

# EVALUATION BRIEF

## Building Evaluation Capacity in Human Service Organizations

November 2013

### What is Evaluation Capacity Building?

Evaluation capacity refers to an organization's ability to conduct, use, and continuously learn from evaluation processes (Preskill & Boyle, 2008a; Torres & Preskill, 2000; Torres, Preskill, & Piontek, 2004). While knowing the basic methods of conducting an effective and accurate evaluation is essential to foster evaluation capacity, it is insufficient by itself. Evaluation capacity building involves developing the motivation, knowledge, and skills for conducting evaluations at the individual and organizational levels. As such, it refers both to the ability to use evaluation information and to conduct evaluations effectively.

Efforts to build evaluation capacity can touch on many aspects of an organization's operations.<sup>1</sup> Bourgeois and Cousins (2013) offer one framework that illustrates the complexity and breadth of activities associated with evaluation capacity building (see Exhibit 1). They view capacity building as a process by which organizations develop the ability to conduct and use evaluation findings across six dimensions. The capacity to implement evaluations involves personnel and broader organizational resources, as well as the leveraging of internal and external supports to plan and conduct evaluations; the capacity to use evaluations requires an organizational culture that fosters involvement in evaluation activities, the integration of evaluation into organizational decision-making, and the application of evaluation findings (Bourgeois & Cousins, 2008). The six dimensions in turn fall along a developmental spectrum of four levels: low, developing, intermediate, and exemplary. Not all organizations can or need to achieve "exemplary capacity"; rather, the framework may best be viewed as a guide to increase an organization's understanding of capacity building concepts and identify areas of improvement in order to reach its desired capacity level.

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<sup>1</sup>Although this brief focuses on the development of evaluation capacity among human service organizations, the ideas discussed herein are applicable to a broad range of organizations.





**Exhibit 1 - Dimensions of Organizational Evaluation Capacity**  
(Bourgeois & Cousins, 2013)

Capacity to Do		
<b>Human Resources:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staffing</li> <li>• Evaluation logic &amp; technical skills</li> <li>• Communication &amp; interpersonal skills</li> <li>• Professional development</li> <li>• Leadership</li> </ul>	<b>Organizational Resources:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Budget</li> <li>• Ongoing data collection</li> <li>• Organizational infrastructure</li> </ul>	<b>Evaluation Planning &amp; Activities:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation plan</li> <li>• Use of consultants</li> <li>• Information sharing</li> <li>• External supports</li> <li>• Organizational linkages</li> </ul>
Capacity to Use		
<b>Evaluation Literacy:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involvement in evaluation</li> <li>• Results-management orientation</li> </ul>	<b>Integration w/Organizational Decision-Making:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management processes</li> <li>• Decision support</li> </ul>	<b>Learning Benefits:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instrumental or conceptual use</li> <li>• Process use</li> </ul>

### Why is Internal Evaluation Capacity Important?

There are numerous reasons for building internal evaluation capacity, ranging from the operational and practical to the broad and holistic, with each affecting an organization's overall health and sustainability. Significant benefits from efforts to increase capacity are highlighted below.

- **Evaluation capacity building informs program planning and decision-making.** With evaluation knowledge, staff can develop logic models, make program theories more explicit, and align evaluation plans. Feedback loops foster the development of a program throughout its life course. Scheirer (2012) suggests that evaluation can become an integrated managerial function in which data are continuously collected and used for decision-making and program improvement throughout a program's life cycle.
- **Capacity building encourages a results-based orientation.** By linking programmatic goals and activities to observed results, staff members at all levels of an organization become more mindful of and focused on the organization's overall mission and purpose. If desired goals are not met, increased evaluation capacity provides the perspective necessary to institute changes and refine program activities in an ongoing, purposeful manner. In so doing, programs demonstrate greater effectiveness and efficiency to funders, board members, managers, and agency partners.
- **Capacity building promotes the increased and appropriate use of evaluation data.** Organizations with greater research and data management skills are more likely to collect, analyze, understand, and use evaluation data regularly. Initially, effects may occur on the individual level, but over time the systematic use of evaluation methods and data affects organizational learning (Cousins, Aubry, Smith Fowler, & Smith, 2004). The more evaluation is used and understood, the greater the motivation of agency managers and staff to engage in and apply evaluative concepts. Indeed, motivation to conduct and

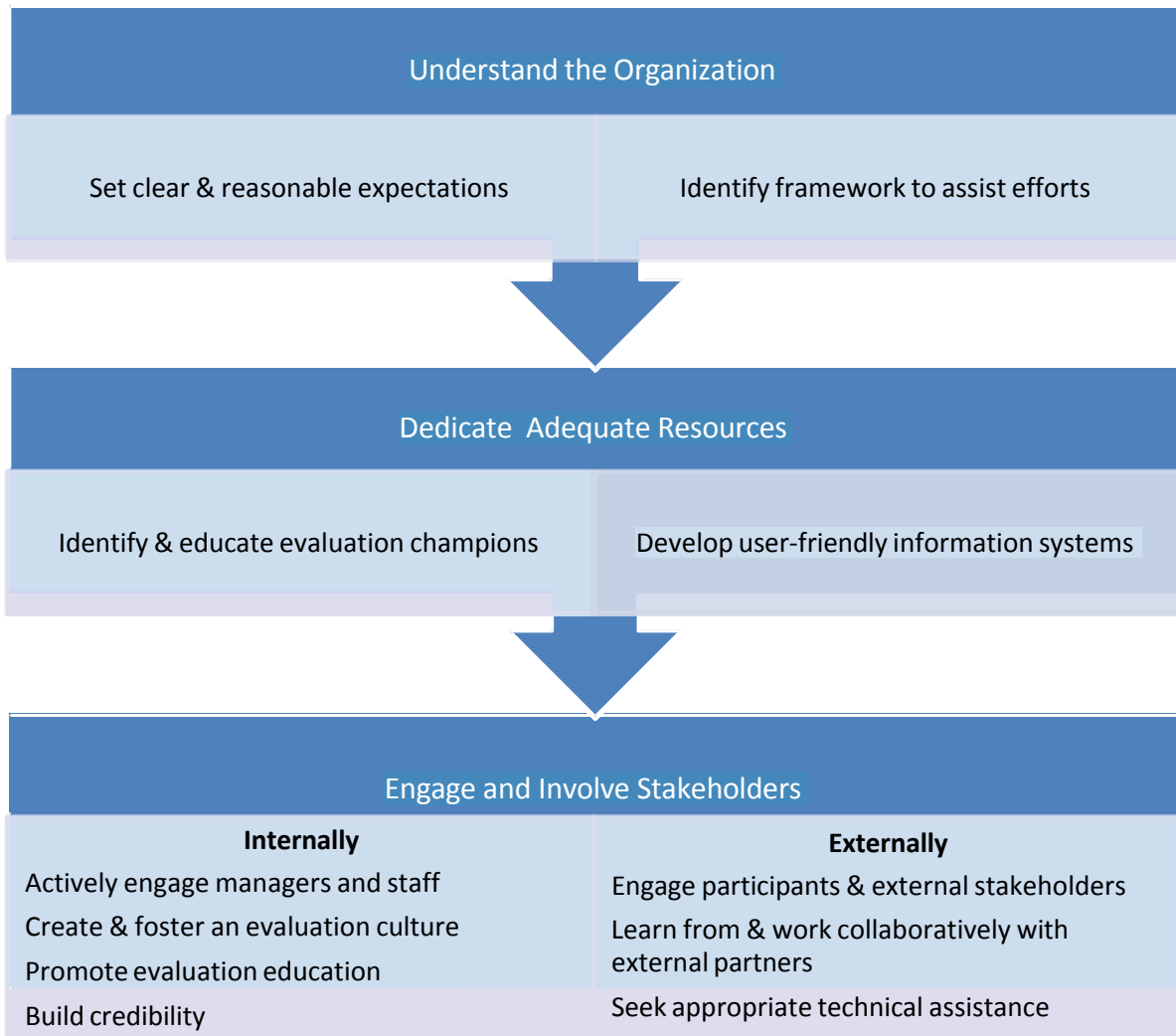
use evaluation data is a central concept in evaluation capacity building (Volkov & King, 2007).

- **Organizations with greater evaluation capacity are better able to evaluate their own programs.** By capitalizing on their inherent expertise in their own services and operations, in-house staff are poised to respond quickly to evaluation needs, provide immediate feedback on organizational processes and programs, and address problems and opportunities as they arise. Greater capacity to engage in internal evaluation can also produce cost savings for organizations by reducing reliance on external evaluation consultants.
- **Increased capacity promotes a culture of inquiry.** Internal evaluators can be advocates for change, stimulating continuous organizational learning, reflection, and development. Capacity building efforts facilitate communication across organizational levels by providing common, more objective ground on which to assess and implement program changes. Consequently, evaluation capacity building elevates organizational thinking to a higher order by expanding an organization's vision beyond program performance to an unbiased view of organizational impact, diversity, ethical treatment of clients, and objectivity in analyzing results (Schweigert, 2011). Patton (2008) explicitly links evaluative thinking with capacity building by suggesting that evaluation capacity enables program staff to think "evaluatively" about what they do and how their work relates to the organization's mission and goals.
- **Evaluation capacity enhances credibility with partner agencies and funders.** Organizations with evaluation skills are better poised to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs and to share evaluation findings with partner agencies and communities. In addition, evaluation contributes to better monitoring and quality improvement processes, thereby increasing adherence to performance standards and expectations. As organizations are better able to meet accountability requirements, they become more effective and competitive in seeking new or increased funding, thereby promoting long-term sustainability.
- **Increased capacity empowers organizations and the communities they work in.** Along with building their credibility with funders and partner agencies, the knowledge that comes with increased evaluation capacity can empower organizations to be more proactive and independent in advocating for programs and policies that benefit them and the communities they serve. This is particularly true in the case of historically vulnerable populations (e.g., communities of color, tribal communities) that have often been the subjects of research and evaluation projects but have sometimes been marginalized in making decisions about findings from these studies.

## How Can Human Service Organizations Build Internal Evaluation Capacity?

Regardless of its size or resources, every human service organization can develop its evaluation capacity. As illustrated in Exhibit 2 below, specific steps for building internal aptitude to understand and apply evaluation knowledge and concepts fall into three broad categories: (1) understanding the organization, (2) investing in adequate resources, and (3) engaging and involving multiple stakeholder groups.

## Exhibit 2 - Conceptual Model for Evaluation Capacity Building



To illustrate the application of these steps in human service practice settings, this brief includes examples of evaluation capacity building efforts by organizations funded through discretionary grant programs operated by the Children's Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The organizations highlighted include:

- Family Central, Inc., a non-profit family service organization based in South Florida, which implemented *Cherish the Family*, a program designed to help parents struggling with substance abuse regain custody of their children.
- Partnership for Strong Families, Inc., a non-profit organization located in Gainesville, Florida that utilized Family Team Conferencing to increase family engagement.
- Oklahoma Department of Human Services, which developed *Bridge to the Future*, a program aimed at enhancing the recruitment of foster and adoptive families for children in out-of-home placement.

- Oregon Health and Science University based in Portland, Oregon, which implemented *Family Early Advocacy and Treatment*, a collaborative project focused on developing more effective systems for identifying and serving substance-exposed newborns.

The specific recommendations listed in Exhibit 2, which can be adapted in response to local needs and available resources, are described in detail below along with selected examples from the experiences of these grantees.

- 1) **Understand your organization.** Develop a clear sense of how evaluation findings will be used to help the organization. Use existing data and prior evaluations to assess current evaluation capacity and areas where further development is warranted. Be aware of present assets and resources (such as existing sources of data available through case records, stand-alone databases, and networked information management systems) and build on these using a strengths-based approach.
- 2) **Set clear and reasonable expectations.** It is important from the outset to establish expectations for evaluation capacity building—specifically, what kinds of capacities are suited to the organization, how much time will be devoted to evaluation activities, and how many resources will be allocated? Both internal evaluators and staff will feel less discouraged and more capable if they set reasonable expectations and identify concrete needs and goals. It is also helpful to understand the nature of evaluation capacity building; at its core, it is a learning process that needs time to evolve as internal and external stakeholders digest the principles and utility of evaluation. Remaining flexible, adaptable, and patient will allow the capacity building process to develop naturally and positively.
- 3) **Identify a framework to promote evaluation capacity building efforts.** Many models have been developed to help organizations assess their readiness to build evaluation capacity, identify factors that may facilitate or impede these efforts, and understand the principles necessary for a successful evaluation. These conceptual frameworks can pinpoint (1) individual factors that contribute to capacity building efforts (e.g., awareness of the benefits of evaluation, motivation, competence); (2) organizational factors such as leadership, resources, and the climate for learning; and (3) evaluation capacity outcomes such as mainstreaming evaluation practices and the use of evaluation findings (Taylor-Ritzler et al., 2013). In addition to Bourgeois and Cousins' (2013) framework presented earlier, other models (accompanied in some cases by checklists and assessment instruments) for guiding an organization's capacity building process include:
  - Preskill and Torres' (1999) Readiness for Organizational Learning and Evaluation Instrument (ROLE)
  - Stufflebeam's (2002) checklist for institutionalizing evaluation
  - Volkov and King's (2007) checklist for building organizational evaluation capacity
  - Preskill and Boyle's (2008b) multidisciplinary model of evaluation capacity building
  - The Evaluation Capacity Assessment Instrument (ECAI) developed by Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2010) and validated by Taylor-Ritzler et al. (2013).

In selecting a useful framework, a human service agency should assess the framework's applicability to its unique organizational culture, context, and priorities, as well as the feasibility of using it within the timeframe and immediate resource constraints for growing the agency's internal evaluation capabilities.

- 4) **Devote adequate resources.** All organizations must make difficult decisions regarding the allocation of often scarce monetary and personnel resources; however, in the absence of commitment, evaluation capacity building will be overshadowed by other priorities and responsibilities (Baron, 2011). It is essential to make capacity building an organizational priority—financial, time, and technical resources are needed to support ongoing data collection and analysis. Without secure resources, internal evaluators may struggle to gain footing in the organization, fail to impact its culture, and fall short in collecting and disseminating useful information. As evaluation becomes an integral part of organizational processes and program improvement efforts, the allocation of additional resources to evaluation will be viewed as a worthwhile investment.
- 5) **Identify and educate evaluation “champions.”** The identification of one or more evaluation “champions” is critical to successful internal capacity building; these staff members are responsible for implementing, overseeing, and promoting evaluation activities in the organization. Given the plethora of evaluation learning opportunities, an organization can start small or “go big” in identifying and supporting champions, depending on human and financial resources. On a small scale, champions may build basic skills in interpreting evaluation data by attending training seminars on evaluation, joining evaluation associations or networks, and participating in online webinars. On a larger scale, an organization may commit to establishing a permanent internal evaluation unit staffed by workers with relevant education and training. Either way, having one or more specialists facilitates both in-house evaluations as well as work with external evaluators. Ongoing professional development is also essential to increasing evaluation capacity; as appropriate, this can be delivered separately from or in conjunction with other programmatic, supervisory, or training activities.
- 6) **Develop comprehensive and user-friendly information systems.** Along with staff training and hiring, perhaps the largest investment that an organization will make in promoting evaluation capacity building is the development or enhancement of its data collection and management systems. Any evaluation is only as good as the quality of the available data. Knowledge acquisition and dissemination
- Grantee Example*

*Cherish the Family’s Project Director valued and championed evaluation from the very beginning as an integral part of the project. Her initial and ongoing support ensured that project staff worked closely with the evaluation team to collect, analyze, interpret, and use evaluation findings to foster continual program improvement.*
- Grantee Example*

Partnership for Strong Families developed a sophisticated and user friendly data management system that tracked and monitored services delivered to families. Data collection instruments were programmed into the system for expedited data entry and retrieval. The system facilitated linkages among case, service, and cost data that supported evaluation activities, informed practice, and improved child welfare administration.



depends on whether appropriate data elements are identified, defined, captured, promoted, and understood. When they are simple, intuitive, and useful, agency staff and management will use information systems willingly and thoroughly. In an era of sophisticated network and computer technology, internal evaluators will benefit from the allocation of time and resources toward the development and maintenance of electronic databases, information management systems, data warehousing, and strategies for the ongoing entry and retrieval of data (Volkov & Baron, 2011). In addition, ongoing training for internal evaluators and other employees in data collection and management protocols is essential.

- 7) **Actively involve management and front-line staff in evaluation processes.** The inclusion of administrators, managers, and front-line staff in data collection and other activities not only benefits internal evaluators, but also enhances broader evaluation capacity building efforts. For example, if staff perceive evaluation as only a management tool to judge their work, they will be less likely to participate with enthusiasm. By working collaboratively and routinely with program managers and staff, those charged with evaluation responsibilities can keep lines of communication open, thereby contributing to general buy-in to evaluation processes. Internal partnerships may take time to build, but will ultimately result in acceptance, understanding, and use of evaluations. Additionally, internal evaluators who remain close to direct service delivery activities can maintain an extensive and intimate understanding of program operations, which in turn informs the selection of appropriate research designs, data collection tools, and analytical methods.

#### *Grantee Example*

To coordinate, guide, and oversee the evaluation activities of the *Bridge to the Future* project, Oklahoma Department of Human Services established an internal Data and Evaluation Team. Comprised of internal evaluation staff and agency managers, this team met monthly to coordinate data collection, evaluation, and dissemination activities both within the agency and with agency partners such as Oklahoma's tribal communities.

- 8) **Include program participants and external stakeholders in evaluation processes.** Once people understand the “value” of evaluation, and in particular their role in shaping evaluative processes, they will want to be involved. Comprehensive evaluation capacity building extends beyond the organization; efforts to educate and involve funders, program participants, and partner agencies can further strengthen evaluation activities. Perceptions and understanding of evaluation are essential; if consumers do not understand how their time, opinions, and personal information matters, they will be less forthcoming and willing to participate in data collection and other evaluation activities. Education and up-front communication with all relevant external stakeholders are critical to capacity building efforts.
- 9) **Create and foster an evaluation culture.** Evaluation capacity building involves more than just developing the technical expertise to implement evaluation activities; equally important is an organizational culture that reflects and supports evaluation as an integral component of the organization's mission and internal processes (Baron, 2011). Strategies



for building an evaluation culture include integrating evaluation findings and updates into routine agency newsletters and correspondence; bringing in local experts who can introduce and expand on evaluation benefits and methods; and including evaluation topics in regular or special organizational gatherings such as semiannual reviews and retreats.

- 10) **Learn from and work collaboratively with external partners.** Evaluation capacity building does not have to happen in isolation; ongoing collaboration with external partners is instrumental to evaluation capacity building. Some organizations may be attempting to achieve the same goals; many may have already dedicated resources to building their evaluation capacity and have lessons to share, advice to offer, or tools to recommend. Look for local partners to share knowledge and experience with, as well as to collaborate on research and evaluation activities where common informational needs exist. National and regional organizations (such as local affiliates of the American Evaluation Association) can provide further learning opportunities. In addition, communication and collaboration with internal evaluators in other organizations, as well as with external evaluators, can contribute to the dissemination of best practices and lessons learned (Volkov & Baron, 2011).

*Grantee Example*

Oregon Health and Science University collaborated with a partner organization in Lane County, Oregon —Healthy Babies, Healthy Communities (HBHC)—on conducting surveys and focus groups with nurses to collect input on optimal procedures for screening newborns for substance exposure. Involving HBHC improved the content of the survey and focus group protocols and increased nurses' participation and engagement in the data collection process.

- 11) **Promote evaluation throughout the organization.** As evaluation champions educate themselves, it is important to allow them to share their knowledge with others by establishing multiple opportunities for evaluation education. Preskill and Boyle (2008a) identify several effective strategies, including regular training and technical assistance (e.g., in-house workshops); written educational materials (e.g., handbooks and worksheets); technologies that support research and evaluation activities (e.g., Webinars); mentoring and coaching; and “communities of practice” in which experiences and information can be shared among those with an interest in or who are engaged in evaluation. As staff learn more, their resistance, anxiety, and skepticism about evaluation will decrease while cooperation, buy-in, and receptivity to evaluation activities and the application of findings increases.
- 12) **Build credibility.** Credibility is of primary importance when evaluations are conducted by internal staff. According to Volkov (2011), it is possible to build credibility by reducing perceptions that internal evaluation is biased. Organizations may apply evaluation standards and ethical guidelines (e.g., the American Evaluation Association's *Program Evaluation Standards and Ethical Guidelines*<sup>2</sup>) that internal evaluators follow consistently and about which relevant stakeholders are informed. Bringing in an external evaluation expert to review organizational practices also helps build credibility. A third strategy

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<sup>2</sup>See <http://www.eval.org/p/cm/ld/fid=103>

involves the establishment of an evaluation oversight committee that involves stakeholders at multiple levels, including program participants. Finally, consider the position of the internal evaluation unit within the organizational hierarchy of the agency: Does the unit report to senior administrators or to managers at lower levels? The higher the unit is located within the organizational structure of an agency, the more credible, independent, and unbiased it will be perceived both internally and externally.

- 13) **Seek outside assistance where appropriate.** Even as they strengthen their internal evaluation skills, organizations should identify those data collection and research activities that they can manage internally with relative ease and those that may be more efficient and cost effective to outsource. Technical assistance providers can provide assistance in the form of coaching and training, while external experts may implement certain evaluation activities directly. Consultants can also provide input on evaluation activities and align organizational systems to support them (Morariu, 2012). Furthermore, external consultants can impart objectivity and specialized skills to internal evaluation champions (Love, 1998). Grantee organizations may receive technical assistance from a sponsoring foundation or grant maker to ensure that evaluation activities are implemented with rigor and consistency.

## Conclusion and Further Reading

Human service organizations of any size can build internal evaluation capacity, and will benefit whether they simply enhance their appreciation of the effective use and application of results-based data or establish dedicated evaluation units with responsibility for ongoing internal evaluation activities and education. The advantages of building internal evaluation capacity are well worth the effort, affecting individual knowledge and skills as well as fostering an organizational culture that embraces learning and reflection. In short, strengthening an organization's internal evaluation capacity results not only in increased knowledge of evaluation, but also in enhanced ability to conduct evaluations and utilize findings appropriately. In addition to the material presented in this brief, readers interested in learning more about evaluation capacity building may wish to consult the following resources:

*New Directions for Evaluation: Internal evaluation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (Winter 2011). Number 132. Boris B. Volkov and Michelle E. Baron (Eds.).

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