Participatory Evaluation: Factors to Consider When Involving Youth

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Abstract: This article provides a critical perspective on the increasing involvement of young people in participatory evaluation as well as identifies the factors to consider when designing a youth-led evaluation project. Through this avenue, young people will increase their participation in organizational development and community change. Youth-led evaluation can be a powerful tool for supporting youth to move beyond socially determined roles to become active participants in evaluation and their own growth.

Introduction

Youth participation in evaluation is an approach in which youth are active participants in defining the problem, gathering the information, and using the evaluation results. Initiatives like youth-led evaluation represent new roles for young people in organizations, allowing youth to challenge the traditional roles ascribed to them (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). To be successful, youth-led evaluation projects exhibit essential key elements, including understanding organizational readiness, conducting adequate training for youth and adults, providing support for youth and adults, selecting the right team, defining clear roles, and sustaining youth involvement (Horsch, Little, Smith, Goodyear, & Harris, 2002; Zeldin, O'Connor, & Camino, 2006).

Organizational Readiness

When considering youth-led evaluation, most non-profit administrators wrestle with issues such as the quality, protocol, and timelines when involving youth. In contrast, youth development organizations look at youth-led evaluation as an avenue to meet its mission of developing youth. To be receptive to youth-led evaluation, the culture within an organization must be ready to embrace and value a youth perspective (Horsch et al., 2002).

Training for Youth and Adults

Training is essential to the success of youth involvement in evaluation activities. According to Checkoway, Dobbie, and Richards-Schuster (2003), the type of training will differ depending on the roles assigned to its participants, the evaluation methodology being used, and the culture within the organization. With this in mind, the training should break down the evaluation process into concrete, manageable steps, helping participants to gain knowledge and skills to understand and implement the evaluation project. Team building and training on generational differences can enhance the success of an evaluation project (Horsch et al., 2002).

Support for Youth and Adults

Horsch and colleagues (2002) and Krasny and Doyle (2002) found a key element in youth-led evaluation projects is proving youth support from caring adults who value the talents and skills youth bring to the table. Adults need to be open to letting youth play new roles, allow youth to make decisions, and treat youth with respect as equal partners. While the support adults provide youth is critical, adults working with youth on evaluation projects also need support. Adults require coaching and training to help them understand and appreciate what youth bring to the table.

Pairing youth with an "expert" can lead to increased knowledge about evaluation and a greater level of credibility to evaluation work (Horsch et al., 2002). Youth and adults should meet regularly to provide feedback, guidance, and opportunities for reflection. These support methods add clarity and meaning to the experience for everyone (Alcoff, 1994; Goodyear, 2002; Schwandt, 1996; Zeldin, O'Connor, & Camino, 2006).

Selecting the Right Team

Another element of a successful program is selecting the right team. While selecting a diverse team can be difficult, it is essential to recruit youth and adults from different ethnicity, gender, income, and educational backgrounds. Projects need team members who have different perspectives and play a wide range of roles from providing leadership to creating the evaluation process and communicating results (Horsch et al., 2002). When recruiting, it's important to select adults who have a philosophy of youth empowerment. These adults share the same ideals as youth and are more likely to succeed with less effort because everyone's principles are aligned (Voakes, 2003).

Clear Roles

According to Zeldin, O'Connor, and Camino (2006), identifying clear roles is critical to meeting evaluation project goals. Traditionally, adults play roles such as initiating the project, recruiting or selecting youth to participate, and training the youth. Adults are an important link to the necessary resources for the project and advocates for youth involvement.

Youth should select evaluation roles that are appropriate to their level of development and expertise. Age, maturity, and level of independence should also be taken into consideration. For some, a gradual approach where youth are initially given well-defined tasks, like data collection, and gradually gain more responsibility, such as determining evaluation questions, is best. More complex jobs can be assumed by youth, depending on individual motivation, time, and ability (Horsch et al., 2002). According to Goodyear (2002), as youth show their competence throughout the evaluation process, the traditional power held by adults shifts, thus diminishing the differential power between youth, program stakeholders, and

decision-makers.

Sustaining Youth Involvement

Sustaining youth involvement can be a challenge because of busy schedules; however, several factors help sustain youth involvement. To promote sustainability, it's important to understand what motivates the participants and how they benefit (Krasny & Doyle, 2002). Using evaluation as a vehicle for change is a motivator for youth in seeing the results of their work in tangible and important ways. These results can be seen through program changes or adults willingness to listen and consider what youth have to say.

Developing close relationships among peers and adults is an important factor in building sustainability. Recognition can serve as a motivator to keep youth involved in a project. This type of validation can take the form of monetary compensation or other reward, use of results, presentation of findings to various audiences, travel to present or collect data, work with others, or service to the community. Offering youth an opportunity to gain skills, both practical and personal, helps sustain youth involvement (Horsch et al., 2002).

Summary

As organizations look to involve youth in evaluation projects, they must examine their organization's mission and culture. Non-profit professionals must realize that multiple priorities, including promoting youth development and measuring program impact, can be met through a youth-led evaluation. However, these priorities must be purposefully reviewed, assessed, and communicated to adult and youth members in order for the project to be successful.

On the front end, critical planning and laying the foundation must be considered when creating a positive organizational culture, selecting a diverse team, training the team, identifying clear roles for those involved, and setting up support systems so the team can thrive. Successful youth-engaged evaluation projects require youth participation as equal partners, encouraging empowerment. When youth add their perspective and voices to all phases of the process, they contribute to the validity of the evaluation.

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