

Evaluation Approaches

How to Choose an Approach to Your Evaluation

Being clear about the purposes of your evaluation will help you in deciding which approach or combination of approaches is best for your needs. The philosophy and values of your organization will also be important to consider. For example, if your organization is one in which many people are consulted and involved in decision-making, then a participant-focused evaluation might be the best approach. The basic issue is alignment. The evaluation approach you choose should be aligned with the purposes of the evaluation and the philosophy and values of your organization. It should also align with the expertise of your evaluator. Some evaluation practitioners are comfortable with a variety of approaches, while others have specialized in particular types of evaluation. This is an important area to explore with potential evaluators.

Major Approaches to Evaluation

Different approaches to evaluation are based upon different theories and are practiced differently. In reality, many evaluations combine different approaches, and different approaches might be most helpful at different stages of the project. Below is a simple classification of approaches:

Objectives-oriented approaches - the focus is on making clear the goals and objectives and measuring how the project has done in reaching them. This might be the approach to choose if measuring outcomes is a major purpose of your evaluation.

Management-oriented approaches - the purpose is to identify and provide the information needed by project directors. This type of approach is helpful if a major purpose of your evaluation is program development.

Consumer-oriented approaches - the goal is to provide information for use by consumers of products or services. This type of approach can be used both to improve products or services and to help users choose among different services.

Expertise-oriented approaches - the judgment of experts is the main source of information. These approaches can provide a simple way to evaluate something that is complex if the stakeholders are satisfied with expert opinion.

Adversary-oriented approaches - the arguments for and against an action or proposal are laid out, as in a trial. These approaches can help if determining whether or not to continue a project is a purpose.

Participant-oriented approaches - program participants and stakeholders are the key sources of both questions and the information to answer the questions. These approaches are helpful for program improvement purposes.

The above classification was developed by Worthen, Sanders, and Fitzpatrick in their book titled, Program Evaluation: Alternative Approaches and Practical Guidelines, Second Edition.

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