



A Climate Change in Evaluation

Leadership in Difficult Times

When resources are tight and organizations face competing priorities, it is critical to use the best information available to make tough decisions that support an organization's viability in the short term and allow it to capitalize on opportunities in the future.

To respond to today's constantly changing economic climate, nonprofit organizations and funders must have data collection and reporting systems in place that provide solid information upon which to base their decisions - decisions about infrastructure, partnerships, strategic relationships, resource allocation, investments, advocacy, business models, programs, staffing, and steps that lead to long-term sustainability.

In the absence of such a system, organizations are left with hunches, best estimates, and guesses. While leaders often make bold decisions with little or no information, when the pressure is on and stakes are high, leaders look to good data for direction.

To understand better how TCC Group's clients are adjusting their expectations about the use of evaluation in these challenging economic times, we queried our clients about their new priorities, specifically: *"What new evaluation questions are being asked and what sort of activities are being implemented? How is evaluation data being used differently in this new climate?"*

In light of an increased demand for accountability and decreased staffing, we found that clients are taking ownership of their evaluation. Clients are interested in mechanisms for collecting, mining, and reporting on their *own* data. Both funders and nonprofits are seeking support in developing infrastructure and building capacity to engage in evaluation. Some of this infrastructure development includes using evaluation leadership teams and expanding participation across organizational departments and functions as a low-cost strategy to preserve evaluation knowledge and build evaluation technical skills and capacity *across* their organizations. In short, tough times call for systematic and rigorous data.

While there are upfront costs to such an investment, clients are strategically seeking efficiencies in the longer term. TCC Group's work with the Office of Catholic Schools in Chicago embodied such an effort. After a year of planning, the organization had created an evaluation framework and an evaluation leadership team to measure the organization's strategic planning efforts. The client described this work in terms of the old adage: "This is about teaching one how to fish." After building capacity, the organization established a path toward greater self-sufficiency in their evaluation efforts. While the Office of Catholic Schools experienced recent leadership change,

the capacity built during the evaluation planning and design process remains strong and persistent. Staff members are forward-looking, exploring new technologies to employ in evaluation.

Understanding What Works

Making bold decisions with regard to an organization's internal operating capacity and strategic direction requires an understanding of what ultimately works best in day-to-day operations. Moreover, understanding the quality of one's programs and how this quality links to results is critical to the long-term success and sustainability of a program from both a cost-effectiveness standpoint and overall mission achievement standpoint.

TCC Group clients such as the Kansas Health Foundation and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute are using evaluation data to facilitate their understanding of how to best allocate resources for more efficient and effective outcomes. As part of an analysis of what works, these clients are paying more attention to the measurement of short-term outcomes as evidence of a *pathway to change or mission attainment*.

Both of these clients are focused on measuring what they can directly influence in their immediate evaluation efforts, while strategically keeping their eye on assessing longer-term impacts.

Such data can help an organization emerge from this economic crisis stronger and more accurately focused on evidenced-based investments to create new pipelines of programs and services. While TCC Group has a number of data collection methods to measure general operating support, we are moving

forward with the development of Program Assessments which are designed to provide direct and immediate measurement of program results.

Asking Evaluation Data to Do More

Clients are demanding answers to more questions and using innovative approaches to meet board and funder priorities. Rather than designing new, complex evaluations or research to answer funders' ongoing and evolving questions, clients are making tough decisions about what their data says and leveraging this information in their marketing, fundraising, and membership decisions.

TCC Group client, Action for Healthy Kids, is a nationwide nonprofit dedicated to improving children's nutrition and increasing their physical activity. The organization has had an ongoing desire to measure the impact of their volunteer network across the country. A complex research study of school wellness policies and body mass indices had been beyond their reach. However, this year they took the innovative approach of developing a database of publicly available data such as obesity rates and state school wellness policies as a way to inform their work on a state-by-state basis to be used as a baseline to track and observe changes and trends.

Rather than getting bogged down in too many measurements, Action for Healthy Kids chose to use free, available data to inform their strategic direction and understanding of their regional work. While the data is not directly linked to the organization, Action for Healthy Kids now has access to state-by-state information about local trends and the environment to which it hopes to make a positive contribution.

Using Evaluation Data to Tell a Story

Recently, TCC has seen clients request evaluation reports that can be used as communication pieces characterized more as journalistic accounts than as evaluation reports of prior years. Further, we are hearing clients talk more about the value of *storytelling* that clearly communicates value and impact.

Current and past funders are asking for case studies or case profiles related to their grantee's projects and accomplishments, while nonprofits are increasingly asking for PowerPoint presentations to accompany or sometimes in lieu of a larger evaluation report.

Further, and no surprise during these times, TCC Group is working with more nonprofits interested in using evaluation findings to court contributors, sponsors, donors, and champions and explore collaborations and partnerships with other like-minded nonprofits to leverage resources and impact.

On the other side, funders are showing interest in using evaluation and assessment findings to re-evaluate relationships with grantees, consider exit strategies, and find opportunities to maximize social return on investment.

Merging Organizational Assessment, Evaluation, Planning

Evaluation is a critical tool in helping nonprofits achieve their mission. Large-scale organizations in particular are well positioned to use their structures to systematically collect and analyze multiple sources of data to examine the relationship between organizational effectiveness and program effectiveness. TCC Group client, Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA), recognizes a powerful opportunity to combine

national program evaluation data and organizational assessment data to determine program effectiveness – which programs work, the resources are necessary, and assessing which capacities are most important for achieving mission.

TCC is working with GSUSA to develop the Girl Scout Core Capacity Assessment Tool using TCC's Core Capacity Model as the framework. The tool, which is administered to board members, staff members and volunteers, allows Girl Scout councils to assess and analyze organizational core capacities that are important to achieving the vision of Girl Scouting. In addition to organizational assessment data, GSUSA is also developing a national system to help councils collect data on program quality and girl outcomes. When analyzed together, these key data points allow GSUSA and councils to examine the cause-and-effect relations between organizational effectiveness and Girl Scout programming and to identify capacities and strategies that are most directly tied to the achievement of girl outcomes.

Other clients are blending evaluation and planning activities, first as a cost-effective way to engage in data collection and decision making. Even more importantly, they use this as an approach toward the development of feedback loops that use evaluation data to inform strategic planning decisions and implementation as well as measure results.

In difficult times, well-led organizations practice informed decision-making by making their data work harder for them

To learn more about how TCC Group's Evaluation Team can work with your organization, contact Chantell Johnson, Director of Evaluation, at cjohnson@tccgrp.com.