

1d.TS2 When should we evaluate our work?

Two things determine when to evaluate the work (if you have a choice):

- What you want to do with the information - how it will be used, and
- When you think you will be able to see the changes you are seeking.

People do evaluations at different times because they need the information for different reasons. For example, evaluations are sometimes done:

- While the work is going on – to ensure accurate and complete information for documentation requirements and for analysis
- Before key decisions are to be made --- for example, about resource allocation or program replication
- When the information can reach key audiences or when key audiences expect the information – for example, to take advantage of public events or opportunities (such as a “state of the community” section in the local newspaper), or for annual reports
- When there are opportunities to reflect and potentially revise activities, programs or strategies – for example, for advisory group or governing board meetings, staff retreats, coalition or partner convenings
- When the group has completed major components or stages of its work and has experiences to share with others who may be involved in similar kinds of work

The nature of the change goal should also inform the timing of evaluation activities. For example, if you are evaluating your strategies to change a community level outcomes, think about what you define as success, and when that kind of success is likely to appear if your work is effective.

For example, suppose your group wants to reduce the achievement gap for children in early grades in school by increasing their access to good quality early childhood education. It will take several years before the first children to benefit from improved pre-school will enter early grades in school - so you won't see reductions in the achievement gap linked to your work before that.

Before that, you may see important markers of progress toward that goal - for example, more children of color attending quality pre-schools, or teachers in pre-school better prepared to teach children from a range of racial/ethnic backgrounds. But if the evaluation is designed to look at your longer-term goal of reducing the achievement gap in early grades in school, the evaluation has to be timed to when that could possible happen.

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When the evaluation is focused on measuring these kinds of outcome changes, it is important to make sure that what would be considered “success” is in line with what can reasonably be expected at the time the evaluation will be picking up indications of whether or not success has occurred. This is true for any kind of evaluation, but it is particularly important for evaluations of efforts to reduce racism, privilege and oppression and improve racial equity and social justice. This is because people often have unrealistic expectations about what it takes to make changes in these things, and one of the things that evaluation can do best is help people be more realistic.

Thus, as you decide how to time your evaluation, think about:

- The expected or desired size or amount of change in the outcomes
- Where the community is starting from on the outcome you are trying to reach
- The amount of time that the change strategy has been in place
- The strength or intensity of your strategies, and
- The number or strength of countervailing factors, barriers or challenges

Make good estimates of when you could begin to see the changes you want, if your work is effective, based on your understanding of these factors, and time the evaluation accordingly if you can.