As a senior analyst at NICHQ, I'm a huge proponent of evaluation. The reason is simple: projects may sound compelling and seem worthwhile, but it is hard to know if they actually achieve their goals without collecting data and conducting an evaluation. Evaluation data provides a window into whether, why and how programs achieve their goals. Evaluation is also essential to ensure that limited resources are utilized most efficiently for the greatest possible impact.

Still need convincing? Here are five reasons why evaluation matters to your project and how to get it done.

1. You learn how to optimize for success and discover the story behind the results

Evaluators ask three over-arching questions at the start, middle and end of the project:

1. What happened?
2. Why? (the story behind what happened)
3. Why do these results matter and what’s next?

During the planning phase, the evaluation focuses on understanding how to optimally design the project to best meet its goals. During the implementation phase, the evaluation seeks to understand how the initiative is taking shape, where there is early progress and how to maximize the ongoing success of the project. At the close of a project, the evaluation assesses the extent to which project aims were met and identifies circumstances that led to both high and low levels of success. Evaluation also probes throughout for important unintended consequences of the work (e.g., a program designed to promote child car seat usage also motivates parents to use safety belts for themselves.) All of this together helps to tell the full project story.

2. Evaluation paves the way to project improvements

In a typical learning collaborative, teams collect data to monitor progress and test change, which is certainly critical for improvement. While improvement advisors for those projects consider the big picture collaborative-wide, they don’t typically focus on the underlying circumstances of what’s happening and don’t usually make recommendations for project enhancements. In contrast, evaluation is research to inform decisions—an opportunity to push for adaptations and mid-course corrections that will maximize success. Evaluation results benefit the immediate project as well as enhance future initiatives with lessons learned.

3. Every voice counts

Each and every person’s perspective is essential and can be very telling for the project as a whole. Participants’ feedback highlights areas of traction and areas that warrant further attention and specifics of what they need for the greatest success. This input can directly lead to improved levels of communication, logistical support, access to experts, guidance for using project resources, webinar offerings and much more. Also, the more people who respond to a survey, the more accurate the results will be. So please answer the next survey that comes your way since every voice does matter!

4. One size does not fit all

Evaluation can take many shapes. For example, evaluators may collect primary data from a variety of stakeholders via written survey, individual interviews and/or focus group discussions. Evaluators sometimes ask for written reflections in the form of a narrative or conduct in-depth case studies with select teams. In addition, evaluations often include analysis of secondary data such as written team work, progress of data submission and extent of online activity. Evaluations frequently include both quantitative and qualitative data.

5. DIY evaluation is possible

Although a full blown evaluation may be difficult, and external evaluators may not be in your budget, a project team can look for opportunities to weave evaluation into other activities. For
example, consider adding a question or two onto another survey you may be fielding for a different purpose. Or, if you are planning discussions about roles and responsibilities, consider adding a probe about what has worked well and what might work even better.

Rachel Levine is a senior analyst at NICHQ.