Program Clarification: What Are We Really Trying To Do?

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At one time or another, most people involved in developing or implementing programs for individuals and families ask themselves the question, "So what are we really trying to do with this program?" Although this may sound dismaying, the absence of this self-reflective question would be even more dismaying. I sometimes think that every program and activity is destined to go awry, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. It allows for successful program clarification.

Through program evaluation, developers examine where they started and where they have arrived, as well as consider what the process means. Although all stages of evaluation are important, program evaluation may be the most critical in our efforts to develop effective programs. Unfortunately, this stage of evaluation is often bypassed as we rush to collect outcome data. I recall a colleague who told a story of being invited to evaluate a program. After several site visits, he reported to the program developers that he would not be able to help them conduct an impact evaluation because he could not "find" the program. He found lots of interesting activities, but no coherent program model or consistent set of goals. He recommended that the program developers conduct a "program clarification" evaluation as their next step.

PROGRAM CLARIFICATION. The purpose of program clarification is to examine more closely the assumptions guiding the goals and activities of a program. Program clarification seeks answers to three questions: 1) What are the specific goals of the program? 2) What activities are designed to achieve these goals? and 3) How can we interpret any discrepancies between the goals and activities? Put simply, the goal of this type of evaluation is to describe why you are conducting each program activity and how each activity will produce specific outcomes.

During the process of designing a program, an implicit model usually guides how-at least in theory-the program is to unfold. As the program is implemented, variations inevitably arise. For example, one group of developers planned a twelve-part parenting program only to discover that parents attended about four sessions. In response, the developers shortened the program. In another instance, developers anticipated parents would spend one slot of time each week with their children at home on an activity. However, this didn't happen until the developers provided an orientation session and regular telephone follow-up. In some programs, new activities are added and others are dropped. In short, the program always changes during implementation.

TYPES OF PROGRAM DATA NEEDED. To conduct a successful program clarification, first gather all the information available about the program. This should include all collected data (for more information on needs assessment and utilization and satisfaction data, see HDFL Bulletin, Vol. 1, Issues 2 and 3). You should also explore the ideas of staff at all levels and clients

regarding the goals and activities. The views of the primary service or program delivery staff, who often have important insights into how the program is working, are essential.

Next, take time to clarify the goals and activities of the program. This process should include both staff at various levels of the program (e.g., program developers, managers, and program staff) and clients. The results of this process should be a clearer purpose, a better sense of what is going on, ideas about what is working or what needs to be changed, and in some cases promising new directions. Often the clarification process will threaten personnel who don't want to challenge their cherished assumptions about the program. Nevertheless, continuing to conduct an ineffective program will not produce results. Program developers must learn what is or is not working and redesign their efforts.

OUTCOMES OF PROGRAM CLARIFICATION. A variety of results may emerge from program clarification. Consider the following examples: One program involved a newsletter series for newly divorced parents. The parents were to start receiving the newsletters after they had finalized their divorce and for each month after in a specific order. During the program clarification process, developers learned that staff at many sites were not mailing the newsletter because they had difficulty keeping track of who was supposed to be receiving which issue. As a result, a computer mailing list program was created that automatically produced mailing labels indicating which issue of the newsletter was to be mailed. In another instance, a school was conducting programs for parents and afterschool enrichment activities for children. After two years, developers realized the parenting programs were not well attended and not very successful. To solve this problem, the program managers collaborated with another community agency more experienced with parenting programs.

Another program, which sought to impact schools and the community in a variety of ways, failed to conduct program clarification altogether. In the early part of program implementation, staff were much more successful working with school personnel than working with community agencies. Gradually, the activities increased in the schools, but did not increase with the community agencies. Had these program developers conducted a clarification process, they might have better understood what wasn't working in the community, perhaps abandoning these efforts and focusing more on the schools. Because they did not, however, some staff became repeatedly frustrated at their inability to work successfully with community agencies. To compound the problem, program staff continued to claim that they were working with community agencies and often inadvertently prevented other organizational linkages from being developed in the community.

SUMMARY. A critical aspect of the evaluation process is clarifying program processes to crystallize an understanding of the program model. The success of a program on any type of measurement (positive outcomes, cost effectiveness, etc.) depends on developers and staff understanding the program, monitoring changes, and learning from mistakes and successes over time. By conducting a program clarification evaluation process, a better program will emerge.

NOTE. For more information about conducting program clarification, see Jacobs, F. H. (1988). The five-tiered approach to evaluation: Context and implementation. In H. B. Weiss & F. H. Jacobs (Eds.) *Evaluating family programs*. (pp. 37-68). New York: Aldine de Gruyter.