Valuing Evaluation

EVALUATION HAS VARIED MEANINGS. Depending on whom you talk to, evaluation is synonymous with tests, documentation, or performance management. Or sometimes it is known as "bean counting" or "number crunching" requiring "jumping through hoops." However, the practice of evaluation is no longer solely a dry and mysterious exercise performed by an outside expert on a quest for accountability. Rather, evaluation is being redefined as an essential tool for assisting groups, organizations, and communities in achieving their goals.

WHAT IS EVALUATION?

Evaluation is a process of choices and thus something that we do daily. For instance, when we buy an automobile, we consider our needs and available budget. We may consult *Consumer Reports*. We may test drive a few cars. Evaluating a program or project involves many of the same activities. It is a systematic and deliberate process of collecting information, applying criteria, and arriving at a new and deeper understanding of our work or the result we want to achieve.

A BROADER VISION OF EVALUATION

Evaluation may have a bad reputation in some circles. Many still apply and interpret evaluation as a "gotcha" exercise resulting in a thumbs-up or thumbs-down judgment. However, the good news is that the field of evaluation has expanded over the past decade to include a broader view of evaluation that emphasizes learning and application of what we learn. Specifically, we can view evaluation as:

1 A process of asking good questions, gathering information to answer them, and making decisions based on those answers. *What do we need to know?*

2 A conduit for learning—a way for an organization to assess its progress and change in ways that lead to greater achievement of its goals. *How can we use this information for better results?*

3 An essential component of effective decision making, whether it be strategic planning or routine operations. When evaluation is part of an organization's ongoing efforts, learning is valued because it provides the information necessary for continuous improvement. *How are we doing?*

❹ The responsibility of everyone involved in the activity. Everyone has a role in gathering information. A question for everybody is: *What can we be doing to improve?*

❺ Evaluation is not a one-time event, but a process; not episodic but ongoing; not outside the organization, but ingrained in the day-to-day work. Evaluation is a developmental process, not just a report-card summary. In addition, evaluation works best in an environment that is as risk free as possible, where people can examine why something succeeded or failed without fear of negative consequences, where honesty is the name of the game.

Finally, evaluation demands a strategic investment of time and effort. Evaluation saves time and effort in the long run by making better use of limited resources and contributing to the viability and sustainability of a program. (Source: Sandra Trice Gray (Ed.), *A Vision of Evaluation: A Report of the Independent Sector's Work on Evaluation,* Washington, DC: The Independent Sector, 1993.)

If we adopt this broader definition of evaluation as we work on community issues, it becomes clear that the *power of evaluation lies in its potential to increase the effectiveness and fulfillment of a certain activity.* Evaluation will require many of the skills that we have discussed in previous modules—developing a vision, thinking strategically, listening, and reflection.