How Can We Plan to Measure Program Outcomes?

Once you’re confident your program is aligned with your nonprofit’s mission and has its full support [see Get Your Organization Ready to Clarify Outcomes], and once you’re confident your program design and implementation is likely to significantly influence participant outcomes [see What Is a Logic Model and Why Is it Important?], you are ready to prepare to measure program outcomes.

One more word of caution. First ask yourself, **Is our program providing all the experiences logically necessary to help participants get to outcomes, at an adequate dosage and duration?** For example, a two-hour workshop is not adequate to help most first generation prospective college students prepare to apply to college; more support is needed around navigating high school success and the college application process. Second ask, **Are we actually observing the outcomes we want to measure, or is this a case of wishful thinking?** You want to avoid measuring outcomes that you are not actually influencing yet. This is like getting on the scale, **before** I start my diet and exercise regimen! (As though the act of weighing myself will help me lose weight!)

Once you are confident you are actually influencing your participant’s outcomes, here are ten steps to making your outcomes measurable:

1. Select from your logic model the most important outcomes sequence to measure, including intermediate outcome(s) and the essential initial outcomes steps leading to the sequence of intermediate outcomes. [link to How can we draft our program’s outcomes] Here are two tips:
   a. Don’t pick the outcomes that look easiest to measure! Here is the important principle: Any outcome can be made measurable! (Just see steps below.) You want to measure the outcome sequence that most closely represents the heart or purpose of your program, what is most important to your participants’ success.
   b. Don’t measure everything! Here is the next important principle: You are a service provider, not a researcher! Measure only what you absolutely need to learn and improve results for your participants.

2. Identify indicators for your outcomes. Indicators are measurable data that reveal whether participants have achieved success on a priority outcome. Indicators answer the question, **What does it look like when the outcome happens? How will I know when the outcome happens?** Here are few pointers:
   - There are 3 kinds of indicators:
     - Yes/No (pregnant, graduation)
     - Count (school attendance)
     - Scales with defined steps or a ladder (skills, knowledge, most initial outcomes)
   - Initial outcomes are often measured as an **improvement** in skills or knowledge, because different participants enter your program at different levels. (You may decide to tweak your logic model to more accurately reflect a logical progression of outcomes.) To measure initial outcomes, you may select or design questions to measure participants’ knowledge or skill. If you are new to outcome measurement, you may start with a simple 3-step scale: Red=outcome not observed, yellow=outcome partially observed, green=outcome observed. The top of the scale or ladder becomes the intermediate outcome.
   - Indicators are specific to your participants’ demographics, culture, language, unique situation, and to the unique expectations of your program related to each outcome. **How do your participants express trusting relationships, love of learning, overcoming barriers?**
   - Be sure you are selecting indicators that represent the outcome you seek to measure. It’s tempting to define an outcome by the indicator for a related outcome on your logic model.
   - By setting indicators, you are defining success for your program and its participants. Be careful not to set the bar so high that no one can attain it, nor so low that everyone attains it. Your goal is to improve outcomes attainment for your participants.
3. Determine who will provide the most accurate data on the indicator: your participant, your staff, or a third party, such as a parent or teacher or partner. This person is the respondent in the measurement process.

4. Design or select a measurement tool or process that fits your indicators and your respondent in 2 and 3 above. Examples of written or electronic sources include surveys, interview protocols, pick-list scales and measurement logs, which are completed in accordance with a plan to collect data. Here is a great website that curates outcomes tools, PerformWell, a collaboration of Urban Institute, Child Trends, and Social Solutions. When assessing a tool’s relevance, ask yourself these questions:
   a. Does this tool address the outcome to be measured?
   b. Does this tool address the indicator(s) my program uses to determine success on the outcome?
   c. Are the questions phrased culturally and developmentally, so that my participants can understand what is being asked? ....can respond truthfully?
   d. For my population, what method of administering the questionnaire will lead to the best quality of response / best number of responses: face-to-face or written? Is the tool too long?
   e. Which questions are necessary for my indicators?
   f. Do I know how to compile the results from this tool?

5. Consider what external and internal factors influence your participants’ change process. You may decide to measure a couple of these to enrich your learning about how to improve success.

6. Decide how often you will collect data, who will do it, and how. This is your data collection work plan; if your plan is not specific about who, what, where, when, and how, I can guarantee it won’t happen. Here are some tips:
   a. Be sure the staff or volunteers you ask to help with measurement tasks have the time and training to take on these tasks.
   b. Make a plan for confidentiality of individual participant data, if you don’t already have one.
   c. Make a plan to notify your participants about your data collection process. It’s their life.
   d. For which participants will you collect outcomes data? Only collect outcomes on those participants who have completed sufficient dosage and duration to see the improvement you expect at each phase of your program.

7. Consider where you will put your data. There are some great Customer Relationship Management (CRM) databases which are affordable for nonprofits; they are getting easier to use every year. Try this impartial guide from Idealware.

8. Try out your measurement plan before you bake it into your program and your database; something always needs to be tweaked. Here is another principle to keep in mind at the trial run stage: Your measurement system should enhance your relationship with your participants, not disrupt it.

9. Here are some great questions to consider after you’ve completed a trial run, from United Way of America’s Measuring Program Outcomes:
   Outcome Findings:
   - Did you get all the data you need?
   - Did you actually measure what you intended to measure?
   - Do you still think what you measured are important outcomes?
   - Does it appear that the finding will be useful?

   Measurement System Features:
   - Data collection instruments
   - Data collector training
   - Data entry procedures
   - Time and cost of collecting and analyzing data
   - Procedures for monitoring the measurement system

10. Remember, you are the expert in your participants and in what success should looks like for them. On the other hand, please rely on guidance from an evaluator in designing your system.