

COMMISSIONING EVALUATION

What to look for in an Evaluator

- Basic Knowledge of substantive area being evaluated
- Experience with program evaluation (especially with non-profit organizations)
- Good References (from sources you trust)
- Personal style and approach fit (probably most important)

Before you Commission an Evaluation

- **Talk to a few trusted colleagues** about experiences they have had. If possible also talk to some grantmakers and a professional evaluator. Gather some basic advice and determine if it is relevant for your project.
- **Think about how you will identify evaluators.** Is sole sourcing an option for your project, or will a competitive process be more appropriate or advantageous? There are merits to either approach. If you want to or are required to use a competitive approach, determine how broad the competition should or must be. (Determine answers to these questions.)
 - Will an invitational approach work, or do you want unrestricted competition?
 - Are there any geographic limitations or advantages?
 - Are there tax or business requirements (for-profit./non-profit, private firm, individual, university institute or department, etc.)
 - What sources will you use to inform evaluators about your project and attract bidders (e.g., RFPs posted on your website, in publications, through associations)
- **Determine the best strategy and requirements for proposals.** Can you go ahead with a letter proposal, a letter of interest (LOI)? or an interview only process, or is a Request for Quotes/Qualifications (RFQ), or a full **Request for Proposal (RFP)** best? *Whatever you decide, be sure to make the request specific enough that you make your needs known, but not so detailed that the evaluator or other stakeholders have no real input into how to proceed.*
- **Determine the timeline for finding evaluators.** If you do a full, competitive proposal process, you will need to determine your sequence for announcing your competition, releasing the actual request (RFP or RFQ), conducting a bidders conference or responding to clarification requests, collecting responses, making selections (including possible “best and final” competitions or invited interviews/presentations) and notification. *Remember that good responses, especially those that are written or presented through a meeting take some time to develop – be sure to give potential contractors adequate time.*
- **Determine the format for response.** Do you need a written or oral response, or a combination? What categories of information are required and what additional materials will help. (It is always helpful to provide specific questions of interest – see following -- and parameters for response.)
- **Determine who will be involved in making the selection and how.** Do you need external reviewers? How will you manage multiple (conflicting?) reviews? If you host an interview, who needs to participate? What role can/should program staff and leaders play?

COMMISSIONING EVALUATION (Con't.)

Questions to Ask Evaluators (in RFP's, RFQs or interviews)

- **What do you need to know to properly design an evaluation for this program/initiative?** (The evaluator should minimally need to know about the purpose for commissioning the work, as well as details about service delivery or other organizational structure, and scope of the project including timeframe, ballpark program budget and size of the target population. A smart evaluator will also request other background materials or perhaps even a preliminary visit.)
- **What evaluation questions would guide your effort?** (It may also be valuable to have a preliminary conversation about outcomes and indicators, or specify a whole task where the evaluator works together with program staff to clarify expected outcomes, timeframes, indicators, and important assumptions and contextual issues related to service delivery.)
- **What strategies would you use to address the evaluation questions?** (Be specific about how you would: collect and analyze data involve agency staff, why this approach makes sense or is common, whether there are any standard instruments and why they were chosen.)
- **How will you handle common challenges?** (For example, how will your evaluation design be affected by poor project implementation, which outcome measures would be appropriate if the program is not well implemented? How will you communicate this to stakeholders?) What will you do to insure necessary access to subjects and confidentiality of response?
- **What timeline will the evaluation project operate on?** (Specify in chart or calendar form, when key evaluation tasks will be completed.)
- **Who will conduct the work and what other relevant experiences do they have?** (Identify key staff and clarify their level of involvement – attach resumes and a capacity statement with descriptions of other similar projects. Be sure to get specific directions if web-site reviews are recommended. Ask about supervision if multiple evaluators are involved – who is ultimately responsible for collecting and analyzing data, verifying accuracy and reporting results? For multi-site initiatives, will any local evaluators be involved? How will they and any other staff be trained to conduct specific evaluation activities?)
- **How and when will the findings from the evaluation work be communicated** What products/deliverables will be developed? (look for multiple products where appropriate) Will the products of the evaluation have any greater usefulness? How are program managers expected to use the information obtained through the evaluation?
- **How will evaluation resources be used to complete this work including professional time, travel, other direct costs, indirect costs.** (Be sure to ask for a task-specific budget.)

Evaluation Resources

- Independent technical assistance or evaluation consultants
- Evaluation consulting firms
- Universities with graduate programs that include training or projects in program evaluation

** Remember, evaluation should not be viewed as in competition with program resources. Evaluations can be funded as a component of a program (using program funds) or as a separate project (using ear-marked or additional funds). A Common rule of thumb is to set aside 10 - 20% of the cost of the program, for evaluation. **

What's the difference between an RFP and an RFQ? Which is best to use?

1) An RFP is a Request for Proposal. Responses to RFPs should include specific projections about how a contractor will undertake the work (i.e., data collection strategies, analysis plans, instrument development), what it will cost (including types of projected expenditures), when it will get done, who will work on it, and what products will be delivered. Usually responses to RFPs also include sections where the potential contractor clarifies understanding of the project and the context surrounding the project, identifies key questions that will guide the evaluation work, clarifies who will be working on the project, what qualifies them and how the project will be managed, and provides specific information about qualifications or previous relevant experiences. Other project-specific sections can also be included depending on needs (e.g., a section on what a contractor thinks are likely evaluation challenges and how those would be handled, a section addressing confidentiality and participatory approaches). Any forms or documentation required of contractors are typically appended.

RFPs are more formal and responses are typically lengthier. They are best used under the following conditions: when the grantor is not very familiar with the potential recipients of the request or when there are very specific evaluation needs (especially those dictated by another external source or a project/program model). Grantors should be sure to provide ample time for a full response.

2) An RFQ can be either a Request for Qualifications or Request for Quote depending on the nature of the solicitation. Responses to RFQs can include many of the same elements as RFPs, but the information is less detailed, focused on approach and why a specific contractor should be selected to do the work. RFQs typically include sections/questions like the following:

1. What would be your general approach to completing this project?
2. Who from your staff would be involved in this project and why?
3. What are the expected timelines for the work and the expected products?
4. What are the projected costs?
5. What prior experiences qualify you for this work.

Contractors are also typically asked to provide specific references and some are invited to participate in follow-up interviews where they come to provide additional responses to specific questions and to clarify their workplans.

RFQs are somewhat less formal and best used when you have some familiarity with the contractors who might respond, when style fit is paramount, and when you have a briefer time span to make a selection. There is less reading and writing involved with RFQs, but more of an onus on both the grantor and the potential contractors to maximize the interview process to inform the selection decision.

Questions to Consider Before Identifying a Project for Evaluation

1) Contributions to Mission or Broader Field

What is the general purpose of the proposed project and how will it contribute to grantmaker's mission? If not, are there other reasons why it should be supported? (This can also be discussed with grantee as long as they are aware of the grantmaker's mission.)

How does this project contribute to the broader field? What are the likely lessons learned?

2) Implementation and Feasibility

Does the program target population know about and want to participate in this program? Have all necessary collaborative agreements been secured?

How will you guard against implementation impediments?

3) Project Design/Staging

Describe the key components of the project and how they are integrated into the overall project design. Has a reasonable logical formulation been developed for the program?

How will the project be staged over time?

4.) Finances (ask if necessary)

Please clarify the following details about projected budget: _____

5) Outcomes & Evaluation

How is the project expected to impact participants? How will you know when this has happened?

Things To Avoid When Commissioning Evaluation Projects

- Agreeing to fund a program evaluation design that you do not understand.
- Agreeing to fund a program evaluation where disbursement is not attached to deliverables.
- Commissioning a program evaluation on a timetable that is inappropriate for the program.
- Commissioning an overly complicated evaluation design, or one for which there was insufficient stakeholder involvement in the development.
- Assuming that you must ALWAYS measure outcomes.
- Forcing evaluation of outcomes that are inappropriate or beyond the scope of the program.

EVALUATION ROLES FOR FUNDERS, NONPROFIT STAFF/LEADERS AND EVALUATORS

Roles for Funders in Participatory Evaluation

- To learn about the programs being evaluated, the outcomes to measure, and evaluation practice.
- To help specify evaluation questions and to encourage grantees to ask questions of consequence.
- To review evaluation designs, and evaluation findings.
- To financially support meaningful evaluation activities, and to promote the widespread practice of evaluation within non-profit organizations.

Roles for Non-profit Leaders in Participatory Evaluation

- To identify programs which will benefit from evaluation.
- To identify and support staff in all aspects of their efforts to design and conduct evaluations.
- To promote the widespread practice of evaluation within the organization.

Roles for Evaluators and/or Non-profit Managers in Participatory Evaluation

- To identify questions of consequence (based on expected or possible program outcomes).
- To carefully select evaluation strategies that will produce usable evaluation findings.
- To thoughtfully conduct evaluation activities and analyses of data.
- (For managers only) To use the evaluation results to strengthen programs and enhance program decision-making, and to share evaluation training and other evaluation learning.

Roles for Evaluators in Participatory Evaluation

- To provide training for non-profit staff regarding evaluation planning and methodologies.
- To collect and analyze evaluation data or assist non-profit staff in the collection and analysis of evaluation data.
- To promote the widespread practice of evaluation within non-profit organizations.

Shared Roles for Non-Profit Leaders/Staff, Evaluators and Funders in Participatory Evaluation

- Promote clear communication about the purposes of the evaluation.
- Design, conduct and support evaluations that are honest and that help promote the continuous improvement of programs.
- Set short-term measures and milestones, but seek clarity regarding how those fit into longer-term outcomes and “the bigger picture.”
- Decide in advance *how good is good enough* (use prior efforts, external standards where available, agreed-upon expectations/hunches, to determine reasonable program targets).
- Do peer education with colleagues, and support good practice regarding evaluation.

How Do You Stay Informed About Evaluation Status After You Agree To Support It?

Periodic or Mid-Point Reports

Request that the evaluator make status reports about:

- What evaluation activities have taken place;
- Any data collection or instrument development problems they have encountered;
- Any proposed changes to data collection timelines or strategies;
- Preliminary findings when appropriate.

These status reports should be on a regular schedule that matches with funder needs and the timeline of the evaluation. Compare each status report with proposed activities and timeline. Be prepared to request clarification if there have been challenges (e.g., timeline, access).

***Note: do not require evaluator grantees to complete status reports unless there is a real commitment to review them. Be aware that to produce them takes time and costs money.

Project Conclusion

Request a final status report or make it part of the final evaluation report. Compare what was actually done with what was proposed. Assume there will be some differences as not all tasks work as projected.