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# EVALUATION FOR LEARNING

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News for an Evaluating Community

Summer 2000

## EVALUATION TRAINING

Looking for tools to evaluate the infrastructure of your organization? The Nonprofit Management Checkup is a self-assessment guide featuring sections on governance, administrative management systems, human resources management, fiscal management, external relationships, and service delivery. Nanette Keiser offers a free introduction to this guide on Friday, November 10, 2000. The brownbag session will run from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. in the Greater Kalamazoo United Way Board Room. Beverages and a copy of the guide will be provided. To register, contact Elaine Griffin at: 616/343-2524 (ph) or 616/344-7250 (fax).

Looking for help evaluating a direct service program? United Way of America's "Measuring Program Outcomes" addresses measurement and analysis of participant outcomes in a 4-session series of trainings: Mondays, 1:30-4:30p.m., September 11, 18, 25 and October 2, Greater Kalamazoo United Way Board Room. Cost \$15. To register, contact Elaine Griffin at 616/343-2524 (ph) or 616/344-7250 (fax).

## LISBETH SCHORR ADVOCATES EVALUATION FOR LEARNING: PART II

At the annual meeting of the Michigan Association for Evaluation in May 2000, keynote speaker Lisbeth Schorr made the case for flexible, responsive evaluation—precisely the approach promoted in these pages. Schorr has examined exemplary programs and reasons for their limited replication in Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage (1988), and Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America (1997).

### Why Exemplary Programs Fail to Diffuse

Schorr identifies two factors limiting diffusion of the exemplary programs she describes in Within our Reach: confusion about insider/outsider roles, and the biomedical approach to evaluation.

#### ➤ **Insider/Outsider Roles**

Confusion exists about insider/outsider roles, that is, the roles of neighborhood residents and outside experts. Imposition of academic models on local programs yields poor results. Researchers cannot successfully mandate local solutions. But Schorr cautions, many people have "overlearned" that lesson and embraced the opposite extreme, regarding all outside information and mandates as undesirable. That leaves local people starting from scratch each time, in each community. For example, Proposition 10 channeled \$700 million in cigarette taxes to early childhood efforts in California. The State offered no programmatic guidance to organizations receiving the funding, only directions about how to plan and who should be at the table! That left organizations struggling over which agency obtained how much of the money, rather than talking about the best ways to achieve the stated outcomes.

#### ➤ **Biomedical Approach to Evaluation**

Schorr points out that certification of "best practices" customarily occurs when evaluators use the biomedical research model. This model includes random assignment to control and experimental groups to test for a causal relationship between one factor and one or more outcomes. Schorr's own work demonstrates that most exemplary programs are multi-faceted, complex and thus do not lend themselves to evaluation using the biomedical model. She argues that instead of seeking to determine which precise factor caused which precise effect, evaluators looking for best practices should seek to verify the overall results of complex interventions.

ASKING GOOD  
QUESTIONS

COLLECTING AND  
SHARING USEFUL  
INFORMATION

USING THE  
INFORMATION FOR:

- IMPROVEMENT
- ACCOUNTABILITY

CONTINUING  
TO REPEAT  
THE CYCLE

*EVALUATION FOR LEARNING*  
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THE GREATER KALAMAZOO EVALUATION PROJECT PUBLISHES THIS NEWSLETTER TO FOSTER EVALUATION THROUGHOUT THE KALAMAZOO AREA. Send your ideas and examples to: Denise Hartsough, Greater Kalamazoo United Way  
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## Evaluation for Learning

Schorr maintains that we can balance insider/outsider roles and generate a large body of best practice knowledge by adopting a different approach to evaluation. She advocates evaluation that combines theory, logic and evidence with insight, creativity and judgement. Such evaluation exhibits the following four critical elements:

1. It systematically utilizes **multiple ways of knowing**.
2. Its conclusions are based on **systematic accumulation of knowledge and judgement from a variety of perspectives**.
3. It builds on current efforts to identify best practices by **identifying interim outcomes**, or pathways to longer-term, larger-scale outcomes.
4. It offers **easy-to-use, interactive methods that rapidly capture feedback and make it available in a timely manner**.

With the flow of results from this type of evaluation, the knowledge base will evolve constantly, helping us learn about implementation, programs, and policies. No experimenter or central authority proscribes the solution; instead, local implementers plan variations on best practices, choosing and flexibly adapting pathways to good results.

### TIPS & TOOLS

"Our State contract requires us to track the number of children who avoid out-of-home placements, which is a longer-term outcome objective of our mentoring program. When we began to monitor development of appropriate communication (an initial outcome), we discovered that our youth and mentors could benefit from additional training in assertiveness. We are now providing that training and will check to see what impact it has on mentees' communication skills."

-- Terri Wood B., Youth Companion Program Coordinator, Bethany Christian Services

## NOTEWORTHY RESOURCES

Child Trends (2000). Building a Better System of Child and Family Indicators.  
<http://www.childtrends.org/PDF/bettersys.pdf>

Child Trends also offers an inventory of over 90 child, youth, and family indicator-based projects. [http://www.childtrends.org/r\\_inves.cfm](http://www.childtrends.org/r_inves.cfm)

Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (1999). Blueprints for Violence Prevention. <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv>

Minnesota Department of Human Services (1999). Kids Killing Kids: A Thoughtful Response. St. Paul, MN: Author. (For a copy, call 651/215-6019.)

## EVALUATION FOR LEARNING IS:

- EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY
- CONTINUALLY ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS, GETTING ANSWERS, AND TAKING ACTION BASED ON THOSE ANSWERS
- INTEGRATED INTO THE DAY-TO-DAY OPERATIONS OF THE ORGANIZATION
- A DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS
- COLLABORATIVE AND DEPENDENT ON INFORMATION SHARING
- TIME WELL SPENT
- GOING TO ENSURE THE ORGANIZATION'S HEALTH AND VIABILITY IN THE LONG RUN IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

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