Building Evaluation Muscle:
Practical Steps for Health Nonprofits at Any Stage

ESTABLISHING POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

PROMOTING A CULTURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

SUSTAINING CONDITIONS

BUILDING BLOCKS

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

ATTITUDES

PROMOTING A CULTURE OF LEARNING

EVALUATION

By Healthcare Georgia Foundation

EVALUATION: Resisted by nonprofits, desired by funders, and misunderstood by many. Over the past 10-15 years, evaluation has begun to get more and more attention in nonprofit and government settings. As the recession wore on and funds from private and government sources continued to shrink, competition for scarce resources increased. Nonprofits were and still are increasingly being required to provide evidence of effectiveness based on past results.

Healthcare Georgia Foundation has shifted its grantmaking from need-based to performance-based funding decisions, requiring from grant applicants evidence of past results in addition to statements of need. However, the Foundation recognizes that small health nonprofits do not always have the knowledge, skills, or resources to plan and conduct evaluation of their programs. It is within this context that the Foundation created and now directs the Evaluation Resource Center (ERC) to help health nonprofits in Georgia achieve better outcomes and improve the health of Georgians.

In addition to providing evaluation technical assistance, an online evaluation Toolkit, and resources, the Foundation commissions and publishes articles on evaluation topics of relevance for health nonprofits in Georgia. The Foundation's evaluation philosophy is one of continuous improvement, collecting and using evaluation data on a frequent, ongoing basis to improve programs in real time. With this approach, the Foundation believes that every health nonprofit organization in Georgia can, and should, conduct evaluation. Some organizations will need to rely heavily on external evaluators, while other organizations will have the capacity to plan and conduct evaluation internally.

> With this approach, Healthcare Georgia Foundation believes that every health nonprofit organization in Georgia can, and should, evaluate its work.

This publication is part of a suite of publications released in 2014 to encourage health nonprofits in Georgia to build capacity and embrace evaluation within their organizations. By applying the concepts in this publication, organizations will gain a broad base of practices and policies necessary to take on evaluation. *Evaluation in Underserved Communities* takes these concepts one step further, applying the steps of an evaluation framework specifically in limited resources settings. Lastly, *Selecting and Working with an External Evaluator* provides readers with a guide to when and how to work with an evaluator outside of one's organization.

Each of these publications was written by an Evaluation Partner of Healthcare Georgia Foundation, all of whom have extensive experience working with small to medium-sized health nonprofits in Georgia. For more information on these evaluators or the Foundation's Evaluation Resource Center, please visit www.georgiaerc.org.

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TERMINOLOGY

LEADERSHIP CAPACITY: The ability to create and sustain a vision, to inspire, to model, to prioritize, to make decisions, to provide direction, and to innovate – all in an effort to achieve an organization's mission.

ADAPTIVE CAPACITY: The ability to monitor, assess, respond to, and create internal and external changes.

MANAGEMENT CAPACITY: The ability to use resources effectively and efficiently. It includes the effective use of human resources, technology, data, and strategic partnerships to achieve one's mission.

TECHNICAL CAPACITY: The resources (e.g. skills, experience, knowledge, financial resources, tools, facilities, technology, etc.) needed to implement all programmatic, organizational and community strategies.

ONGOING, SUSTAINABLE EVALUATION PRACTICE: A habit in an organization, supported by policies, resources and cultural norms, of continuously asking questions about the implementation and effects of the organization's actions, collecting and studying data to find answers, and basing decisions and actions on findings.

INDIVIDUAL EVALUATION CAPACITY: The level of evaluation knowledge, skills and attitudes an individual possesses.

ORGANIZATIONAL EVALUATION CAPACITY: The level of resources and structures an organization has available for evaluation combined with the aggregate of its staff members' individual evaluation capacities.

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

At a basic level, evaluation is simply the exercise of studying the past in order to make better decisions about the future. Since health nonprofits want to generate as much positive change as possible toward their missions given available resources, it might seem natural that they would embrace evaluation as an integral practice for their organizations. If some are reluctant to do so, it may be from a sense that the field of evaluation has grown so complex as to appear out of reach for the "lay person" in a small- to medium-sized nonprofit.

"No amount of sophistication is going to allay the fact that all your knowledge is about the past and all your decisions are about the future."

– Ian E. Wilson

This paper bridges the academic literature and ordinary practice to show how nonprofit organizations, regardless of where they are on the spectrum of evaluation capacity, and regardless of their desire to conduct evaluation internally or use external consultants, can strengthen their ability to engage in and sustain an ongoing evaluation practice. These suggestions are not exhaustive; but they are meant to be practical, accessible, and realistically doable for most nonprofits. Additional tools and information are available from the Foundation's Evaluation Resource Center and the references for this article (also available from the ERC), for those who wish to explore the subject more deeply.
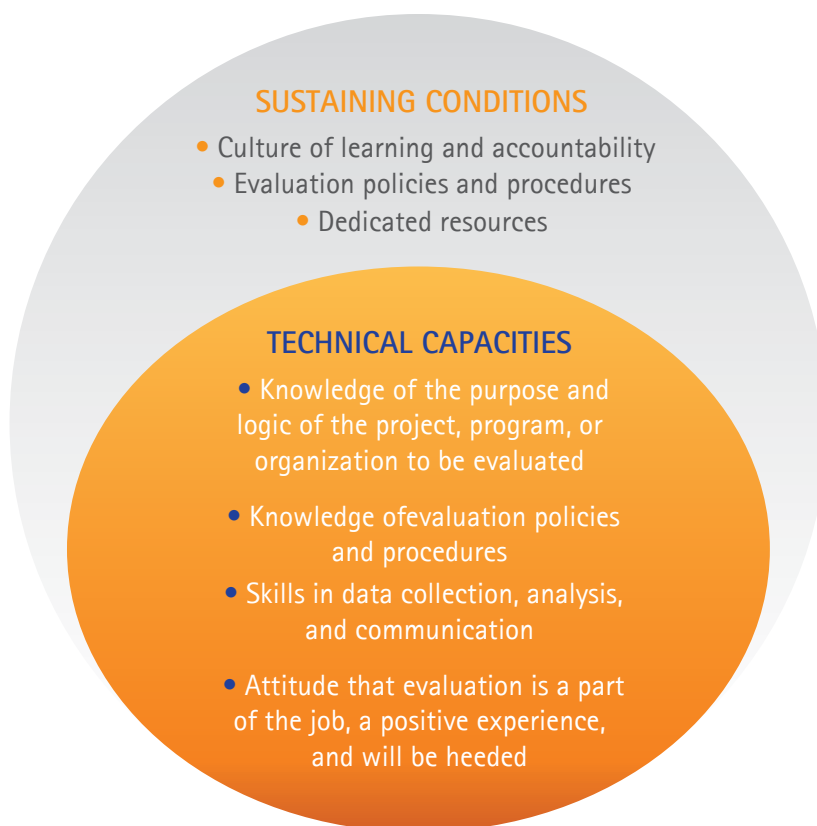
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Capacity–Building Journeys

Evaluation capacity, as a component of overall capacity, exists along a continuum that mirrors the lifecycle stages of organizations. Ideally, evaluation capacity grows steadily as an organization matures, in concert with the four core capacities: leadership capacity, adaptive capacity, management capacity, and technical capacity. Indeed, evaluation draws on elements of each of those core capacities; and implementing an evaluation practice builds strength in each of them as well.

Realities of organizational growth and development are more meandering. Nevertheless, at whatever stage in which you find your organization now – new or established, small or large – it's a good time to consider evaluation capacity and the many ways it can strengthen your organization.

Building Blocks

The building blocks of organizational evaluation capacity can be grouped into two types – technical capacities and sustaining conditions, as shown in Figure 1. Technical capacities are the knowledge, skills and attitudes that an individual needs in order to be an effective evaluator. Sustaining conditions are the adaptive, structural, and normative conditions that an organization needs in order to maintain an effective, integrated, ongoing evaluation practice. Of the building blocks shown here, all except the skills are important even for organizations that hire external evaluators – and some level of skill is helpful there, too. Below we describe the sustaining conditions and give suggestions for fostering them. We then explain the technical capacities and their development.

FIGURE 1. Building Blocks of Evaluation Capacity

SUSTAINING CONDITIONS
- Culture of learning and accountability
- Evaluation policies and procedures
- Dedicated resources

TECHNICAL CAPACITIES
- Knowledge of the purpose and logic of the project, program, or organization to be evaluated
- Knowledge ofevaluation policies and procedures
- Skills in data collection, analysis, and communication
- Attitude that evaluation is a part of the job, a positive experience, and will be heeded

For an organization to integrate and sustain an effective evaluation practice, it must have a culture of learning and accountability. In an organization with a learning culture, executive and board leaders place a high value on continuously growing their own and their staff's understanding of the systems in which they seek to intervene and of their collective and individual roles in those systems. In a culture of accountability, leaders and members are committed to the responsible planning and management of resources, seeking to leverage available resources for maximum impact toward the organization's mission.

> *"I know that half of my advertising dollars are wasted ... I just don't know which half."*
>
> – John Wanamaker

When these two values are part of an organization's culture, its members are naturally dedicated to the full strategic cycle: learn, plan, implement, learn more, and so on. (Figure 2). They study the issues the organization faces, the context in which it operates, the state of the art regarding interventions in their field, the resources and other forms of leverage at their disposal. Organizations use that knowledge to plan actions toward their goal. They implement actions as faithfully to the plan as possible. Learning organizations study what they did and what resulted. And they combine insights from this study with other new learnings to determine future actions for continued or improved effectiveness. Such a culture is fertile ground for sustainable evaluation practice.

FIGURE 2. Strategic Cycle
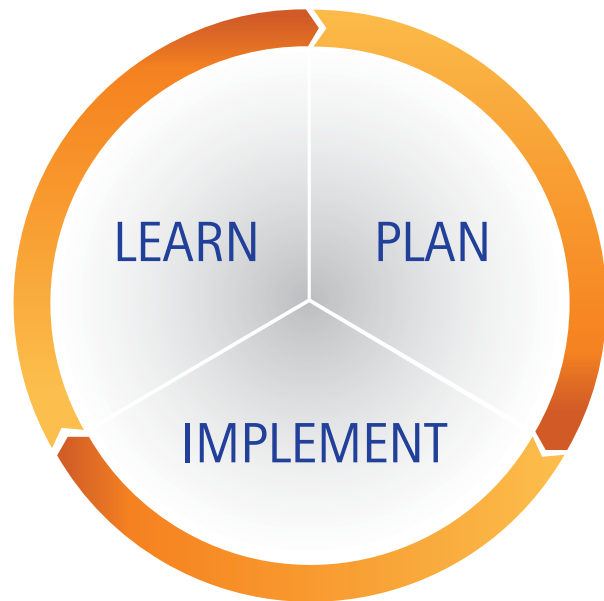
Promoting a Culture of Learning

Leaders can take steps to promote a culture of learning in their organizations. Below are a few suggestions; a simple Internet search on "culture of learning" will yield many others. The principles typically apply equally to nonprofit organizations, even if writings focus on different types of organizations (e.g., these suggestions in the context of education from Edutopia, and these for business environments, from Forbes).

1. Seek out new knowledge from external sources and share significant learnings with organization members. Read scientific and reliable gray literature; attend conferences and meetings; network with colleagues in your field; consider how learnings from other fields might translate to your own.

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2. Create opportunities for members of the organization to exchange knowledge with each other and outside peers. Support a variety of channels for internal communication and knowledge transfer – formal and informal, in-person and virtual; send staff to conferences; bring in experts for briefings and networking; encourage participation in online learning communities and communities of practice.

3. Reflect on new theories and observations that arise from the organization's work. Hold periodic meetings for staff to discuss their activities and challenges, the intended and unintended results, and the possible implications of new learnings to the work. Incorporate time into regular staff meetings for such observations and insights to surface.

4. Plan, measure, and report results at project, program and organizational levels, in both operational and programmatic areas. Regularly review the allocation of resources to ensure their optimal use for operations and programs.

5. Adapt practices based on new information. Demonstrate openness to learning by acting on what is learned and rewarding actions of others that are responsive to new input. Focus on the teachable moment in errors and undesired results.

Promoting a Culture of Accountability

Responsible planning and management of resources in service of the mission is the stated job of board members and executive leadership. But an organization typically needs buy-in from wider members of its staff for a sustainable evaluation practice. A culture of accountability exists when all members of the organization share a sense of responsibility for the wise use of resources.

The last two suggestions above for fostering a learning culture also contribute to a culture of accountability, by demonstrating that value is placed on understanding and improving organizational effectiveness. Other practices that can help staff share a sense of accountability include involving them in strategic planning, organizational and programmatic budget discussions, and resource development activities, as well as in the planning, implementation and use of evaluation itself.

Healthcare Georgia Foundation hosts "Listen, Learn, and Lead" two to three times per year to learn from and with grantees via post-grant reflections and candid discussions about performance and evaluation results.

Establishing Policies and Procedures

Established evaluation policies and procedures provide the structure and direction needed for evaluation to be a routine, ongoing activity. Policies outline broadly when, how, and by whom evaluation is to be conducted, and how results are to be used. Procedures guide the practice more specifically, clarifying methods, expectations, and standards.

Many nonprofits maintain evaluation practices with implicit policies and procedures; but formalizing these is important for making the practice sustainable – not only for ensuring consistency, but also for keeping evaluation visible and communicating organizational commitment.

A designated committee of board and/or staff members can create an evaluation policy by developing statements addressing questions such as the following:

1) How often will a program be evaluated?

2) What (if any) evaluations will be conducted by staff? By external consultants?

3) How do we decide how much money to invest in evaluation? How much time?

4) Who determines the focus of an evaluation?

5) Who is responsible for designing and conducting data collection? For managing data?

6) Who is qualified to analyze evaluation data? Whose input is considered in drawing conclusions and making recommendations?

7) How are evaluation results disseminated? To whom?

8) Who reviews evaluation policies and processes? How often? Who can make changes?

Further guidance for developing evaluation policy (see Trochim 2009), as well as examples, are available on the internet. A good example of an evaluation policy for a very large health agency is that of the U.S. Agency for International Development. Your policy can be as high-level or as detailed as needed; and it can and should grow and change as your evaluation capacity evolves.

While some organizations develop their own evaluation manuals to standardize their procedures, many rely on established best practices such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Framework and Standards for Evaluation and the American Evaluation Association's Guiding Principles for Evaluators. It is worthwhile to become familiar with these since they are so commonly known and applied, even if your organization chooses a different or truncated approach. Like policy, specific evaluation procedures can expand as your organization gains practice and expertise. An intentional (prospective) evaluation is better than a de facto (retrospective) one; and a sustained evaluation practice requires ongoing intentionality and improvement.

CAPACITY
BEGETS
RESOURCES

Dedicating Resources

The amount and type of resources that an organization needs to maintain an effective evaluation practice vary considerably according to its policies and procedures regarding evaluation. (Likewise, policies and procedures must be designed or revised so that they are appropriate to the type and degree of resources available for evaluation.) Consider all forms of resources: funding, staff time, expertise, technology, and materials.

Whether using internal or external evaluators, staff time should be dedicated to the following:

- learning about evaluation;

- discussing evaluation in the context of planning (for programs, projects, or the organization overall);

- disseminating results; and

- ensuring their use.

In addition, staff must have time either to research, hire and oversee external evaluators, or to plan and conduct evaluation. External evaluation requires funds (unless donated as services in-kind); and some level of record-sharing and data coordination are likely. Internal evaluation may call for data collection resources and infrastructure such as internet surveys, telephone systems, mailing costs, databases, and analysis software. The Evaluation Resource Center's online Toolkit includes a checklist for developing an evaluation budget. http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/archive_checklists/evaluationbudgets.pdf

To ensure that resources are available for evaluation, it is ideally given a specific allocation in the organization's budget. If each program's budget includes a line item for evaluation –10 percent is a good estimate– this signals that evaluation is integral to programs and helps ensure that this important component is not overlooked by sponsors or funders. Organizational-level evaluations and longer-term investments in evaluation such as software and specialized training should be factored into organizational planning and included in budgets when appropriate and feasible.

Knowledge and Skills

An effective program director or project leader will necessarily have a strong grasp of their activity's purpose and logic. They must understand the project's ultimate goal, the short and intermediate outcomes expected to produce that result, and the activities that will be carried out to produce those   outcomes. They should know the basis – ideally the evidence – for expecting that their activities will produce the desired outcomes, and those outcomes the desired result. They hold management responsibility for the resources (inputs) that will be used to carry out the specified activities. In short, program or project leaders should hold all the knowledge necessary to create a logic model.

The Evaluation Resource Center Toolkit provides instruction and templates for creating a logic model. If an external evaluator is used, they might elicit the information from staff to develop a logic model – but the staff must be able to understand and verify that the logic model correctly reflects the program's design in order for the consultant to design an appropriate evaluation.

Program staff also need to understand the organization's evaluation policies and procedures if the practice is to be integral to operations. Staff can gain familiarity with these by helping to create

or review and revise them; or through regular consultation of the written policies and procedures. They can develop the in-depth knowledge and skill to uphold evaluation standards and carry out evaluation procedures, including data collection, analysis, and communication, through practice and a range of learning approaches including the following:

- Participating in evaluation with an experienced evaluator, as an intern or volunteer, or under the guidance of a mentor

- Reading materials from academic journals, professional associations and other credible sources

- Academic classes, online courses*, workshops

- Professional meetings and conferences

- Local or online learning communities

- Dedicated training, technical assistance and coaching

* (Completing the ERC Evaluation Toolkit (www. http://www.georgiaerc.org/ch1-a.asp) takes approximately 8-10 hours. All resources are free, and the ERC is available to review draft Logic Models and Evaluation Plans for health nonprofits in Georgia.)

Attitudes

Attitude is to culture as weather is to climate: a short-term manifestation of a long-term trend. Thus the final technical capacity brings us back to the first-described sustaining condition. The values and practices of a learning and accountability culture themselves foster positive attitudes toward evaluation among members of an organization. Staff who share a sense of responsibility for the organization's resources understand that evaluation is integral to the work. Coupled with a learning orientation, they

will see evaluation as a positive experience – an opportunity to find out what works well and what can be improved – and they will have trust that evaluation findings will be taken into account in future decisions. Establish a culture of learning and accountability, and positive attitudes toward evaluation should follow.

Continuity

As stated at the outset, now – any time – is a good time to consider evaluation capacity and where it could be enhanced. This is because, as organizations change, as their areas of strength ebb and flow, and their context and needs evolve, there may be different aspects of the ongoing practice in need of sharpening at different times. There may be innovations in the field of evaluation and changes in the information needs of funders and other stakeholders to consider. There may be knowledge transfer needs within the organization or among partners due to shifts in the constellation of players involved. And it is good to remember to focus on maintaining the organizational culture you desire. Developing the conditions and capacities described above will serve this continuity well.

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About the Georgia Health Policy Center

Georgia Health Policy Center (GHPC), a unit of the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University, provides research, program development and policy guidance regionally and nationally to improve health status at the community level. Jane Branscomb, MPH, is a Senior Research Associate with GHPC and has 15 years of previous experience in nonprofit development and executive leadership.