SPF Step 5: Evaluation

Evaluation, the fifth step of the SPF, involves examining both the process and outcomes of prevention interventions. Specifically, evaluation is the systematic collection and analysis of information about prevention activities to reduce uncertainty, improve effectiveness, and make decisions. According to Michael Quinn Patton, an expert in evaluation, research seeks to *prove* while evaluation seeks to *improve*.[i] Evaluation is about enhancing prevention practice.

Evaluation and the SPF

Evaluation in the context of the SPF means asking questions at three levels:

1. Since a comprehensive prevention plan includes multiple interventions, examine the degree to which *each intervention* produces positive outcomes.
2. Determine how well these different interventions *work together* as part of your community's comprehensive plan to address your priority substance use problems.
3. Evaluate the SPF process, itself (e.g., Were all step-specific tasks completed? Was cultural competence and sustainability integrated along the way?). Remember, the better your prevention *processes*, the better the prevention *outcomes.*

For example:

- In Assessment, you might evaluate your ability to find existing data on local substance use problems.
- In Capacity, you might examine how successful you were in bringing key prevention stakeholders onboard.
- In Planning, you might look at how well your selected interventions align with your priority risk and protective factors.
- In Implementation, you could evaluate the degree to which your community delivered selected prevention interventions as intended.
- In Evaluation, you could assess the quality of the data you collect from participants following an intervention.

Benefits of Evaluation

Evaluation can help prevention professionals and communities to accomplish the following:

- Systematically document and describe prevention activities
- Meet the diverse information needs of prevention stakeholders, including funders
- Continuously improve prevention interventions
- Demonstrate the impact of prevention interventions on substance abuse and related behavioral health problems
- Identify which elements of a comprehensive prevention plan are working well
- Build credibility and support for effective interventions in the community
- Advance the field of prevention by increasing the knowledge base about what does—and does not—work

Types of Evaluation

There are two main types of evaluation: *process* and *outcome.*

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- *Process evaluation*, which documents the implementation of an intervention, can be used to improve intervention delivery and enhance understanding of prevention outcomes. The following are examples of process evaluation questions:

    - To what extent were program sessions delivered as original designed?
    - How many people participated in the program?
    - How many participants did not complete the program?
    - What, if any, adaptations were made to the program?

- *Outcome evaluation,* which measures the effects of an intervention following its implementation, can reveal whether the intervention produced the anticipated short- and long-term prevention outcomes and helped build support for those interventions that worked. The following are examples of outcome evaluation questions:

    - To what extent did participants' attitudes toward the priority problem(s) change?
    - To what extent did local rates of substance use behavior specific to the priority problem(s) change?

There are also two different ways for communities and evaluators to work together: *traditional* and *participatory*.

- In a *traditional* approach to evaluation, an evaluator is hired to conduct an evaluation and works independently—interacting with program or agency staff as needed to retrieve information.
- In a *participatory* approach to evaluation, an evaluator is invited to take part in an evaluation as more of an advisor and partner—interacting regularly with all involved as part of, rather than outside of, the group. The team, of which the evaluator is a member, works together to plan and carry out the evaluation.

Benefits of the *participatory* approach include the following:

- Builds on the strengths and values of the contributions of all participants
- Increases evaluation buy-in and evaluation capacity among participants
- Increases the likelihood that the evaluation results will be valued and used
- Increases the likelihood that the evaluation will be culturally appropriate and relevant
- Can reduce evaluation costs

<u>Evaluation Principles</u>

All evaluations—whether process or outcome, traditional or participatory—should adhere to the following four principles: utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy.

- *Utility* is about making sure the evaluation meets the needs of prevention stakeholders, including funders. To increase the utility of the evaluation, prevention professionals should:
    - Identify the evaluation needs of all key stakeholders
    - Make sure evaluators are trustworthy and competent
    - Document findings so they are easily understood
    - Share findings with stakeholders in a timely manner

- *Feasibility* is about making sure the evaluation is realistic and doable. To ensure the feasibility of the evaluation, prevention professionals should:
    - Establish data collection procedures that are practical and minimize disruption
    - Anticipate and address potential obstacles (e.g., opposition from political or other interest groups)
    - Consider efficiency and cost-effectiveness
- *Propriety* is about making sure the evaluation is conducted in accordance with legal and ethical guidelines and is consistent with each community's cultural context. To support the propriety of the evaluation, prevention professionals should:
    - Respect the rights and protect the well-being of all involved
    - Examine the intervention in a thorough and impartial manner
    - Define how findings will be disclosed and who can access them
- *Accuracy* is about making sure the evaluation is conducted in a precise and dependable manner. To increase the accuracy of evaluation findings, prevention professionals should:
    - Clearly describe the intervention and evaluation procedures
    - Gather and use information that is both valid and reliable
    - Systematically and appropriately analyze all information
    - Justify and fairly report all conclusions

Evaluation Tasks

Evaluation tasks, which are based upon the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *Framework for Program Evaluation*, include the following:

Task 1. Engage stakeholders: An evaluation stakeholder is anyone who cares about, or has something to gain or lose from, an intervention and its evaluation findings. Stakeholders include everyone who is:

- Involved in *delivering* the prevention interventions (e.g., intervention staff, managers, funders, prevention partners, task force members)
- *Served or affected* by the prevention interventions (e.g., participants, advocacy and interest groups affected by the issue, public officials)
- In a position to *do something* with the evaluation findings (e.g., prevention partners, task force members, funders, public officials, public/taxpayers)

By involving diverse stakeholders, you can:

- Demonstrate respect for the many individuals and groups connected to prevention efforts
- Obtain the help and support needed to conduct a thorough evaluation
- Enhance understanding of evaluation among those involved in data collection and analysis
- Ensure the cultural relevance and appropriateness of the evaluation design, tools, and findings
- Increase the credibility of prevention interventions as well as the evaluation process and findings
- Increase the likelihood that evaluation findings will be disseminated and used
- Garner support for any efforts to expand and/or sustain prevention interventions

Task 2. Describe the initiative: Remember the logic model from *SPF Step 3: Planning,* which lays out exactly what a prevention initiative intends to do and achieve? This tool can help your prevention team

communicate its plans to stakeholders and serve as a framework for evaluating the initiative. Specifically, this logic model identifies the following:

- Priority substance use problem to be address by the prevention initiative
- Risk and protective factors, prioritized based on the degree to which they influence the problem at the local level and existing capacity to change them
- Evidence-based programs and strategies selected to address each priority factor
- Anticipated short- and long-term outcomes (e.g., changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills and—over time—behaviors of intervention participants)

You can use the process evaluation to monitor and improve the implementation of selected prevention interventions and the outcome evaluation to measure the degree to which those interventions produce anticipated prevention outcomes. When a prevention initiative is laid out fully and clearly in a logic model form, it is much easier to identify appropriate evaluation questions and gather the data needed to answer them.

Task 3. Focus the evaluation design: Often, at the beginning of an evaluation, people jump right to thinking about *how* to collect data (e.g., "Let's do a survey!") before thinking through *what* data they'll need. The following tasks can help you design the right evaluation for your prevention initiative:

- Clarify your purpose: For example, do you want to find out if your interventions reached your focus population, or how well they worked to bring about change? Your purpose should be dictated by your stakeholders' needs, including funding requirements, and guide all decisions that follow.
- Develop your questions: Once you're clear on your purpose, you'll need to develop evaluation questions that are specific to what you want to learn. Some questions can help you learn about the implementation of an intervention while others can help you learn about its outcomes.
- Select the right design: There are different ways to design, or structure, an evaluation. Some questions are best answered by gathering data from intervention participants and practitioners **throughout** implementation. Other questions are best answered by gathering data **before and after** an intervention, and/or **from non-participants as well as participants**. This latter approach allows for helpful comparisons and a better understanding of an intervention's effects.
- Choose appropriate methods: There are many different ways to gather the data you need. Qualitative methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups) produce data that are usually expressed in words. They let you explore an issue or population in-depth by answering questions such as *Why or why not?* and *What does that mean?* Quantitative methods (e.g., surveys, checklists) produce data that are usually expressed in numbers. They allow you to draw general conclusions about an issue or population by answering questions such as *How much? How many?* and *How often?* Which methods you select will depend on what you want to learn, your budget and timeline, and what's most appropriate for your focus population.

Task 4. Gather credible evidence: How you gather data will determine how well you can answer your evaluation questions—and whether your findings will be taken seriously by others. The following are some ways to increase the credibility of your evaluation:

- *Use quality tools and procedures:* This means using data collection tools and procedures that are both valid and reliable. A valid tool measures what it's supposed to measure. A reliable tool produces

consistent results each time you use it. Selected tools and procedures should also be culturally appropriate.
- *Take a mixed-methods approach* (i.e., a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods). This approach will allow you to examine your initiative from diverse perspectives, answer your evaluation questions more fully, and feel more confident in your findings.
- *Provide training and support:* Make sure that everyone involved in collecting and analyzing data gets the training and support they need to do it well.
- *Gather enough data:* Gather enough data from different sources to be able to draw conclusions with confidence—without going beyond your budget or missing important deadlines.
- *Manage the process:* It's important to take a systematic approach to storing and analyzing these data, as well as to developing and acting on your findings.

Task 5. Justify conclusions: Before you can justify your conclusions, you will need to analyze, synthesize, and interpret your evaluation data.

- *Analyze:* This involves systematically examining each data source to determine key findings. Whenever possible, engage multiple reviewers in the data analysis process and make sure that everyone follows the same protocol.
- *Synthesize:* The next step is to compare and connect your results across data sources. By combining information from different data sources, you can detect areas of overlap and consistency—and identify new questions to explore when findings are inconsistent.
- *Interpret:* Finally, draw conclusions based on a careful examination of all your data. What positive or negative outcomes do your data reveal? Can you attribute these outcomes to the intervention—or are other explanations possible? What decisions or actions do you recommend based on your conclusions?

When analyzing, synthesizing, and interpreting evaluation data, it is important to involve the right people. These include individuals with research expertise, intervention staff, focus population members, and other prevention stakeholders who can help increase the accuracy and cultural relevance of evaluation findings.

Task 6. Ensure use and share lessons learned: The best way to make sure that your evaluation findings will be used is to communicate them in ways that meet the varied needs of your diverse stakeholders. For each audience, ask yourself the following questions:

- *What do they want to learn from the evaluation?* Different audiences care about different things. For example, the general public will want to hear about the big picture. Are your interventions saving lives? Are you putting tax dollars to good use? Your *funder*, on the other hand, will want all the details of your evaluation procedures, methods, and findings.
- *Which communication methods and channels are most appropriate?* Consider *how* your different audiences get their information. You may be able to share information with some groups—such as community service providers—through meetings, workplace newsletters, or listservs. But you may have better luck reaching other groups, such as young people, with posts to social networking sites and tweets!

The following are some different reasons and ways to communicate evaluation findings:

- To share key evaluation findings with the public, submit a short *press release* to local newspapers
- To get a large group of community members thinking and talking about evaluation findings, convene a *town hall meeting*
- Create *fact sheets and/or infographics* of key findings to post on websites, distribute on listservs, and hand out at events
- To provide funders with a complete overview of the evaluation process and findings, write a *full report*
- To explore findings and potential next steps with local cultural and advocacy groups, schedule a *small group presentation* for each group
- Contribute to the prevention field by sharing findings in a *conference presentation or journal article*

Evaluation and Cultural Competence

The following evaluation activities can help to ensure that your prevention efforts will be culturally competent:

- Involve diverse stakeholders, including focus population members, when clarifying your purpose and questions
- Identify data collection methods and procedures that are appropriate for all participants
- Consult diverse stakeholders, including focus population members, when analyzing, synthesizing, and interpreting your findings

Implementation and Sustainability

The evaluation process can help support the long-term sustainability of prevention efforts. For example:

- Evaluation can help to improve interventions so they're worth sustaining.
- Evaluation will reveal which interventions should be expanded or sustained.
- By sharing evaluation findings, you can help build the support needed to expand and sustain effective interventions.
- Evaluation can help you examine your ongoing plans for, and progress toward, sustaining interventions that work.

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[i] Patton, M. Q. (2002). Qualitative research & evaluation methods (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.