Outcome Focused Service Delivery: A Common Sense Approach

There are those who say that applying an "outcomes" model to social services delivery is a flawed activity. I disagree strongly with that view and think that program performance measurement is fundamental to accountability, not only for private organizations, but also for public agencies and their use of tax payer dollars.

Through the years we have all been exposed to multiple approaches for moving an organization's vision and mission to reality (Management by Objectives, Total Quality Management, etc.) While I have learned from many of these, I have also seen them, at times, lead to project work plans so complicated they have no chance of helping an organization's staff reach its goals.

So, is there a common sense way to measure service delivery performance that helps an organization get where it wants to go, helps it to be accountable, and helps staff keep mission focused? I think the answer is, "yes."

For those research purists in the group, what we are suggesting is not a "controlled evaluation" process that will address all the variables, causal chains and data interpretations. Research plays an important role in public policy but that is where it needs to be applied – to in-depth studies of policy development and implementation. This "common sense" approach to program performance measurement that we will be covering today is focused on the basic who, what, where, when and how of service delivery.

So, the first thing to be asked in this model is the "what" question. What did you tell us in your grant proposal will happen as a result of your project? What will be the "outcome?"

Outcomes are the changes or benefits to those receiving services that occur because of the program activities. They may include, but are not limited to, a change or benefit in behavior, knowledge, skills, attitude, values, or condition. Outcomes answer the "so what" question. You planned and conducted five training sessions, 50 people attended, *so what difference did it make and how do you know*. That difference is the outcome and the manner in which you determine the difference has been achieved is the performance measurement.

An outcome tells what the difference is and the performance measurement tells how you know that. Sometimes outcomes and performance measurements are stated separately and sometimes they are joined together in an outcome statement. The following examples illustrate this.

Example 1

Outcome: One-Stop and community partner staff has knowledge of workforce development competencies through training.

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Performance Measure: Pre-Test –Post Test at workforce development staff & partner workshops.

In this example the desired outcome is a change in knowledge and that change will be measured through pre and post test surveys.

Example 2
Outcome Statement: Children of prisoners being mentored have improved academic performance as measured by school attendance, report cards, feedback from caregivers and teachers.

Example 3
Outcome Statement: Married couples have strengthened marriages and family relationships as a result of improved communication, problem solving, and conflict resolution skills for couples being mentored.

Performance Measurement: Pre and post training participant surveys, monthly written mentor feedback, demonstrated use of conflict resolution skills during weekly problem solving exercises.

All of the examples tell us what will happen (the outcome, the difference to be achieved) and how we will know that has occurred (the performance measurement). Performance measurements require a variety of tools (surveys, focus groups, documented observations, etc). It will be important to know what these tools are, who is responsible for developing them, and by when. This level of detail is sometimes shown on a project work plan or stated as an expectation on individual staff activity plans.

The next question to be asked in the outcome model for service delivery is "how." How identifies the activities that will occur to help bring about the desired outcome. Activities may include training, development and distribution of informational materials, In describing how an outcome will be achieved, two other frequently used planning terms come into play. These terms are inputs and outputs.

Inputs are the resources that go into your program activities such as personnel, capital, and information technology. Outputs are the products of those activities. Examples of output measures could include how many people were served, average application processing time, and number of training sessions conducted. Inputs and outputs are used in comparison to each other to determine a program's productivity or efficiency.

The final questions of who, where, and when are addressed in a program or project planning document. The "who" identifies the individual responsible for assuring an activity is completed. The "when" addresses activity completion date or starting and ending dates. The "where" identifies the location for the activities. This may be a geographic area, a specific address, or a department within an organization.

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Using an outcomes approach to service delivery will not only help us better deliver the services we offer but will also help us know if funding is going to projects that really do make a difference for families and our communities.