LEARNING TOGETHER

FIVE IMPORTANT DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

to make EVALUATION USEFUL

ONTARIO
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SECTOR DRIVEN EVALUATION STRATEGY

This resource is part of ONN's work to develop a Sector Driven Evaluation Strategy to empower nonprofits to become more actively involved in setting the evaluation agenda. Our aim is to create a more enabling ecosystem for evaluation in the nonprofit sector. In other words, we want to change the system so that it addresses evaluation questions that really matter. We want a system that makes it easier, more rewarding, and less stressful for nonprofits and their partners to do meaningful evaluation work.

TaylorNewberry
C O N S U L T I N G
E v i d e n c e ➡ I n s i g h t ➡ A c t i o n

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About the Ontario Nonprofit Network

ONN is an independent network focused on policy and advocacy work to create and influence systemic change for Ontario's nonprofits and charities.

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LEARNING TOGETHER – THE BASICS

FIVE IMPORTANT DISCUSSION QUESTIONS TO MAKE EVALUATION USEFUL

At its best, evaluation can help a nonprofit make sense of what they do and how they do it. It can provide an opportunity to engage with all stakeholders, acknowledge failures and successes, and learn from them. Ultimately, good evaluation work can help a nonprofit advance its mission. As we work toward developing a Sector Driven Evaluation Strategy, we have heard many times that evaluation doesn't always deliver on this promise. In large part this is due to whether the relationship between nonprofits and their funders and other stakeholders is one that prioritizes learning and includes reciprocal respect. At the same time, both nonprofits and funders are looking for ways to make the evaluation process less frustrating and more useful. Changing evaluation practice in the sector, of course, won't be easy. It will take time and effort. However, talking with one another about the purpose of evaluation and the problems that get in the way of fulfilling that purpose is a good place to start. Here are five questions that you can ask when talking with funders and other stakeholders to help you engage in a discussion about simple ways to make evaluation more useful. These questions emerge out of extensive research and consultation on what makes evaluation useful. They can be used together or individually. They can be used in a formal meeting about evaluation or in the course of another kind of discussion. They can be asked by nonprofits, by funders, or by evaluators and they can be answered by each of these groups as well.

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1.
What are we really trying to learn? How will this learning lead to action?
Evaluation discussions go better if the focus is on why the evaluation work matters and not just how to do it.

2.
How can we help each other learn?
When partners value one another's contributions, evaluations are more useful.

5.
How will we communicate?
Insights and action don't come from evaluation data, they come from discussions about data.

4.
Who is going to do what?
Buy-in to evaluation increases if people are clear about what they are being asked to do and how it will benefit them.

3.
Is evaluation the right approach? If so, what kind?
Managing expectations is key to useful evaluation.

While these questions can be used individually, the order is important. People often start out thinking that they need answers to more practical questions (like question four). However, we have found that backing up and asking some of the earlier questions first may set the stage for agreeing on a more manageable and collaborative approach to evaluation.

We recognize that these questions have the potential to open up some big issues and that you might not feel ready to go there, especially when talking to one of your funders! This guide is meant to help you articulate more clearly what you want to get out of an evaluation and what concerns you may have about the process. It is meant as a conversation starter and is a means to open up a dialogue with your stakeholders in a subject area that can be complex and difficult. That's why we have developed a discussion guide. It provides tips about how to ask these questions in different contexts, the challenges that can come up, and what to do about them.

WHEN EVALUATION IS USED EFFECTIVELY: It can lead to action & meaningful outcomes
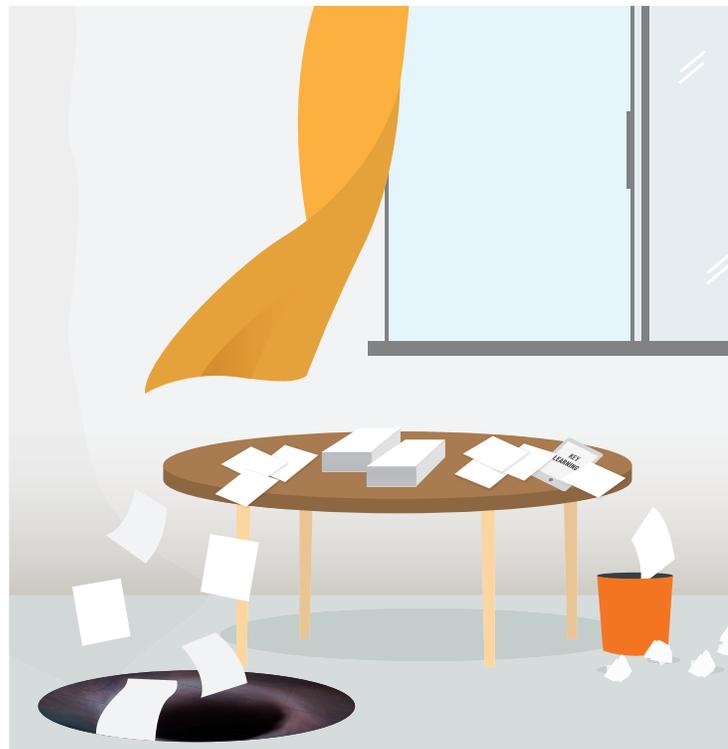
WHEN EVALUATION ISN'T USED EFFECTIVELY: It can lead to missed opportunities and wasted resources

http://theonn.ca/our-work/our-structures/evaluation/

OVERVIEW

This evaluation discussion guide is one element of the Ontario Nonprofit Network's (ONN) work to develop a Sector Driven Evaluation Strategy. A lot of evaluations involve more than one stakeholder group (e.g. funders and grantees, board and staff, evaluators, etc.). When two or more of these groups get together to talk about evaluation, they often spend more time talking about the technical process and less time on why they want to do evaluation and what they hope they will learn. If you are meeting with another stakeholder group that sees evaluation a bit differently that you do, this guide may be a good way to learn more about each other's perspective and identify ways to make the evaluation less frustrating and more useful for everyone. In our research, we found that frustration about evaluation often arises when the people involved don't feel they have had a say in how the process is designed. Our hope is that this resource can help you and your evaluation stakeholders to better understand each other's needs and design an evaluation that leads to the greatest benefit for both sides.

RESEARCH TELLS US THAT THE FOLLOWING SIX FACTORS ARE KEY TO A USEFUL EVALUATION:

A clear, shared purpose	Specific people committed to meaningful use of the evaluation	A plan for ongoing communication that ensures buy-in and transparency
Follow-through	A process to ensure that there is a safe space for critical reflection and learning	A match between expectations, skills/capacity, and funding

Let's be honest. We recognize that an evaluation can involve a lot of power dynamics. Nonprofits may feel pressure from funders to approach evaluation in a certain way. Civil servants may feel pressure from politicians. Within a nonprofit, service users or front line staff may feel similar pressure from managers. These power dynamics aren't easy to talk about. Many people in the nonprofit sector don't have a lot of experience talking about evaluation. This guide is meant to help you articulate more clearly what you want to get out of an evaluation and what concerns you may have about the process. It is meant as a conversation starter and is a means to open up a dialogue with your stakeholders in a subject area that can be complex and difficult. Through these conversations, important building blocks such as trust and collaboration can begin to form, which will ultimately lead to a more useful evaluation process.

? WHAT IS EVALUATION?

For the purposes of this guide, we use Michael Quinn Patton's definition of evaluation: "Evaluation is the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and results of programs to make judgments about the program, improve or further develop program effectiveness, inform decisions about future programming, and/or increase understanding." We follow Patton in defining "programs" very broadly to include, for example: events; artistic projects; or systems change work. However, it's important to consider whether evaluation is even the right approach for you or whether a performance measurement or applied research project, for example, would be better. This ONN blog entitled, Whaddaya mean, "evaluation?" — Mismatched expectations in nonprofit measurement, can help to explain further, but is not required reading for this guide.

? WHO IS THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR?

The primary purpose of this guide is to help nonprofits communicate more strategically about evaluation. We expect that this guide will be used most frequently in conversations between nonprofits and funders since our research suggests that these are often the most challenging evaluation conversations. However, we believe that this guide can be of value to anyone trying to get different stakeholder groups on the same page when planning an evaluation in the nonprofit sector. For example, it may be used in a conversation involving service users, family members, a provincial association, evaluation consultants, or staff from different parts of your organization.

? WHEN WOULD YOU USE THIS GUIDE?

This is an important question. Nonprofits and their funders may not have a lot of experience sitting down to talk about learning together or building useful evaluations, so one of the challenges facing you may be the creation of a suitable opportunity to talk. Consequently, the questions in this guide are designed to be used individually and informally or to form the basis of a more structured meeting about planning useful evaluations.

THE IDEAS IN THIS GUIDE MAY BE USEFUL IN SITUATIONS LIKE THESE:

You've invited your funder to attend the first meeting of the steering committee for your new project and you're not sure how to raise the topics of learning and evaluation.	You're completing your annual report to a funder and you are meeting with the funder to clarify what is expected.	Your funder has invited you to a training or information session about their reporting requirements and you're not sure how to raise your concerns.
You have joined a multi-agency planning table designed to develop collective approaches to social issues and the group isn't sure how to begin talking about consistent measurement of outcomes.	You are contacting your funder to let them know that meeting their reporting expectations is taking a lot of time.	Your funder has contacted you with questions about the outcomes information you reported.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

We know that many funders in the nonprofit sector have standardized evaluation frameworks that can't easily be changed to meet the needs of one project or agency. That is why this guide isn't focused on evaluation methodology (i.e. we are not talking about how to do the technical aspects of an evaluation such as collecting surveys or calculating social return on investment). Rather, it is more about how you communicate with funders and other key stakeholders about evaluation, how you find mutually supportive goals, how you talk about the results, and how you translate them into action. These are things that can often be improved without making major changes to evaluation frameworks or grant reporting templates.

THE FIVE QUESTIONS

Evaluation conversations can take many forms and sometimes the best approach is informal. This guide is designed to be adapted to work in your context. Depending on what stage of the process you are in, some questions may be more relevant than others. Feel free to use this in the way that best suits your needs. However, there are five basic questions that we have used to help organize discussions with your stakeholders.

THE FIVE QUESTIONS

**1
What are we really trying to learn? How will this learning lead to action?**

**2
How can we help each other learn?**

**3
Is evaluation the right approach? If so, what kind?**

**4
Who is going to do what?**

**5
How will we communicate?**

These questions may be used individually or grouped together to form the basis of a more structured conversation about making evaluation useful. If you use them individually, it is important to remember that the sequence of the questions is important. Knowing the answers to earlier questions will increase the chances of successfully resolving later questions. It is difficult to talk about who will do how much of what if you aren't on the same page about whether you are applying the right evaluation approach. Similarly, choosing an evaluation approach requires a solid understanding of what you and your partners can each contribute to helping each other learn. Sometimes, backing up and asking questions near the top of the list is the best way to resolve issues related to later questions!

It is also important to remember that these questions are focused on the why of evaluation rather than the how to. Question 3, about approaches, for example, shouldn't lead to a discussion of the pros and cons of qualitative data. Rather, the discussion should be about whether the overall approach fits with the particular learning goals that you and your partners have right now.

Q1

What are we really trying to learn? How will this learning lead to action?

These questions may be used individually or grouped together to form the basis of a more struc-tured conversation about making evaluation useful. If you use them individually, it is important to remember that the sequence of the questions is important. Knowing the answers to earlier questions will increase the chances of successfully resolving later questions. It is difficult to talk about who will do how much of what if you aren't on the same page about whether you are applying the right eval-uation approach. Similarly, choosing an evaluation approach requires a solid understanding of what you and your partners can each contribute to helping each other learn. Sometimes, backing up and asking questions near the top of the list is the best way to resolve issues related to later questions! It is also important to remember that these questions are focused on the why of evaluation rather than the how to. Question 3, about approaches, for example, shouldn't lead to a discussion of the pros and cons of qualitative data. Rather, the discussion should be about whether the overall approach fits with the particular learning goals that you and your partners have right now.

WHAT THIS QUESTION MEANS AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR USEFUL EVALUATION

Ultimately, all evaluation should be useful. It should be designed to help organizations learn and equip them to act in new ways. However, different kinds of information are useful in different con-texts. Funders and nonprofits face different management challenges and need to speak to different kinds of audiences. It can be challenging to generate useful evaluation results if you don't under-stand your partner's learning goals. This question is designed to help stakeholders gain a better un-derstanding of one another's learning goals (even if they are not yet clearly articulated). It can also be helpful, when asking this question, to learn more about how your partner organizations learn best. This question is designed to make evaluation more useful by clarifying the needs, interests, and styles of evaluation users.

At the end of the day, an evaluation project is a type of intervention. It is a series of activities (plan-ning, data collection, sharing results, etc.) designed to lead to a specific kind of change (improved service, new funding, etc.). However, we rarely evaluate our evaluations to see whether they were successful. The idea behind this question is to get people thinking about what would count as success in the evaluation project under discussion.

HOW TO ASK IT

Evaluation is only worthwhile when it leads to action and usually the pathway to action goes through learning. It is important to remember that any healthy organization learns in a variety of ways and evaluation is only one of several tools that informs the process. The idea behind this question is for both nonprofits and other stakeholders to talk at a general level about what their own organizations want to learn and how they like to learn. Having new insights or aha moments is fun and energizing for most people and people enjoy the evaluation process more if they see it as having the potential to generate insights.

This question is also a chance to explore expectations about what will be achieved through evaluation work. If the evaluation work discussed at this meeting isn't tied to the participants' learning journey or if it is only going to help ONE of the participating organizations learn, then the obvious question (even if it isn't stated explicitly during the discussion) is what's the point?

WHEN EVALUATION IS FOCUSED ON LEARNING: Open & clear communication, trust, and collaboration > Meaningful outcomes
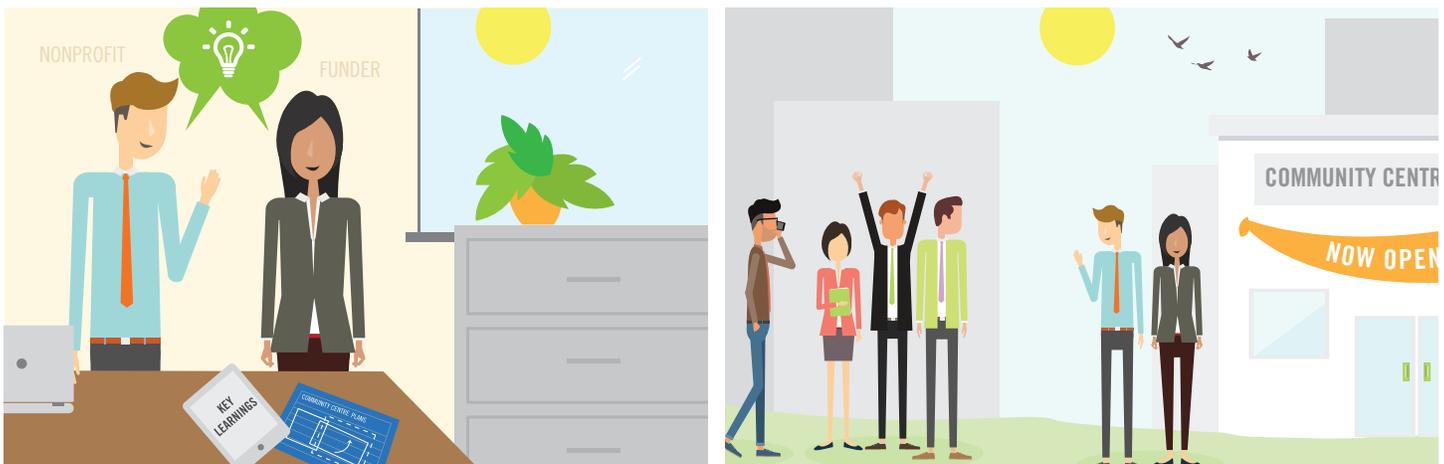
WHEN EVALUATION IS FOCUSED ON ACCOUNTABILITY: Unclear expectations, miscommunication, and frustration > Missed opportnities

This question can be framed in many different ways.
Here are some additional questions that are designed to provoke high level discussion about learning goals and styles of learning.

How will it factor into decisions about future funding for us?

How does your organization or your team like to learn and reflect? Do you tend to produce reports? Do you chat over coffee? Can you give me an example or a story?

What are your most important learning goals?

Right now, what are the biggest questions you have about those goals? What do you want to learn most?

What unanswered questions are preventing you from acting on your goals? What don't you know?

Can you provide an example of an evaluation report that you found really useful?

Can you tell me more about how you intend to use this information? Who will you share it with? How will it factor into decisions about future funding for us?

How do you normally evaluate yourselves or reflect on your practice? What works best for you internally?

Do you have a good understanding of our agency's mission and goals? Do you have any questions about those?

Who are our key audiences for this evaluation work?

Complete this sentence: "If this evaluation went really well, it would enable me to _____."

What kinds of decisions will be made based on the results of this evaluation? By whom?

DISCUSSION STARTER

Here is an exercise that can be a good discussion starter. This exercise does not have to replace the questions above, but is rather another way to engage in conversation. We've talked a bit about the questions we want to ask in this evaluation and about the data that we plan to gather. Let's take ten minutes and write down a plausible guess as to what the ultimate findings of this evaluation might be.

Do these findings seem plausible to you? Given your evaluation plan, are these kinds of findings possible? ▶ Do these findings strike each of us as useful? ▶ What would we do if the results were very positive, very critical, or didn't show much difference? ▶ How, exactly, would you use them? What would be your next step if you got these results out of the evaluation?

WHEN AND WHERE TO ASK IT

This question is a good, non-threatening get-to-know-you question. It is especially helpful when the parties involved don't know each other very well. It can be a helpful question when it is the first time that your agency has received a grant from a particular funder or you may be meeting with a new representative from an existing funder. This question is also helpful in situations where the people representing the agency or the funder don't have a lot of experience with evaluation.

This question can also be asked later in the evaluation process (if asked in the form "what were we trying to learn?"). If an evaluation project has lost focus or generated confusing results, going back to the original purpose can be helpful. If there has been turnover of staff since the evaluation began (within your organization or on the funder side) discussion of this question can help to orient new people.

CHALLENGES THAT MIGHT COME UP
STAKEHOLDERS ARE NOT READY TO HAVE THIS CONVERSATION

The most likely challenge at this stage is that people simply won't be willing to have this kind of discussion. This question isn't typically included in evaluation planning meetings so participants in the meeting may jump ahead to discussions of topics that they are more familiar with or topics that they see as more important, such as evaluation methods or funding requirements.

If you are the person initiating the discussion of this question, it will be your job to slow people down and make sure that they take the time to share their learning goals. Making space for this question may be especially important when:

The funder involved has a history of not providing feedback on evaluation reports or not using them for decision making.

Evaluation is being looked at as a bureaucratic requirement rather than a learning opportunity by the funder, the agency, or both.

KEEP in MIND

One way to get people to slow down and spend time on this question is to give the floor to the practitioners in the room. People who spend the bulk of their work time on planning, policy, or measurement may be most likely to jump ahead to the technical questions, but those who work in the field or with people may feel more confident talking about how their organization learns and what it needs to know. Keep in mind that there are planners and practitioners in government and in other funding bodies too.

LEARNING GOALS AREN'T CLEAR

It can also be helpful to let people know it is okay if they feel their learning goals aren't particularly clear. That is a common challenge and talking about this question can be a good way to explore potential learning goals together.

YOUR CONTACT PERSON MAY NOT BE ABLE TO SPEAK ON BEHALF OF THE FUNDER AS AN ORGANIZATION

It can also be challenging to ask this question when the funder involved is very large (such as a government ministry). The representative that you are talking to may not know how their organization or department learns or what it hopes to gain from this particular evaluation. A good starting point in situations where you are dealing with a representative who may not know how their organization or department learns may be to ask them how their particular team would answer these questions.

Q2

How can we help each other learn?

WHAT IT MEANS AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR USEFUL EVALUATION

Succeeding at evaluation has a lot to do with being willing to listen even when the messages lead you to challenge your assumptions about your work. One of ONN's principles for good evaluation practice is reciprocal respect. This question is designed to get people thinking of evaluation as a collaboration between partners rather than a situation where one group sends data to another. In a subtle way, it may highlight power imbalances by sending the message that funders should be willing to help grant recipients learn. Sometimes, nonprofits get frustrated with evaluation because they feel as if they are expected to answer questions that are beyond their capacity to answer.

HOW TO ASK IT

The idea behind this question is to try to identify the positive contributions that each partner (primarily the nonprofit and the funder, but there may be other important partners in some situations) can make to the other's learning and to highlight the fact that groups need to work together to succeed. At the same time, this question may give people permission to say that they don't feel that they can meet all of their partner's learning needs. This question involves reflecting on the points of intersection of stakeholders with a particular focus on how each group is important to achievement of the other's goals.

Here are some suggestions for other questions
to ask should you need further probes to
get to the information you are looking for:

Where do our learning goals overlap?

Which of your goals are things you can't accomplish without help from others? Without help from us specifically?

How do we demonstrate accountability? To each other?

What are the consequences if we fail to meet expectations?

Does our shared interest have to do with:

The populations we serve?

The outcomes we hope to achieve?

The approaches or strategies we use in our work?

The advocacy work we want to do?

Our physical location or connection to a specific neighbourhood or community?

Our shared funding source?

Something else?

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WHEN AND WHERE TO ASK IT

This is a great question to ask in situations where past evaluation work has been heavily focused on accountability and there has been little discussion of how the data translates into learning or action. It is also a good question to use when there is an imbalance of power or size between the two organizations. This question may be less useful in situations where the parties don't need or want a close partnership.

This can be a helpful question at the end of an evaluation process, when a nonprofit is considering how best to synthesize evaluation results for a funder. When you have a lot of data, it isn't always easy to distill the key messages and this question can help you clarify what is most salient for a particular audience.

CHALLENGES THAT MIGHT COME UP
POWER DIFFERENCES

Power differences are a big challenge when planning evaluation and this question is designed in part to explore these differences. If you are a small nonprofit meeting with a large funder about your evaluation, you may be completely dependent on that funder for achieving your goals or even for continued survival. The funder, on the other hand, may see itself as having little need for a partnership with you. However, the very fact that it is sitting down to talk with you about evaluation suggests that it has some interest in the information you might gather.

Identifying some strong shared goals or interests and using them as a point of reference during evaluation planning can often be a very powerful strategy for building relationships.

IDENTIFYING SHARED INTERESTS

If it proves challenging to identify areas of shared interest or shared goals, it is sometimes helpful to pick something more general as a focus (e.g. "we both have an interest in serving this neighbourhood" or "we both have questions that need answers about this program").

If there are very serious challenges in identifying any shared interest, it may be best to put the evaluation conversation on hold until these differences can be better understood.

Sometimes, when you know the other group well, there can be a lot of subtext in this kind of conversation. What people say about shared interest on paper may not reflect how they act in practice. Interpersonal dynamics or ideological differences may seep into the discussion as well.

One way to get past defensiveness or small "p" politics is to try to get more concrete and specific about learning goals. For example, if a funder were to say that their main learning goal is to make sure you are doing what you said you would do, you may want to ask them how they will use that answer once they have it or what challenges they have faced in monitoring grants in the past.

THE FOLLOWING TWO ONN RESOURCES MAY BE USEFUL AT THIS STAGE:

Unpacking Nonprofit Evaluation: Who is taking the risks and who is making the decisions?

Principles to Help Us Get to Useful Evaluation

URL http://theonn.ca/our-work/our-structures/evaluation

Q3

Is evaluation the right approach? If so, what kind?

WHAT IT MEANS AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR USEFUL EVALUATION

The term evaluation gets used in a variety of ways in the nonprofit world and this can lead to confusion. Sometimes, evaluation can mean very simple satisfaction surveys or basic tracking of attendance. At other times, people may use the term to describe a very complex and long-term piece of applied research. Evaluations tend to lead to action when there is a good fit between approach and expectations and when everyone involved has the same understanding of this fit. There are even situations where evaluation (of any kind) may not be very useful at all. Evaluation tends to focus on how an intervention is working, what has been achieved, and why. If your questions are about other topics (e.g. is this intervention even needed at all? What are we going to do about the fact that we are not achieving outcomes?), then an evaluation may not be very helpful. The idea behind this question is to get people thinking about what they mean by evaluation and whether the evaluation approach they are considering really fits the situation at hand.

HOW TO ASK IT

This question is a bit more technical than the last two. People who don't know a lot about evaluation (or the distinctions between evaluation, applied research, or performance measurement) may struggle to understand what is being asked here. A good starting point might be to ask for clarification on what each stakeholder means when talking about evaluation. As the person asking this question, the key thing is to try to keep the discussion focused on each group's hopes and goals for evaluation rather than the technical details.

EFFECTIVE EVALUATION MEASURES WHAT COUNTS

Here are some suggestions for other questions to ask should you need further probes to get to the information you are looking for:

Are you more interested in investigating deep probing questions or checking to see if the program is on track?

What are you hoping this evaluation will tell you?

What do you mean or think of when you suggest we do evaluation?

Do we really need to do an evaluation? Should we consider, instead

How will you use the results of the evaluation?

Looking at research that has already been done?

Backing up a bit to better understand the needs of the community we serve?

Talking through our assumptions?

How does my organization stand to benefit from this evaluation? How do the people my organization serves stand to benefit?

Do you, as an evaluation stakeholder in this project/program, clearly understand our expectations around evaluation of this project or program? What concerns do you have about our expectations? Do you see any potential risks?

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KEEP in MIND

WHEN AND WHERE TO ASK IT

This is a good question to ask when you feel your partner's expectations about your evaluation work may be vague or unrealistic.

CHALLENGES THAT MIGHT COME UP
CONFLICTING VIEWPOINTS

This question can bring to the surface some particular viewpoints that may be in contradiction with yours, such as what is reasonable to achieve within the timeframe or whether you will have input into the evaluation design. While you may not be able to have as much progress on some of these questions as you would like, there may be an opportunity to probe a bit more and identify the reasons behind certain decisions, which over the long run may help to better understand each other's position.

The ONN blog entitled: Whaddaya mean, "evaluation?" — Mismatched expectations in nonprofit measurement may be useful when exploring this question. *http://theonn.ca/whaddaya-mean-evaluation-mismatched-expectations-nonprofit-measurement/*

Q4

Who is going to do what?

WHAT IT MEANS AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR USEFUL EVALUATION

One of the things that can undermine the usefulness of evaluation is a lack of buy-in from key people like front-line staff or board members. Lack of buy-in often arises because people feel that evaluation will create a lot of extra work for them without yielding any useful result. They may feel that others have overly optimistic ideas about how long things will take or will take their contributions for granted. Time and money are always limited in the nonprofit sector, so people are understandably cautious about taking on any new tasks. This question is designed to address that type of concern head on. It gets into the practical aspects of evaluation work and tries to clarify who will do what, how much of it they will do, and whether they are comfortable with that role.

HOW TO ASK IT

The prompts below are designed to get as concrete as possible about the work that needs to be done in any evaluation project and to make it clear who will do what. Hopefully, these prompts will get people thinking about a few of the less obvious tasks that can end up using a lot of time and creating frustration. The focus here may differ depending on whether you are planning a completely new evaluation, seeking to improve or refine an existing plan, or simply trying to make the best of a plan that is already implemented. This discussion isn't designed to create a complete, detailed evaluation workplan, but rather to get people talking about roles and workloads. In the process of asking questions like these, it is often possible to draw out people's underlying concerns that they won't be able to deliver on what is being asked of them.

Here are some suggestions for other questions
to ask should you need further probes to get
to the information you are looking for:

How much time
and energy do you,
as a funder,
expect to us devote
to this evaluation?

What kind of support
can you provide to
help us succeed at
this evaluation?
What kind of
feedback are you
able to provide?

How will we ensure
that our evaluation
is done ethically
(e.g. in cases where
we are working w
ith vulnerable
populations)?

Given what we talked about in
question 1 (what we want to learn)
and question 2 (how we can help each
other learn), do we feel that this
evaluation will be good value for
money? Does anyone feel that they
won't see a lot of benefit for the
time they are investing?

In this
evaluation
work, who
will play the
following
roles?

How willing are
you to participate
in the evaluation
process?

Deciding on the key evaluation questions;
Clarifying the project's logic model or theory of change;
Designing or choosing surveys or other evaluation tools;
Developing an evaluation work plan with timelines and costs;
Gathering data; Analyzing data; Communicating about the findings

Are all of us clear
on what is being
asked of us?
Do these
roles seem
manageable?

What might go
wrong during
this evaluation?
Who will address
these problems
if they arise?

Is there a good balance
of roles? Are the people
making the decisions about
this evaluation empowered
to act on those decisions?

What
support do
you need to
play a specific
role?

Could we meet
again if things
start taking longer
than expected or
if we have trouble
getting data?

When do we
need help?
When do we
need an
outside
consultant?

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WHEN AND WHERE TO ASK IT

This question is often helpful in situations where a nonprofit is having trouble understanding funder expectations regarding evaluation. Talking about roles and responsibilities and clarifying the amount of work required is a good way to clarify exactly what is expected. It can also be a gentle way of letting a funder know that their expectations may be unrealistic. This question is also useful when front-line staff or volunteers within an organization are unsure what is being asked of them. It can help to address concerns about staff being taken away from service delivery to do paperwork by putting concrete parameters around the tasks required and the time they will take.

CHALLENGES THAT MIGHT COME UP
FUNDER WON'T PLAY A SPECIFIC ROLE IN THE EVALUATION PROJECT

If you are talking with a funder about evaluation, you may find that they aren't willing to play any concrete role in carrying out your evaluation project. This is, perhaps, understandable. A funder may not want to be perceived as interfering and they are keen to make sure you do the type (and amount) of evaluation that works for your organization. This is fair, but if the funder isn't willing to shoulder any of the work themselves or fund you to do it, they shouldn't have high expectations in terms of what they will get back from you!

Funders who aren't able to help in a direct way may be willing and able to help with background work like sharing examples of similar evaluations and linking you to people with specific evaluation expertise. They may also have a vested interest in helping you synthesize your evaluation learnings into a form that is useful to them.

ROLE CLARITY ISSUES THAT DON'T BECOME CLEAR UNTIL THE EVALUATION IS UNDERWAY

DISCUSSION STARTER

Sometimes, concerns about who is doing what don't arise until you are in the middle of an evaluation project. You may, for example, be midway through your evaluation when you realize that your methodology is limited and you are not able to ask the questions that would help you to learn about the impact of your project.

How can we learn from this experience and share our learnings in a productive way with our funders and other stakeholders? ▶ To what extent can we change the evaluation process to make it work for us? Who needs to be part of this discussion? ▶ What is realistic for us to do given our timelines and budget? ▶ How might we still use the data we have already gathered even if it isn't everything we need or want to know?

The ONN Blog: Unpacking Nonprofit Evaluation: Who is taking the risks and who is making the decisions? may be useful when exploring this question. *http://theonn.ca/unpacking-nonprofit-evaluation-who-is-taking-the-risks-and-who-is-making-the-decisions/*

Q5

How will we communicate?

WHAT IT MEANS AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR USEFUL EVALUATION

Often, evaluation findings don't come to life until you sit down to talk about them. The potential for insight and innovation is even greater if the group that meets to talk is diverse and people with different points of view and different kinds of knowledge share their impressions in an honest, respectful way. Evaluation plans that have the potential to generate useful results sometimes don't lead to action simply because the stakeholders involved haven't put in place good communication channels. These channels are important at all stages of the process — not just at the beginning and the end. This question is designed to get people to think ahead and plan for good communication.

In many situations, improving communication is a relatively easy way to make evaluation more useful. It doesn't require a lot of time and no-one needs to change their priorities, evaluation policies, or methodologies. Although staff in nonprofits may not have a lot of experience with evaluation, they often have a great deal of experience bringing people together and fostering a sense of cohesion. This question may help people realize that those skills can help to make evaluation more useful.

HOW TO ASK IT

Compared to questions 3 and 4, this one is relatively simple. It is really about making the simple point that communication matters. Here are a few suggestions about how to approach it.

Here are some suggestions for other questions to ask
should you need further probes to get to
the information you are looking for:

How much input will I/we have
into how the evaluation is designed?
If I/we feel the methodology is too
intrusive, for example, would I have
an opportunity to get that
method changed?

How and
when will we
communicate about
this evaluation?
Who should we
call if we have
questions?

What should
we do if we face
challenges (like low
response rates)?

Could we
arrange to meet
half-way through
to discuss
preliminary
results?

Could you
come to one of
the meetings of
our evaluation
or program advisory
committee?

Would it be
possible to arrange
a meeting with
other similar
grant recipients
to discuss our
evaluation plans?

Who else should
be part of this
conversation?

Once we submit
our report, will we
have a chance to
meet with you to
discuss what
we learned?

How often will we communicate
during the evaluation process?
Will the people I serve be part
of this communication?
Will the evaluators be present
at these meetings?

How do we share
information about
things that didn't
work? Are you
comfortable
with that?

How did you think the last evaluation went?
What did you learn?

DISCUSSION STARTER

It's also important to consider the role and views of the community participants or service users. In other words, evaluation shouldn't only take information from these groups, but instead actively engage them. Here are a few suggestions about how to approach this.

How will we communicate with respondents/participants regarding the focus, process, status/update, results, and how the evaluation is being used? ▶ How will we communicate the findings back to the respondents/communities/participants? ▶ How will we help to make sure the evaluation is also useful to them?

?

WHEN AND WHERE TO ASK IT

This is a good question to ask at the planning stage, especially in situations where an evaluation feels like it is being imposed from the outside without a lot of dialogue.

This question can also be helpful when a project is already underway. When projects encounter unexpected obstacles or evaluation starts to generate negative findings, talking these challenges through with partners can be very helpful. It can sometimes be helpful to consider where communication broke down when looking back on a challenging phase of the work.

KEEP in MIND

CHALLENGES THAT MIGHT COME UP
EVERYONE IS BUSY

Depending on the funder, your main contact person — the person you would want to communicate with about evaluation — may be responsible for dozens of grants in many different communities. They may not have time to attend lots of meetings. There are ways to improve communication in situations like these. Some nonprofits simply send periodic, unsolicited email updates on how the evaluation is proceeding. Some funders invite grant recipients to share videos or blogs every now and then. On the other hand, people who work for funders often crave communication as much as nonprofits do. Smaller, more local funders have told us that they enjoy being invited to discussions about evaluation or being included as a focus group participant or interviewee.

When working with large funders, it can sometimes be difficult to identify the best person to go to with your questions about evaluation. Questions like the following may help you decide who best to talk to and how to approach those people.

DISCUSSION STARTER

If others within your organization need to be consulted, will you take our concerns to your colleagues? ▶ Will you or one of your colleagues follow up with us about our concerns? ▶ Do you have any tips for us on how we can highlight our concerns with others in your organization or department? ▶ When is an appropriate time for us to discuss our next steps? Who will be responsible for arranging the follow up?

NO COMMUNICATION PLAN

Developing a communication plan can take time. It may be that you or your other evaluation stakeholders will not have answers to all these questions right away. Moreover, even if you have a communication plan, it may be the case that, as the evaluation project evolves, the level and type of communication may also evolve.

Allow for flexibility, but be clear on your own communication needs. Developing a simple, informal terms of reference that includes a few points on the above question can help to clarify expectations for each party.

ONN'S RESOURCE: 6 Simple Tips For Communicating About Impact may be helpful in developing a strategic approach to communicating about evaluation. *http://theonn.ca/wp-content/ uploads/2015/12/6-Simple-Tips-For-Communicating-About-Impact.pdf/*

DIGGING DEEPER
TOOLS AND FURTHER RESOURCES

In this section, you will find some more information regarding how to ask certain questions, particular scenarios where an evaluation discussion might take place, what to ask yourself before you begin an evaluation discussion, a draft template for writing to one of your stakeholders to arrange for an evaluation discussion, and finally some links to ONN and other resources that might be of use.

QUESTION 1: NEXT STEPS

A potential next step once you have identified what you want to learn is to begin to focus on questions that will help get people talking about what they want to learn through this particular evaluation effort. However, if you are not yet ready to have these discussions that is okay too. If you are ready to begin to focus in on particular details, here are some questions that might help.

What kinds of questions are we hoping to answer here?
To what degree are we interested in:

Learning about process (i.e. how and why we do things), the challenges that we
are facing, the lessons being learned, and the way this work is evolving over time?

Learning about the immediate outcomes of this work for the people we serve
(e.g. new skills, new social connections, increased activity levels, or reduced energy use)?

Learning about how this project contributes to larger community outcomes
(e.g. reduced poverty, improved student success, or strengthened cultural identity)?

To what degree are we interested in evaluating a single intervention
on its own vs. understanding how a group of agencies or programs work together?

To what degree are we interested in asking deep, probing questions about this
work vs. just making sure things are on track?

If we got answers to the types of questions we just discussed,
what would we do with them?

SAMPLE SCENARIOS
FUNDER INFORMATION SESSION

You are at an information session hosted by one of your funders. The purpose of the session is to explain recent changes to the granting criteria. During the presentation the funder explains that outcome measurement is going to be a key component of the process. Grant applications are to align with a list of priority outcomes and grant recipients will be expected to report on how they have measured their contributions to these outcomes. You feel these outcomes are good, but a bit ambitious, and you aren't clear on exactly what kind of evaluation work you will be expected to do. You'd like to ask for clarification. At the same time, you don't want to give the funder the impression that your organization isn't supportive of the new direction. **Should you raise your concerns and, if so, how?**

Question 1 (What are we trying to learn and why is it important?) may be a good place to start here. It might help you gather more information about the funder's strategy so you can decide how to proceed.

Question 5 (How will we communicate?) might be helpful as well. It positions you as a collaborator and might help to shift the conversation from one focused on measurement strategies to one focused on learning.

You might be tempted to ask **Question 4 (Who is going to do what?**). Q4 might help clarify expectations. However, this question requires a detailed answer and could come across as argumentative in a public information session. If you have the chance to take the funder aside after the meeting, Q4 might be a good discussion starter.

TALKING TO YOUR BOARD

You are an executive director with an interest in getting your organization to do more evaluation. You think it will put you in a stronger position when applying for grants and you also think it will improve your service. However, your board of directors is cautious. It doesn't want the organization to take time away from providing service to clients in order to do paperwork. How do you get it on board?

It might be helpful to come to this meeting prepared to answer **Question 4 (Who is going to do what?)**. This may help to reassure the board that you are keeping tabs on how much time evaluation work will take. You might move from that to a discussion of **Question 1 (What are we trying to learn and why is it important?)**.

MEETING WITH A FUNDER

You are interested in applying for a grant from a funder, but it requires all grant recipients to pick one outcome from a list and focus their projects on that. The outcomes on the list are all very concrete but also more long term (e.g. people get stable employment, youth graduate from high school, etc.). Your program is preventive in nature. You have a great evaluation system in place and it works really well for you. However, it doesn't really track the big-picture, life-changing outcomes

the funder is talking about. Instead, it focuses on the small steps your participants are making in building their resilience (e.g. showing up to program more often, participating in discussion more frequently, etc.). You've arranged a meeting with the funder to try to get it to allow you to report on the measures that make sense to you. **What do you say?**

Question 2 (How can we help each other learn?) may be a great place to start. It will give you a chance to highlight the unique insights that your measurement approach has to offer and give you both an opportunity to gauge whether there is enough shared interest to warrant changes to your existing evaluation strategy or the funder's reporting requirements.

OTHER RESOURCES
BEHIND THE SCENES: TAKING STOCK OF YOUR NEEDS

Before you begin a discussion with your evaluation stakeholders, consider what is at stake. Below are a few possible questions to first ask yourself/your team.

- ☑ What kind of relationship do you have with the other party? What kind of relationship do you want to have?

- ☑ How far apart are you right now? What elements need to be resolved?

- ☑ What is at stake for you? What do you hope to gain and what could you lose?

- ☑ Are you concerned that this evaluation could cause harm?

- ☑ Do you know how much decision-making power the person you are meeting with has?

- ☑ Will they need to check with others before answering your questions?

- ☑ What is already decided and what can be changed? How clear are the options for action?

- ☑ Are you willing to walk away from this partnership if the evaluation plan doesn't work for you?

- ☑ How well do you understand the other party's goals, context, and motivations?

AN INVITATION TO AN EVALUATION MEETING TEMPLATE

You may not know how to broach the topic of an evaluation discussion with other stakeholders. If so, here is a template for an invitation you might send:

To:	John Doe
Cc:	
Subject:	Evaluation

Hi! I am writing to invite you to participate in a meeting to help us get a clearer idea of how and and why we will undertake this evaluation. The Ontario Nonprofit Network has designed an evaluation discussion guide based off of extensive research that can help us to clarify our expectations and goals.

We know that the stakeholders in any evaluation project may have different needs, goals, and concerns. In this meeting, we hope to better understand those differences and (if possible) change our approach to evaluation in a way that leads to the greatest benefit for both sides.

As a funder, we recognize that you may not be in a position to change the reporting requirements that are attached to the grants that you give us. However, small changes in an evaluation strategy may be possible within those requirements and small changes can often make a big difference. It may be possible, for example, to change how results are analyzed and shared or how you provide feedback on evaluation findings. If you are willing to explore such possibilities, then we are keen to meet!

A FEW HELPFUL LINKS

ONN RESOURCES:

Sector Driven Evaluation Strategy

6 Simple Tips for Communicating About Impact

Evaluation Literature Review Matching Evaluation Approaches to Expectation*s*

Principles to Help us Get to Useful Evaluation

Unpacking nonprofit evaluation: Who is taking the risks and who is making the decisions?

What We Learned From Talking Evaluation to Funders

Matching Evaluation Approaches to Expectations

http://theonn.ca/our-work/our-structures/evaluation/

EXTERNAL RESOURCES:

A Practical Guide for Engaging Stakeholders in Developing Evaluation Questions. FSG.
http://www.fsg.org/tools-and-resources/practical-guide-engaging-stakeholders-developing-evaluation-questions-0

Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA). Beyond Intractability.
http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/batna

Better Evaluation. An international collaboration to improve evaluation practice and theory by sharing and generating information about options (methods or processes) and approaches.
http://betterevaluation.org/

Common negotiation language. Collins International. Collins/International House. *http://news.collinselt.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/languageofnegotiation.png*

Five tips for getting buy-in for your evaluation. Project Oracle. Center for Gender in Organizations. *http://project-oracle.com/news-and-events/five-tips-for-getting-buy-in-for-your-evaluation/*

Get to know your evaluation stakeholders. Community Solutions. *http://communitysolutions.ca/web/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Stakeholders.pdf*

Utilization-focused Evaluation, 4th Edition. Michael Quinn Patton. *https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/utilization-focused-evaluation/book229324*

EXTERNAL ARTICLES:

Evaluation and Foundations: Can We Have an Honest Conversation? Nonprofit Quarterly.
http://nonprofitquarterly.org/2006/03/21/evaluation-and-foundations-can-we-have-an-honest-conversation/

Getting to the Heart of Healthy Funder-Grantee Relationships. Stanford Social Innovation Review. *https://ssir.org/articles/entry/getting_to_the_heart_of_healthy_funder_grantee_relationships*

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