PHASE II

Choosing The Right Evaluation Questions

Writing well thought-out, relevant evaluation questions is the secret to a meaningful evaluation. Keep in mind that the more specific the focus of the evaluation, the more efficiently the evaluation team can use its resources. In addition, the fewer evaluation questions asked, the more information that can be collected about each question. Conversely, the broader the scope of the evaluation, the less time and resources there are to devote to single issues.

Step 1: Define the program
- Explain the rationale for the program's implementation within the district.
- Describe the design features of the program.
- Outline the program's goals and objectives.

Step 2: Set the scope of the evaluation project
- Articulate what the evaluation team intends to accomplish with this evaluation project.
- Think about what means it will take to accomplish this evaluation project.
- Decide what kind of analysis to present to the intended audience.

Step 3: Develop general evaluation questions
- Write general questions about program implementation objectives.
- Write general questions about participant outcomes

Step 4: Write specific evaluation questions
- Write evaluation questions in measurable terms.
- Note questions that will not be addressed in this study.

Step 1

Define The Program

Evaluation questions stem from the information key stakeholders and other primary audiences want to know about the program. Usually, more answers are sought after than can be efficiently provided in a single evaluation effort. While choosing what to evaluate within a single program can be daunting, a clear understanding of the program itself will illuminate the elements of a program that should be addressed.

With completion of this step the evaluation team will have a description of the program in concrete terms, *as it is designed to be implemented.* This will be helpful in the following ways:

▶ Clearly identified program characteristics, goals and objectives will give the intended audience the necessary background to understand the scope of the evaluation study.

▶ The evaluation team should identify the selected program's implementation objectives and participant outcome objectives in precise terms. The more precise the objective, the easier it becomes to link specific operations to specific outcomes. This process will help generate clearly focused and manageable evaluation questions.

▶ A clearly stated, well-understood program design will enable the evaluation team to make decisions about what components of the program to focus on and to select program objectives that are feasible to evaluate within the scope and time frame of the evaluation.

▶ Clearly defining terms and stating program objectives enables evaluators to compare actual implementation of the program with the program design as it was intended to be implemented.

⌔TASK   *Describe District Background Information*

This section should briefly describe any district demographic information that would help the audience understand the rationale for implementing this program. These might include:

- County or district population,
- Level of unemployment,
- Number of juvenile arrests,
- Number of elementary schools,
- Number of middle schools,
- Number of high schools,
- Percent of free and reduced lunches,
- Number of non-public schools within the county,
- List of risk factors and protective factors as assessed in your needs assessment,
- Other school district characteristics that you feel are relevant.

⌔TASK   *Delineate a Program Overview*

- Give the name of the program, explain any acronyms.
- Identify the type of program: ATOD, Violence Prevention, or both;
- Identify state SDFS goals or district-developed goals the program is addressing;
- List risk factors and protective factors addressed specifically by this program;
- Provide a general description of the program design:
    - What are the basic components of the program?
    - If the program is a commercial package, what are the manufacture specifications?
- List the materials and resources required to administer program;
- Summarize program costs.

Clarifying Program Goals and Program Objectives

For the purposes of this evaluation project, and particularly the next task, "program goals" and "program objectives" assume specific and separate meanings.

Program goals address the overall purpose, or mission, of a specific program. They outline the conceptual scope of what the program plans to achieve. Program goals are stated in a general fashion and denote intent. In the case of SDFS projects, for example, a five-year goal may be to reduce vulnerability to pro-drug social influences by a certain amount across the district. *Used in this manner, program goals provide the overall direction for the program.* Do not confuse program goals with the 5-Year Project Goals. These refer to the overall goals for the state regardless of the programs implemented. The program goals defined here refer specifically to the program to be evaluated.

Program objectives are concerned with the design and implementation of specific activities within a given program, as well as the range of outcomes expected as a result of that program. An example of a program objective would be one that addresses providing adolescents with the skills to handle social situations with confidence.

Program objectives can be categorized into two types[3]:
- Program implementation objectives
- Participant outcome objectives

Program implementation objectives

Objectives of this type concern themselves primarily with processes, including identification of target populations, the manner in which specific skills are taught, staff, material resources required, and the scheduling of planned activities throughout the school year. *Program implementation objectives address the program's effect on outcomes in terms of the efforts made in design and operation of the program.*

It is important to understand that the manner in which these objectives are actually applied during the life of the program directly affect program outcomes.

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[3] Use of these two terms is inspired by, but not limited to, the approach in the Administration of Children, Youth, and Family's *The Programmer's Guide to Evaluation.*

TABLE 2.2 Program Participant Outcome Objectives

Participant Outcome Objectives Address:	Oceanside District Examples
What you expect to happen to your participants as a result of your program?	
Immediate Results: The expectations about the changes in a participant's knowledge, skill, intentions, attitudes, and/or perceptions, as well as behavior (when applicable) immediately after completion of the program.	**Immediate Results:** • Provide students with the necessary skills to resist social (peer) pressures to smoke, drink and use drugs; • Help them to develop greater self-esteem, self-mastery, and self-confidence; • Enable children to effectively cope with social anxiety; • Increase their knowledge of the immediate consequences of substance abuse; • Enhance cognitive and behavioral competency to reduce and prevent a variety of health risk behaviors; • Reduce vulnerability to pro-drug social influences.
Longer-term Outcomes: The changes in behavior anticipated to follow the immediate results. These can be reflected in rates of expected change, as stated in the district's established Priority Project Goals 2005 or for any time period in the interim such as the 1-Year Outcome Objectives.	**Longer-term outcomes:** • Decrease drug abuse risk by reducing intrapersonal motivations to use drugs • Cut tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana use 50%-75%. • Cut polydrug use up to 66%. • Decreases use of inhalants, narcotics, and hallucinogens

Participant outcome objectives

Objectives of this type address the anticipated changes in participant knowledge, skills, perceptions, attitudes, intentions, and/or behaviors that occur as a result of program implementation. Ultimately, anticipated changes in participants are reductions of ATOD use and violence among youth. The very nature of prevention programs is such that expected outcomes often do not occur immediately following program implementation. It may take months or years after program delivery before changes in participants' behavior come to fruition.

For the purpose of program evaluation, therefore, participant outcome objectives need to be separated into two types: (1) ones that occur immediately following the completion of the program and (2) those that occur in the longer-term[4]. (This will be discussed in greater detail in Step 1 of Designing a Data Collection Plan.)

TABLE 2.2   Program Participant Outcome Objectives

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[4] Discussion of outcome objectives as immediate and longer-term has been taken from Hawkins and Nederhood (1987), but is not limited to this source. Program outcomes may also be categorized into immediate, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. This would be suited for programs that have outcomes that can be clearly delineated into three such stages and distinctly measured as such. Use of a three stage categorization of program outcomes is best utilized for a program evaluation that can extend beyond a 1-year school timeframe. For more information see for example, McNamara (1999) *Basic Guide to Outcomes-Based Evaluation for Non-Profit Organizations with Very Limited Resources.*

✍ TASK   Outline Program Goals and Objectives

Using the preceding definitions as a guide, outline the program's goals and objectives based on the following suggestions:

1. State the mission (or overall goal) of the program.

2. Describe the overall program objective(s).

   Again, these are not the 1-year outcome objectives established in the grant application, but the overall agenda the program is designed to accomplish, i.e., teach children specific interpersonal skills providing them with the ability to say no to drugs in peer pressure situations.

3. List specific program implementation objectives.
   - What activities or curriculum or other services will be delivered?
   - For whom is the program designed?
   - Identify the target population for whom this program is designed;
   - In which school(s) is the program being administered?
   - Which students will participate?
   - How will the program be built into the existing school(s)?
   - Who will administer the program activities?
   - How will the program activities be administered?
   - What is the schedule of activities throughout the school year?
   - Other information relating to the planned implementation of the program

4. List immediate participant outcome objectives.

   These include what is expected to change in the participant's knowledge, skill, perceptions, attitudes, intentions, and/or behavior immediately after the completion of the program. These will be specific to the content of the prevention service delivered.

5. List longer-term anticipated outcomes of the program.

   These are the anticipated changes in behavior, perceptions, attitudes, and/or intentions some time after completion of the program. These are both specific to the content of the prevention service delivered and related to the corresponding 5-Year Goals of the district.

Worksheet 2.1
Defining the Key Aspects of Your Program

Mission statement: What does this program intend to accomplish?

_____

_____

Target Population: What are the important characteristics of the planned targeted population?

_____

Linking Program Processes to Participant Outcomes

What are the key targeted Risk or Protective Factors?	What specific implementation objective addresses the risk or protective factor listed?	What are the immediate outcomes expected? , I.e., skills gained, or change in intentions	What are the longer-term anticipated outcomes? i.e., 1 yr Program Outcome Objectives

Set The Scope Of The Evaluation Project

Begin to establish the scope of the evaluation project by setting goals for the evaluation itself. Decide what the evaluation team can achieve with this evaluation project; then, conceptualize what it will take to accomplish those goals.

⎙ TASK   *Set Specific Evaluation Goals For the District Evaluation Project*

The focus of the SDFS evaluation project in general centers on whether the programs currently in progress are working effectively within districts. District evaluation teams must focus on setting goals for the evaluation project that are specific to the circumstances within their own district. For example, if the program is a large one, a reasonable goal may be to evaluate only a single grade level of a multi-grade level program. If issues of program delivery are a major concern, then an appropriate goal would be to place emphasis on an evaluation of program implementation objectives. If the program happens to be in its first year of implementation, it would be appropriate to set a goal to establish a baseline of outcome information with which to compare future years' outcomes.

Use these questions as prompts to develop goals of the evaluation:

- What is the rationale for choosing this program to evaluate?

- What information would the SDFS Advisory Council, the School Board, the school administration, or other primary audiences, like to learn from this evaluation?

- What decisions do you want to make as a result of this evaluation?

- If it is a large program, do you want to document just one component of it?

- Which program objectives take priority in this evaluation project?

- Is there a particular component of the program that would benefit most from a careful examination?

NOTE

An evaluation project can have as many goals as necessary; however, too many goals will convolute the evaluation process. Each goal should clearly reflect what it is the evaluation team wants to learn.

Worksheet 2.2 Setting the Scope of your Evaluation Project	
Goal(s) of the Evaluation	**Reason for choosing this Goal**

✏ Task Envision the Major Aspects of The Evaluation Project

This is not the point to outline specific details of the evaluation plan. Rather, it is the time to conceptualize the entire process of the evaluation so that the evaluation team can assess available resources, time limitations, and effort involved in conducting the evaluation. It is time to get an idea of what evaluation strategies are feasible.

Important questions for the evaluation team to consider include:

- Which program activities can be examined that fit within the scope of your evaluation? For example, if you are evaluating only a single component of your program, what service or curriculum will you evaluate?

- How might evaluators examine these program activities? For example, would surveys best measure participant behaviors and attitudes? Would teacher interviews on program delivery provide additional relevant information?

- What types of information will be compared with your results: School disciplinary referral records, already existing state or county youth surveys?

- Who can responsibly collect information (data) for the evaluation project?

- Will information be collected from the entire target population or just a sample of them? What is the rationale for sample selection?

- Can you foresee any potential problems that might hinder the evaluation team's ability to accomplish the goals of the evaluation?

- What is the best way to report the findings in a useful way to your intended audience?

- How much time do you have to collect data?

NOTE

Again, do not try to outline the specific details of an evaluation plan here. The purpose is to envision the evaluation project as a whole from start to finish. As the evaluation team looks at its own situation, it will become apparent what can be realistically accomplished with the evaluation project.

Step 3

Develop General Evaluation Questions

General evaluation questions follow from the goals set for the evaluation process. For example, a general evaluation question regarding program implementation would be, 'Is the program being implemented with fidelity?'

There is no specific formula for writing evaluation questions. They must be asked in a manner that requires a response that can be accurately measured, analyzed, and reported. As a rule of thumb, avoid vague and complex evaluation questions. It is far more constructive to keep the scope of the evaluation project small and develop meaningful results than to try to accomplish too much and not do an adequate job.

TASK Review Previous Evaluation Research on the Same or Similar Programs.

Other evaluation studies will provide ideas on evaluation questions, data collection methods, and depth of analysis of findings. Check for previously published studies online or ask a resource librarian for help. If the program is produced commercially, contact the company directly for documentation on previous evaluations. (Also inquire about any evaluation kits or data collection tools available from the publisher?)

TASK: Ask Questions About Program Objectives That Are Relevant to the Goals of the Evaluation

Evaluation questions need to be concerned with how well program objectives were met. The program objectives under question must relate to, or fall within the scope of, the goals of the evaluation.

The number of general questions to be asked depends upon what the evaluation team deems to be efficient relative to the size and focus of the evaluation project.

If helpful, refer back to Worksheet 1.2 to review what it is that key stakeholders want to find out about the program. Link this information to specific program implementation objectives and participant outcome objectives as described in Step 1. Generate a list of questions from these two sources.

TABLE 2.3   Examples of General Questions

1. How does the LST program affect the health knowledge of 6th to 8th grade students towards tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs?

2. Is there any evidence of changes in behavior or attitudes towards tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs in 6th to 8th grade students who have participated in the LST program?

3. Do teachers follow the program implementation instructions as planned?

4. Do any variations in the original LST design plan such as targeted student population affect program outcomes?

✐ TASK   *Select Which Questions to Evaluate*

More than likely the evaluation team will come up with more questions than can be evaluated in this study. It is not feasible to address every question, no matter how significant. The evaluation team must decide which question(s) take priority.

Suggestions for selecting questions:

- Which stakeholder concerns do you want to satisfy?
- Who among your audience will make good use the evaluation information provided in the final report?
- Is there something about your program that is not being answered adequately elsewhere? Would the evaluation questions you select address that something?
- Would the information resulting from the selected evaluation questions be considered interesting?
- Will the resulting evaluation information contribute to new knowledge about the program?
- Do you have the resources available to answer the selected question adequately? Costs include labor, a reliable method of collection, a quality data source, adequately trained evaluation staff, etc.
- Do you have a sufficient amount of time to answer the selected question adequately?

Worksheet 2.3 Selected Evaluation Questions	
General Question(s)	Rationale for Evaluating this Question

🗒 TASK   *Note Questions Not Selected*

It is helpful to make a list of those questions that will not be evaluated[5]. Inevitably, at some point later in the evaluation, you will find yourself asking, "Why didn't we evaluate this?" Refer back to this list to remind yourself of your rationale.

Worksheet 2.4 Evaluation Questions Not Selected	
General Question(s)	**Rationale for Not Evaluating this Question**

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[5] Hawkins and Nederhood, p.9

Step 4

Write Specific Evaluation Questions

In order to plan a data collection procedure it is necessary to develop specific evaluation questions for each general question which will actually measure what is being asked.

TASK   *Develop at Least One Specific*
              Evaluation Question for Each
              General Question.

General evaluation questions need to be broken down into specific questions that ask for concrete evidence. Each specific question should specify an activity that can be clearly measured or observed, e.g., occurrence of fights on school grounds, self-reported attitudes about drug use, number of students completing the program. Specific evaluation questions are the basis of actual student surveys, teacher implementation questionnaires, and other forms or records that you may use to collect the desired information.

Often there is more than one type of evidence that will answer a general evaluation question. For example:

▶   When tracking the impact of the program on participants, evaluators may look at gains in skill, changes in attitudes, and/or changes in behavior. These are three distinct elements all of which indicate an answer to the same general evaluation question.

▶   When documenting the actual delivery of a specific program activity, evaluators may want to ask about teachers' training sessions prior to the program. In addition, specific questions can be asked about how teachers actually used the program curricula in the classroom. Both are distinct elements that are equally valid and important to the evaluation of program implementation.

Specific evaluation questions need to be written in a manner that points to only one distinct facet of change. For example:

▶ In a program that aims to reduce vulnerability to pro-social influences, asking students if they experience a positive change in their perceptions of drug-use after participation in the program examines just *one* facet of change within that program. Testing students knowledge about refusal skills is another.

Specific questions concerning implementation of program services can be stated in a manner that asks for a description. For example:

▶ A numerical count: How many students participated in a specific scheduled activity? How much time is actually spent on program curriculum in the classroom?

▶ A verbal account: In what settings is the program being offered? Which components of the program were actually implemented by each teacher? How did teachers actually implement program activities within their own classrooms?

Specific questions concerning program outcome objectives are usually phrased in a manner that establishes a relationship between some facet of the program and a desired change in outcome. For example:

▶ Is there a decline in fighting incidents?

▶ How does this decline compare with schools without the same program over the same period of time?

▶ What is the difference between students' knowledge of tobacco before and after program curriculum was taught?

Specific evaluation questions concerning program outcomes will reflect an inquiry into changes over time resulting from program participation, or an inquiry into the differences in changes over time because of age, gender, socio-economic status, or other characteristics.

TABLE 2.4   Examples of Measurable Questions

General Evaluation Question	Specific Evaluation Questions
1. How does the LST program affect the health knowledge of 6th to 8th grade students towards tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs?	1a. Do 8th grade students show significant improvement in knowledge about the detrimental effects of tobacco on individuals' health? 1b. Do students show a significant increase in knowledge about effects of alcohol on the central nervous system? (Student surveys might include specific knowledge questions about the risk of lung diseases, or blood-alcohol levels, etc.)
2. Is there any evidence of changes in behavior or attitudes towards tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs in 6th to 8th grade students who have participated in the LST program?	2a. Is there a significant decrease in the number of student participants who report using tobacco products? 2b. Is there any difference in attitudes concerning use of alcohol or other drugs. Between 6th, 7th, or 8th graders?
3. Do teachers follow the program implementation instructions as planned?	3a. Are teachers working within the timeframe recommended by the LST program instructions? 3b. Are teachers actually teaching the LST program curriculum as instructed in the teaching manual?
4. Do any variations in the original LST design plan such as targeted student population affect program outcomes?	4a. Are the students receiving the LST curriculum within the target age group? 4b. Do the students receiving the LST curriculum fall within the risk factors listed by the LST program?

Worksheet 2.5 Writing Your Specific Measurable Questions	
List your general evaluation questions here	**Write specific evaluation questions for each general question**

Select specific evaluation questions based on what you and other stakeholders want to find out. Follow the same list of considerations as given for selecting general evaluation questions in order to determine which specific evaluation questions to pursue.

Things To Remember

1. It is not necessary to construct a highly detailed description of your program. Listing the major program objectives should be enough to "kick start" the process of developing evaluation questions. As you develop your evaluation plan it will become evident which program objectives will require more attention to detail.

2. The goals of the evaluation reflect what the evaluation team wants to accomplish, which in turn reflects what the key stakeholders and other primary audience want and need to learn about the program.

3. Evaluation questions always need to relate to what key stakeholders and the primary audience wants to find out about the program as a result of the evaluation.

4. Delineate the goals of the evaluation clearly. The more clearly delineated, the easier it will be to write questions and formulate a design plan.

5. All evaluation questions must relate to how well the program is working in the school district.

6. Be prepared to refine specific evaluation questions as you work through the data design and collection phase of the evaluation project.