STAGE THREE EVALUATION UTILIZATION

This chapter contains:

1. Three steps to using evaluation conclusions and recommendations

- Reflect and Generalize

- Apply

- Share: Internally and Externally

2. Evaluation Utilization Checklist

INTRODUCTION

"Creative thinking may mean simply the realization that there is no particular virtue in doing things the way they always have been done."
- RUDOLF FLESCH

One of the most common misconceptions about evaluation is that the process is finished when the final report arrives on the project leader's desk. In fact, the final report represents the completion of only the first two-thirds of a process whose main benefits are packed into the final third. Imagine that the evaluators have brought a full bucket of water to the project leader on a scorching hot day. Someone has to reflect on how the water will be used and then take action to pour it into glasses, drink it, use it to water the plants, or bathe with it, otherwise it will just sit there and evaporate until it is no longer useful to anyone.

The latter third of the evaluation process focuses upon the use of the recommendations and conclusions. This stage is often referred to as the feedback loop, and it generally has two facets: internal learning and external sharing.

With the pressure to write proposals, implement projects and report to donors, internal learning may feel like an additional burden to the already overburdened practitioner. Yet the benefits of utilizing evaluation results are multiple and they are at the heart of the effort to advance the peacebuilding field. Within the project team, evaluation results enrich the discussion on whether the work is helping those it is supposed to help in the way it was planned. More pragmatically, it can indicate ways and means of improving the process. In addition, the advancement of models and designs indicates a level of expertise that can be compelling to donors.

Sharing the evaluation results and the subsequent reflections and adaptations to the project externally increases transparency between the organization and its stakeholders and donors. Such sharing can also foster dialogue and reciprocity between organizations. It contributes to the growth and value of the field while reducing the amount of resources wasted through reinventing the wheel. As conflict transformation theory and practice continue to develop, a commitment by organizations to internal learning and external sharing has great potential to effect change within the practice of this field.

In fact, the final report represents the completion of only the first two-thirds of a process whose main benefits are packed into the final third.

10
Evaluation Utilization

The benefits of utilizing evaluation results are multiple and they are at the heart of the effort to advance the peacebuilding field.

As conflict transformation theory and practice continue to develop, a commitment by organizations to internal learning and external sharing has great potential to effect change within the practice of this field.

When do I start thinking about the "use" of an evaluation?

Begin thinking about how the evaluation will be used during the preparation stage. The evaluation objectives and how the project team hopes to use the information generated by the evaluation must be aligned. If, for instance, the evaluation objective is management and administration but the team hopes to use the evaluation information to understand more about the effects of the project, the team is unlikely to find the findings useful. External use of the evaluation should also be addressed briefly during the preparation stage when deciding on the evaluation's audience and its potential readers.
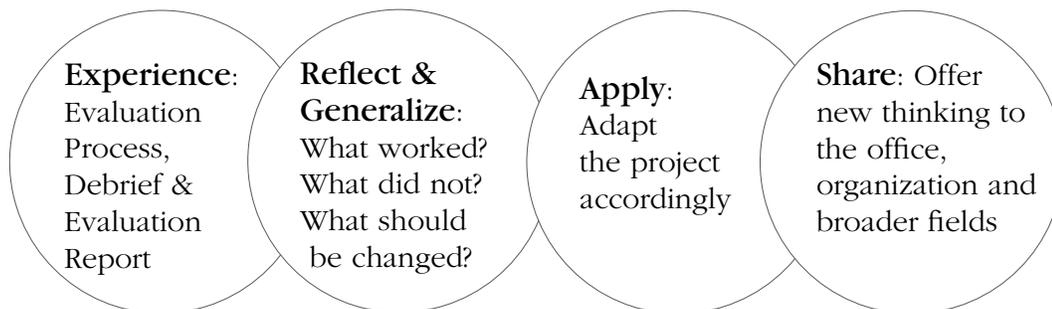
Of course, the evaluation implementation itself is a learning experience, but the real attention to internal learning starts when the evaluation team presents their draft conclusions while still in-country. A smart evaluation manager will remind the project team at this stage that there are more steps left to come.

The evaluation objectives and how the project team hopes to use the information generated by the evaluation must be aligned.

What are the steps needed to use the content of the evaluation report?

There are a series of overlapping steps, based on the Kolb adult learning stages outlined in the Learning Chapter page 6, that should be taken to maximize the internal and external benefits of an evaluation report. First, the project team goes through the experience of the evaluation – preparation, evaluation plan, process, debrief and review of the final report. The team then reflects on the conclusions and recommendations, and generalizes the information beyond the immediate project. From there the focus shifts to how this newly acquired knowledge should be applied to the project or beyond. Finally, the team considers what needs to be shared with other teams, with the broader organization, and with the field as a whole.

Applying Kolb's Theory of Learning

Experience: Evaluation Process, Debrief & Evaluation Report

Reflect & Generalize: What worked? What did not? What should be changed?

Apply: Adapt the project accordingly

Share: Offer new thinking to the office, organization and broader fields

As illustrated in the diagram, these steps overlap. What is important is that all the steps be taken and that they be completed in real-time. In other words, the process should not be delayed until the team thinks it will have more time to discuss the results.

Well-intentioned evaluation managers and project teams sometimes jump immediately to application. This is not altogether bad; however, these discussions often become stuck in the technicalities of the project and may not offer the opportunity to reflect on the macro-level issues or to address issues at a generic level separate from the immediate demands of the project.

EXPERIENCE: The evaluation has been planned, data collected, and tentative conclusions drawn. Both the in-country debriefing and the discussion with the project team have taken place. The remaining steps begin at this point.

REFLECT AND GENERALIZE: This step involves consideration of the findings from the perspective of the immediate project and long-term learning, review of the recommendations, and identification of the actions to be taken.

Once the evaluation is submitted, someone – often the evaluation manager – should be appointed as the learning facilitator. Remember, this role may not be necessary if it is already part of the evaluator's responsibilities. The learning facilitator works with the project team to identify who should be included in these reflections. Together they should consider people located horizontally from the team as well as vertically above and below the team decision makers. Horizontally, staff members responsible for similar processes, partners, and stakeholders should be considered since they can benefit from the experience of others. Vertically, supervisor(s) – whether immediately above or even more senior – should also be included.

Next, develop a facilitated process to support the reflection and generalization. As with a conflict resolution process, simply gathering the right people is not enough. The process requires additional thought and creativity. For larger groups, this may involve a multi-stage process or different processes for different groupings. Sometimes it is helpful to focus solely on the evaluation conclusions in the first conversation and to leave the recommendations for the next discussion. This allows the project team to focus on the findings and to have a rare opportunity to discuss assumptions, principles and techniques outside the context of the day-to-day pressure of implementation.

In designing the process and selecting the participants, the conflict setting should not be ignored, particularly if staff members are from the area of conflict. Ensure that the process does not permit individual staff members, groups in the community or aspects of the governance structure to be blamed either for problems that arose or for a lack of results. Affirm the challenges of working on conflict issues and recognize the need to work around them.

As with a conflict resolution process, simply gathering the right people is not enough. The process requires additional thought and creativity.

In designing the process and selecting the participants, the conflict setting should not be ignored, particularly if staff members are from the area of conflict.

10
Evaluation
Utilization

Whatever the process used, the discussion should facilitate reflection and generalization. Consider questions that range from the conceptual to the technical. The discussion need not be restricted to the evaluation results; however, be careful that the conversation does not avoid the thorny issues that an evaluation may raise. Depending on the evaluation objectives, the report conclusions may bring up some or all of the following questions for the project team to discuss:

- Did our theory(ies) of change work? Why or why not?

- Would a different theory of change have catalyzed a greater transformation?

- Was the context analysis accurate?

- Did our strategy link to the analysis in the best way?

- What happened as a result of these activities?

- What did not happen – that we expected to happen – as a result of these activities?

- Was the process we used within each activity the right one?

- How can we improve our techniques (e.g., training techniques)?

- What do the evaluation recommendations mean for the project and organization?

- What are the key learning points from this for the future?

- What were the critical factors for success?

- What are the pitfalls to look for next time?

To facilitate sharing and building institutional memory, the process and conclusions from these discussions should be documented.

Key Principles of Learning [21]

- Help others actively interpret information so that they can construct new knowledge for themselves, rather then relying solely on paper formats.

- Situate abstract tasks in real contexts so that the relevance of the task is apparent and others can adopt the new knowledge.

- Separate knowledge from a single specific context in order to maximize knowledge sharing.

- Provide others with many examples of a new concept.

- Explain how essential features of a new concept are reflected in a variety of different settings.

[21] Adapted from the *UNDP Handbook on Monitoring and Evaluation for Results*

Identifying what did or did not work is an important first step. However, without an intentional discussion about what will be changed both in the immediate aftermath of the evaluation and in the longer term, it is unlikely that reflection alone will be enough to change the way projects are designed and implemented.

Begin by determining if everyone involved in the reflections conversation needs to be involved in setting action steps. This is facilitated by keeping the discussions on reflections and generalizations separate. Then review the team conclusions that resulted from the reflections and generalization discussion and determine the action steps to be taken to implement those conclusions. This discussion should also address which of the evaluation recommendations will be adopted. It is important to note that a project team is not required to act on every recommendation. The team should reflect, however, on all the recommendations and determine which will be accepted or rejected and why.

For those recommendations not adopted, the reasons for not adopting them should be stated.

APPLY: This step moves the team back into action. To facilitate this, it may be helpful to develop a utilization plan. Action steps based on evaluator recommendations should be noted in conjunction with the recommendation from which they are taken. For those recommendations not adopted, the reasons for not adopting them should be stated. The utilization plan should also outline what will be done, by whom, and when.

This document can be a valuable addition to institutional memory since it captures decisions that may be useful for future evaluators, proposal writers, donors or new staff joining the team. Pending the content of the utilization plan, it can also be beneficial to attach it to the evaluation circulated to donors and key stakeholders. This shows that the organization is taking the evaluation seriously and has the capacity to learn and improve.

It may be helpful to extend the learning facilitator's role by a few months or even a year so that this person can check in with the team to ensure that the utilization plan has been implemented. As time passes, the learning facilitator can also initiate discussions on what difference those changes have made to continue the learning process.

SHARE: INTERNALLY Finally, what was learned needs to be shared with others both within the office and throughout the organization. At a minimum, circulate the evaluation and utilization plan to relevant parties such as department managers, senior personnel, field directors, etc. Other actions may include:

- Circulating the evaluation and utilization plan to wider range of staff

- Hosting a workshop on the results and lessons learned

- Adding panels to regional staff meetings on lessons from the evaluation

- Developing a short lessons learned summary

- Contributing a paragraph on the two critical factors for success in the internal newsletter

- Convening meetings to share the learning with regional or technical staff who support a wide range of programs

- Posting the evaluation on the organization intranet

Consideration should be given to the process used to share information if the goal is not only to assist people in knowing it but also applying the new information. Use the Key Principles of Learning depicted on page 182 to inform design of these mechanisms.

"I can honestly say that not a day goes by when we don't use those evaluations in one way or another."

Written by *M. M. Rogers* and illustrated by *Lawson Sworh*

SHARE: EXTERNALLY In addition to the learning benefits from the evaluation results, a wise organization reaps an array of valuable benefits from distributing the evaluation externally. Different formats, such as key results document, may need to be developed for different external audiences in order to be effective. Possible external uses include:

Donor Relations

- Incorporate evidence-based results to strengthen proposals
- Use the document as a means of outreach to new donors
- Strengthen established relations through discussions about the results and the changes the organization is making as a consequence of the evaluation

Public Relations

- Host a meeting with interested stakeholders to discuss the results
- Include key quotes on websites and brochures
- Add a "Results" or "Accomplishments" section to the annual report
- Include the results in a key talking points packet for the press
- Produce an "Accomplishments" brochure that focuses on the difference the work has made in the world
- Write a concise summary and circulate to electronically to relevant peacebuilding listservs

Academia

- Write journal articles that include the evaluation results or that are based on the evaluation experience
- Invite academics and researchers to use the data collected for the evaluation in their studies
- Present papers on the evaluation at conferences

I'm really busy. Can all of this be put together in a checklist?

Within the fast-paced context of a conflict situation, engaging in systematic reflection can prove to be extremely challenging as the needs or opportunities that prompted the project in the first place may no longer be relevant. In addition, a sense of urgency can develop that one needs to learn new things to address up-and-coming problems. If this sense dominates, the ability of the peacebuilding field to improve

Within the fast-paced context of a conflict situation, engaging in systematic reflection can prove to be extremely challenging as the needs or opportunities that prompted the project in the first place may no longer be relevant.

and to increase its effectiveness in achieving its goal of building positive peace around the world will remain limited. Moreover, project teams and organizations will not learn to do their work better, which will also limit the sharing of knowledge within the field.

Use the following Evaluation Utilization Checklist as a tool to ensure that none of the steps are missed. The "Lead Actor" column indicates who is responsible for the task, while the "Who is involved?" column covers key participants within the organization. The "When" column requires a sense of timing for the task.

Evaluation Utilization Checklist

Tasks	Lead Actor	Who is involved?	When
Determine evaluation objective(s)			
Conduct draft conclusions and debrief with project team			
Determine who will be involved in reflections conversation			
Develop process for reflections conversation			
Circulate final evaluation report to all involved in conversations			
Conduct first reflections conversation			
Document thoughts and ideas from conversation			
Determine who should be involved in making decisions about changes at the project, program and/or organizational level			
Identify adaptations to be made including responses to the evaluation recommendations			
Development of utilization plan			
Evaluation and utilization plan (including new knowledge) circulated to relevant staff			
Monitor how the new learning and utilization plan has been applied			
Incorporate results into organizational working knowledge through a variety of forums such as • Workshops • Internal Newsletter • Panels • Lessons Learned Briefing			
Consider use of results in donor relations, public relations and academia			
Circulate to other organizations in the field			

Utilization from a long-term perspective

Over time, an organization will accumulate more and more evaluations, which will create opportunities for greater utilization, improvement in evaluation quality, and the maximization of learning. Some options to consider include:

- ***Evaluation Synthesis:*** *The gathering and summarizing of the results of evaluation studies of similar programs (by theme or tool).*

- ***Standards of Practice Guidelines****: Development of standards of practice or guidelines that evaluations can use to assess programs against.*

- ***Meta-evaluation****: Assessing existing evaluations against pertinent standards to help improve evaluation implementation in the future. This is a form of evaluation quality control.*

10

Evaluation Utilization

Further Reading:

Michael Quinn Patton, *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*, Third Edition, SAGE Publications, 1996.

David A Kolb, *Kolb's Theory of Adult Learning*, 1984.
http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/experience.htm