Outcomes for Success!

A product of The Evaluation Forum

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2000 Edition

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Preface

It has been five years since the publication of our first edition of *Outcomes for Success!* Since that time, many organizations have embarked on an enthusiastic and profitable (although sometimes bumpy) journey toward outcome planning and evaluation.

We have all learned a great deal about outcomes during our travels. We have shifted focus from what staff do to what staff cause to happen. We’ve eliminated the “activity trap” in which staff effort is viewed as an end in itself.

While this journey requires new technical knowledge, the far greater challenge is to embrace a fundamental belief: outcomes have the power to successfully guide planning and prioritize activities to achieve powerful results in people’s lives.

This revised edition of *Outcomes for Success!* includes many features to help prepare you for beginning or continuing on your own journey:

- More examples of logic models, outcomes, and evaluation plans;
- Numerous new coaching exercises to help you and your team learn new skills;
- Clarification of the language and framework of outcome evaluation and how it relates to other models; and
- New material about the role of program theory, managing the transition to outcomes, and more.

This handbook can be used as a stand-alone “travel guide” to help you on your outcomes journey. It also can be used as part of a training course provided by outcome measurement consultants. It is written for you – program staff, funders, policy makers, and others who wish to learn about outcome planning and evaluation in an easy-to-digest, jargon-free format.
We are indebted to our clients and workshop participants who have helped sharpen our understanding about outcomes. They have lent us examples and sparked insights that we share in this handbook.

We wish you nothing but success on your journey!

Jane Reisman and Judith Clegg
Co- Principals, The Evaluation Forum
What is Outcome-Based Evaluation?

Outcome-based evaluation is a systematic way to assess the extent to which a program has achieved its intended results. In the past, the focus of program assessment has been on activities, or what staff members do. Assessment typically has been a numbers game: the number of counseling hours provided; the number of bednights provided; the number of workshops delivered; the number of workshop participants, etc.

Now, outcome-based evaluation shifts the focus to results. The main question addressed in outcome-based evaluation is:

What has changed in the lives of individuals, families, organizations, or the community as a result of this program?

Outcome-based evaluation focuses on these key questions: "How has a program made a difference?" and "How are the lives of program participants better as a result of the program?"

In other words . . . “So what?”

To answer this question, program administrators need to realistically assess factors over which they have reasonable control. Two examples of such assessments are:

- A grassroots community organization program to reduce illegal gang activities cannot actually control the number of gang-related arrests. However, it can increase community involvement by providing information and documentation to law enforcement agencies which can aid arrests.

- An AIDS housing program cannot control the life expectancy of the people for whom it provides housing. But the program can reduce stress for people previously forced to change residences frequently by providing a stable living environment.
Fear and Hope on the Evaluation Trail

Many people have an evaluation story to tell. For some, the moral of the story is frightening. For others, the moral is filled with hope. Both fears and hopes reflect elements of truth about the reality of evaluation.

Common fears about evaluation are:

- Excessive staff time and agency resources will be devoted to implementing outcome evaluations;
- Collection of evaluation information will interfere with services to fragile or distrustful clients;
- Funders will have unreasonable expectations of outcome performance levels, thereby adversely affecting program funding;
- Agencies will be afraid to provide services to harder-to-serve clients, as this could negatively impact outcome performance levels;
- Different funding sources will have different outcome requirements, resulting in excessive data collection and reporting requirements.

People with an optimistic view of evaluation offer their hopes that outcome-based performance evaluation will:

- Provide a logical, focused framework for guiding staff activities;
- Generate useful information for program decisions;
- Document successes so that funding and thus the long-term survival of the program can be secured.
Outcomes for Success! takes the optimistic view and supports it by outlining a series of steps to help you achieve success through outcome evaluation. By reading this handbook and working through the exercises at the end, you will also learn how to minimize any potential negative consequences of evaluation. While the handbook is meant to stand alone, it also introduces complex topics for you to explore more fully by participating in one of the many stimulating workshops offered by The Evaluation Forum.
The Uses of Outcome-Based Evaluation

In the past, evaluation was seen as something imposed on agencies by funders, or as an academic project run by outside experts. Today, funders and academics are still involved in evaluation, but outcome-based evaluation has become much more useful for individual programs. Outcome-based evaluation helps:

- **Provide accountability.** Programs can show legitimate accountability to funders and to the community at large. Solid evaluations help convince people that they are getting something for their money.

- **Improve program quality.** Evaluations help determine which programs are working, which are not, and which work for some people and not for others. Additionally, evaluations pinpoint opportunities to adjust program strategies and tactics for increased effectiveness.

- **Allocate resources.** Evaluations help direct resources to successful programs. They also indicate whether more intensive or less intensive programs make a difference.

- **Market successful programs.** A history of proven success provides an immense boost to fundraising efforts. Program evaluation also helps others understand precisely what a program achieves and how it does so.

As more funders require outcome-based evaluation, it has become clear that different funders have different priorities for its use. Some funders are primarily interested in accountability to successful outcomes. Organizations which demonstrate highly successful outcomes likely will obtain and hold on to support from such funders. Other funders emphasize using outcome data for quality improvement as well. Organizations which demonstrate how outcome data will be used to strengthen programs will win their support.
Your purposes for conducting outcome-based evaluation will influence
the types of outcomes which you choose to measure. For example, if
your primary purpose for evaluation is accountability, that is, to insure
funders and stakeholders that your program is achieving its intended
results, you will be likely to select those outcomes which are both politi-
cally compelling and in which you have great certainty that you can
demonstrate measurable results. In contrast, if your primary purpose
for evaluation is improving quality, you will likely focus on those out-
comes which you are interested in learning more about in order to
strengthen specific aspects of your program. In reality, programs usually
have multiple purposes for conducting outcome-based evaluation and
the outcomes selected for measurement will serve these varied purposes.

No one is pleased with poor outcomes. However, many funders know it
sometimes takes program administrators up to two years to make pro-
gram improvements based on outcome findings. If program outcomes
remain poor over time, there is strong evidence that the program strate-
gy or implementation is flawed. This signals that such programs should
be carefully reviewed by agency managers and boards with an eye
toward significant redesign or elimination.
Identifying Outcomes

The Change Process

To identify the outcomes of a program, an organization must envision the expected impacts of the program on its participants. It begins by asking a simple question: "What has changed in the lives of individuals, families, organizations or the community as a result of this program?" Outcomes focus on the people or groups involved in the program – the people or groups it touches.

There are several ways to find the answer to this question, several perspectives to consider. Program staff will have ideas about the kinds of changes participants may experience. However, it is important to ensure staff focus on the participants, not their own actions. In other words, the organization must look beyond what its staff does and ask, "So what?" "So what if staff provide 1,000 hours of child care? What is the impact on the children involved in that program, or on the parents? What will change for the children and parents as a result of the program?"

One method for identifying outcomes is to use a "so that" chain like the example on the left. Begin by describing what staff do, and follow that description with the phrase "so that" to trigger people’s thinking about the implications of their actions. Consider what they believe or hope will happen first because of their actions, what will happen because of that, and so on.

Using Participants to Identify Outcomes

The best source of information on outcomes is likely to be the participants themselves. Why do they come to the program? What do they believe will happen? What do they hope will change because of their involvement in the program? Getting participants together to discuss why they came to the program and what they hope to gain from their involvement may be the most useful step an organization can take to identify meaningful outcomes.
A focus group is one way to bring program participants together. Invite eight to ten people who have taken part in a program to share their thoughts about what the program should achieve. Kick off the meeting by talking about the organization’s desire to provide good service and learn how it could improve its programs. Ask a short series of questions related to participants’ expectations about the program and how they hope to benefit from it, then listen. What is important to the participants? What do they care most about? These are likely among the meaningful outcomes an organization will identify.

Other individuals and groups may have important perspectives to consider as well. What might family members or caregivers have to say about expected outcomes? What about staff from similar agencies? What about organizations that refer participants to the program, or organizations that participants move on to after completing the program? For example, what would teachers expect their students to be able to do after attending a job training program? And what would an employer expect from a new employee who has completed the job training program?

It is important to explore all these perspectives fully in order to get a comprehensive view of possible outcomes for a program. At that point, the organization can ask which of those outcomes should be included in the evaluation. These questions will help with the selection:

- Which outcomes are most important to achieve? Which are most closely related to the core business of the program?

- Are outcomes meaningful? Is the change or benefit something that makes a real difference for the participants?

- Which outcomes are most useful? Which will provide the best information for decision-making or program improvement?

- Which outcomes are most reasonable? Which outcomes can the program be expected to influence in a non-trivial way? Which can the program be fairly held “accountable” for?
- Which outcomes are *most realistic?* Which are most likely achievable within the resources available? Which are likely achievable within the designated reporting period?

Outcomes are changes that would not happen if the program did not exist. In order for change to occur, it is important that the intended participants fully endorse the need for change and recognize the steps necessary to achieve it. For example:

- In a substance abuse treatment program, participants must recognize the need for change before they will be able to acquire and employ the skills needed to resist alcohol and/or drugs.

- For a program aimed at increasing use of public transportation, commuters must first change their attitudes about driving their own cars. Also, they will need to learn about public transportation alternatives before they can change their behavior and board a bus or light rail.

Outcomes must realistically reflect the kinds of change the program can make happen. For some programs, this may mean major behavioral changes on the part of the participants. In other programs, outcomes may be the more preliminary steps taken by participants in a change process, such as building trust with others or stabilizing a crisis.

The following table provides a continuum of outcomes. Typically, program participants must go through the first steps on the continuum before the later steps can occur. However, these steps are not *always* linear and not every step is applicable to every program.
Steps in the Change Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Types of Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>Building trust with staff, family, friends, neighbors (ending isolation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Connecting with needed community resources or services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stabilization</td>
<td>Meeting other financial obligations and dealing with crises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stabilizing or maintaining basic needs (e.g., shelter, nutrition, clothing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes and Values</td>
<td>Changing attitudes, norms, and values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respecting others and themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accepting program norms and rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions and</td>
<td>Changing perceptions and feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings</td>
<td>Being willing to talk about past experiences, telling their stories, releasing their feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having a sense of hope, believing they can make it, seeing new options for themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having a positive view of themselves, seeing themselves in a new way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognizing the need for change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being willing and motivated to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Gaining knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning what triggers reactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Learning new skills, developing coping mechanisms, making appropriate decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>Adopting new behavior(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policies</td>
<td>Adopting new policies and laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Passing new laws</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Types of Outcome Statements

There are various types of outcome statements – different ways to describe what a program is striving to achieve:

- **Change Statements** include the increase, maintenance, or decrease in behavior, skill, knowledge or attitude, etc.

  *Example:* Increase immunization among young children

- **Target Statements** state specific levels of achievement.

  *Example:* Immunize 80 percent of two year-old children in the community according to recommended public health schedules.

- **Benchmark Statements** include comparative targets, generally related to other time periods or organizations.

  *Example:* Increase the current 70 percent immunization rate for children aged 0 to 24 months to 90 percent by the year 2002.
Writing Different Types of Outcome Statements

The following formula can be used to write a good `change` statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Change or Desired Effect</th>
<th>In What</th>
<th>For Whom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Such As:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>Population group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease</td>
<td>Perceptions</td>
<td>Program participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Client</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve</td>
<td>Skill</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce</td>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand</td>
<td>Condition</td>
<td>Neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Example:**

*Increase*  

`awareness of environmental protection activities`  

*among community members*
A similar formula can be used to write a good **target** statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Amount of Change</th>
<th>For Whom</th>
<th>In What</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Such As:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Population group</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate</td>
<td>Program participant</td>
<td>Perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio</td>
<td>Client</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neighborhood</td>
<td>Condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 percent</td>
<td>of community members</td>
<td>will increase their involvement in environmental protection activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
With additional information, a target statement can be converted into a benchmark statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type &amp; Amount of Change</th>
<th>For Whom</th>
<th>In What</th>
<th>Against What Standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An Example:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase by 20 percent</td>
<td>community members</td>
<td>involvement in environmental protection activities</td>
<td>as compared to the 1998 rate OR to exceed the national standard of 50 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Getting Real**

The best batting average in baseball history belongs to Rogers Hornsby at .424 (St. Louis, 1924). A perfect batting average would be 1.000; i.e., “batting one thousand.” So Hornsby was far from perfect, yet he still is renowned for his great success.

**Batting Averages**

.424 All-Time Best, Rogers Hornsby, St. Louis, 1924
.358 Alex Rodriguez, Seattle, 1996
.356 Edgar Martinez, Seattle, 1995
.300 Very Good
.200 Not Great
.135 All-Time Worst, Ray Oyler, Detroit 1968

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{= .400} \\
\text{= .300} \\
\text{= .250}
\end{align*}
\]
Do you know of any program administrator who would proudly boast to board members, "We are tremendously successful! We made it less than halfway to perfection this year."

The truth is, health, human service, housing, environmental, and other programs often are expected to achieve a phenomenal success rate of 80 percent or better as they work to solve community problems.

However, organizations shouldn’t yield to the pressure of unrealistic expectations and over-promised results. It is important to be realistic about what actually can be achieved through a program.

Fifty percent might be a stellar success rate in some cases. It all depends upon the participant population and program strategy. Programs to keep homeless youth off the street, provide substance abuse treatment, or stimulate community participation in arts events might consider halfway to 100 percent a triumph.

This is extremely important: set realistic targets so success can be properly recognized and celebrated. It is essential to recognize the limits of what can actually be influenced by a program.

Once a baseline of success has been established, program administrators and staff alike can then work to continuously improve results.