CHAPTER FOURTEEN

COMMUNICATING RESULTS TO DIFFERENT AUDIENCES

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With its focus on serving the information needs of intended users (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994), evaluation is a fundamentally practical form of inquiry. This emphasis on practicality places a high premium on effective communication among all the people involved in an evaluation, including those conducting the study and those who will use the information it generates. Indeed, as evaluation approaches have proliferated (Stufflebeam, 2001), so has the potential for misunderstandings about the expectations and assumptions underlying a particular evaluation project, making the need for accurate, balanced, and clear communication stronger than ever.

This chapter is about the communication of evaluation results—an area that experience shows can frequently be neglected or devalued. Communication of results is sometimes viewed as a procedurally routine phase of the evaluation process that involves drafting and distributing a report, possibly accompanied by a meeting or oral presentation. Furthermore, many evaluation reports follow the template of a research paper, in which background, hypotheses, techniques,

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findings, and recommendations are methodically detailed. What sometimes seems to underlie this standardized approach to communication is the belief that an evaluation study's technical aspects (such as its adequacy of design, soundness of data-collection methods, and relevance of data analysis) require thorough consideration, whereas its human aspects (such as how the project gets communicated, what it finally means, and whether it answers people's questions) are easily managed. Of course, this view is mistaken. Good communication is neither easy nor routine, and careful attention to it can enhance the conduct of evaluations themselves and increase their usefulness to a wide variety of audiences (Patton, 1997; Torres, Preskill, and Piontek, 1996).

Our central theme is the need for sound communication planning, which involves identifying specific audiences, determining how to approach them, deciding the purpose of the communications, fashioning the messages, and considering other characteristics of the setting. Our aims are to stimulate communication planning and to help evaluators and foundation personnel take account of the interplay of factors that affect communication, with the ultimate goal of making the evaluation process more useful. The task of planning and conducting the communication of results may fall on the shoulders of foundation-based communications staff or evaluation managers, external evaluators, or grantees. We direct our discussion primarily toward these individuals, but we hope it will also be useful for readers involved with foundation-based evaluations in other capacities.

The chapter has four major sections: (1) a description of the elements of an evaluation study's communication environment, (2) a discussion of different potential audiences, (3) an overview of communication tools and approaches, and (4) implications of these considerations for communicating evaluation results.

Understanding the Communication Environment

A communication environment is established early in an evaluation study, characterized by how information is exchanged and how decisions are made. This environment might also include shared or divergent understandings about the purpose of the study, the primary and secondary audiences, the evaluation questions, the evaluation methods, and the relevant timelines. Appropriate planning can help to develop the communication environment for an anticipated evaluation in a constructive way.

In the next sections, we present six questions that are fundamental to both evaluation and communication planning. Working through these questions can help evaluators understand what types of information (delivered at what times and in what formats) will be most useful to various audiences. Pursuing these questions can also help them gauge the dynamics of the organizational setting (for example, the degree to which the environment may be collegial or adversarial). Finally, it will facilitate budget planning, because different communication strategies can vary substantially in their resource requirements. If the planners of the evaluation study are not clear about the answers to these questions, the communication of findings will be seriously hampered, and the evaluation may fail to achieve its intended purposes.

What Information Is Being Sought?

In most cases, the evaluation will be designed to address a number of discrete evaluation questions, which are the central guiding statements that will structure the information-gathering activities that follow. The answers to these questions will form a basis for the later communication of results. In addition, new questions that should be pursued sometimes emerge once an evaluation is under way. The advisability of midcourse adjustments to an evaluation, to take account of these new directions, is best assessed by keeping the needs of the study's primary intended users clearly in sight.

Who Are the Audiences for the Information?

Identifying an evaluation's primary audience is a critical objective of communication planning. As will be discussed in detail, a fundamental distinction is whether the primary audience is internal or external to the organization sponsoring the evaluation. The audiences may be supportive, skeptical, antagonistic, or indifferent. They may be sophisticated or novice consumers of evaluation. The better the audience is understood, the greater the likelihood will be of communicating with them productively.

Why Do They Want to Know?

This question addresses the intended use of the evaluation results by particular audiences. Patton (1997) describes three general categories of evaluation use: (1) *making judgments,* including questions of accountability and program effectiveness, (2) *facilitating program and organizational improvement,* which may involve helping foundations or grantees become more effective or adapt to changing circumstances, and (3) *generating knowledge* that can advance a field or be used broadly by government agencies and other foundations to improve practice and social policy.

Audience interest in evaluation findings will depend, in part, on how they might be affected by an evaluation and whether they can act on the study's findings and recommendations. For example, foundation officers receiving information about the progress of grantee programs will approach the evaluation setting differently than would grantee organizations. In addition, some groups may view the evaluation with reasonably high levels of objectivity, whereas others may be heavily invested in demonstrating program success.

In other instances, an audience may be unaware of the evaluation study or not interested in its results, yet the presenter wishes to make a case for the importance of the program or the evaluation. This can occur with secondary audiences external to the project, such as other funders or the press. In such cases, the strong motivation lies with the presenter, whether evaluator, grantee, or foundation, and the pertinent question might become, Why do *we* want them to know?

How Much Information Do They Want?

Information needs differ by audience: program staff and grantees might want all the details about the results; trustees and executives might want a brief presentation of highlights and bottom-line implications; academic audiences might want to know specifics about the scientific and technical aspects of the study. Audience members' responsibilities within their home organization or their field play a major role in shaping their information needs; the nature of these responsibilities can help guide decisions about content and presentation. Of course, individual preferences also warrant consideration, particularly if the primary audience is small, such as a board or a president. Some audience members or groups may be particularly attuned to communication via graphical, written, or oral formats.

Who Is Doing the Communicating?

If a foundation is large enough to have a communications or public affairs staff, that group may have the primary responsibility for communicating evaluation results. Typically, the evaluator will also be involved, especially for certain audiences. The foundation staff person managing the evaluation contract can be effective in framing evaluation findings and recommendations for internal audiences. Program staff can be important internal communicators, providing executives or trustees with their views on the evaluation and their proposals on how to respond to its findings. Program staff are also obvious candidates for sharing evaluative information with grantees.

In all cases, the credibility of the source must be firmly established if the audience is expected to act on the findings. If the grantee organization is communicating evaluation results about its own program, some audience members may be skeptical of its willingness to reveal negative information. Similarly, external audiences may be suspicious of a foundation that shares only the "good" news from its evaluations. In such cases, the organization must be particularly careful to convey evidence of objectivity, balance, and open disclosure.

The planning for communication also needs to consider issues of intellectual property rights. For example, who owns and controls the data and findings that will emerge from an evaluation? When an evaluation is externally contracted, this question can create problems if it has not been addressed. In some cases, the foundation may want to exert ownership and control; in others, these prerogatives might be granted to the evaluator. The best time to decide intellectual property questions is in the early stages of planning, prior to final selection of the evaluator. The terms and conditions governing the dissemination or other use of data and findings should be clearly articulated in the evaluation contract.

When Should Evaluation Results Be Communicated?

Effective communication of results is rarely a one-time event that takes place after the various analyses, interpretations, and recommendations have been formulated and packaged. On the contrary, communication can be planned to occur in phases, with target times being identified for sharing specific types of information with certain audiences. For example, the parties closest to a program evaluation study, such as program officers and grantees, might be kept apprised of findings as they become available; communication with other audiences might occur less frequently or only after the study's completion. Similarly, the information being learned about program implementation might be communicated earlier than information about program outcomes.

In cases where an evaluator discovers that a program is not being adequately implemented, and that the evaluation will therefore not be a test of the intervention as it was planned, it can be useful to share this information with the program staff. The rationale for sharing grows much stronger if the implementation issues are correctable and meaningful data could still be gathered from a properly implemented program. However, care must be taken to ensure that the plan for communicating this feedback is compatible with the evaluation's purpose and design. For example, if the study involves an evaluation of a packaged program and places high priority on the generalizability of the findings, it may be necessary to withhold evaluative information until the completion of the program delivery. This will help to maintain the generalizability of the results to other program settings that do not have the benefit of self-correcting feedback (see Shadish, Cook, and Campbell, 2002, for a detailed discussion of generalizability issues).

More generally, evaluation communication can be an ongoing exchange of information among the evaluator and various program stakeholders at well-planned points in time. As noted earlier, creative new questions or perspectives are sometimes identified only after a study has begun. This type of creative thinking may emerge, in part, because of the richness of ongoing communication and the cumulative growth of shared learning. Strong communication can also foster a sense of buy-in for the evaluation study among diverse audiences and build their anticipation to learn its final results.

Evaluation Audiences and Their Information Needs

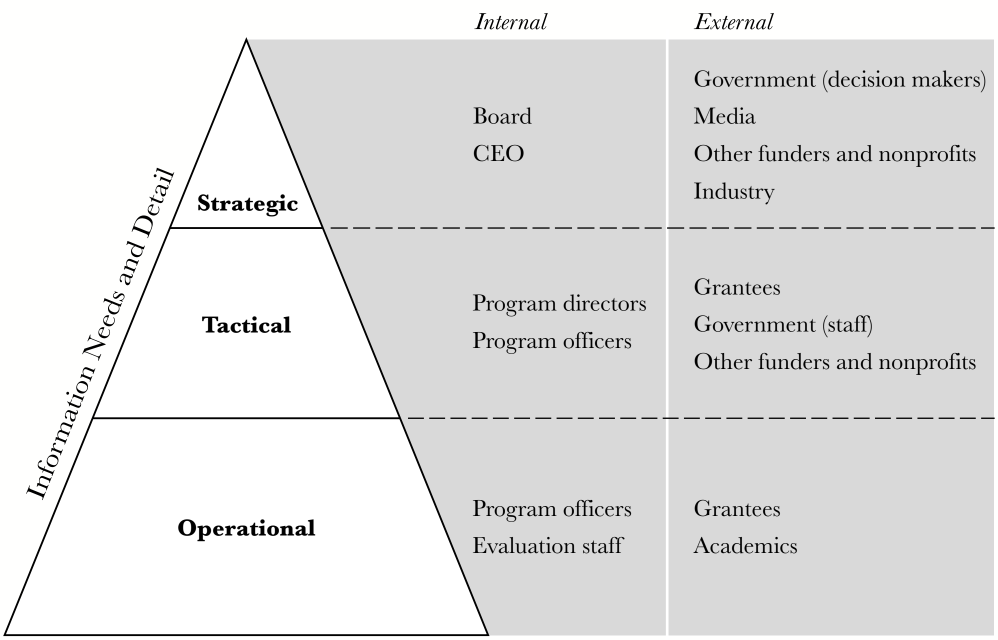
A given evaluation study may have several potential audiences, but usually only one or two of these will be considered primary. Understanding one's audience is a key to successful communication in any endeavor, and audiences for foundation-sponsored evaluation information can be varied indeed. Evaluations should be designed, conducted, and conveyed with the needs of the primary audience in the forefront. Secondary audiences may have different needs, which may also be considered, particularly if anticipated in advance and if resources permit. But evaluation use will inevitably be limited unless the core messages are delivered in a way that can be heard by the intended primary audience.

Determining whether the primary audience is *internal* or *external* to the foundation is fundamental because these two types of audiences may have information needs and purposes that are better served by different communication approaches. When the primary audience is internal, the evaluation information usually is needed either to inform organizational decision making (for example, "Should we continue to invest in this approach or project?") or to improve programs and projects (for example, "How can this program's strengths be better deployed?" "What are the weaknesses of this program, and how can they be addressed?"). Certain external audiences may share these priorities, particularly audiences that are close to the foundation (for example, grantees or funding partners) or embarking on similar projects. For other external audiences, however, particularly those more distant from the foundation, the benefit from the evaluation is likely to entail overall knowledge generation and understanding of the issue, rather than being tied to specific decisions. The internal evaluation manager will usually have limited access to external audiences but ongoing access to most internal audiences, providing the option of using a wide range of communication tools to reach them.

We also distinguish among three broad types of information needs: (1) strategic, (2) tactical, and (3) operational. Figure 14.1 illustrates the relationships between an evaluation's potential audiences and their information needs. *Strategic* information needs are dictated by the mission, values, and goals of the organization. Evaluation findings that bear on a foundation's approach to philanthropy, its goals, or its allocation of resources, for example, may inform the organization's strategic decisions. Communications to meet strategic information needs should be concise, with what Tufte (1991) would characterize as "rich information density." The content should focus on the grantmaking context, core evaluation findings, large lessons relevant to future or ongoing work, and emergent issues.

Tactical information needs are shaped by the objectives, grantmaking approaches, and specific grants within well-defined program areas. Evaluation findings that inform either the implementation of a grant (or a collection of grants)

FIGURE 14.1. POTENTIAL AUDIENCES AND THEIR CHARACTERISTIC INFORMATION NEEDS.



or the approach to a specific issue (for example, underage drinking, wilderness protection) serve the foundation's tactical decision needs. Actors at the tactical level, such as program directors and officers, are much closer to the topics of the evaluation itself. Communication to meet tactical information needs may include regular updates during the course of the evaluation, as well as the full evaluation report and information about what strategic content will be conveyed to the organization's highest-level decision makers.

Finally, *operational* information needs derive from the activities and products expected from a grant or collection of grants. This detailed picture is often developed through a foundation's grant-monitoring or administration processes rather than through an evaluation. Nevertheless, evaluators usually become deeply familiar with the immediate work of grantees and can provide program officers and grantees with an independent perspective on the timeliness, quality, and usefulness of specific activities and products. In addition, evaluators may be exposed to personnel or organizational issues that bear on a project's progress. The specific nature of the operational information will help determine whether it should be discussed in the written evaluation report, an appendix, a separate memo, or a briefing.

Internal Audiences

Within the foundation, several audiences may have an interest in evaluation results. We cover four here: board members, executive management, program staff, and internal evaluation staff.

The Board of Trustees. Foundation trustees' stake in evaluation information lies in its potential to help them make better decisions about the foundation's mission and major directions, program areas, and funding levels. The level of their decisions tends to involve the broadest issues facing the organization, and thus their decision-making role is primarily strategic and direction setting in nature. Furthermore, their responsibility to the foundation as board members is generally not a full-time commitment. Boards typically meet for only a handful of days per year, and their meetings must cover a broad agenda of topics, including organizational governance, financial management, personnel, and public relations, in addition to decisions about program areas. Therefore, these decisions (for example, involving resource allocation or grant approval) must be managed very efficiently.

What are the implications of these considerations for trustees' information needs? In their responsibilities, they can profit most from concise information that supports their organizational role. Information shared from an evaluation study should generally include key findings, the recommendations that were offered, the larger lessons that can be gleaned for the field under examination (for example, public health, education, child development, the environment), and relevant emergent issues—those not anticipated when the evaluation was launched but that emerged during the study and are relevant to the program area or the institution at large. Trustees do not have time for detailed evaluation reports that document methods, instruments, and analyses. In most cases, asking trustees to review such reports is a poor use of their time, because drawing conclusions about evaluation rigor or similar concerns tends not to match either their expertise or their responsibilities on behalf of the foundation. (Nevertheless, of course, the full report should be readily available on their request.)

Foundation Executive Management. The foundation executive is the senior ranking staff person in the organization, with responsibility for the overall day-to-day management of the foundation. This person's title might be CEO, president, or executive director. This individual, often a member of the foundation's board, is a bridge between the board and the program officers, ensuring that the board's vision is infused in the foundation's approach to philanthropy. The senior executive's work spans organizational direction setting and operational oversight but usually not direct project oversight. The executive's decision-making responsibilities can therefore be characterized as both strategic and tactical, in the sense that he or she must participate in the board's decision making and promote the smooth functioning of the organization. Evaluation information for this audience should be oriented and organized in a way that will promote efficient action and decision making. As is true for the trustees, to do their work effectively, foundation executives need synopses of evaluation studies rather than detailed comprehensive reports. These synopses can be accompanied or augmented by memos or briefings that elaborate on selected findings or recommendations, or that raise management issues for the foundation or program. In some cases, however, the top executive may indeed need full evaluation reports on topics of particular import, for example, cluster reviews that assess a foundation's philanthropic strategy for a particular area.

Program Staff. Program directors and officers oversee funded projects and serve as the main points of contact with grantee organizations. In some foundations, the program staff make project funding decisions themselves, whereas in others they prepare funding recommendations for their board. In all cases, however, it is their responsibility to be well versed on the proposed or ongoing projects, and their judgments and opinions carry a great deal of weight. Their decision-making role is primarily tactical in nature, as their work is close to the primary ongoing function of the foundation. The grantmaking staff with direct oversight responsibilities for the projects being evaluated will also have operational information needs.

Program staff are the foundation personnel whose interests are most closely aligned with the details of the evaluation study. They frequently have a hand in the focus and design of the evaluation, either directly through collaboration with grantees or in the requirements they set for evaluation activity within projects. Program staff may also have the most interaction with the evaluators, particularly if regular briefings are part of the evaluation's communication plan. If an evaluation focuses on the performance or outcomes of a grantee project or organization, the task often falls to the relevant program officer to represent that study or the knowledge gained from it to other internal audiences of the foundation. It is generally the responsibility of the program staff to synthesize evaluation information into a format that allows the board to take appropriate action quickly and effectively. Program staff may also be in the best position to share evaluation findings that could inform grantmaking elsewhere in the foundation, because peer-to-peer learning can be an effective way to build organizational knowledge.

Our recommendation that foundation trustees and executive managers be provided with concise syntheses of evaluation studies implies that those individuals will not have the full set of background materials needed to determine whether a study has been conducted with a high degree of technical merit. The foundation needs other staff to be able to make this type of judgment, and the program staff (sometimes aided by consultants) typically fill this role in the absence of internal evaluation staff. Accordingly, program staff need to be well-versed in the details of the foundation's evaluation studies.

Internal Evaluation Staff. Several large foundations are fortunate to have evaluation expertise on-staff. These individuals can take on many of the responsibilities described earlier: helping to shape the organization's approach to evaluation, designing evaluations, judging the technical merit of evaluations, and playing an important role in communicating evaluation results. They often make recommendations to the trustees and executive management about the projects that should be selected for careful study and, most broadly, about the foundation's strategies for collection and use of information to strengthen institutional decision making. The decision-making role of the evaluation staff is tactical in nature to the degree that it supports the management of the organization and its grantmaking, though the evaluation staff may also prepare and deliver the strategic information from the evaluation to the foundation's board. Further, their role is operational in nature to the degree that it supports the operation and effectiveness of the foundation's grantmaking programs and helps the program staff acquire the information they need to track the progress of their grant portfolios.

External Audiences

Outside the foundation, the number of audiences potentially interested in evaluation results is striking. In this section, we discuss several of these, including grantees, government, news media, academia, other funders and nonprofits, and private industry.

Grantees. Both grantees and their funders have a strong stake in the success of their programs. Thus grantees are a foundation's most direct and often most important external audience. As with program directors and officers, grantees' information needs are usually tactical. Communication regarding program implementation and results is most beneficial when it is candid, collegial, ongoing, and bidirectional. This advice has been borne out by evaluators' experiences. Torres, Preskill, and Piontek (1997) canvassed members of the American Evaluation Association about communicating evaluation findings with intended users and reported that communication that is ongoing and collaborative was most successful, including informal conversations and other means of keeping in close contact throughout an evaluation. Foundations can do much to promote that kind of communication by encouraging strong working relationships among program officers and grantees.

Communication between foundations and grantees about evaluation results can take many forms: grantees can report results to their program officers; foundations can report to their grantees about all of the projects in an initiative; grantees and foundations can work together to report results to other audiences; or a foundation might communicate evaluation results to a grantee about the grantee's own programs. In these latter cases, if an evaluation report is involved the grantee should, whenever possible, have the opportunity to review and comment on a draft version. Grantees should also have the opportunity to be briefed about the evaluation's findings by the foundation's program or evaluation staff (or both) and to be informed about how the foundation will use the evaluation.

Government. Government officials and staff may be interested in evaluation results because of their policymaking, programmatic, and budgetary responsibilities. *Government* actually represents a broad cross-section of potential audiences, including government agencies and legislative bodies at the local, state, or federal level (as well as the organizations that exist to inform or otherwise aid legislatures, such as the Congressional Research Service or the National Conference of State Legislatures). Agency staff and legislative staff tend to be most interested in the findings and recommendations that arise from an evaluation, that is, the "big picture" issues. They need to have confidence in the technical adequacy of an evaluation, and those staff responsible for assessing a study's technical merits may share some of the tactical information needs of the foundation's internal audiences. Even if they are not fully equipped to make that determination themselves, government staff will want to understand the important strengths and weaknesses of a study before bringing it to the attention of decision makers such as agency executives or elected or appointed officials. Similar to a foundation's trustees, the information needs of government decision makers and their advisers tend to be strategic in nature because they are focused on policy development and implementation and broadly oversee the more detailed operations of government. Communications with these audiences need to be brief and focus squarely on the results and implications of the evaluation study, that is, what the evaluation adds to what is already known about a field, policy, or program.

News Media. Print and broadcast media can be secondary (or, on rare occasion, primary) audiences for information about foundation-funded projects. The news media represent an important communication vehicle to inform public opinion in efforts to promote policy change. In addition, communications with media can inform policymakers, who often look to media representations of important issues as markers of current public opinion or its future direction. The information needs of most media will be at the strategic level, concerned with new ideas or evidence about existing and emerging problems. For specialized media such as professional or trade press, additional information may also be relevant.

Of course, working with news media involves experience and expertise. Few evaluation reports will be featured by the media in the absence of a deliberate effort on the part of the evaluators, the foundation, or grantees. If an evaluation has been well-conducted, and its results are judged to have strong applicability to current public issues, foundations and grantees are certainly well advised to attempt to give it appropriate exposure. Outreach to the media can include issuing press releases, contacting individual reporters, identifying and preparing organizational spokespeople to discuss the evaluation and its implications, and even hiring a public relations firm. These activities can be adapted to local, statewide, or national-level communication channels.

Academic Audiences. Scholars at universities, research institutes, think tanks, and other academic locales can play a role in two important aspects of an evaluation study's dissemination and use. First, they often participate in the debate on social or policy issues. Public discourse about controversial topics such as the effects of day care on young children, effects of various HIV-prevention strategies, or local experiments in school vouchers can be marked by sharp dispute about the scientific adequacy of evaluation studies presented in support of one position or another. Through their critiques, researchers sometimes play a gatekeeper role in shaping the acceptance of a research study by policymakers or the public. Second, academics can become involved in the formulation of new research directions that follow from an evaluation study. Through the development of follow-up projects, academics often take part in shaping the long-term investigation of social issues and policy questions.

Communication to academic audiences requires careful attention to the technical details of the study. Two major avenues of potential communication are research reports, which can be issued as separate documents from the comprehensive evaluation report, and publication in peer-reviewed academic journals. Journal publication signals some degree of academic acceptability for the study (depending on the journal involved) but can carry the strong disadvantage of a long time period—sometimes over a year—between a manuscript's submission and its availability. Furthermore, many journals require that reports be embargoed until the time of publication, which delays other avenues of dissemination and conflicts with the need to share results with other audiences in a timely manner.

Other Funders and Nonprofit Organizations. Other foundations and funders that make grants in a project's general topic area may have common interests in program effects, and sharing results with them is an important way to make progress in the field as a whole. Similarly, sharing results with a range of nonprofits beyond the grantee organization can also develop knowledge about effective practice. These communication decisions require judgment about the kinds of information that will be useful. For example, an evaluation focused on the operational detail of a recently implemented project will generally not be suitable for wide distribution, except under unusual circumstances such as when the project is so novel, the evaluation so informative, or outside interest so high that dissemination is warranted.

Private Industry. A foundation's grantmaking objectives can aim to influence private sector behavior through promoting policies, changing norms for industry practices, or providing resources for new industry initiatives. Thus the private sector may be an audience for an evaluation. It will, in fact, be a primary audience when the foundation intends to alter industry behavior or when a private corporation works with a foundation or nonprofit grantee in a programmatic partnership. In the former instance, the media can be a useful avenue for communicating to different audiences about private sector practices or policies.

Communication Tools and Approaches

Several writers have described the variety of tools available for communicating evaluation results (Hendricks, 1994; Smith, 1982; Torres, Preskill, and Piontek, 1996), and we provide a brief review here. Some of the most important options are presented in Table 14.1, which describes their particular strengths and limitations and some considerations about suitable audiences. Some formats are superior for conveying technical detail; others are well suited for convenience and broad distribution; still others are preferred for facilitating decision making and stimulating an audience's motivation to follow through on a recommended action. Good communication planning matches specific approaches with audience needs. Different tools and approaches may also be needed to convey different aspects of the evaluation study.

Final Reports

The most common form of evaluation reporting is the final project report. Final reports have a reputation, probably deserved, for having limited relevance and often remaining unread. Nevertheless, this format can be a comprehensive record of the evaluation study, and it certainly does not need to be doomed to irrelevance.

Hendricks (1994) provides a series of valuable stylistic recommendations for producing final reports that are oriented toward action and meeting an audience's information needs. Among his recommendations are that the report

- Be written in an active, readable style
- Have decreased emphasis on background and methodology and increased emphasis on findings and their meanings
- Use strong visuals
- Be clear in the study's interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations

Evaluators should also be creative and flexible in designing a report's format. Rather than echoing the format of an academic research paper, the evaluation report should be planned with the information needs of the primary audience squarely in mind. One effective way to organize tactical and operational information for the internal audience is to clearly address the questions that triggered the evaluation. These answers, accompanied by the most important evidence supporting them, can form the body of the evaluation report. Details about methods, data, the history of the efforts under study, contextual matters, and the full range of evidence collected can be displayed in appendixes. We have read wonderfully clear evaluation reports that consisted of a series of well-thought-out and logically arranged bullet points that conveyed important observations, findings, and recommendations, with the various details that evaluators and academics love fully reported in technical appendixes. The challenge for this type of reporting is to be able to justify such discussion by clearly linking it to underlying evidence.

Summary Reports

Strategic information can be conveyed effectively through a written summary—a concise, engaging, and informative report geared to the audience's needs. For internal audiences (the board and CEO), the summary could consist of background (for example, the grantmaking objectives, major lines of work, resources committed, important contextual matters, evaluation objectives, brief biography of the lead evaluator, and a snapshot on methods), core findings (positive, negative, and equivocal), recommendations (guided by the author's institutional knowledge), and conclusions (the "takeaway" messages). Preparing a lucid summary that informs the audience while maintaining the integrity of the final evaluation report is challenging, but in our experience it is the rare evaluation that cannot be summarized in about three thousand words. Summaries for an external audience may need to be written with even greater economy, perhaps including only the barest of background details and revising the recommendations as appropriate (for example, recommendations prepared for an internal audience may differ from those directed outside the foundation).

Sonnichsen (2000) has written insightfully on the value and preparation of internal evaluation summaries. These are among his recommendations that resonate most strongly with our own experiences (adapted from Sonnichsen, 2000, pp. 248–250):

- The purpose of the *executive summary* is to convey concisely and meaningfully the highlights of the evaluation and the benefits to be derived from the recommended actions.
- Outline the focus of the report for the audience with emphasis on prominent organization components, individuals, or programs. Organize the report around material topics.
- Format the summary for power and impact. Put the "good stuff" up front. Be clear about the evaluation objectives and questions.
- Use data in the summary when appropriate. Use representative, descriptive quotes that convey the essence of the data collected.
- Do not mix together findings and recommendations.
- Include minority views and rival data. Being clear does not mean ignoring complexity or nuance.

TABLE 14.1. COMMUNICATION TOOLS AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS.

Tool	Strengths	Limitations	Audiences
Final reports	• Allow for sustained analysis and interpretation • Allow for detail and comprehensiveness in their description of the program, evaluation focus, and evaluation methods • Serve as archival records of the study	• Even if well written, are not appropriate for certain audiences • Are often shaped by the author's needs rather than those of the primary audience • May require technical expertise to fully absorb	• Are suitable for audiences that need to understand the study in detail (for example, program staff, evaluation staff, grantees, academics)
Summary reports	• Highlight the evaluation's critical items of information • Identify core findings and recommendations • Stimulate thought and action • Can be read in brief periods of time	• Pose a challenge to maintaining the integrity of the larger final report (for example, the need to guard against distortions, omissions, editorializing) • Require additional effort to prepare	• Are useful in conveying strategic content to internal and external audiences
Other written formats • Synopses • Memos • Press releases • Academic papers	• Can be read in brief periods of time • Can be customized for specific audiences • Can be released in digestible packages of material, as relevant information is generated (rather than all at the end of an evaluation)	• Can make it difficult to provide a comprehensive picture of the program and evaluation if used in isolation	• Depending on the nature of the product, can be useful for a wide range of audiences
Presentations and briefings	• Allow for human interaction, with the reporting process following the spontaneous lead of audience members • Allow for misunderstandings to surface and be addressed in the moment	• Success of the method depends on skills of the presenter • Is inflexible with regard to time constraints of individual audience members	• Work well with audiences that require relatively brief summarization of results and are oriented toward decisive action (trustees, management staff)

TABLE 14.1. COMMUNICATION TOOLS AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS. *(continued)*

Tool	Strengths	Limitations	Audiences
	• Encourage elaboration of follow-up ideas • Encourage audience members to discuss issues with each other • Can be customized to specific issues and audiences		• Appropriate for strategic content or narrower slices of tactical and operational information • Effective for candid exchange on sensitive issues
Periodic informal meetings	• Build rapport between evaluator and intended users • Can be useful format for presenting negative findings	• Can threaten an evaluator's objectivity due to the extended discourse involved, with negative consequences for the report's recommendations	• Very useful for communications involving ongoing relationships, especially internal foundation audiences and grantees
Internet-based resources • Web sites • E-communication (mail, alerts, news wires) • Keyword buys	• Are generally low-cost • Permit rapid dissemination • Can reach wide or narrow audiences • Allow site visitors or communication targets to customize content • Allow for ongoing updates of communications to keep information current as project circumstances change	• Effort is needed to direct traffic to site. • Web postings make it difficult, if not impossible, to identify the audience that has actually been reached. • Audiences' different hardware formats can make it difficult to know if there is congruence between the visuals as designed and as received.	• Web site postings are an excellent format to reach the general public and other audiences. However, to accommodate audience biases due to differing patterns of technology use, this method should generally be used in combination with others. • E-mail lists can be used with a broad range of audiences. • All tools are well suited for communicating with other foundations, government, media, academics, businesses, and (usually) grantees.

Other Written Formats and Graphical Displays

In addition to a single report, or sometimes in place of it entirely, Hendricks (1994) suggests the option of issuing a series of shorter reports that can each be targeted for a specific audience or cover a particular subtopic. A collection of such reports, taken together, can quite successfully represent the full scope of an evaluation project.

Of course, reports should be delivered in a timely manner. Utmost care should be taken to ensure that the timeframe for delivery is appropriate for supporting necessary decisions and other actions. This fundamental requirement is often not fulfilled in practice. Another frequent recommendation is that reports be shared with important users while still in draft form. This practice has multiple advantages. First, errors of fact or perspective can be corrected by the project staff members, who will often be the individuals with greatest familiarity about the details of the project. Second, the inclusion of the primary evaluation users in the report development process can increase their eventual buy-in and acceptance of the report. If the evaluation findings are negative or otherwise unwelcome to the users, sharing draft versions of the report may be an awkward process, but even in these cases early communication is helpful. The program staff will thereby have time to reconcile their views with the evaluation's findings and be in a better position to contribute insights about the circumstances underlying the results.

There are many other productive ways of communicating through written reports. Newsletters, bulletins, fact sheets, and other approaches can be used. The evaluator can distribute a series of memos that keep audiences updated with the progress of an analysis. Memos can convey sensitive or confidential operational information to the foundation CEO or program director that may not be appropriate to include in a summary report (for example, personnel issues or other topics that bear on the management of a grant). In addition, reports should make use of graphics to the extent possible, including charts, tables, diagrams, and outlines. These options provide the opportunity to communicate information clearly, succinctly, and powerfully (Henry, 1995; Torres, Preskill, and Piontek, 1996).

Presentations and Briefings

As is the case with written communications, there are numerous formats for delivering information face-to-face. Presentations should be geared to be clear and understandable, and encourage audience involvement. As always, information presented should be developed with the particular audience in mind, with attention given to appropriate terminology and the level of technical detail. Care must be taken to have the core messages drive the design of the presentation rather than rely on standard formats (see Tufte, 1991, 2003, for further elaboration on this point). Presentations must also allow ample time for interaction between presenter and audience, as well as between audience members themselves.

Briefings are short oral presentations that are typically geared toward the communication of specific aspects of a study, with strong emphasis on interpretation and potential applications. Oral briefings are a useful option to convey sensitive information. The Pew Charitable Trusts often conclude important evaluations with a half-day series of meetings between the evaluators, the CEO, the program director, other program staff, and the Trusts' evaluation staff. As part of these meetings, the CEO meets privately with the evaluators to give them the opportunity to discuss any issues that arose during the course of the evaluation. The CEO also participates with program staff in a briefing led by the evaluators on the evaluation's findings and recommendations.

Periodic Informal Meetings

Some evaluators schedule regular meetings with program managers or funders to update them on progress and the emerging results. This approach allows information to be shared shortly after it becomes available. Continuing engagement carries several advantages, including the opportunity for evaluation users to receive information in an informal context that encourages comment and suggestions. Regular engagement also helps lay the groundwork for the integration of evaluation results into the program under study and throughout the organization.

Communicating via the Internet

Internet communication can take the form of Web sites, listservs, discussion forums, and e-mails, to name just a few. These options provide enormous opportunities for tailoring communication, and new approaches are evolving rapidly. Electronic communication is often inexpensive and convenient. Content can be easily revised, quickly distributed, and broadcast to a wide range of audiences or narrowcast to a targeted few.

A foundation's public Web site can become its major electronic communication tool. Visitors searching for content may come to the site unbidden, or they may be steered to the site through links posted on related sites, e-mails announcing new content, or even keyword purchases at major search engines. The site can be designed to give visitors the option to indicate interest in specific issues (for example, health care or early childhood education). When new content is posted on the subscribers' topics of interest, they can receive e-mail announcements that provide links to the new content. The electronic version of a wire service can be developed to deliver even more customized content (analysis, interpretation, or opinion) to a narrowly focused target audience (for example, government or nonprofit decision makers, journalists, academics). In general, the narrower the audience the more targeted the content and the dissemination tool must be.

As for potential evaluative content, a foundation can use the Internet to present its approach to evaluation, list past or current evaluation projects, summarize results from grants and specific evaluations, synthesize findings across evaluations, and discuss how it is integrating evaluative findings and recommendations into its work. For example, the reporting practice at The Pew Charitable Trusts has developed by experimentation over time. Roughly four times a year, the Trusts post material to their Web site about some aspect of planning or evaluation. To date, this content is split almost evenly between summary information on specific evaluations and descriptions of how evaluation is more broadly integrated into the Trusts' program planning and design.

Of course, the promise of electronic media also brings communication challenges. Posting full evaluation reports on a public Web site may be problematic, for example, unless it was clear from the evaluation's inception that the public was a primary intended audience. In our next section, we discuss the issue of public dissemination of evaluation reports, which carries strong implications for how the Internet might be used.

Implications for Communicating Evaluation Results

As we have described, planning for effective communication can be a complex process. In this final section, we consider several implications of our discussion for broader issues involving foundations' communication of evaluation information.

Varieties of Communicator-Audience Contact

In several respects, internal audiences will be easier for communication planners to accommodate than external audiences. Most notably, the channels between the evaluation team and the internal audiences—boards, executives, program staffers—are more likely to be open and ongoing. This characteristic accommodates the use of multiple communication approaches quite well: there can be comprehensive reports, e-mail correspondence, regular briefings, and other kinds of contact. The continuing use over time of multiple approaches allows a rich dialogue to develop. For example, a program officer can contact the evaluator for clarification of a critical point several days after a presentation and receive it via telephone, e-mail, or face-to-face contact. A board member can raise an analytical question that initiates a re-analysis of some of the data. This pattern of communication helps make it likely (though it does not guarantee) that inadvertent misinterpretations will be corrected, unanticipated questions will be pursued, and the new evaluation information will be integrated into decision making. As Rallis and Rossman (2001) describe, open exchanges between evaluators and intended evaluation users allow for areas of unexpressed knowledge to be negotiated and developed into shared understandings or, in cases marked by lack of consensus, dissenting positions that at least are clearly understood.

A corresponding depth of interaction is harder, though not impossible, to achieve when communicating with external audiences. With government agencies, news media, and other external audiences, there are fewer opportunities for dialogue, and feedback to the foundation or the evaluator is sparser. (Grantee organizations can be an exception, depending on the strength of the foundation-grantee relationship.) Many of the end-users of the communication may in fact be anonymous to the evaluator, as in the cases of readers of journal articles or visitors to a Web site. If an audience member raises a question or perspective that leads to further interpretive clarifications or new data analyses, the new information, though it can become part of the ensuing discourse about the evaluation study, might not reach the individual who originated the question. These limitations on the communication process place a great burden on the evaluator to be unambiguous, direct, and precise when communicating with external audiences. Therefore, in comparison to internal audiences, the nature of the message might need to change along with the choice of communication channel.

An illustration of this perspective is provided by Snow (2001), who explores the problems inherent in "communicating with the distant reader" (p. 33). To meet the challenge of representing and communicating the "quality" of a program or product, he notes, the evaluator can make use of both subjective and objective approaches. Subjectivity in communication involves the incorporation of the evaluator's personal reactions into the communication, which can frequently be a powerful strategy for influencing judgments or decisions. By contrast, objectivity relies on replicable descriptions and assessments. Because the value, relevance, and acceptability of subjective statements depend, in part, on the audience's familiarity with the communicator, Snow notes that objectivity and replicability must take on greater importance as familiarity within the evaluator-audience relationship decreases.

Contributing to Public Debate

The opportunity to contribute to public policy discussions through broad and thoughtful communication of findings is recognized as one important potential benefit of foundations' evaluation practice (Council on Foundations, 1993; Patton, 1997). As yet, however, there has been limited attention to it in the foundation community (McNelis and Bickel, 1996; Patrizi and McMullan, 1998). Foundations that wish to be more active in this area should take account of several considerations in their planning processes.

Variations in the Interpretations of Findings. The characteristics of limited audience access and one-way communication can lead to the evaluator's or the foundation's loss of involvement—even loss of knowledge—regarding how the audiences interpret the evaluation message. If indeed a foundation's evaluation study is relevant to a topic of high public interest, foundation personnel may find themselves unable to contribute appropriate or needed input to the variety of meanings and implications that interested parties will assign to the study, including occasional misinterpretations. Of course, this unpredictability is a natural element of public debate and suggests that the foundation may have to stay involved as the debate unfolds to guard against the inappropriate representation of evaluation findings. Communication professionals can help the foundation ensure that an evaluation's major themes are accurately portrayed.

Public Dissemination of Evaluation Findings. Foundations have taken different approaches to questions about how broadly to share evaluative information on their programs. This issue has assumed new prominence with the rise of the Internet and the powerful new capacities it presents for direct communication with the public. Complete evaluation reports might not be suitable for Web posting or other dissemination in unabridged form because of their high level of detail and potentially sensitive information about identified individuals. However, such reports can be recast for dissemination purposes, and this effort can be a good investment of resources if reaching an external audience is a primary purpose of the study.

Foundations that strongly value the open disclosure of evaluation findings may make the public release of evaluation reports a matter of standard policy, as has occurred, for example, at The Wallace Foundation. In addition, several prominent organizations that conduct evaluation research, such as the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, Public/Private Ventures, and the Rand Corporation make public access to results a condition of undertaking an evaluation engagement. These organizations and many other experienced evaluators are well versed in making evaluations public in ways that are sensitive to the concerns of funders and grantees alike.

Communicating Negative Findings. Evaluation studies that fail to demonstrate a program or initiative's anticipated benefits can present a special dilemma. Foundations may be reluctant to disseminate what they view as negative findings out of a concern for the potential repercussions to their reputations and those of their grantees. However, from the perspective of advancing general knowledge in a field, it is useful to know about approaches that fail to meet expectations, as well as those that do. The reluctance to share findings can result in the perpetuation of ineffective program approaches.

One distinction that may be helpful for encouraging disclosure in some cases is to consider whether an evaluation's negative findings represent a failure of *strategy* (the guiding concepts or theory on which a program is based) or of *implementation* (the degree to which the program is delivered as planned). The results from well-implemented program strategies will usually be useful, whether the program is judged to have been successful or not. Indeed, information about strategies that failed, despite faithful implementation, can be especially valuable for moving a field forward in new directions. Thus evaluation findings that reflect such new information are good candidates for sharing.

By contrast, if a program is found to have been inadequately implemented, especially if the reasons are peculiar to the specific program setting, the lessons to be learned will probably be of more purely local interest. In such cases, dissemination of the evaluation will add little to general knowledge, may cause harm to the grantee organization, and thus will probably not be warranted. (See Chapter Twelve for further discussion of the interpretation of null and negative findings.)

Conclusion

Those of us with responsibility for communicating evaluation results sometimes forget that a study will not disseminate itself, no matter how expertly it has been designed and conducted. Our overall theme in this chapter has been the need to plan for communicating results, so that the evaluation has the best possible chance of reaching its primary audiences in forms that will encourage its appropriate application. Given the amount of new information that evaluation studies produce, as well as the amount of effort and expense that they typically entail, it is remarkable how frequently this phase of the process is overlooked. The use of foundation evaluations will increase dramatically if foundations and their grantees give careful attention to the questions of what, why, when, how, and to whom they wish to communicate the new knowledge made possible by their evaluation work.

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