Mapping Outcomes

Embedding evaluation in the life of an organization for improved social change programming

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The approach discussed in this paper was originally applied in 2011 in developing a theory of change for the Centres for Disease Control in Africa (supported by the World Health Organization and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation) and then in several other evaluation efforts, including for the USAID Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning and for the Saving Newborn Lives program (funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), both in 2012. Many of the ideas herein were presented at an August 2014 workshop at the Third International Seminar on Evaluation for the Private Social Investment in Rio de Janeiro, and later published under the title, *Smarter Organizations: A guide to using evaluative thinking for strategic planning and organizational learning from investments in social change*, in 2016.

This update presents the authors’ latest thinking on the use of Outcome Mapping as part of an Appreciative Evaluation process. The authors continue to be grateful to CECIP for permission to use its experiences as an inspiration and guiding example. Designed by Julie Harris. Edited by Jaime L. Jarvis.

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Evaluating What Matters

Governments, social impact investors, nonprofit organizations, and many other groups make significant investments in a range of community-level, national, and global programs. Such organizations are interested in evaluation for many reasons, such as learning and performance improvement, making smarter decisions about where to invest their efforts and money, and accountability to their boards, funders, oversight agencies, and the public.

Investing in evaluation takes financial resources and time for funders and implementers alike. It is therefore important to commission evaluations that contribute to the overall goals of the funding organization and are used to improve the effectiveness of the programs it funds.

This paper advocates for the creation of an overall evaluation plan—an “evaluation system”—for all social change programs. We contend that any organization funding programs that aim to serve communities and the public will increase its strategic focus and impact by building an evaluation system to support its programming. Such a system aims to enhance the capacity of the organizations implementing these types of programs by enabling them to learn from their experiences, strengthen their partnerships, and promote strategic thinking.

Through evaluation, organizations implementing social programs can become more effective in their work and present clearer and more persuasive evidence of their effectiveness—“telling their story.” By embedding evaluation in their work, these programs become more effective in bringing about the desired changes.

This paper outlines a step-by-step process for designing evaluations that bring value for money, are embedded in program designs, and ensure program implementers, funders, and evaluation commissioners are evaluating what matters.
Facilitating Evaluative Thinking

Good evaluation benefits organizations and programs from the first moment of engagement, even before any data collection, analysis, or assessment has begun. A first step for any evaluation is to understand the *theory of change* of the program (or organization). A theory of change explicitly articulates the ideas program funders and implementers have about how the program or intervention should create the desired results.

Every organization has some theory of change, but it is often implicit or spread across multiple sources. Evaluation can make an important contribution by helping translate the organization’s business onto a clear, coherent map. This reframing occurs as the evaluator facilitates discussions to uncover the theory of change of a program (or group of programs)—making assumptions explicit, enabling conversations for seeking common ground, and linking programming and evaluation activities to the broader strategic goals and values of the organization.

In this task, the evaluator asks the organization to articulate the desired high-level outcomes—the changes that will signal the program has been successful—and then the link between those changes and the organization’s activities. In other words, the organization answers the question:

*Through what pathways do we believe our activities will lead to the changes we are working toward?*

Answering this question reveals the organization’s expectations, assumptions, and strategies, as well as the level of agreement (or divergence) among stakeholders.

Even if an organization has not specifically developed its theory of change, we often find clues about the theory of change on its website, in its founding documents, and in its annual reports. The real contribution of evaluation, however, is to facilitate a dialogue within the organization that enables people to revisit the narrative that describes their organization’s mission and business, to explore different and updated perceptions and perspectives, and to discover common ground and arrive at newfound clarity in their collective purpose and work.

Evaluators use many techniques to facilitate this thinking, including those that build on storytelling and participatory processes. The
evaluator becomes a facilitator, someone committed to bringing all voices to the table, who helps explain and populate the outline of the theory of change in a process of *Outcome Mapping*. In that role, the evaluator asks questions that help the group become increasingly clear about goals, definitions, boundaries, and meaning.

**READY TO GO DEEPER?**

For more reading on this topic, we recommend the following as starting points:


Creating a Map of Outcomes

This section presents a step-by-step methodology for reframing an organization’s core business using an Outcome Mapping frame. For each step, we show an application of how to achieve this reframing. This is a useful way to articulate the theory of change for four reasons:

- **Outcome Mapping recognizes the importance of partnership,** because social change goals tend to be larger than any one organization or program can achieve by itself, and because goals are often achieved when the organization is able to influence others to act.
- **It lends itself to using familiar program language** to lay out a program’s design in an evaluation-friendly structure.
- **Outcome mapping brings realism** to organizational strategy by helping organizations and programs be ambitious without committing to outcomes beyond their control.
- **It also offers a frame that can be used in conjunction with an organization’s marketing strategy (or advocacy strategy).**

This frame identifies partners, distinguishes each one’s role, and enables the organization to articulate partner-level outcomes—how it wants to influence key partners, called “boundary partners” in Outcome Mapping.

By placing partners clearly on the map, an Outcome Mapping frame enables organizations to reflect on their unique value among partners, their comparative advantage, their “brand,” and their potential catalytic role in influencing change. Organizations also see clear links between this framing of their core business and their advocacy strategies.

In this process, Outcome Mapping differentiates the concepts of control, influence, and interest:

- **Sphere of Control** – what an organization can control (what it does—its actions)
- **Sphere of Influence** – what the organization can influence and what it tries to influence (behaviors and actions of others, due to what the organization does)
- **Sphere of Interest** – what the organization is ultimately trying to achieve
Five Steps to Map a Theory of Change

EnCompass has developed a five-step process for outlining an organization’s theory of change. Evaluators can use this process to develop a theory of change for a client organization or for a specific project or program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STEP</th>
<th>ACTIONS</th>
<th>BENEFITS</th>
<th>METHODS*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Clarify high-level outcomes or impacts (sphere of interest)</td>
<td>Identify 3–5 high-level outcomes that would fulfill the organization’s mission.</td>
<td>Recognizing common ground between documented mission and goals and different stakeholders’ perspectives.</td>
<td>Review project documents and engage in visioning with implementers and other key stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Articulate key areas of activities (sphere of control)</td>
<td>Identify and group what the organization does to generate or contribute to the high-level outcomes. For example, you could place all workshops under “capacity strengthening.”</td>
<td>Provides an overview of the main types of activities that make up the core mission of the organization.</td>
<td>Using a participatory process, generate a list of the main categories of activities the organization carries out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Identify key stakeholders and partners (sphere of influence)</td>
<td>Identify groups or entities the organization aims to influence through its actions, or that it uses as supporters to achieve results.</td>
<td>Recognizes partners’ importance in achieving the mission, and can create a sense of priority among different partners.</td>
<td>For each activity area, identify key partners and stakeholders, using a participatory process. Ask: Who needs to do something to help us achieve our outcomes and impacts?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Articulate the targeted behavior changes (sphere of influence)</td>
<td>Identify specific actions or behaviors the organization aims to promote in key stakeholders and partners that will, in turn, point to the ultimate, high-level outcomes.</td>
<td>Recognizes that success for the organization is also defined (at least in an intermediate way) as changes at the partner level (in their behavior or actions).</td>
<td>Using a participatory process, review the organization’s program strategy and goals. Ask: How does achieving partner-level outcomes help us move closer to our high-level outcomes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Test and prioritize stakeholder outcomes</td>
<td>Apply the five “tests” (desirability, realism, ease, strategy, and capacity) to all outcomes on the map and agree on the top-priority outcomes. Identify key assumptions.</td>
<td>Creates a sharper focus on the value we add in moving toward high-level goals and helps focus time and money in activities and partners where the organization can make the most difference. Making assumptions explicit helps verify their status and strengthens the theory of change.</td>
<td>Answer these questions:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- What are the 3–5 most important things we do that move us toward our high-level outcomes?
- Given time and funds, what are 3–5 reasonable partner-level outcomes we want to achieve?
- What assumptions are we making about the causal links? About implementation? About context and external factors that can affect outcomes?

* Methods used in steps 2, 3, and 4—and indeed, across many parts of this process—rely on a participatory process.
Although we list the steps in an order, this is actually an iterative process, in which reflections at one part of the theory of change lead to refinements in other parts. In some cases, it is useful to start with steps 3 and 4 before embarking on step 2. The beauty of the map is that you can start anywhere and keep building, while keeping everything else in mind.

Throughout the rest of this paper, we present details and illustrations for each step. To make this process concrete, we use an example adapted from the real-world experiences of a Brazilian not-for-profit organization, Centro de Criação de Imagem Popular (CECIP).³

The visualizations presented here are one of many ways to represent a theory of change. For example, it can appear vertically, with the outcomes stacked; horizontally, with outcomes to one side; or in nested circles or half-circles, as presented here. Each evaluator and each organization or program should develop a visualization that resonates best, based on their mapping of outcomes.

Applying the Steps to Develop a Theory of Change

Step 1: Clarify High-Level Outcomes – the Sphere of Interest

In the mission statement on its website, CECIP states that it aims to achieve “empowerment through education and communication.”⁴ A first step for evaluation using an Outcome Mapping frame is to make this broad statement more concrete—in other words, to identify the high-level changes that, if achieved, would fulfill the larger organizational or programmatic mission.

The evaluator must work with the organization to come up with these larger desirable outcomes in dialogue with stakeholders, using well-structured, participatory approaches. The evaluator places these high-level outcomes in the sphere of interest; these are outcomes the organization cannot achieve by itself, but ultimately wants to contribute to through its efforts and investments.

Returning to our example, together with CECIP and its stakeholders, we agreed on the following three most important outcomes, illustrated in Exhibit 2:

- Students complete their school education.
- Schools are peaceful environments where students learn.
- Schools have adequate funding for their programs.
Many high-level outcomes could fit the overall mission of “empowerment through education and communication.” For example, we could have chosen “schools have adequate funding for after-school programs.” It all depends on what the organization really thinks the community needs to move toward the overall goal.

How we derive these three high-level outcomes is crucial. Initially, we look for what is explicit—what is written in project documents, on the organization’s website, or in its annual reports. It is always important, however, to provide an opportunity for implementers and other stakeholders to revisit and revise any explicit desired program outcomes, adding their own understanding and experiences. Often, statements in documents are very broad, so this conversation is critical to understanding what is behind the written word.

Step 1 works best when it engages as many stakeholders as possible in contributing to the dialogue; for example, through Appreciative Inquiry or other storytelling techniques. Participants deepen their understanding of their programs, surprise each other with their different perspectives, and appreciate the discovery of common ground among their views.
Step 2: Articulate the Areas of Action – the Sphere of Control

This step is usually the easiest of the five to complete, because organizations are generally able to articulate their main activities and programs. In this step, it is important to reflect on how people and teams in the organization spend most of their energy and time—their primary and most important areas of work.

Once an organization develops a list of activities, it is helpful to combine them under broader categories or areas of action. For example, if the organization conducts different kinds of training and capacity development as part of its activities, we might group these activities in a single category, called “capacity strengthening” or “training,” depending on the organization’s preferred language.

This part of the map, where we place the areas of action, represents the sphere of control, because it represents activities the organization can control.

Returning to our example, we would visit the CECIP website again and find that it lists the following activities:

- Produce audiovisual and printed materials
- Design public campaigns
- Offer training to social workers and young people
- Operate in the management of educational and cultural spaces
- Build community partnerships
- Invest in child participation
- Promote conflict resolution at school

To complete step 2, we have grouped these seven activities in four categories, as Exhibit 3 shows: produce materials, conduct campaigns, train social workers and students, and establish partnerships.

In your evaluative work, remember that activity groupings need to be developed collaboratively and in dialogue, involving members of the organization, participating communities, and other stakeholders. Furthermore, in facilitating the naming of categories, it is important to reflect the language of the organization—else we risk using evaluation to alienate organizations from their work, rather than placing them more firmly in the driver’s seat. For example, ask the team to meet and individually think of all the things they do to contribute to impact. Then, ask them to complete an affinity analysis and group those actions under some larger categories. The aim in this step is to select three to five action areas that are in the organization’s (or program’s) sphere of control.
Step 3: Identify Partners – the Sphere of Influence

No single organization, by itself, can accomplish the high-level social change goals to which it hopes to contribute. If the goal is “make schools peaceful environments where students learn,” for example, it is likely that the organization does not have the authority to go into a school and dictate changes; nor does it have the resources to go into every school. Rather, this organization will likely work with some schools to introduce new programs and practices that promote the goal of making them more peaceful, and then might publish about what works and try to influence other organizations and schools to establish the types of programs that work best. Therefore, schools are one important partner. The organization aims to influence schools whose actions will achieve intermediate outcomes that will, in turn, lead to the long-term goal of schools being peaceful environments.

Social sector organizations know this instinctively and are skilled at brokering partnerships and building coalitions. However, different types of organizations might have very different relationships with
their partners. What is important to recognize is that these partners, whoever they are, also represent “targets of change.” They are in an organization’s path toward achieving its ultimate, larger outcomes. Thus, the organization needs to be clear about the changes it aims to achieve in each of them. Because the organization does not directly control the changes it is trying to create in these partners, we consider them to be in the sphere of influence.

Clarifying this part of the map—the partners an organization is trying to influence—is essential, because it is really at this level that evaluation can provide useful feedback about the organization’s performance and effectiveness. This is the level that many theories of change leave inside the black box. In fact, engaging in this process can help an organization improve its focus on partnerships.

Exhibit 4 presents the boundary partners of CECIP, our example organization. For the organization’s goals around empowerment through education and communication, we have identified six boundary partners: schools, the Brazilian Nonprofit Association, student unions, Brazilian foundations, international funders, and the Municipality of Rio de Janeiro. These are boundary partners because without their actions, it would be impossible for CECIP to achieve its desired outcomes.
Step 4: Identify Partner-Level Outcomes

For each partner, we now need to agree on the specific outcomes we are targeting. In this step, the focus is on the actions or behaviors the organization wants its partners to take to achieve the high-level outcomes. We have to be strategic, because it is not possible to focus on everything; we need to look at what things are feasible and will make the best contributions to our desired impact.

Again, let’s take schools as our example. The organization might like to see many changes take place in schools, such as:

- Every school hires a mediation advisor.
- Every school ensures it is freshly painted and has green spaces.
- Every school offers mediation and student empowerment programs.

However, it is important to be realistic and practical. The organization must ask:

*What changes in schools will make the most difference toward our goals? What can we realistically convince schools to do? What can schools sustain if we do not have funding for every school, every year?*

After considering these questions, the organization might conclude that even though it would be great to advocate for a mediation advisor, there is not enough money to do so—and there might be legal complications with who would hire and supervise the advisor, for example. The organization might further conclude that even though a freshly painted school would be good, the culture of graffiti that exists in many schools would make that effort futile.

Consequently, the organization might decide that *promoting mediation and student empowerment programs* is the change that would best ensure a more stable and peaceful environment, and it can periodically fund or support these capacity strengthening programs. That is a realistic and desirable outcome. It is not necessary to limit ourselves to just one change or action per partner, but each one should be feasible.

When we continue this line of questioning for every partner we identified in step 3, we have a completed map, as we can see in Exhibit 5.

Sometimes, there are multiple levels of partners or stakeholders. Some organizations work through other groups that directly influence the “beneficiaries” or end users. For example, an organization’s work influences a health ministry, which then influences the behaviors of the health workers who serve the community.
Step 4 is most effective when there is an opportunity to involve stakeholders or partners in discussions about their roles, perceptions, and needs. Doing so enables deeper thinking about the strategies the organization uses to achieve its goals and enables possible leveraging of partner efforts. For example, you might conduct a workshop to identify the changes the organization will target in this step. Or, you could complete this step and then validate the outcomes through a participatory workshop or discussion session with stakeholders.
Step 5: Check Assumptions and Set Priorities – the Five “Tests”

Before we finalize the map of outcomes, whether it will be used for evaluation or planning, or both, there is one important concluding step. In this final step, we check our assumptions and consider five issues: desirability, realism, ease, strategy, and capacity.

Although these are sometimes called the five tests, they are not evaluation tests. In practice, they are common-sense questions, because evaluation (and planning) must fit local realities. The experts on local realities are the implementers, communities, and other stakeholders who interact with the program every day.

These questions are designed to look at assumptions, which can range from ideas about the context to ideas about the cause-and-effect relationships between interventions, outcomes, and context. All theories of change are built on assumptions, which need to be articulated, understood, and tested, but which can sometimes be, as Isabel Vogel has written, “hard to access because they represent deeply held perceptions that have become ‘rules of thumb’.”

Testing assumptions benefits the organization by ensuring plans are well targeted and well laid-out and, at the same time, by ensuring they position the organization for more realistic and useful investments that will help inform its good work.

In evaluation, using the five tests with stakeholders helps uncover values and issues early on, opening them up to exploration and debate. For example, some aspects of a program might be easy to achieve, but some will be more difficult; in that case, the evaluation would need to explore the enablers and obstacles to better understand them. Or, the capacity test might uncover areas of preparedness and gaps, and so forth. Answering these questions in relation to the map of outcomes can reveal early-warning indicators to an evaluator and to program implementers and funders.
1 Desirability

Sometimes, we get carried away with filling out our map of outcomes and make up outcomes we really do not want. To weed those out, we need to ask:

*If we were successful in achieving all these outcomes, would we want this new reality?*

Let’s imagine one of our colleagues says, “We want every school to involve every member of the student body in all decisions.” If we were successful in making this outcome a reality, schools would never make decisions; it would take too long! Furthermore, students would be involved in some decisions in which they had no interest or expertise. If we were to rethink this outcome, we might decide it was not something we actually wanted to do, and we would need to revise it.

Having an outcome on the map that we really do not want to achieve risks wasting resources and moving in the wrong direction. Testing desirability is a way to pause and check with each other to make sure we mean what we have said. This check is also important to ensure we consider a forgotten stakeholder who might be worse off in the new reality.

2 Realism

The second test offers a chance to think about how ambitious we have been. If we were betting on our chances to achieve this outcome, what would be our chance of success? Would we take the bet? We ask:

*How likely are we to achieve the outcome we are targeting?*

For example, a colleague might say, “We want the municipality to give 50 percent of its education budget to peace-building training programs.” On reflection, we would conclude that this is not realistic, because the municipality has many other priorities. This test of realism means looking at the assumptions we are making about the context and how others must contribute to achieve our desired outcomes.

Unrealistic outcomes are demoralizing for the organization because they typically cannot be achieved. They also result in disappointing evaluation findings. Checking for realism is a way to pause and make sure our outcomes are attainable.
The third test focuses our attention on the relative effort required to achieve each outcome. We ask:

*How hard is it to achieve each of these outcomes?*

We want to have a balance of outcomes that are relatively easy to achieve—the “low-hanging fruit” we can harvest without much effort—and others that require more investment. We need to check our assumptions about what drives the change we are seeking and how effectively we can influence it.

Having some easy targets can be motivating for staff. Conversely, lacking some easy targets can be disappointing. The same is true for ambitious targets. We want to have some early and easy successes, and we want to work toward a few more ambitious goals:

- For easy targets, an evaluator might ask, *Is the program cost-effective? Are there lower-investment ways to achieve these outcomes?*
- For more difficult targets, an evaluator might ask, *Are there resources or partners we would need to engage in program implementation to make it easier to achieve these outcomes?* This question has frequently revolutionized how organizations see their role and helped them free themselves to partner strategically, rather than go it alone.

If a goal is too ambitious, we might think of it as a longer process of sequential outcomes. In that scenario, we could set forth the achievement of each step in that process in the outcomes sequence.

The fourth test addresses the importance of each outcome for moving us along the path toward the larger goal. We ask:

*If our organization had to pick three things to work toward in the next year, what would they be? Which of these outcomes move us closer to our goal? Which move us faster?*

Asking these questions is an opportunity to reflect on our assumptions. We assume that doing all the things reflected in our map will move us closer to the larger desired outcomes, yet this might not be so. If we fail to answer these questions, we risk working on things that are not the most important and could be less likely than other options to help us, and society, achieve our overall goals. The
strategy test helps us focus on making the biggest difference, toward our goals.

In evaluation, the strategy test helps us focus evaluation questions and resources on those that most benefit the key strategies and are likely to be the most useful for an organization’s success.

### Capacity

The fifth test is about our ability to carry out activities that will lead to the desired outcomes. We ask:

_Do we have the capabilities to undertake this work? Which partners might we work with to achieve our desire?_

These questions force the organization to decide what is most important and set priorities based on the value it adds to the overall goals. This question also asks organizations to think strategically about their coalitions and the value other coalition members add. If we fail the capacity test, we need to reconsider the scope of our effort. This last test ensures we have funds and staff (or volunteers) to implement our plan.

For an evaluator, answers to this question provide early warning about capacity issues, an indication of possible missing partners, and a set of assumptions to be tested and validated over time.

Returning one last time to the example of CECIP, we can now add a final component to our theory of change—the assumptions we have uncovered through the five tests (and, indeed, through the entire Outcome Mapping process). For CECIP, the following are some assumptions, also shown in **Exhibit 6**:

- Municipalities have the political will to invest adequately in schools.
- Adequate resources, peaceful environments, and student engagement are sufficient to ensure students complete their education.
- Students and other stakeholders hold similar ideas about what comprises appropriate student rights.
- Other organizations, schools, and municipalities will take up (and implement) our successes.
READY TO GO DEEPER?

For more reading on this topic, we recommend the following as starting points:


Using Appreciative Inquiry to Manage the Process

The most recent frameworks of evaluation competencies show that an evaluation methodology is not complete without a clear sense of how it should be implemented. It is no longer enough to have competencies in evaluative thinking and framing, evaluation design, and facilitation of data collection with strong interpersonal skills; it is also important to have skills in processes for stakeholder engagement and the broader management of the evaluation process. Thus, going through the guidance on mapping outcomes and the case example in this paper could make this process sound like a paper exercise. It is not. If you approach Outcome Mapping as a paper exercise, you will likely clarify your own thinking, but you will probably make up stories about what is really going on, and you will not support the organization’s learning and improvement path.

Whom you engage in this process and how you engage them are critical. The organizational or programmatic outcome map is most useful if it is a result of facilitated, interactive, and collaborative deliberations and conversations. As evaluators, we recommend engaging a wide set of individuals and stakeholders—staff, community members, partners, funders, and advisors. Developing this plan is a benefit in itself, because it gets the whole organization thinking strategically, creatively, and evaluatively.

We encourage organizations to develop inclusive, interactive, and collaborative processes and to be creative in how they engage people to come up with the map of outcomes. Evaluators can help facilitate this process. We further encourage those commissioning evaluations to require multi-stakeholder engagement at every phase of the evaluation; these engagements will lead not only to better evaluations and learning, but also to more strategic and coherent relationships.

An Empowering Approach

Because evaluation is frequently a process that increases stress in organizations and programs being evaluated, evaluators will engage organizations more productively if they use empowering processes. EnCompass consistently embeds Appreciative Inquiry in its evaluation facilitation, because it provides a strong foundation for this engagement process, with powerful results. Appreciative Inquiry begins by involving participants in a systematic review of successful experiences and achievements, helps them draw lessons
from that review, and explores the alignment of mission, values, and theory of change, as well as future directions for the organization. Frequently, participants forget they are involved in an evaluation and begin speaking directly about their work, offering open and honest reflections.

This reframing from “What’s wrong, what’s missing, and why?” to “What has worked and what are your wishes for the best outcomes?” is powerful. It helps participants manage the stress of evaluation and helps shift evaluation from a contentious and sometimes punitive experience into a constructive and hopeful experience, which makes it easier and more productive to address disagreements and discuss challenges. Let us explain how.

In their book, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, Ron Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky write about the losses people experience when managing change, and urge those who play a role in that change to be mindful to address the losses. Some evaluators might argue that managing change is the job of leaders and people of authority, not evaluators. And yet, engagement in an evaluation heralds change. We expect findings, conclusions, and recommendations; change is in the nature of the work. Perceptions about the truth are acted on as if they are true, and therefore can make that perception truth. So, since many evaluation participants have negative expectations, worries, and even distress about evaluation and the change it might bring, we must address these worries in our methodology of evaluation engagement.

Here is how evaluation-induced stress manifests itself. People experience:

- Blame for what is not working on those who are implementing programs
- A sense of loss from being asked to let go of aspects of a program that might have some problems, but also has some positive aspects
- Alienation from a sense of powerless in an evaluation in which evaluators and their funders are in control, and the evaluation is “done to people”
- Uncertainty about the evaluation participants’ ability to be successful in the future.

And, here is how Appreciative Inquiry addresses each of these aspects of evaluation stress.

**Blame.** Appreciative Inquiry begins—and frames the evaluation—by delving into a study of successful experiences. It conveys, up front, a trust in the people doing the work and, in its collaborative
design, invites people to co-author the story the evaluation will tell. People are willing to discuss what could be better once they have had a chance to celebrate what has gone really well. In his red bead experiment, Dr. W. Edwards Deming demonstrated how easy it is to blame people for problems not in their control—those that are inherent in a system and those caused by factors outside a system.\footnote{13}

Appreciative Inquiry helps us manage the perception that evaluation is an audit looking for faults and ascribing blame for errors. It also helps evaluators manage their tendency to identify challenges and unintentionally embed an implication of fault. Appreciate Inquiry addresses this stress head on by starting with an invitation to identify, study, and celebrate achievements, saying,

\textit{We will get to challenges and shortcomings, but we know some things are working well around here, so let’s find them and understand them first. Let’s make sure they’re part of the narrative of this evaluation.}

This invitation is irresistible, and it sets things up for a better, more comprehensive evaluation that is better used. In short, Appreciative Inquiry in the practice of evaluation turns judgment into curiosity, reducing evaluator bias. For evaluation participants, it turns defensiveness into self-reflection.\footnote{14}

\textbf{Loss.} Appreciative Inquiry in evaluation begins by asking people to identify and honor the things they value that will be preserved, and that they can take with them into the future. It is easier to embrace a change in three practices when you realize you will be able to take 50 other practices forward. Evaluations frequently devote the greatest portion of their time and their reports to problems and challenges. Appreciative Inquiry embeds a better balance in evaluation reports, seeks an understanding of patterns and causes of successful experiences that offer valuable insights, and grounds the evaluation’s recommendations in the life of the organization—its whole experience.

\textbf{Alienation.} Appreciative Inquiry incorporates storytelling in ways that preserve the stories and their language in the evaluation. Because it begins with an organic process in which participants help shape the evaluation’s agenda, participants frequently forget they are \textit{talking about evaluation} and move into \textit{talking evaluatively about their programs}. The work shifts from “doing an evaluation” to “talking about what we value and how we will best build and live them.” By inviting participants to write their own narrative in the evaluation report, an Appreciative Evaluation becomes a generative part of organizational life, and frequently begins to influence organizational action even as it is just getting underway.
**Uncertainty.** By inviting people to study successful experiences first, Appreciative Inquiry builds confidence in participants’ ability to innovate, work in synergy, address unexpected challenges, demonstrate resilience, and succeed in their work. When people talk about what they value and how this has manifested in their experience, they are demonstrating that they have the knowledge and commitment to succeed. As they move into addressing some of the more challenging, complex, and controversial issues, they are able to turn disagreement into shared exploration. And, because they have shared stories about how they have addressed uncertainty and learned in the past, they understand that they can do it again.

Ultimately, Outcome Mapping needs to be implemented in a highly participatory way to bring its full benefit to organizations and programs. Many people think participation is about giving everyone the floor, such as inviting them to a meeting about the evaluation. This is not so. Being serious about engagement in participatory approaches means thinking through how to equalize voices with attention to existing power inequities, enabling people to listen to each other, inviting people to speak in their own language, reaching people who cannot be at the meeting, and organizing a sequence of conversations that will invite deep thinking, open listening, and honest sharing. The evaluation will benefit from more accurate and useful data, and organizations will benefit from a lively, relevant, and useful evaluation.

**READY TO GO DEEPER?**

For more reading on this topic, we recommend the following as starting points:

- American Evaluation Association (AEA) Competencies: [https://www.eval.org/page/competencies](https://www.eval.org/page/competencies)


Developing an Evaluation Plan

At this point in the process, we often feel inspired to have this organized and strategic presentation of the organization’s work. An outcome map needs to reflect the organization’s culture and its brand. Looking at the map, an organization should feel excited and be proud to share it. In collaboration with evaluation participants, think about how to ensure access for every type of stakeholder. For example, when working with low-literacy groups, you can use images to symbolize each core outcome. Make this a map of images!

We can use this mapping of outcomes in many ways:

- Making plans and decisions on strategies and directions
- Prioritizing and deepening partnerships to achieve goals
- Matching staffing and competencies to tasks in ways that move the organization closer to the targeted outcomes
- Assessing the organization’s performance and impact in moving closer to outcomes at different levels
- Including the map in outreach materials to convey the vision and passion of the organization

Many organizations report that even just completing their map of outcomes is useful and empowering, offering them greater clarity and enabling a strategic focus in their comparative advantage to achieve their mission. At the same time, a good map of outcomes helps organizations invest wisely to get the most value from evaluation. This section lays out how Outcome Mapping can help you use monitoring and evaluation (M&E) to track your progress, continue checking your assumptions, learn from your experiences, tell your story, and improve strategies and programs as you work to realize the outcomes you are targeting.

The Value of Evaluation

Investing in M&E makes sense only if it is useful. As Dr. W. Edwards Deming, the father of Total Quality Management tells us, collecting and analyzing data to answer questions is expensive. We only want to monitor and evaluate if we know what we are going to do with the results. Therefore, do not place anything in the M&E plan just because it would be “nice to know”; only include questions for which you plan to use the answers.
What are appropriate uses of M&E? Michael Quinn Patton describes several possible uses of evaluation:

- Making decisions and improving programs and strategies (**instrumental use**)
- Learning or informing plans, strategies, and designs (**conceptual use**)
- Informing the public and contributing to public knowledge and awareness (**reflective use**)
- Promoting accountability; expanding or closing down a program (**persuasive use**)
- Empowering participation, understanding stakeholder perspectives, promoting organizational capacity development, and catalyzing organizational change (**process use**)
- Complying with an evaluation requirement and showing support for a project (**symbolic use**)

Thinking about use and assessing the value of evaluation are the most important criteria in developing your evaluation plan.

**M&E and the Map of Outcomes**

Organizations might say they cannot invest time and resources in evaluation because they are too busy implementing programs. Yet, what if what they are doing is having little or no impact? What if some of their programs are making a significant difference in the lives of communities, while others are not? Why would anyone want to continue doing something ineffective, especially if a significant part of the budget and staff or volunteer time is invested in it?

We would venture to say that every organization should consider it essential to know what part of its work is effective in serving its beneficiaries and what is not. If the organization knew what worked and what did not, it would use that knowledge immediately to modify its actions.

**Exhibit 7** presents the essential how and why of M&E, based on a mapping of outcomes, emphasizing four areas of focus:

- Quality of activities
- Partner-level outcomes
- Program-level outcomes
- Assumptions
Activity-level evaluation offers an opportunity to enhance quality and keep engaging in activities that are making a difference, while evaluating partner-level outcomes offers the chance to influence and strengthen key partnerships and target advocacy and influence. Evaluation of partner-level outcomes and assumptions is valuable because it can highlight needed adaptations or enhancements of strategies and clarify the organization’s (or program’s) role and brand among partners.

Evaluating program-level outcomes helps organizations assess whether they are achieving outcomes and making a difference for...
those they intend to serve. Results from evaluation of program-level outcomes can inform the overall strategy and be used in an organization’s public education, advocacy, or marketing materials to tell the story of what it looks like to be successful in serving people through the program.

Finally, evaluating or validating assumptions ensures the strategy and its theory of change can make the differences the organization hopes to see.

READY TO GO DEEPER?

For more reading on this topic, we recommend the following as starting points:


Putting Evaluation to Work

Organizations funding and delivering social change programs are doing important work toward broad goals, and they can only achieve those goals by influencing other organizations and social systems. Evaluation is an essential strategy in this effort because it enables organizations to clarify their thinking, learn from their experiences, and use data to work more effectively.

By using an Outcome Mapping frame developed through an appreciative, participatory process, organizations and their programs can engage in dialogue with staff and stakeholders to identify:

- Outcomes that stem from their mission and vision statements (*sphere of interest*)
- Outcomes at the level of partners (*sphere of influence*)
- Outcomes related to the effectiveness and quality of activities and services they provide (*sphere of control*)

In developing this map of outcomes, organizations reveal their beliefs and assumptions about how they intend to bring about the social changes they hope to make (*theory of change*).

M&E requires investments of funding and people’s time. It is important to make these investments where they will add the greatest value. Once an organization is clear about the outcomes it aims to achieve and how its actions are expected to lead to those outcomes, the organization is ready to consider what it wants to learn from M&E and how it plans to use the findings and recommendations to improve the effectiveness and quality of its core activities and services. Having a collaboratively developed map of outcomes enables program funders and implementers to have productive conversations about the program strategy and the roles of their partners. It also enables investment in evaluation that supports transformative positive change and accompanies implementation through a powerful learning agenda.
Where to Learn More

To build skills in facilitating Appreciative Inquiry in evaluation, we invite you to visit the EnCompass Learning Center for a chance to learn directly from (and with) Tessie Catsambas and other thought leaders and practitioners in the field. The ELC, launched in 2019, offers virtual instructor-led training in *Appreciative Evaluation, Principles-Focused Evaluation, Embedding Learning in Organizations*, and other evidence-based approaches to enhance evaluation practice and evaluative thinking. You will come away with new guidance and skills that will help you become a stronger evaluator, evaluation commissioner, or evaluation-minded program manager. Visit encompassworld.com/ELC to learn more and register for an upcoming course.
Endnotes


3  Outcome Mapping is a project progress measurement system that was designed by the grant-making organization International Development Research Centre. Outcome Mapping experts will recognize what is presented here as an adaptation of the early steps of the approach, with similarities and differences from the original methodology. See Jones and Hearn, *Outcome mapping: a realistic alternative for planning, monitoring, and evaluation* (Overseas Development Institute, 2009), http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/5058.pdf.

4  The idea of spheres of control, influence, and interest originate in the field of management. Some organizations find that a different set of terms resonate more; for example, an organization may feel that the terms “action” (for control), “empowerment” (for influence), and “impact” (for interest) resonate more fully with its mission.

5  These examples were inspired by the experiences of an independent Brazilian NGO, Centro de Criação de Imagem Popular (CECIP), which has been working in education and communication for three decades.

6  CECIP’s stated mission statement has changed since we first developed this paper.

7  For more guidance on visioning through Appreciative Inquiry, see Preskill and Catsambas, *Reframing Evaluation*. We also invite you to visit the EnCompass Learning Center, which offers virtual instructor-led courses in Appreciative Evaluation and related topics. Learn more at https://encompassworld.com/elc.


10 Ibid.

11 See, for example, the American Evaluation Association (AEA) Competencies: https://www.eval.org/page/competencies.


