

# Action Evaluation: A New Method of Goal Setting, Planning and Defining Success for Community Development Initiatives.

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## Overview

Evaluation should not be an onerous chore, put off until a program's conclusion. Neither should it be something that is done after much time and money are spent, only to have an outside evaluation team inform the organization (and its funders) that the program did not, in fact, accomplish its goals. Nor should it be simply a ritual in which funders are appeased as project directors find ways to justify their use of resources and make a claim for additional support.

Instead by making a virtue out of necessity, evaluation should be integrated into program development itself in order to help an organization define, assess, and ultimately successfully achieve its goals. Such evaluation, integrated into each step of a program can significantly enhance program design and effectiveness. Action Evaluation is such a method. It incorporates goal setting, monitoring and evaluation into an organization's life rather than seeing these as distinct activities to be conducted independently and at different points in time.

Action Evaluation has its origins in a number of different collaborative approaches, but most clearly shares fundamental principles with Action Research:

- 1 The core assumptions of participants are made explicit and those assumptions are then examined in terms of their practice. The methodology creates conditions under which practitioners can build and test "theories of practice."
- 2 The methodology is purposeful and has the intention to create alternatives to the status quo. Like Action Research, Action Evaluation ". . . seeks to generate knowledge that is a useful, valid, descriptive of the work, and informative about how we might change it" (Argyris, 1985)
- 3 The methodology is highly participatory, viewing all stakeholders as legitimate participants in the evaluation process. Action Evaluation, like Action Research, focuses on creating conditions of collaborative inquiry.
- 4 The methodology requires cycles of Action and Reflection in order to enable people to critically examine both behavior and the values underlying them with the goal of changing either the values (goals, assumptions) or behavior (actions.)

In addition, Action Evaluation is based on assumptions from other collaborative approaches to understanding and enhancing organizational behavior, including Organizational Learning Theory, Participatory Evaluation, and Conflict Resolution:

Participation and engagement in a process not only improves the outcome, but also results in greater commitment and sense of "ownership" among participants. (See Ross, 2000 and Fetterman, 1998)

Goal setting and evaluation should be an ongoing and iterative process reflecting an organization's evolving concerns and the shifting context and circumstances in which their activities are carried out. (See Rothman 1997)

The more deliberately and consciously success is defined and monitored by project participants themselves, the more likely it will be self-fulfilling; that success is achieved.

Conflict acknowledgment and embracing "error" can lead to dynamism, creativity and growth.

Over the past seven years, dozens of researchers, practitioners, and evaluation specialists throughout the world have worked with the Action Evaluation Project and its successor, The Action Evaluation Research Institute, doing basic and applied research to develop this action-based methodology, which merges effective program design and implementation with participatory evaluation. Action Evaluation is intended to help all key project participants (or "stakeholders") interactively define their shared goals from the outset, and, as the work of the project or organization evolves, continuously monitor the congruence between their goals and their actions.

Action Evaluation helps organizations or projects achieve success by deriving goals in a reflective and participatory manner. In contrast to more "traditional" methods of evaluation, Action Evaluation is seamlessly integrated with program development and implementation.

Action Evaluation is designed to be used in a wide range of settings by professional staff, community residents, researchers, policy makers and foundation officers. It has been applied to more than 40 projects worldwide including a number of complex ethnic conflict resolution initiatives, several school district-wide projects, a race relations conflict in the US and a number of community development initiatives. (For more details, see the website at [www.aepro.org](http://www.aepro.org).)

A specially trained Action Evaluator facilitates the Action Evaluation process. Ideally, this person should be "in-house". The role of the Action Evaluator is to collect data on goals from various groups and summarize this data in terms of what is shared, unique and contrasting. This summary is done first within each group and then across the groups.

The role of the Action Evaluator is critical to the success of the Action Evaluation. As in other forms of participatory evaluation, Action Evaluation is less concerned with traditional notions of "objectivity" or detached research than it is designed to stimulate self-reflection and contextual thinking. The Action Evaluator is, in many ways, a full and complete participant in the project, informed about the planning, preparation and development. He or she seeks to build and sustain engagement in the process among participants, which requires trust and facilitation skills while treading the delicate balance between involvement and detachment.

Part of the role of Action Evaluator, of being actively engaged in the process, is quite different from most traditional forms of evaluation in which evaluators keep their "subjects" at arms length in order to minimize researcher bias.

Researcher bias is addressed by making the Action Evaluation process and the Action Evaluator's analysis transparent and available for scrutiny at every step. Participants are educated in the principles of Action Evaluation, are urged to ensure that their ideas have been faithfully represented and that any kind of redaction or interpretations made by the Action Evaluator are correct.

### **The Action Evaluation Process.**

**Data Gathering.** Action Evaluation begins with the systematic and broad-based collection of the goals of all key stakeholders (participants, staff, funders, project conveners) involved in an organizational initiative. The Action Evaluation process is launched by asking three questions: What, Why, and How. (Rothman 1997).

**WHAT?** What goals do key stakeholders have for this project, program, organization or initiative? What will success look like?

**WHY:** Why do the various stakeholders care about their goals so much? What are the motivations, assumptions, or theories of practice that are driving those goals?

**HOW?** How will these goals be accomplished? What actions and interventions must be carried out so that the organization or project can move from its present reality to the vision of success (accomplishment of their goals) that they have just articulated?

This data is gathered via a password protected on-line questionnaire which is specifically designed for each organization or project, through face-to-face or phone interviews (which can also be used to supplement data

gathered on-line) or through paper and pencil surveys which the action evaluator then enters into the computer data base for analysis. The preferred method for gathering data is through the on-line website based process that makes the questionnaire easily accessible from anywhere in the world where the Internet is available. Using the website further eliminates a data-entry step.

In addition to narrowing geography and aiding in data collection and analysis, the web-based goal setting process allows participants to reflectively enter information and refer back to their previous responses as they continue to move through the questionnaire.

**Data Analysis.** The Action Evaluator organizes and analyzes the data of each stakeholding group using the web-site itself

The WHAT data is analyzed and organized into Shared Goals (those of two or more respondents), Unique Goals (that only one respondent has articulated) and Contrasting Goals (between two or more respondents.)

One of the unique qualities of Action Evaluation is that it actively seeks out Contrasting Goals from participants. This is done in order to make sure that potentially conflicting views are articulated at the very beginning of the process. This concept of actively seeking out views that may be in conflict arises from Jay Rothman's work in conflict resolution that is one of the cores of Action Evaluation (Rothman 1997a). One of the most important lessons that can be taken from this work is that conflict, particularly conflicts around values, identity and needs, does not "go away" merely because it remains un-articulated. In fact, Rothman's work (and that of Ross and Rothman, 1999) shows that the opposite is often true. Un-identified (and therefore un-resolved) conflict can undermine (and ultimately destroy) a goal setting or planning process.

Moreover, when conflict levels are found to be very high or intense, this is a sign that a goal setting process may well be premature.

**WHY.** The WHY data is prepared verbatim for feedback. (While the WHAT data can be cumulated and summarized, the WHY data is not altered in any way.) The WHY data enables project members to learn more about each other, hear their stories and learn what motivates them.

The sharing of this WHY data can be very powerful as a team-building process.

The HOW data is listed and consolidated by the Action Evaluator according to the number of participants who have proposed similar ideas and later matched with the shared WHAT goals.

**Feedback Stage.** Assisted by the web-based system, all of this data is fed back to respondents in their respective stakeholding in a face-to-face meeting in which the various groups can work through their internal priorities and differences as they arrive at agreement on goals.

While group consensus is sought, it is almost always lacking at the start of the feedback stage. Action Evaluation, by acknowledging this lack of consensus, helps the various stakeholding groups to creatively and deliberately employ the diversity of their differences and disagreements to enrich the planning and goal setting process.

After this consensus building process is completed within each stakeholding group it is then repeated across all stakeholding groups together – with all participants or their representatives gathering -- to arrive at project-wide agreement on goals.

In addition to ensuring that the Action Evaluator has his or her analysis "right", these feedback sessions help ensure that key project leaders, participants and other stakeholders are helped to function more effectively together and are truly "on the same page" about goals as they move forward.

### **Case Example.**

In 1998, Jay Rothman was asked by the steering committee of a new community development initiative (a local community development corporation) in the Midwest to help it define its goals and establish a baseline for self-monitoring and assessment. It is important to emphasize that Action Evaluation has three phases: Goal setting and consensus-building on definition of success (Baseline), Reflection and Monitoring (Formative) and Collaborative Assessment (Summative). This Case Example only describes the Baseline stage.

### **Questionnaire:**

WHAT are your goals for the CIC over the next six months?

WHY are those goals important to the village?

HOW do you think they can best be achieved?

### **Stage 1: Data Gathering: The WHAT Data**

Examples of responses

Respondent A.

To have an impact on affordable housing in the township.

To help maintain and enhance essential services.

To provide project management and leadership for strategic economic ventures.

Respondent B.

To coordinate efforts of the village, townships, businesses, lenders, real estate interests and citizen groups to improve the economic environment of the village.

To leverage local resources (financial and technical) by securing grants, loans and technical assistance from outside sources (e.g., government, foundations, venture capitalists, etc.)

To provide a forum for community discussion, consensus-building and problems-solving.

To promote economic growth in order to provide stable, above average employment.

To increase community participation in all aspects of community life.

To improve the quality of the housing stock.

Respondent C.

### **Stage 2: Data Analysis by the Action Evaluator**

Examples of Shared Goals

To develop a structure for assisting in the formation, location and expansion of businesses in the village such as a research park, an incubator, a commerce park, or high-tech center [Six of ten respondents]

To provide incentives to retain existing businesses and attract new appropriate businesses by providing

technical assistance, project management, assistance to struggling businesses, and leverage of local resources. [Five of ten respondents]

To leverage local resources (financial and technical) by securing grants, loans and technical assistance from outside sources. [three of ten respondents]

### Examples of Unique Goals

Only one respondent suggested each of the following. However, they were fed back to the entire group verbatim in order to explore whether the group may wanted to adopt any of these unique goals and place them in the Shared category.

To help maintain and enhance essential services.

To coordinate efforts of the village, townships, business, lenders and citizen groups to improve the economic environment of the village.

To focus on providing jobs for our youth.

To develop a strategy and action plan to attract "clean" businesses that provide good paying jobs to local folks.

To build a sustainable local economy based on life cycle costs.

To encourage and help make possible a larger proportion of these who work in town to live there.

Examples of Contrasting Goals. These are goals that either do or could lead a group to pull in different directions.

To have an impact on affordable housing in the township

To provide a forum for community discussion, consensus building and problem solving.

The Action Evaluator noted that these two goals did not necessarily clash with one another. However, they did suggest different directions, priorities or perhaps a need for sequencing. It would be important for this group to continue to explore these two directions: being a forum vs. "doing" and being an economic development organization vs. being a housing developer.

Here is where the Action Evaluation method, which encourages the articulation of contrasting and diverse visions can be particularly effective in helping a community development corporation define its goals and subsequent actions. As in this particular case, it might be preferable to start out as an organization purely focused on economic development – that clearly has the "votes". However, by discussing the contrasting goals of also being a forum or being a housing developer, it can assist the organization to see itself as legitimately having a broader mandate, with multiple, legitimate roles, albeit one that emphasizes economic development first.

The Action Evaluator (who lives in the village) understood the "context" in which this discussion was taking place. As stated above, Action Evaluation is less concerned with notions of "objectivity" and more concerned with stimulating reflection and contextual thinking. He knew that housing development was an issue that had already been a source of conflict in the village and it was important to have the group discuss what role, if any, the CDC might take on that controversial issue.

HOW Data (For the sake of brevity, we have only used the HOW data from one Shared Goal.

Shared Goal #3: To leverage local resources (financial and technical) by securing grants, loans and technical assistance from outside sources

- 1 Develop a local barter and exchange system.
- 2 Identify available resources by using paid, loaned or volunteer staff.
- 3 Present this plan to CDC constituencies.
- 4 Apply for grants and loans.
- 5 Get more technical assistance (either own staff or contract)
- 6 Find money for basic operating costs by approaching major businesses and governmental sources or establish a revolving loan fund.

## **Conclusion**

The material presented above illustrates only the first stage of Action Evaluation, gaining consensus on definition of success (baseline goals). It shows how Action Evaluation can help a group be clear about its purpose and functions while acknowledging and recognizing areas of contrast and diversity. This process should ideally be conducted within and then among all stakeholding groups involved in a project. In this illustration, only steering committee data was presented. A full Action Evaluation would gather data from other groups, such as the business community, local residents, village council, funders, etc. and identify Who, What and When.

In addition, Action Evaluation is intended to be a much longer process continuing on to the formative stage which is highly reflective and focuses on refining and monitoring the congruence between goals and actions so that success can be more readily achieved. The final stage is summative which is the more conventional "assessment-as-judgment" phase of determining the project's success.

However, even this more "conventional" stage of evaluation is significantly modified in an Action Evaluation because the standards of success, or goals, being assessed were articulated and agreed upon by key stakeholders themselves. Thus it is contextually relevant and the normal evaluation aversion (or slight of hand) may be overcome. Participants become truly interested and invested in internal and external assessments because these assessments help them understand how well they have met their own goals.

Too often, the success of community development initiatives is determined by standards decided outside of the communities themselves. As Ron Shiffman, Director of the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development, stated " . . . CDC's were able to carry out a number of highly successful development-related efforts, . . . [but] these were often responses to standards of accountability and definitions of productivity centrally defined, rather than activities planned to meet locally defined needs or priorities" He goes on to state that, "The key issue is who asks the questions.

If practitioners and community residents aren't full partners with academics and researchers in framing the parameters of the study and questions to be asked, then the issues we raise [that CDC's are being evaluated by the "wrong" standards] will inevitably apply." (Shiffman 1989)

We contend that Action Evaluation is a method that can provide just this kind of collaboration and partnership between researchers and evaluators and practitioners and community residents. It is a powerful and effective method of determining success that can be particularly useful to Community Development Corporations, their funders, their boards, and their constituents.

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