

Creative & Credible

CONSULTATION AND AIMS SETTING

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One of the first steps in evaluation is identifying and consulting with the people that are involved in or affected by the project, i.e., your stakeholders. The evaluation strategy needs to take into account how they perceive the evaluation and what information they require. For evaluation purposes, key stakeholders could include project managers, those who will be delivering the project (the artists), funders, commissioners, and – crucially – the participants, service users or their representatives. Here we discuss some of the issues surrounding effective consultation, signposting useful tools and resources.

Aims Consensus

Setting clear aims is a crucial part of the evaluation cycle. A clear set of evaluation aims will provide a framework for inquiry and inform the key questions that the evaluation seeks to answer. However, it is common for arts and health projects to have a wide range of aims, not all of which can be easily measured. Further, evaluation resources are often limited. Hence evaluation aims are not necessarily the same as project aims. Often it is not possible to evaluate all of the project aims and certain aims will need to be prioritised based on stakeholder priorities and available funds and resources. This may be challenging, because different stakeholders may have different perspectives on what is important to capture.

It is worthwhile investing time and energy in reaching a consensus on evaluation aims as you commence the evaluation cycle. Involving stakeholders in priority setting secures early engagement and ownership over the project. Consultation also provides the opportunity to test out ideas and methods and to discuss the likely impact of different activities, establishing feasibility and ensuring that the evaluation does not become burdensome to project participants. Developing aims consensus requires a process of prioritisation – prioritising from a potentially vast list of aims, those that reflect most accurately the shared priorities of everyone concerned.

A variety of methods can be used to support effective development of aims consensus. The method of consultation, will depend on the context of the project and the roles and backgrounds of stakeholders. There are formal methods,

such as focus groups and questionnaires, as well as informal and creative methods such as polls, card games, mapping exercises, graffiti walls etc. Your choice of method will depend on:

- Time and resources available
- Skills and experience of the facilitator
- Characteristics of the stakeholder group
- Purpose of the consultation event and questions it is seeking to answer
- Expected outputs/outcomes from the session

A creative way of making deliberative methods open to anyone has been developed by the New Economics Foundation in the form of Democs kits, which provide information about a topic on a set of cards used in an interactive process to support small group discussion (<http://www.neweconomics.org/projects/entry/democs>). Creative methods for aims setting in arts and health evaluation can be devised and adapted for specific contexts. They can help to ensure that stakeholders make informed decisions about evaluation aims and priorities. It may be appropriate to use formal techniques of consensus development designed to guide priority setting and decision making. An example is the Nominal Group Technique (Delbecq and VandeVen, 1971). This is a focused technique for group decision making in which people silently write down their ideas before going on to discuss and rank them and vote to decide group priorities. It is useful for balancing power dynamics in a group and allowing people from different backgrounds an equal voice. This is an important consideration in arts and health, where stakeholders may range from hospital consultants through to service users.

An effective aims setting exercise will usually generate a maximum of five clear, focused and measurable aims that the majority of the group agree on. The clearer the aims, the easier it is to evaluate them in a meaningful way. An aims consensus exercise should involve all of the project's key stakeholders. Specialists may be drawn in for the setting of the evaluation aims, for example those with knowledge of the setting or with expertise in research or evaluation.

Conclusion

Consultation is important throughout the evaluation cycle. As well as informing evaluation aims and methods, it ensures that all stakeholders have realistic expectations of what the evaluation can achieve. It is important to keep people informed with the progress of evaluation as it progresses, especially if it is of a large scale or long duration. Tools to support consultation exist and can be effective for helping people understand the issues before giving an opinion or reaching a decision. A well managed consultation process will result in a set of outcomes and impacts that are measurable, or possible to assess using available tools, as well as being relevant to practitioners, participants, stakeholders and commissioners.

References

The Nominal Group Technique (Delbecq and VandeVen 1971) is a formal technique for group decision making that has been widely used in health and social care. See: Delbecq A. L. and VandeVen A. H, (1971). "A Group Process Model for Problem Identification and Program Planning," *Journal Of Applied Behavioral Science* VII (July/August, 1971), 466 -91).



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