same time it points to another level of specifying goals and objectives. On this level the concern is with the particular goals and objectives of the HPER overall service, or each of the programs that are offered. Thus, if "effective" means the extent to which the service or its individual programs are meeting their stated objectives it would be necessary to evaluate the extent to which such objectives are specific, clear, and measurable, and this in turn might then be reflected as an additional purpose of the evaluation.

A case example might provide a useful illustration. In the recently completed JWB Health, Physical Education and Recreation study a number of goals and objectives were agreed upon by the study committee. For example, the committee agreed:

1. To compile a clear picture of JWB's services in the H & PE field.
2. To evaluate these services against current and future needs.
3. To recommend the most effective use by JWB of its staff and its support services and its expenditures.⁶

Although it was possible for the study committee to carry out certain of the tasks required by the goals of the evaluation, it quickly became evident that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to carry out other tasks in the absence of some benchmark for assessment. In short, the committee realized that unless there were some agreed upon goals and objectives

⁶ JWB Health, Physical Education and Recreation Study Committee Summary Report, New York: JWB, 1977, p. 2.

for HPER services in Centers, there would be little value in attempting to gauge the extent to which HPER services were addressing current Center needs. Moreover, it would be equally difficult to assess the extent to which HPER services reflected the broader goals and objectives of the Center of which they were a critical part. As a result, a general statement of Center HPER goals and objectives was developed that was based upon a broader statement developed by JWB for a project on Center standards.⁷

Finally, in the search for appropriate goals and objectives, some additional issues have to be addressed of which the following are important:

1. Of various goals developed, which are the most important to be pursued?
2. Is the primary concern with short term or long term goals?
3. Are there "covert goals . . . that are unlikely to be articulated, but whose achievement sometimes determines success or failure no matter what else happens?"⁸

Setting Criteria For Assessing Goals and Objectives

Once the goals and objectives of the evaluation are selected, criteria have to be identified for measuring the extent to which they are achieved. Some thought has to be given to the question of goal achievement. On what basis is progress to be determined? Is the presence or absence of program or program components sufficient? Or is the yard stick based on a "more or less than last year" continuum? Perhaps, participant satisfaction with the program is the key. On the other hand, criteria might reflect much greater complexity. Thus, if the evaluation is interested in determining the need for changes in the Center's existing HPER services, then some model has to either be developed or applied against which present practices are assessed. Fortunately, in this particular instance the JWB HPER study

⁷ The reader is referred to the study report for a fuller discussion.

⁸ Weiss, *op. cit.* pp. 26-31.

referred to earlier and actual evaluations carried out by JCCs on their HPER programs, provide such potential criteria. The following represents one example of criteria successfully used by JCC's:

- (a) Does the program or service meet the established objectives?
- (b) What type of demand does the program or service put on the facilities? Does it make good use of the facilities?
- (c) What is the participation in the service or program? Does it fill to capacity? Can more people be accommodated? Is the response poor?
- (d) What are the demands on staff time? Are they appropriate to the activity or do they take an excessive amount of time?
- (e) Is the service or program income producing? Is it an expense? Does it break even?

A second example is provided by the JWB HPER study. If a primary goal of Centers is the maintenance and enrichment of Jewish identity, and it is assumed that Jewish association represents one legitimate form of addressing this goal, then the following criteria might be used to measure goal achievement.

1. The program aims are to provide activities for Jewish members of all age levels.
2. The program includes activities aimed at reaching out to the Jewish community in order to solicit as many participants as possible in H&PE programs.
3. Opportunities are provided for social contact among individuals and families of the Jewish community through physical activities . . .⁹

Gathering Information

Following the setting of criteria, information or data is gathered by the professional and/or study committee to provide the basis for answering the questions posed for evaluation. This means that relevant instruments have to be developed and the information required has to be collected from the population or particular constituency of concern.

When a part of the evaluation or the total evaluation is designed to assess outcomes, it is

⁹ JWB HPER Study *op. cit.*, p. 110.

essential that program intent be examined to determine which outcomes are sought. As a result, the evaluation may be concerned with changes in attitudes, values, knowledge, behavior, budgetary allocation, agency service patterns, productivity and so on.¹⁰

The actual collection of data is obtained from a variety of sources. Interviews, questionnaires, agency records, tests of skill or the level of physiological conditions are just a few of the many different methods available for gathering data. Centers most frequently rely on interviews and questionnaires, and like evaluation research, most self-evaluations are concerned with collecting information from the members or program participants themselves—"who they are, what they do in the program, and what their attitudes and behaviors are"¹¹ in relation to the program.

Unfortunately, unless the evaluation process is built into the program from the beginning, it is not possible to examine changes in feelings, levels of participation, or other factors that may be of prime interest. Moreover, if the more rigorous procedures of evaluation research are not used, and as I indicated earlier that is not usually the case, no statements can be made about the extent to which any changes observed or reported are caused by the program.

This raises the question of whether self-evaluations, usually carried out at the end of a program year or some other defined period of time are useful and worth the investment of time required. The answer in my opinion is yes. Such evaluations provide departments and the Centers with focused knowledge about what members, staff and others perceive, feel or know about programs and services offered by the agency and the extent to which their perceptions, feelings and knowledge influence their behavior. Ultimately the assumption is made that such knowledge provides the insight necessary for the Center to planfully implement any changes that seem to be indicated.

¹⁰ Weiss, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Analyzing Information Gathered

Once the information needed for the evaluation is gathered, it must be analyzed in light of the questions posed. To some extent, this will likely require a degree of statistical analysis, however, the level of analysis undertaken is most often of a basic nature and does not usually require highly technical capabilities. In those instances where more sophisticated statistical knowledge is required, outside consultant resources can and should be utilized to assist with this phase of the effort.

Reporting and Interpreting the Evaluation

The evaluation process is not completed until some kind of final report is prepared for distribution to the Board, staff, and the broader community. Because such a report usually has to address different audiences, including Center membership, it may be necessary to develop a second more abbreviated form of the report for mass distribution. Such a report would highlight the conclusions and recommendations of the effort as well as summarize the overall evaluation process. It does not, by definition, detail the process.

Final reports are an essential ingredient of any evaluation effort since they provide an important means of interpreting the evaluation undertaken. Yet, they should never be viewed as a substitute for good process. And good process requires that adequate interpretation of the self-evaluation be provided at every stage of the study. Progress on the evaluation should be reported at regular intervals and opportunities should exist for concerned individuals to express their comments and concerns. This provides for maximum investment in the evaluation and develops the support necessary for implementing the recommendations indicated.

Staff and Lay Leadership Roles

Staff and lay leadership roles in the evaluation are critical. Since it is often a confusion of role between the two that creates some of the

most significant problems in the actual evaluation process it is important discussing the role of each in the evaluation.

As a general rule, the role of the professional is to serve as a resource to the evaluation committee and to assume the leadership in directing the various operational tasks required by the evaluation. The role of the Board members, in this case the evaluation committee, is to be responsible for all policy matters generated by the evaluation. Thus, the committee should be involved in defining the scope and purpose of the evaluation, the specific goals and objectives to be pursued, the criteria to be employed in assessing goals and objectives, and the recommendations generated by the evaluation.

The professional has to assume responsibility for developing the instruments required for data gathering; for carrying out the collection of data and for analyzing the data collected in addition to insuring that the various policy issues raised are satisfactorily resolved.

Often the enthusiasm of lay leaders which results from their participation in the process leads them to want to actively participate in operational aspects of the evaluation. This deserved participation which may take the form of serving as interviewers in the data gathering phase is an unwise course of action. Aside from the role confusion and strain with the professional which tends to result, experience has shown that more often than not, such involvements result in great frustration because the lay leaders underestimate the demands made upon them in terms of the time required to successfully carry out the task.

Summary

In summary, self-evaluation represents both a legitimate and an important form of evaluation to be used by Jewish Community Centers and other communal institutions. While such evaluations need not be complex undertakings, they do require a thoughtful process. Such processes are likely to be most evident when key staff and Center lay

leadership are involved in the effort and when the evaluation is built into the ongoing operations of the Center.

Further, it has been pointed out that this investment of lay leadership and professional staff in the process serves as an important first step in successfully carrying out self-evaluations. When this is accompanied by a clear definition of the roles that each is to assume in

the process, the tasks of the evaluation—(1) defining scope and purpose; (2) specifying goals and objectives; (3) setting criteria for assessing the achievement of goals and objectives; (4) gathering information; (5) analyzing the information gathered; and (6) reporting and interpreting the findings of the study—can be carried out with a maximum of effectiveness and a minimum of frustration.