

## What is evaluation and why bother?

*This is a 3 page introduction to evaluation – what it is and how to get started - either for the newcomer or for the experienced practitioner who wants a little refresher. There is a further training tool on questioning for evaluation appended to this on pages 4 to 6. More resources are at [www.jimsimpsonconsultancy.co.uk/resources-library](http://www.jimsimpsonconsultancy.co.uk/resources-library)*

**Question: What is evaluation and why bother?**

**Answer: Because we're worth it, aren't we?**

### Introduction

These 3 pages will introduce to easy evaluation methods and show you how to get started. You can be using evaluation methods starting with just a 45 minute-long technique.

If the thing you are doing is 'worth it', or at least you think it is so, then you might need to either, test something out, make plans for the future, decide between options or explain it to others. We have all come across so many fantastic ideas, projects or services or businesses that are excellent, but sometimes they are not well known. Why? Well sometimes it is because they are not evaluated and their value is not disseminated. So they don't get up that all important league table of recognition.

Formal evaluation is usually done for a reason; the reason is usually about decision-making about say sustainability, or doing something different; and often the decisions are about funding, value or making changes and progress.

### What is evaluation?

Evaluation is a systematic assessment of *worth, merit or significance*. So you might be asking questions like: Is what I am doing or going to do 'a good thing?'; Why is it good, effective or useful?; What does my project do that is significant?; How does it achieve positive results; ... and so on.

Evaluation starts with intelligent questioning as does any reflective process or research.

Evaluation can be short and sweet or it can be in depth and elaborate. We all do it anyway, to an extent at least, stemming from our naturally inquisitive nature and those early why questions we ask as children – the 'why is the sky blue mummy?' sort of questions.

So let us start with the short and sweet look at evaluation with a little quotation and a worked example. You will see how the evaluation method can be translated to your situation. You could be evaluating anything: a career or learning choice; a business idea; how good a health service; how to save money; or how to go about changing relationships.



You might come up with better questions than this plus you will easily come up with more questions - that is the idea at this first step of evaluation - asking lots of questions before you attempt to answer them (see page 3 to 6 for an exercise in questioning insight). For instance if you were trying to solve a crime you would not ask your prime suspect one or two questions then proceed with the answer (well of course you could but you might be lumbered with a miscarriage of justice!).

### **Types of evaluation:**

Banana skin number one is always just doing evaluation only once you have completed your project or activity – i.e. summatively. Where you can, at least begin to plan your evaluation at the start of the process so as to make the process formative. As per the Mindset example they will ask themselves at the start of their project: *‘How will we know we have done a good job once we have completed the first stage of the project?’*

*Formative* evaluation includes techniques such as:

- *Needs assessment* - what need am I trying to fulfil through the next course of action? who needs the work/project/service/technology/course or whatever ‘thing’ it is you want to do?; why do they need it?; what do they need or want?
- *Structured visioning* - imagine what the work will do; how will the people involved or the environment be different when the work is done? who it will reach? and how will they be reached?; what it will do?; and what goal or objectives are appropriate?
- *Feasibility* - testing how something works by trialling or testing elements of it before you put it all in place

*Summative* evaluation includes:

- *Outcomes evaluation* - did the work do what it said on the tin?....did it achieve the outcomes that were intended at the outset?
- *Impact evaluation* – what effects did the project, intervention or technology have? whether they were intended or not.
- *Value-for-money (VFM), Cost-benefit analysis* – accounting and econometric analysis based on evaluation of recognisable or standard outputs and outcomes. Usually involves making comparisons.
- *Secondary enquiry or analysis* – probes, analyses and synthesises existing knowledge and information on a subject. Generally this is the most common form of research piecing together what is already known to inform a course of action.

Evaluation involves comparison between, say, different approaches and solutions to problems or between the past and the present. With evaluation we can see *how we can make a difference* from the outset and *how we made a difference* at the end of an activity.

Evaluation is an *end product* – a statement of the worth, merit and significance of something. Evaluation is also a *process* that enables you to reflect on and measure how you are doing and make plans for what you are going to do next.

*Jim Simpson* ©Jim Simpson Consultancy<sup>i</sup>

## **APPENDIX: Questioning Brainstorm.**

This is trainer instruction that explains a rapid brainstorming exercise used in project evaluation. It is used in a group-training context. It is used for and adapted to *anyone* managing *any project* and *evaluating what to do next*.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Activity 1. 'Questioning Brainstorm'**

**(AKA 'Who, why, what, where, when + how' brainstorm)**

#### **Why are we doing this?**

1. To demonstrate the value of questioning for change agents.
2. To develop some questioning skills. To discover what sorts of questions can most help people make progress with their projects.
3. To raise questions that participants might find helpful to address in their action planning.
4. To provide an opportunity for participants to network with people they don't know well.
5. To help participants with their project development.

#### **Materials required**

Flip charts and flipchart stands and lots of flip chart paper

#### **Procedure**

1. Explain that this exercise is about 'brainstorming' helpful questions for a change agent.

Reminder: Remind participants what we mean by brainstorming.

This is a process where anyone calls out ideas according to the following rules:

1. Defer judgement of the ideas

2. Go for quantity of ideas not quality
3. Wild ideas are welcome

If necessary write these 'rules' on a sheet of flip-chart paper.

2. *Demonstration*: Ask for a volunteer to share their idea or project and its main aim. Write this on the top a sheet of flip chart paper on the flip chart stand.

Ask the entire group to brainstorm helpful questions about the project using the stems:

- Who?
- Why?
- What?
- Where?
- When?
- How?

Say that the target is to produce 25 questions. This will actually happen really fast.

3. Look round the room and identify the 3 or 4 people you have spoken to least. Form groups of 4 people (who you don't know well) and repeat the process i.e. getting 25 questions per person - taking a maximum of 10 minutes per person.
4. Come together in a full group. Ask each person to identify the 3 questions that they see as most significant to them in tackling their project.
5. Tally up the relative frequency of the stems by going round the room and asking each person for the first word of each of their 3 'chosen' questions. You will almost certainly discover the 'How?' and 'What' stems occur most frequently amongst the most helpful questions. This will allow you to make the distinction between 'open' and 'closed' questions and the value of open questions in triggering further thought about an issue.

(You might also wish to distinguish between questions that help people to *reflect* and questions that help people decide *what to do next*.)

6. End the activity with the following round: In the light of that questioning activity, what 2 actions could you take in the next 2 weeks that would contribute to the success of your project.

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<sup>ii</sup> Thanks to Professor Tom Bourner for compiling the original version of this exercise which has since been revised.