



EVALUATIVE THINKING

2. EVALUATIVE THINKING IN ORGANIZATIONS

What is Evaluative Thinking?

Evaluative Thinking was defined by former REP partners who participated in the ETHOS project as a type of reflective practice that incorporated use of systematically collected data to inform organizational actions. Key components of *evaluative thinking* include:

- Asking questions of substance and determining what data are needed to address the questions
- Gathering appropriate data in systematic ways
- Analyzing data and sharing results
- Developing strategies to act on evaluation findings

Evaluative thinking can be applied to many organizational functions (e.g., mission development, HR decision-making, communications/marketing) in addition to program development and delivery.

Using the EVALUATIVE THINKING ASSESSMENT TOOL to assess Evaluative Thinking

The Evaluative Thinking Assessment tool was created in 2005 by Bruner Foundation evaluation consultants and representatives from 12 non-profit organizations in Rochester, New York to assess the extent to which evaluative thinking is present in various organizational capacity areas. The tool grew out of the Bruner Foundation's Evaluative Thinking in Organizations Study (ETHOS). Since that time, the tool has been revised (spring 2007) and automated and more than 30 organizations have used it to help identify evaluative thinking strengths and needs. For more information about ETHOS and/or to obtain an electronic, self-scoring version of the tool, a meeting planning guide, and action planning guide please see the Bruner website (www.brunerfoundation.org).

The tool was developed by the original ETHOS partners after a review of multiple organizational assessment tools. It specifically focuses on indicators of evaluative thinking for a critical subset of organizational capacities.

Evaluative Thinking Assessment Tool Organizational Capacity Areas		
★ Mission	★ Fund Development	★ Technology Acquisition & Training
★ Strategic Planning	★ Evaluation	★ Staff Development
★ Governance	★ Program Development	★ Human Resources
★ Finance	★ Client Relationships	★ Business Venture Development
★ Leadership	★ Communication & Marketing	★ Alliances and Collaborations

The purpose of the Evaluative Thinking Assessment tool is to help organization's obtain data about and discuss evaluative thinking in multiple organizational areas. The tool was designed to be used with multiple respondents in each organization so that varied perspectives, knowledge of and experiences with evaluative thinking could be obtained. Prospective users of the tool are encouraged to collect and summarize the evaluative thinking assessment data in a group which includes multiple stakeholders such as the executive director, representatives from upper and mid level management, line staff, representatives from the board of directors and others as appropriate. The tool can also be used by a single knowledgeable stakeholder such as the Executive Director, or a small group charged with assessing and helping to enhance organizational Evaluative Thinking.

This bulletin was developed by Anita Baker with Beth Bruner to help organizations integrate evaluative thinking into their organizational practice. After a successful effort to help organizations build evaluation capacity (see www.brunerfoundation.org for more information about REP 1996-2003), the Bruner Foundation has been working to help organizations use that capacity in other management areas. The Foundation continues pursuing its strong belief that using evaluation skills, specifically identifying key questions of substance, determining what data are needed to answer questions, gathering appropriate data in systematic ways, analyzing data, sharing results, and developing strategies to act on evaluation findings, is valuable in everyday work of organizations. The contents of this bulletin were influenced by the non-profit organizations in Rochester that are former REP partners and ongoing consumers of these efforts, as well as by the work of Michael Quinn Patton, Paul Connolly, Paul Light, and Peter York, and the many others who thoughtfully add to the evaluation and organizational capacity-building literature.



EVALUATIVE THINKING

What Should the Evaluative Thinking Assessment Tool be Used For?

The Evaluative Thinking Assessment tool includes multiple questions (indicators of Evaluative Thinking) in 15 different organizational capacity areas (see list above). For each item on the assessment tool, a respondent reports, based on his/her own knowledge or familiarity, whether an indicator of evaluative thinking is present or not. **Summarizing the evaluative thinking assessment data for a group of respondents helps an organization recognize whether and to what extent it is incorporating specific evaluative thinking strategies into the agency's work, and in which organizational areas.**

Example: Evaluative Thinking Data Collection, Leadership

LEADERSHIP	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know	Priority
a. Executive leaders support and value program evaluation and evaluative thinking.				
b. Plans for executive leadership succession include attention to evaluation – the new executive leader is expected to value and be knowledgeable about evaluation.				
c. Executive leaders use evaluation findings in decision-making for the organization.				
d. Executive leaders educate staff about the value of evaluation.				
e. Program decisions are based in part on program evaluation results.				
f. Executive leaders motivate staff to regularly use specific evaluation strategies.				
g. Executive leaders modify the organizational structure as needed to embrace change in response to evaluation findings.				
h. Executive leaders foster use of technology to support evaluation and evaluative thinking				
i. Management uses data to set staff goals and evaluate staff performance				
j. Plans for management succession include attention to evaluation – new managers are expected to value evaluation and where possible are knowledgeable about evaluation.				
k. Staffing decisions are based on data.				

The electronic, self-scoring version includes a copy of all the assessment items as well as a guide for developing an action plan in response to the results. It can be downloaded free of charge from the Bruner Foundation website (www.brunerfoundation.org).



EVALUATIVE THINKING

Evaluative Thinking and Organization Mission

A mission statement is an organization's vision translated into written form. It makes concrete, key stakeholders' views of the direction and purpose of the organization. A mission statement is generally a short and concise statement of goals and priorities that clarifies the overall purpose of the organization. An organization that regularly uses Evaluative Thinking will:

- Develop a clear and concise mission statement that tells people what the organization does and who it serves.
- Have a mission statement specific enough to provide a basis for developing goals and objectives for programs and other actions.
- Will insure that there is alignment between the mission and the work of the organization.
- Apply the mission to influence the work of the organization.
- Discuss and review the mission with staff and the board of directors and insure that they know or can describe the mission
- Review and revise the mission statement on a scheduled basis (e.g. annually)

Regularly assess the compatibility between programs and mission and act on the findings of those assessments (in other words, if a program is not compatible with the mission, it will be changed or discontinued)

Evaluative Thinking and Strategic Planning

Evaluative Thinking, as well as the results of specific evaluations, can inform an organization's strategic planning. Planning of any kind is an indicator that Evaluative Thinking is in use. When an organization undertakes strategic planning it develops long-term (typically 3 – 10 year) plans based on the organization's overall objectives. Strategic planning helps an organization project how it will operate, what services will be provided, and what new directions will be pursued. The focus of a strategic plan is usually the entire organization.

What should your organization do to integrate Evaluative Thinking into Strategic Planning?

FIRST: Use the four key components of evaluative thinking when generating a plan (ask questions, gather data, analyze data/share results, USE the results of analysis to inform the strategic plan). An organization that regularly uses Evaluative Thinking will: have a written (i.e., official) plan, will develop goals and objectives and will have a formal process for developing the plan.

SECOND: Use evaluation skills such as interviewing, surveying and working with stakeholders to gather input from multiple sources. Good strategic plans reflect accurate perceptions of environmental factors, risk, and rewards, and the ideas of many stakeholders.

THIRD: Strategic plans have a short shelf-life and in fact too often don't represent what is actual/current organizational practice. Additionally, the process of strategic planning can become perfunctory with the focus on completing the plan rather than making it useful. An organization that regularly uses Evaluative Thinking will: assess its plan(s) regularly and with the involvement of multiple stakeholders, AND, it will use the strategic plan as a road-map to inform organizational decision-making.



EVALUATIVE THINKING

Evaluative Thinking and Program Development

A core activity of organization is service delivery through programs. It is critical for an organization to think carefully about how best to develop programs and to assess what happens as programs are delivered. An organization that regularly uses Evaluative Thinking will:

- Identify gaps in community services before planning new programs; assess the needs of the target population as part of program planning process and then use data from needs assessments and/or gaps analyses inform planning.
- Incorporate findings from program evaluation into the program planning process.
- Involve program staff, clients where appropriate, Executive leaders and fund development personnel in developing and revising program plans.
- Develop written program plans including a logic model or some logical formulation of each program.
- Follow program plans where possible and insure that there are strategies in place to modify program plans if needed. Develop correction strategies if a program plan is not being followed.

Evaluative Thinking and Client Interaction

When an organization regularly uses Evaluative Thinking:

- Client needs assessments are conducted regularly (annually or more often as needed).
- Program services reflect client needs.
- Clients have meaningful involvement in the process of program development
- Client satisfaction is regularly assessed (annually or at program conclusion) and the results of client outcome assessments and client satisfaction are used in development of new programs.

Organizations commonly fall into two traps regarding client interaction 1) they design program based on what funders want for clients or what the organization “thinks” is best and 2) they collect but never carefully analyze client satisfaction data. Findings from systematically collected data about the results of similar programs can be truly informative as new programs are designed. Organizations that have incorporated an Evaluative Thinking approach will always include that kind of information in their planning process. Don’t forget that clients don’t have to “like” a program or be happy all the time for it to be a successful program, but they can often weigh in significantly about what worked and what didn’t. At a minimum resist collecting client satisfaction data simply because you can’t imagine not collecting it. If you take the time to ask for clients’ responses to the program, be sure to use what they say.



EVALUATIVE THINKING

Evaluative Thinking and Fund Development

Two key ways that organizations raise money are through **Fund Raising** activities such as benefits or campaigns, and **Fund Development** actions such as responding to RFPs for grants and contracts. An organization that regularly uses Evaluative Thinking will:

- Develop a written fund raising plan with the input of staff, executive leaders and the board of directors. The fund raising plan will be in sync with the organizational mission and leaders/staff will insure that it is regularly assessed and revised as needed.
- Assess the potential and actual costs and benefits of all fund raising events and activities and use those assessments to inform decision-making regarding whether to undertake them currently or in the future.
- With executive leaders, staff and board members, conduct research on potential fund development opportunities (grants and contracts), assess which to pursue, and summarize those assessments into a plan which specifies projected fund development strategies (including which types of grants and contracts not to pursue).
- Involve program staff (as appropriate) in the writing of grant proposals, particularly sections on program design and outcomes. Regularly assess the financial status of the organization.

What Can Organizational Leaders do to Enhance Evaluative Thinking?

- ⇒ Educate staff about Evaluative Thinking. Be clear about what it means to take an evaluative approach – i.e., to ask important questions before decisions are made, to systematically collect and analyze data to inform decisions, to share results of findings in response to those important questions, and to base responses in large part on the results of analyses.
- ⇒ Set the stage for others by using Evaluative Thinking in your own practice and perpetuating an organizational interest in it. For example, host meetings where key concepts are discussed and staff members are provided with opportunities to clarify how evaluative thinking might work in different organizational efforts. Share this guide and customize the list of Evaluative Thinking questions to ask to match your organization's profile.
- ⇒ Conduct an evaluative thinking assessment (see the ETA tools on the Bruner Foundation website), share results of the assessment, and then use the information to develop an action plan to help the organization become more evaluative.
- ⇒ Conduct follow-up assessments as needed and especially after trying strategies to increase use of Evaluative Thinking. Be as inclusive as possible – the most valuable assessments depend on multiple perspectives.



EVALUATIVE THINKING

How to Use These Bulletins

The *Integrating Evaluative Thinking Bulletins* were developed in response to the continuing need expressed by nonprofit partners to clarify **how** to enhance evaluative thinking and put enhanced evaluation capacity to work. The bulletins are intended to do the following:

- Clarify what evaluative thinking is, why it is important, and who can do it.
- Provide direction regarding the use of the Bruner Foundation's Evaluative Thinking Assessment Tool to inform action plans that will enhance evaluative thinking.
- Describe additional ways that evaluation strategies can be used internally to increase evaluative thinking (e.g., evaluating the effectiveness of staff development efforts or collaborative ventures).
- Help organizations think about creative ways to present and use evaluation findings.
- Provide practical advice on how to hone analytical skills, and use Evaluative Thinking when making decisions about standard organizational procedures including governance, mission development, strategic planning, fund development, leadership, technology, human relations, staff development, alliances and business ventures.

There are 11 individual *Integrating Evaluative Thinking Bulletins* including this edition. They cover the following topics: evaluation basics and definitions, evaluative thinking basics and assessment of evaluative thinking, evaluation and nonprofit boards, commissioning evaluation, collecting, analyzing and using evaluation data, communicating about evaluation, evaluation and technology, evaluation and HR, evaluation and alliances, increasing participation in evaluation and sustaining evaluative thinking. Each bulletin is brief and replete with practical suggestions made by nonprofit partners who reviewed the work (including some very specific pointers highlighted in yellow). A complete set of all Bulletins, as well as other complementary tools and resources are available via the Bruner Foundation website, www.brunerfoundation.org. We encourage all users of the bulletins to:

- Familiarize (or re-familiarize) yourself with basic information about evaluation capacity.
- Orient yourself regarding the Bruner Foundation's Evaluative Thinking Assessment Tool and conduct preliminary assessment in your organization.
- Develop action plans informed by the suggestions found in the bulletins.
- Implement action plans to enhance Evaluative Thinking in your organization.
- Use these specific bulletins as reference materials when needed.
- Visit the Bruner Foundation website Effectiveness Initiatives pages (www.Brunerfoundation.org), to familiarize yourself with the history behind this effort and to access the tools and resources available there.

**** These materials are for the benefit of any 501©3 organization and may be used in whole or part provided that credit be given to the Bruner Foundation. They may NOT be sold or redistributed in whole or part for a profit.**