How to Design Successful Evaluation and Assessment Plans

The more focused you are about the purpose of your evaluation, the more effective and efficient you can be in the design and implementation of evaluation plans, and the more useful your evaluation results will be. That kind of focus comes from using a formal approach to evaluation, which requires using a formal approach to designing your plans for evaluation, as well. Consider the following key questions when designing any kind of evaluations or assessments.

1. **Who are the primary audiences?**
   For example, is the information for Board members, management, other employees, investors or customers? Each of these audiences might need to make specific decisions about the project. Also, they might require that project evaluation information be organized and presented in a certain manner to really be useful to them.

2. **What are the primary purposes?**
   For example, the purpose of the evaluation might be to answer certain management questions, such as: How do we address problems and improve the project? How do we discern if the project is achieving its goals? How do we clarify and verify what benefits the organization is realizing by participating in the project?

3. **What questions must be answered?**
   If the decision that you need to make is about improving the project, you might have a range of evaluation questions to answer, such as: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the approach in the project? Is the project achieving its goals and if not, why not?

4. **What types of information are needed**?
   For example, if you want to know if you need to improve the project or not, then you might need information on employees’ and client’s complaints, costs of the project, or the changes that clients report from having participated in the project.

5. **From what sources should the information be collected?**
   For example, should it be collected from individual employees, groups of employees and/or documentation in the organization?

6. **What are the best methods to collect the information?**
   Can you get the best information from reviewing documentation, using questionnaires or conducting interviews? Are there assessment instruments that you can use? Should you use an instrument that has already been developed or should you develop your own? Is it best to use a mix of these methods?

7. **What context-sensitive considerations must be made?**
   Each organization has unique features, such as its culture, nature of leadership, rate of change in its environment, nature of products and services, and size. How do these features influence how you will gather your information?

8. **What is the best timing for getting the information?**
   Do you need to provide a report by a certain date? Are there problems that need to be addressed right away? How often can you get access to the sources of the information that you need? How long will it take to collect information?

9. **Who should collect the information?**
   Ideally, someone from outside the project does the information collection, analysis and reporting. That approach helps to ensure that the evaluation is carried out in a highly objective and low-bias manner. However, it is often unrealistic for small organizations to afford an outside evaluator. Consequently, it is important to select personnel who can conduct the evaluation in a manner as objective as possible. Equally as important is to ensure that the project operations are designed so they automatically generate much of the information that will be useful in evaluating the project.

10. **How will you analyze the information?**
    How the information is analyzed depends much on the focus of the evaluation questions and on the nature of the information, for example, whether the information will contain lots of numbers or comments.

11. **How will you make interpretations and conclusions?**
    You will need some frame of reference from which to make judgments about the information, for example, performance indicators, best practices, theories or standards of performance.

See “Maximum Performance – Different Things to Different People” on page 179 for more information about best practices.

12. **How will you report the information?**
    How the evaluation results are reported depends on the nature of the audience and the decisions that must be made about the project. For example, you might provide an extensive written report or a presentation to a group of people.

13. **Should you test your evaluation and assessment plans?**
    Depending on the complexity of your plans, you might benefit from field testing them by using data-collection tools with a certain group of people to discern if the tools are understandable to them.

14. **What ethical considerations must be made?**
    For example, do you want to report any information unique to any of the participants? If so, you will need to get their expressed consent. In any case, you will need to tell any of your potential participants of your evaluation plans.