Evaluation Toolkit

MODULE TWO

Evaluation Practice Guidelines

Resource Sharing Project

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INTRODUCTION

The first module in this toolkit shared the values that anchor our TA: trauma-informed, survivor-centered, anti-oppression and adult learning. This module introduces Evaluation Principles or "evaluation practice guidelines" as a tool for decision-making about evaluation design, implementation and use so that we can clearly communicate to others how we intend to translate these values into evaluation. Evaluation practice guidelines ensure that values don't stay at the level of belief but become actionable.

Evaluation practice guidelines are most effective when they reflect the culture of the organization they are meant to guide. Therefore, rather than having RSP develop a set of practice guidelines for all coalitions, the toolkit provides guidance on how individual coalitions can develop a set of practice guidelines on their own. Although the focus of this toolkit is on how we will evaluate TA, a set of practice guidelines for all our evaluation activities is a good idea. Having this tool in place enables those responsible for evaluation to make good decisions quickly, even if the situation is completely new.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICE GUIDELINES

One of the things impacting the creation of this toolkit was the recognition that there are many groups who do not hold power in research and evaluation. Historically, research and evaluation were not only done to groups without power but did harm.

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As a result, many people come to the evaluation table with current and historical distress resulting from

negligent and unethical research and evaluation experiences. Two well-known examples include The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment and the story of Henrietta Lacks. These experiences represent only two of the many times where researchers took the story from communities of color and benefited from it themselves. Although we would like to think that we have reconciled these experiences, we are far from it.

Evaluation practice guidelines are one way we can change this experience.

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The Belmont Report

Some of you may be aware of [The Belmont Report](). This report was commissioned in 1974 to describe basic ethical principles to guide any research that involved people. The Belmont Report came about because of the experiences like those on the previous page. The Belmont Report was intended to ensure that people who do not hold power are not forced into research or harmed by research and established rights and benefits for people participating in research. The [Office of Human Subjects Protections]() provides leadership to ensure the principles established under the Belmont Report are applied for research activities that fall under certain categories of research and for certain types of funding and organizations.

Evaluation and its Connection to Research

Evaluation is a type of research that often involves people, but because it is not focused on knowledge for knowledge's sake (i.e. generalizable knowledge). It falls under a different set of rules. Evaluation is focused on understanding the value of a specific set of activities for a specific group of people experiencing those activities under a certain set of conditions. Thus, evaluation is not governed as strictly by human subjects' protections as other forms of research. The ways in which evaluations often get designed, implemented and used sometimes makes them "exempt" (meaning there is minimal oversight) from the human subjects' process that ensures these protections.

On the one hand, this is good because it provides timely access to critical perspectives and learning that evaluation provides regardless of the wealth of an organization. (Human subjects review can be a lengthy and costly process.)

On the other hand, it means that, in many cases, we need to take accountability for ourselves to ensure that we are practicing evaluation that does not further harm the people we work to protect.

> *...in many cases, we need to take accountability for ourselves to ensure that we are practicing evaluation that does not further harm the people we work with.*

✎ The American Evaluation Association has adopted [The Guiding Principles of the American Evaluation Association](#) which provides professional guidance for the ethical conduct of evaluators at large. The principles are designed to cover a large field of practice and therefore reflect many, but not all, of the principles that guide our work.

Many organizations doing evaluation do not have a formal process for reviewing the risks and benefits of evaluation (and it is not required by law). However, some organizations do have an internal committee to provide oversight. There are training resources and tools available to help put these committees in place that range from internal policy guidelines to establishing a formal certified internal review board for all research activities including evaluation.

💬 It is important to note, in addition to ethical review guidelines, evaluation work supported by federal funds *may* be subject to the federal Paperwork Reduction Act. Coalitions should check in with their OVW Program Manager about any evaluation projects.

ESTABLISHING & IMPLEMENTING GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The AEA principles shared earlier in this module are driven largely by a standard that applies to the field of professional evaluators. Our evaluation practice guidelines need to reflect the norms and behaviors of those charged with the responsibility of leading our learning and evaluation work and take into consideration the available capacities and resources within a specific coalition. Although common guidelines can be adopted across groups, RSP and each coalition needs to reflect independently on which principles are most aligned with their own culture and resources and that of the programs and communities they serve.

It is also essential to develop a set of evaluation practice guidelines that are clear and consistent with the core values that guide the TA work.

The Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative developed these tenets to guide effective TA. These basic tenets can also serve to inform principles for evaluation and learning. The tenets are driven by the same values that guide our work.

The tenets are:

- Strengths-based
- Empowering
- Survivor-Centered
- Ethical
- Collaborative
- Culturally Relevant
- Responsive
- Flexible

Building the Practice Guidelines

Evaluation practice guidelines are not established overnight, and a coalition should expect there to be substantive debate around the principles. A first step to deciding on which principles will guide your TA evaluation and learning activities is to determine who and how you will engage various audiences in the process.

> *For learning and evaluation principles to be meaningful they must be developed by and for the people they affect*

Evaluation, as traditionally practiced by many mainstream programs, often assumes that people who don't do evaluation do not understand evaluation and therefore cannot help shape what good, ethical evaluation and learning practices look like. This is not true. For learning and evaluation principles to be meaningful they must be developed by and for the people they affect.

This will mean building in some time to establish a common vocabulary and shared understanding of what evaluation and learning look like within the context of technical assistance. This toolkit as well as the RSP's resource [Coalitions Role as Technical Assistance Provider](#) can help support those sets of activities.

Because evaluation and learning draw on multiple perspectives, it is important to create room for discussion of the principles that lends validity and credibility to these perspectives:

- Providers of technical assistance
- Users of technical assistance
- Leaders who develop technical assistance strategy

- Evaluation and communication team members
- Survivors
- Funders, policy makers and other stakeholders
- Other people that use or leverage your work

Practice guidelines define what evaluation actions coalitions will take and sets expectations that the programs we work with can hold us accountable to. We recommend that representatives from programs and communities help shape these guidelines.

A good starting conversation is around sharing of experiences, both positive and negative with evaluation, to help prioritize which practices matter most to communities. We used this simple reflection in our focus groups with coalition members in designing this toolkit:

Please share what your experience has been with evaluation:

- Things about it that excite you
- Things about it you don't like or just don't get
- Examples of where you have seen it used well or not

Testing the Practice Guidelines

The values behind coalition work do not assume that because a "type" of person is in the room that they represent the perspectives of everyone who identifies with that group. Once the practice guidelines are drafted, it is important to put them out there for comment and review.

Depending on the reach of your coalition, this may involve using several tools to gather input and feedback to refine the principles including focus groups, survey comments, one-on-one outreach and meetings.

There is no need to rush this process. Practice guidelines are intended to communicate how a coalition positions evaluation and learning within a values frame. It is okay to do evaluation while building the evaluation practice guidelines. Evaluate your evaluation! Feedback from evaluation is good input into how to further refine your practice guidelines.

The values behind coalition work do not assume that because a "type" of person is in the room that they represent the perspectives of everyone who identifies with that group.

Accountability to the Practice Guidelines

Like most tools, practice guidelines are only effective if they are used. Once the guidelines have been developed, resources will need to be directed towards communicating about the guidelines and monitoring its use. It is recommended that evaluation practice guidelines be visible with other TA resources and supports a coalition provides.

The guidelines are meant to be enduring, yes. They also need to be revisited and revised. We recommend that when the principles are approved, they include a plan for monitoring and annual review. There will need to be a core set of voices that determines the extent to which the principles:

- Are being practiced

- Continue to reflect the values and tenets of technical assistance

- Incorporate feedback and learning

A coalition may want to establish a point person to take primary responsibility for ensuring use and accountability including on-boarding and training new staff and other audiences on the principles.

We need to be open to having our norms and practices challenged, not just accepted at face value. This openness is part of living out our values. Although few coalitions have resources to establish their own review panels to oversee evaluation, establishing a committee or workgroup that involves coalition staff, users of programs, survivors and community members and organizations is a great way to ensure accountability but also a way for the community to see a coalition and its values presented in a new way.

CORE ELEMENTS OF GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Unfortunately, the use of practice guidelines is not as widespread in the field of evaluation as we would hope. As a result, there is not a standardized format or set of requirements to guide the development of evaluation practice guidelines. What is most important is that your coalition identifies its boundaries for evaluation and feels it can be accountable to the guidelines it sets forth. The principles a coalition chooses should grow out of the coalition existing ethics and values practice but be specific to behaviors and activities connected to evaluation practices.

Guidelines developed should be clear enough that no matter who within the organization is responsible for designing, implementing, interpreting or reporting on evaluation findings knows what is expected and can make decisions that protect anyone who could be harmed by evaluation activities.

Common core elements of practice guidelines include:

- **Evaluation Mindset** The philosophies and approaches that inform the types of evaluation methods that get used, what assumptions underpin the values of evaluation for the organization including how evaluation is viewed (e.g. tool for learning, performance improvement, demonstrating impact, motivating change, etc.), who is the "expert" in evaluation, how various interested groups are engaged in evaluation, etc.

- **Role of the evaluator** Identifies who within the coalition, by role(s), is responsible for knowing about and implementing evaluation and the ethics, norms and behaviors they are expected to bring to the evaluation process. Practice guidelines also typically outline the resources available to support building capacity in evaluators to ensure principles can be implemented.

- **Timing and types of evaluation** Identifies when evaluation is appropriate and expected as a regular course of work and what resources exist to support this expectation. This may help determine whether evaluation is used for everything within a coalition or triggered by a predefined criterion.

- **Data integrity and credibility** Reflects to a broader audience what constitutes data, how the coalition collects and stores data, who has access to that data, how long it is kept and where, and how identity for sensitive data is protected.

- **Action on evaluation** Describes how meaning is made from the data that gets collected, who informs that meaning making, and how evaluation findings will be reported and used.

- **Accountability and Transportability** Identifies a set of practices and protections to ensure the evaluation is not misused, including the ways in which it may benefit or hurt those involved.

EXAMPLES OF GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Practice guidelines for learning and evaluation supports good practice and provides clear communication and guidance to staff who do not have evaluation responsibilities as a primary role.

There are very few organizations who are intentional about calling out the principles and practices that ensure their values make their way into evaluation. However, we believe good practice guidelines are those that can be shared not only internally but externally, keeping us accountable to all audiences.

Here are a few samples of guiding principles designed to be shared with public-facing audiences. These examples guide both learning and evaluation.

🖉 [Essential Principles of Effective Evaluation](#) These principles were drafted by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. These principles are used to guide the structure and implementation of the evaluation for educators so they can improve practice.

🖉 [Evaluation Principles and Practices from the Hewlett Foundation](#) Pages 5-6 of a more comprehensive white paper show how Hewlett creates a common understanding and consistency around evaluation and learning.

🖉 [Guiding Principles for Evaluation at UNODC](#) These principles of evaluation are designed to guide the professional practice of evaluators who undertake evaluation activities of the United Nations Office of Drug and Crime.

🖉 [Innovations for Poverty Action CART Principles](#) Outlines four simple and clear guiding principles that balance evaluation for learning and measuring impact.