

Evaluation - A Key to Success

How can this process be used to benefit your community?

Communities face many challenges related to their overall economic, environmental and social well-being. Your group, like many others, probably formed to focus on one of these aspects and to solve specific problems that have been identified in your community. However, you should remember that all of these factors are connected and should be included in any measure of success. Effective projects have goals and specific objectives meant to meet those goals. A goal refers to the vision that your group wants to attain in the future. Objectives are specific and measurable steps taken to attain those goals.

Once you have established your goals and objectives, how will you know if a project is successful? How will you know if the project is achieving its goals? Well, you probably know already. You have seen the actions of your group and probably have a “gut feeling” that tells you whether or not a specific project is successful. Or maybe you feel that your project could be doing even better. While there is nothing wrong with evaluating your group’s projects this way, everyone’s “gut feeling” is different. Understandable and clearly defined indicators of results are important in order to know whether your projects are successful or not. They can also help you inform people outside of the group about your projects and accomplishments.



The Benefits of Evaluating Your Project

Evaluating the progress of your project can provide benefits for both your group and your community. These benefits include learning new skills, raising general awareness and changing attitudes towards the environment. Evaluating a project is also an important step for keeping your group focused on its responsibility to the community and to those who give you financial support. It can also enhance your public image, which can help your group attain resources, such as increased membership, partnerships and funding.

It is important to have an accurate and appropriate record of the results of your project in order to make good planning decisions. Information on your project’s outcomes helps your group improve the way it uses its resources, which may include people, equipment, time or money. This information can also show if the project is moving in the right direction. Evaluating whether certain goals have been neglected may help your group redistribute resources to areas where they are most needed. Having a way of measuring your outcomes gives your group a way to demonstrate to your members, partners and funding sources whether your goals are being met. The results of your evaluation may help participants to gain a better understanding of how their actions

impact a project's results. Finally, most grantors want to know where their money is going. It is important to show them why the group deserves funding and how important their support is to your community.

What would happen if a town official asked about the effects of your group's roadside litter education project on the community? Do you know? Can you provide information to support your claim? What if a journalist wanted to write an article on your group's aquatic habitat restoration project? Do you have information to demonstrate the success and progress your group has made on the project? What if a grantor asked for an update on your group's water quality monitoring project that they helped fund? Could you show that your project has used the funding in a responsible and effective way?

Evaluation of your projects can give your group the ability to answer these questions. It can also help your organization in these ways:

- **Enhance planning and management**

In the short-term, using an evaluation method makes resource allocation more effective for current projects and activities. This can help group leaders to concentrate on management issues such as group training needs and workload distribution among staff and volunteers. It can also provide the necessary information to develop a working budget. Overall, better management improves motivation of volunteers and staff.

The evaluation process can help your group develop long-term plans. Having a long-term goal allows for better distribution of resources and provides guidance for the future. This may lead to expansion of the scope of successful services, a clearer perception of what needs to be done and a better idea of how to approach problems. This can raise awareness in the community and mobilize new volunteers and collaborators.

- **Increase financial support**

Evaluation helps your group clearly show that you have made a difference. Sponsors often want to fund projects they know are successful. A clear record of success is often important to retain existing funding and to obtain additional resources.

- **Improve public understanding and support**

Obtaining favorable public recognition raises awareness for your program. A well-known and respected group can increase its membership and easily rally support for activities. This can lead to recognition as a model community group. An active base of community support also provides a certain degree of recognition and leverage with the local government.

- **Demonstrate accountability**

Evaluation allows you to show that you are doing what you say you are doing. This can be important to outside agencies that provide funding, group members and the community. An accurate and detailed record of indicators can give current supporters confidence in their investment in your group.

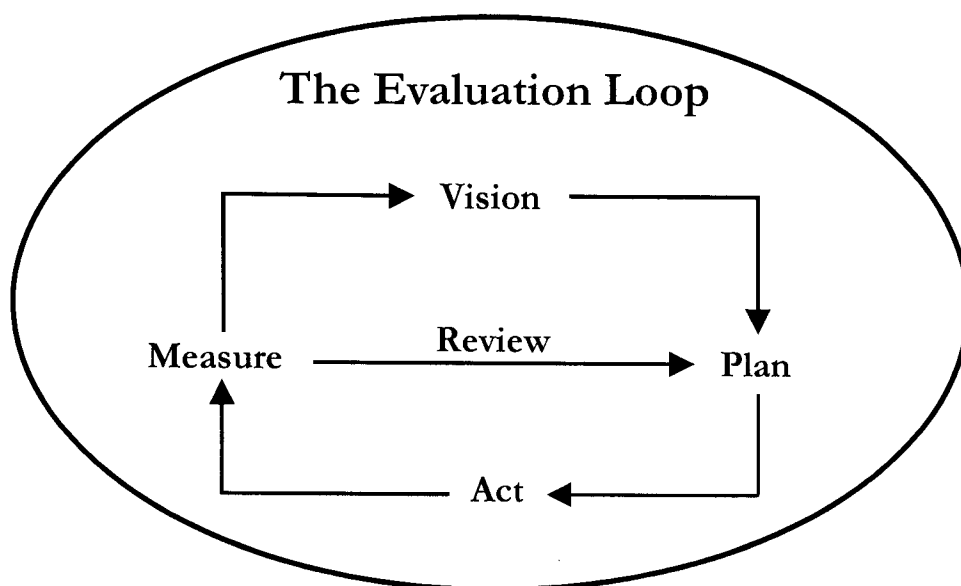
- **Strengthen partnerships**

The evaluation process lets everyone involved know where your project stands and what progress has been made. It also helps identify how everyone is working together toward a common goal and where responsibilities lie. Evaluation can also improve your capacity to distribute information on your achievements.

The Evaluation Process

This section starts by highlighting the benefits of evaluating your program, as well as providing some concrete examples that can be expected from the evaluation process. Now, it is important to know how to make the process work for your group.

The basic idea of evaluation is that it helps you to review and adapt your group's objectives and focus on how they can best be attained. Using this information throughout the visioning, planning and acting processes will have a significant impact on your group's activities. This mechanism will help your group become more effective, improve the quality of your work and be more responsive towards participants, community and other partners.



Visioning helps define the goals of your project. It is about figuring out where you want to go and what you want to achieve.

Planning provides the blueprint of the vision. It includes the definition of objectives and the steps that need to be taken to achieve them.

Acting is going out and getting the job done by taking the steps necessary to meet your objectives.

Measuring helps you determine if your actions made a difference. It lets you see the impact of your actions in a way that is clearly understandable. This step helps your group assess and track its progress towards the goals of the project.

Reviewing allows you to use the information collected in the measuring process to understand the relationships between actions and objectives. This step can show you if other actions need to be carried out to ensure that objectives will be achieved.

To be effective, evaluation should be an ongoing process. Visioning identifies goals of the project. Planning identifies objectives and steps necessary to achieve those goals. Acting is carrying out the steps identified during the planning phase. Measuring quantifies the results of the actions taken. Reviewing the information gathered and adjusting the goals and objectives identified through the visioning and planning processes closes the loop.

By now, you should understand the importance of having an evaluation program. If used effectively and as an essential element of your group's regular activities, it can generate diverse outcomes that can help your group enhance the environmental, social and economic quality of your community. It can help you identify objectives and the best way to achieve them. It can track whether you are making progress toward your goals. It can boost participants' motivation, increase their sense of responsibility and promote the mission of the group. It can improve the group's public image, which will not only attract more participants and partners willing to cooperate on project, but will also increase the chances that potential funders are aware of your group and its work in the community.

The following chapters of this manual will help you identify what to evaluate and the tools and indicators you can use in the evaluation process. As you work on evaluating your project, it is helpful to keep the following in mind:

INCLUDE EVERYONE



Volunteers working on a dump site

One essential component of the evaluation process is to make it participatory. Make sure that the volunteers, staff, community and other partners know the importance of the evaluation process and why you want to make it participatory. Different views and opinions will lead to a stronger program. Make sure that everybody understands that it is not going to be an occasional event, but an ongoing process for the entire group.

BASELINE DATA

Baseline data is the first data collected on your indicator. All other data that will be collected for that indicator will be compared to this baseline. It is from comparisons to this data that your group will know whether or not the project is moving towards its goals.



Volunteers monitoring water quality

An example of baseline data is determining the present condition of the watershed. You can collect information on what you want to focus on before you start activities and programs. Then, a few months or years down the road when you collect additional information, you will have something to compare. You will be able to see what your group has accomplished by doing your projects and how you made a

difference. Collecting baseline data will improve your group's effectiveness, fund raising capabilities, public influence and decision-making. Furthermore, keep in mind that even though your project may be well underway, **it is never too late to collect baseline data!**

BE REALISTIC

Choosing what to measure will likely depend on what kind of time, skills and financial and volunteer resources your group has to draw upon. For example, if a member of your group is a science teacher, use his or her skills to develop educational or environmental indicators. No matter what is being measured, it is very important that your group has the capability to collect data regularly. Be realistic about how often you can collect data. Do not put unnecessary strain upon your resources. However, don't limit yourself to measuring only one type of indicator. Your indicators need to be as comprehensive as possible and reflect the relationships among the many environmental, economic and social factors within your community.

CREATE A SCHEDULE

Develop and commit your group to a data collection schedule. Routine data collection will provide your group with on-going information on the relationship between actions and outcomes. It can demonstrate how well you are progressing towards meeting your objectives. Remember, successful groups regularly evaluate their progress.