

## **The Importance of Conducting Process Evaluations<sup>1</sup>** **by Shawn M. Flower**

### **THE PURPOSE**

The strength and integrity of a program are important for achieving program outcomes. The purpose of conducting process evaluations is to assess whether programs are implemented as they were intended. To do this, the program must establish implementation standards. Implementation standards are written values or goals for ensuring that the planned program is the delivered program. Standards should clearly define when the intervention is to begin, how long the intervention will last, to whom the intervention is to be applied, who will perform the intervention and how specifically the intervention is to be delivered.

Why is process evaluation an important component of implementing programs? Why should a provider spend time and personnel resources to conduct a process evaluation? The reason is that understanding how a program is implemented allows you to evaluate the outcomes of your program with more confidence. Integrity of program implementation process is the key to your ability to assert that the program had the desired impact on the participants. Further, knowledge gained from a process evaluation can be used to modify program standards in order to improve future program effectiveness.

### **What You Can Learn When You Conduct A Process Evaluation**

As an example of what you can learn when you conduct a process evaluation, imagine that your county has a two month substance abuse program with two components: an eight-week drug and alcohol awareness education program and weekly group therapy sessions. Assume that when this project was implemented you included a process evaluation which required that the service provider report on a number of measures you felt indicated the program was implemented as intended.

For example, you asked the program provider to maintain attendance records for all program participants to ascertain what percentage of the participants actually attended every week of the drug and alcohol awareness education and group therapy. In addition, you asked the program provider to confirm that the drug and alcohol awareness curriculum was followed according to the program specifications, and you required verification that the therapists leading the group sessions were qualified state-certified professionals.

Thirty adults are sent to the program and are asked to complete a self-report survey before and after their participation in the program (a pre- and post-test assessment). This assessment includes questions that ascertain if the participants show a change in their behavior and attitudes toward alcohol and drugs use. Upon analysis, the data reveal a lower level of change of attitudes and behavior than you had anticipated – only 25% of the participants report that they have changed their attitudes toward the use of drug and alcohol and that they are abstaining from drug and alcohol use. The remaining 75% of the participants show no change in their behavior or attitudes.

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As the post-test data indicated a low response to the treatment, one possible reason for this reduced treatment effect may have been that the program was not fully implemented as intended. With the information gathered in your process evaluation, you are able to review the data reported to you by the program provider. In this example, the data confirms that the curriculum was followed each week and that the therapists were qualified to lead the group therapy sessions. However, the attendance records indicate that only 60% of the program participants attended only half of the drug and alcohol awareness education program and 65% participated in 5 of the 8 group therapy sessions.

Given this information, you hypothesize that the lower treatment effect was the result of program participants failing to benefit from all of the planned drug and alcohol awareness education and group therapy sessions. You believe that an increased rate of attendance by program participants will result in a stronger treatment effect and a higher percentage of those abstaining from drug and alcohol use. Consequently, the next time the direct service provider implements this program, you set a standard requiring a higher participation rate by program participants. Alternatively, if you conducted the process evaluation and found that the program was implemented exactly as intended, you may wish to substantively examine the program to ascertain if your county wishes to continue a program that has a less than desired success rate.

### **What You Don't Know When You Don't Conduct A Process Evaluation**

In the alternative, assume that when this program was implemented you didn't include any process evaluation measures. You have little knowledge beyond the provider's proposal (or program description) and staff assurances about how the program was implemented. You don't know about the attendance rates by the participants, you don't know if the curriculum was followed, and you don't have confirmation as to therapist's qualifications for leading group therapy sessions.

While the post-test results remain the same, (25% participants are abstaining from drugs and alcohol use) you have no standards by which to ascertain if the way the program was implemented was instrumental in this change or if there is an alternative explanation for this result. Other factors may have influenced the participants that had nothing to do with the program such as the death of a popular person in the community as the result of a drug overdose. While a process evaluation will not eliminate all rival factors that may influence the results, it may narrow the scope of possibilities.

### **Another way to think about this:**

Ask yourself – how do I generally like to cook? More structural (you follow a recipe) or more instinctual (throwing things into the pot and enjoy what emerges)?

But suppose you wanted to make that same meal again - how hard would that be to do?

It would largely depend on the type of cook you are. For an instinctual cook - while very creative and innovative, it would be more difficult (if not impossible) to exactly duplicate the meal.

In contrast, a structured cook would have a better chance at doing so because they have the ingredients, measurements, timing, temperature, and process written down.

If you don't know what went into the pot, you can't recreate it.