Recommendations in Evaluation

an Evaluation Café presentation by
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Western Michigan University

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Session Objective

To catalyze reflection, dialogue, and forward thinking about the WHY, WHAT, and HOW of making recommendations in evaluation
Continuum of Evaluative Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information is gathered through various means.</td>
<td>Data are cleaned, organized, transformed, and described.</td>
<td>Findings are synthesized and interpreted to reach conclusions about a program’s merit, worth, or significance.</td>
<td>Actions are proposed to improve program performance for consideration by stakeholders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An evaluation without recommendations is like a fish without a bicycle.

—M. Scriven
WHY (or WHY NOT) should evaluators make recommendations?

“The evaluator is an expert in systematically collecting, acquiring, synthesizing, and helping to value data. The evaluators are not necessarily expert in the content area of the program; many, if not most of the relevant stakeholders are.”

—Marvin Alkin, *Evaluation Essentials*
“Often, evaluators think they do not know enough to make specific recommendations—that their job is to collect data and to make a judgment based on it. But, the actions that should emerge from the report’s conclusions and judgments are often not immediately obvious to readers.”

—Jody Fitzpatrick, James Sanders, & Blaine Worthen, *Program Evaluation*

**WHAT** types of recommendations should evaluators make?
Types of Recommendations

- **FORMATIVE**
  Suggestions about actions to take to improve performance

- **SUMMATIVE**
  Suggestions about program expansion/contraction, continuation, cancellation

- **MINOR**
  Tweaks to implementation

- **MODERATE**
  Significant changes in goals, activities, or audiences

- **MAJOR**
  Changes that substantially impact funding, personnel, policy or service delivery

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An Alternative Classification of Types of Recommendations

1. Offer same program to new or wider clientele
2. Further research, more information, increased funding, or better communication
3. Address deficiencies (without specifying explicit action to be taken)
4. Change strategy or tactics
5. Change policy or program objectives

HOW should evaluators make recommendations?

Tips for Evaluation Recommendations
(Heavily influenced by Hendricks, 1990; and Patton, 2008)

Development
1. At the design stage, determine the nature of recommendations needed or expected.
2. Generate possible recommendations throughout the evaluation, not just at the end.
3. Base recommendations on evaluation findings and other credible sources.
4. Engage stakeholders in developing and/or reviewing recommendations prior to their finalization.
5. Focus recommendations on actions within the control of intended users.
6. Provide multiple options for achieving desired results.

Presentation
7. Clearly distinguish between findings and recommendations.
8. Write recommendations using clear and specific language.
9. Specify the justification/information sources for each recommendation.
10. Explain the costs, benefits, and challenges associated with implementing recommendations.
11. Exercise political and interpersonal sensitivity in the focus and wording of recommendations.
12. Categorize recommendations, such as by type, focus, timing, audience, and/or priority.

Follow-Up
13. Meet with stakeholders to review and discuss recommendations in their final form.
14. Provide tools to facilitate decision making and action planning around recommendations.
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**3. Base recommendations on evaluation findings and conclusions and other credible sources.**

Other (potentially) credible sources:
- evaluation RPF
- stakeholder
- project goals
- prior research/established criteria
- target audience needs
- logic models
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12. Organize recommendations, such as by type, focus, timing, audience, and/or priority.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Timing</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Priority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quick fixes</td>
<td>Evaluation question</td>
<td>Immediate</td>
<td>Type of participant</td>
<td>Critical/ must do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic changes</td>
<td>Program component</td>
<td>Near-term</td>
<td>Type of stakeholder</td>
<td>Important/ should do if possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Long-term</td>
<td></td>
<td>Desirable/ nice to do</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. At the design stage, determine the nature of recommendations needed or expected.

Ask key stakeholders:
- What do you hope to learn from the evaluation?
- What, if any, decisions will be influenced by the results?
- Should the evaluation include recommendations? If so, what type?

Excerpt from a Fictional RFP:

“Administrators will use the results to determine if the program should be continued into subsequent years. If the program is to be continued, they would like recommendations about how it could be improved with minimal additional resources.”
2. Generate possible recommendations throughout the evaluation, not just at the end.

- Ask stakeholders, *what will you do if the findings look like*...
- Identify potential recommendations, given the evaluation’s focus and data being collected.
- Keep a running list of observations/findings that may inform recommendations.

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**Recommendation Generation Framework**  
*(Inspired by Roberts-Gray, Buller, & Sparkman, 1987)*

**Evaluation Question 3: How effective is the program in terms of increasing the frequency of hand washing?**

- **Not at all effective**
  - Report results and explanation of why program did not improve hand washing
  - Recommend discontinuation of program, redesign based on research

- **Minimally effective**
  - Identify weak links, compare program with research on hand washing promotion
  - Recommend inexpensive strategies with strong evidence of effectiveness

- **Moderately effective**
  - Determine facilitators/impediments by comparing results across schools
  - Recommend strategies used at schools with especially good results

- **Highly effective**
  - Report results and lessons learned
  - Recommend continuation, offer ideas for continued improvement
4. Engage key stakeholders in developing or reviewing recommendations prior to finalization.

Discuss potential recommendations with stakeholders to ensure their viability in terms of
- **consistency** with their understanding of the program
- **relevance** in relation to program priorities
- **practicality** in light of available resources for implementation
- **conformity** to legal/ethical requirements
- **acceptability** to those affected

5. Focus recommendations on actions within control of intenders users.

**FORMATIVE**
Suggestions about actions to take to improve performance

**MINOR**
Tweaks to implementation

**MEDIUM**
Significant changes in goals, activities, or audiences

**SERVICE PROVIDERS**
Managers

**MANAGERS**
Administrators

**SUMMATIVE**
Suggestions about program expansion/contraction, continuation, cancellation

**MAJOR**
Changes substantially impact funding, personnel, policy or service delivery

**POLICYMAKERS**
Legislators

**DONORS**
6. Provide multiple options for achieving desired results.

- Options may vary by cost and difficulty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COST</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No/Low</td>
<td>Ensure proper placement of posters *</td>
<td>Assign a school-level campaign coordinator**</td>
<td>Create classroom or school-specific hand washing songs**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Use germ simulation lotion in hand washing lessons ***</td>
<td>Provide education sessions for parents*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Hire external organization to provide assemblies on hand hygiene and follow-up lessons ***</td>
<td>Develop grade-level science units on hygiene and disease transmission ***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Expected Improvement: ***Substantial  **Moderate  *Minimal
7. Clearly distinguish between findings and recommendations.

“The presence of crackers in your cupboard suggests you should prepare goat cheese-strawberry-and-balsamic appetizers this evening.”

“The data indicate a need for additional efforts to increase motivation for hand washing, such as a rewards system.”
Data usually **do not** speak for themselves

“The data indicate a need for additional efforts to increase motivation for hand washing, such as a rewards system.”

**Finding:** Students have generally achieved the learning objectives of the hand washing lessons, but this has not led to a substantial increase in the frequency of hand washing.

**Recommendation:** Experiment with a few different strategies to encourage behavior change, such as a rewards system, allowing more time for restroom breaks, and having schools create their own hand washing songs.
8. Write recommendations using clear and specific language.

Which actions are clear/specific?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>✔️</th>
<th>✗</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consider</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend to</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decide</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assist</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledge</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Be specific when a specific action is called for.

**Problem**
Website links to lesson plan materials are not functional.

**Recommendation**
Correct website links and assign a staff person to maintain the site.

Call for attention and a subsequent decision when a solution is not obvious.

**Problem**
Knowledge gains among lower elementary students are smaller than those of upper elementary students.

**Recommendation**
Review the lessons and tests to assess their grade-level appropriateness and determine if revisions are needed.

9. Specify the justification/information sources for each recommendation.
**Recommendation:** Designate a program coordinator at each school to ensure posters are properly placed and lessons are being delivered.

**Justification**
- Satisfactory implementation is a key factor in achieving both learning and behavior outcomes, as expressed by stakeholders and borne out by patterns in the data.
- Schools with local program coordinators had better implementation and larger increases in hand washing frequency.
- Our experience with similar programs, we have observed better outcomes when an individual is charged with program coordination.

10. Explain the potential costs, benefits, and challenges associated with implementing recommendations.
**Recommendation:** Add a demonstration of proper hand washing technique using germ simulation lotion and black lights to the hand washing lessons.

**Costs:** Simulated germ lotions costs $.11 per student per lesson; black light (one-time purchase) costs $10—can be shared across classrooms; no additional time needed

**Expected Improvement:** Three-fold increase in hand washing frequency

**Challenges:** Requires that all teachers receive guidance on how to deliver the lesson, as well as their commitment to doing so. May require some coordination to share use of black light across classrooms

**Justification:** Research shows this strategy to be highly effective in increasing the frequency and quality of hand washing (see Snow, White, and Kim, 2008)

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11. **Exercise interpersonal and political sensitivity in the focus and wording of recommendations.**

- Avoid “red flag” words, e.g., *failure, lack, incompetence*
- Don’t blame, embarrass
- Be respectful of cultural/organization values
"The district coordinator should inform all principals about the program at the first district-wide meeting of the school year. Every principal should receive written instructions with their materials packet. Subsequent meetings should include reminders about proper program implementation."

“Principals who have shown a lack of interest in the program should be made aware of its importance.”

Getting the Horse to Drink...
Consider

Decision

Act
13. Meet with stakeholders to review and discuss recommendations in their final form.

In-person meetings or teleconferences are critical to ensure stakeholders pay attention to recommendations.

14. Provide tools to facilitate decision making and action planning around recommendations.

- Record decisions
- Assign responsibilities
- Set deadlines
- Track progress

## UNDP Management Response Template

**Evaluation Recommendation 1:**

Management Response:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key action(s)</th>
<th>Time frame</th>
<th>Responsible unit(s)</th>
<th>Tracking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Comments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.1

1.2

1.3

1.1 Evaluator’s verbatim recommendation
1.2 Project’s response (re: perceived practicality, appropriateness)
1.3 Concrete actions to be implemented, articulated by project

Notes on progress
- Pending
- Initiated
- Completed

Who is responsible for implementation