



GOODMAN RESEARCH GROUP, INC. PERSPECTIVES

Evaluation and Research News From Cambridge, MA

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Greetings from the President



In January 2009, Goodman Research Group, Inc. (GRG) will celebrate our 20th anniversary as a full-service research evaluation firm. This seems like a good time to revisit several of the questions we generally ask our clients and ourselves as we conduct evaluations. These questions represent some of the opportunities and challenges that have remained constant in our work, as we adjust to ongoing changes in the economic, political, social, and educational environments.

What is a realistic goal? An important part of our discussion with a client is to investigate the beliefs they have about their program, as well as perceptions about its intended effects. Although the program world has become more sophisticated about a program's "theory of change," too often a program lacks articulated goals, or else the goals and objectives that do exist are not realistic. The ideal is to have a match between the type and level of program activities and the desired outcomes.

What is appropriate? As time goes on, we've seen more emphasis on the need for accountability and the importance of measuring project impact. These are good things. However, the current emphasis on experimental and quasi-experimental designs, and on assessing specific content through use of standardized tests, sometimes leads to programs being evaluated rigorously before they are mature enough to provide meaningful impact data. The aim should be to select the most rigorous design appropriate for a project's current stage and scope. A challenge is to meet the funders' requirements, while at the same time providing information that is useful to the client for improving their program.

What is in the black box? We believe strongly that one should examine the processes as well as program outcomes. Probing inside the "black box" (how the program unfolds and whether it does what it said it would) helps us to

understand and interpret outcomes. A challenge with some clients is to convince them of the usefulness of this evaluation component.

What is authentic? An exciting challenge for us is assessing impacts in a relevant, realistic, and fun way. Because of the usual time and budget constraints, we – like many evaluators – often have respondents report their own perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. However, we are always working to push the envelope to find measures that flow seamlessly from the project. Authentic assessment is an increasingly valued approach to evaluate a program's success, as described by Karen Peterman on page 3 of this newsletter.

What is affordable? In this era of scarce resources (and even in the flush 1990s), having adequate funding for evaluation remains a challenge, and evaluation may be the first line item to be reduced or eliminated. We always try to carry out the most rigorous evaluation allotted by the budget. We know from experience that spending money on evaluation can, in the long run, save an organization even more money, by indicating what is the most efficacious allocation of project resources.

What does success look like? Success may look different to the program developer, to the funder, to constituents, and to the evaluator. Therefore, communication among all the stakeholders is imperative, so that programs or services, when released, reflect the full range of stakeholder criteria. Moreover, communication about these perspectives tends to result in fewer surprises when the outcomes are revealed.

Best wishes,

Irene F. Goodman, Ed. D.
Founder and President

