Understanding the Evaluation Function and Process

T here are many reasons to evaluate leadership development. If you are reading this book, you have probably already decided that you are interested in evaluating leadership development, and a significant portion of this book is designed to help uncover the purposes specific to your situation. We thought it would be helpful to share with you some of the common reasons people evaluate leadership development efforts (Hannum, Martineau, & Reinelt, 2007, p. 8):

- To demonstrate more fully how participants, their organization, and communities do or might benefit from their leadership development program experiences

- To fine-tune a proposed or existing leadership development intervention so that it has farther reach and might better meet its goals

- To show how participation in leadership development experiences connects to such visions as improving organizational performance or changing society for the better

- To promote use of learning-centered reflection as a central evaluation activity

- To pinpoint what leadership competencies are most appropriate in particular settings

- To encourage more comprehensive discussion about what works and why

Evaluators come from a variety of educational and professional backgrounds. Research and evaluation are often seen as involving the same tasks and skill sets. However, while the two can be very similar, there are important distinctions. Evaluation traditionally focuses on determining the quality, effectiveness, or value of something, while research seeks to understand relationships among variables or describe phenomena on its way to developing knowledge that can be generalized and applied. When possible, it is good to seek someone who has extensive evaluation experience and training that is relevant to the context in which the leadership development program is operating.

In general, evaluators can be classified as either internal evaluators or external evaluators. Internal evaluators are part of the program, organization, or community in which they conduct evaluations. External evaluators are hired from outside the program, organization, or community in which leadership development is taking place to conduct the evaluation. Internal evaluators usually have the benefit of a deep understanding of the context of the program and evaluation. They may also have developed credibility and trusting relationships enabling them to gather data that is more relevant and candid than data gathered by an outsider. However, because they are part of the organization or group they are evaluating, internal evaluators may be seen as biased and may also take aspects of the context or initiative for granted when an external evaluator would probe more deeply and challenge assumptions. External evaluators have the benefit of being able to ask questions that might seem naïve for an internal evaluator to ask. External evaluators may also seem more objective and less biased to stakeholders. If an evaluation requires asking sensitive questions, an external evaluator may be a better choice because individuals may be more willing to share that information confidentially with someone from outside. However, external evaluators may not fully understand the context of an initiative and evaluation, and may therefore be less sensitive to potentially offensive language or make recommendations or choose approaches that are less relevant.

If at all possible, a combination of internal and external evaluators brings the best of both roles to the evaluation—their strengths complement each other. If funding is not sufficient for both and only internal evaluators are used, another strategy is to use an external evaluator as an advisor for certain parts of the evaluation. Doing so will cost less than using an external evaluator to conduct the evaluation, but it will provide some of the credibility that is sometimes more

likely to be associated with external perspectives. Note that we are not suggesting that internal evaluators lack credibility—just that some organizations place a value on external perspectives that should be considered.

If you are pursuing an internal evaluation approach, but do not have individuals trained in evaluation, consider investing in training for those selected or volunteering to conduct evaluation. There are many colleges and universities that offer courses in evaluation as well as evaluation groups that offer workshops. If money is not available for courses or workshops, then you may want to build a small library, or at least purchase a book, to help build evaluation capacity. Hallie Preskill and Darlene Russ-Eft's book *Building Evaluation Capacity: 72 Activities for Teaching and Training* (2004) is a practical choice. Another way to build capacity is to start an evaluation learning group. The group could meet to discuss shared reading on evaluation and/or to help each other think through evaluation issues.

If you've decided on using an external evaluator but aren't sure where to locate one, the web page for the American Evaluation Association (www.eval.org) includes a search function to locate evaluators. Many, although not all, of the evaluators listed on the site are located in the United States. Other professional evaluation associations also have searchable lists of evaluators. A list of evaluation associations and their websites is available in the list of resources on pages 117–128.

Once you have identified an evaluator or group of evaluators, an important consideration is being clear about role expectations. Evaluators can play many roles. This list below (Hannum, Martineau, & Reinelt, 2007, pp. 8–9) outlines some of the more common roles played by evaluators. These roles are not mutually exclusive; an evaluator can play a combination of roles, as well as play different roles over the course of an evaluation. It is important to understand what the evaluator and those working with the evaluator are expecting in terms of the role the evaluator will play.

- *Assessor.* Evaluators assess the value and quality of a leadership development program or intervention in order to determine whether it has achieved its desired outcomes without doing harm or provided a valuable return on investment.

- *Planner and designer.* Evaluators assist stakeholders in using evaluation findings and processes to improve and sometimes to design a new program or

intervention. They also engage designers to identify what outcomes are desired, what will demonstrate success, and what program elements will contribute to or cause these outcomes.

- *Trainer and capacity builder.* Evaluators educate stakeholders so that they might design, implement, and use evaluation effectively. Often this is done by facilitating gatherings in which stakeholders participate in the evaluation process and learn how to use evaluation tools.

- *Translator and boundary spanner.* Evaluators cross boundaries to listen to and search for multiple perspectives and interpretations. As they move back and forth across boundaries, evaluators carry perspectives and findings with them and share those with the other groups in ways that those groups can hear and understand.

- *Advocate.* Evaluators present evaluation findings in public forums that are intended to influence decisions about a program, policy direction, or allocation of resources. Evaluators can give voice to ideas, perspectives, and knowledge that normally go unheard or unknown because the groups that espouse them are ignored by groups with more resources and power. Evaluators advocate for taking the time and investing the resources to reflect, inquire, study, and assess programs and interventions because this process increases the likelihood of success and impact. In their role as advocates, evaluators may find that they are asked to modify or couch their findings in ways that will have positive results for a particular audience. Evaluators have an ethical obligation to do their best to maintain the integrity of the evaluation.

- *Reflective practitioner.* Evaluators learn from their own thoughts, reactions, and experiences through a systematic process of interaction, inquiry, and reflection.

THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF THE EVALUATION PROCESS

Developmental initiatives often link different kinds of learning opportunities and occur over a period of time. They also link back to the efforts of an organization, community, or larger group so that individual development is connected to larger goals in a cycle of assessment, practice, and learning. We argue that the results of such initiatives are best measured with an evaluation process that is itself

cyclical—not isolated in its methods or defined by discrete points in time. Recognizing the cyclical nature of evaluations allows those involved to use them as planning and learning tools that augment the individual and group impact of leadership development.

Change is the norm, and evaluation can be a tool for enhancing and dispersing learning amid what can be seen as continuous transition. This approach creates a fluid process for evaluating leadership development initiatives while enhancing individual, group, organizational, community, or collective learning, rather than creating a measurement system designed solely to create valid results (Preskill & Torres, 1999). It requires groups to think about creating or modifying structures and systems in order to incorporate evaluation more deeply into the culture. CCL has based its framework on the approach described by Preskill and Torres (1999), with some modifications in terminology to reflect its focus on leadership development.

THE CONTEXT FOR EVALUATION

Because people have different worldviews and value systems, appropriate data gathering, synthesis, and interpretation require more than applying a set of tools. To be relevant and useful, data collection, analysis, and dissemination strategies need to "take into account potential cultural and linguistic barriers; include a reexamination of established evaluation measures for cultural appropriateness; and/or incorporate creative strategies for ensuring culturally competent analysis and creative dissemination of findings to diverse audiences" (Inouye, Cao Yu, & Adefuin, 2005, p. 6). Practicing culturally competent evaluation involves understanding how history, culture, and place shape ways of knowing and the ways in which knowledge is used. If you are working in a culturally diverse context (and most of us are), it is important to examine and understand how cultural differences may influence or impact leadership development and the evaluation of leadership development (see, for example, Chapters 12 and 13 of *The Handbook of Leadership Development Evaluation* (Hannum, Martineau, & Reinelt, 2007), as well as publications available on the California Endowment website: www.calendow.org or www.calendow.org/evaluation/reports.stm (such as www.calendow.org/evaluation/pdf/OverviewBook.pdf).

THE FRAMEWORK USED IN THIS BOOK

The first phase of our framework, focusing the evaluation, includes learning and planning activities that guide evaluators and others toward results that are relevant and beneficial (see Chapter 2). Activities that focus an evaluation include the following: identifying stakeholders for the initiative and for the evaluation, determining the purpose of the initiative and the evaluation, identifying the resources available, determining the level and type of impact, surfacing expectations, and drafting evaluation questions and potential data-collection methods. Ideally, evaluators conduct these activities in conjunction with the design or implementation of the initiative. The complexity of contexts and cultures combined with the complexity of developing leaders requires processes to help stakeholders develop a common understanding of issues, purposes, and roles. Combining the design phases of the evaluation and the initiative helps ensure the utility and efficiency of both processes. As you focus your evaluation, this combination will help you ask the appropriate people the right questions. At the end of this phase, you will have developed your evaluation strategy.

Once the focusing activities are complete, the next phase is designing and conducting the evaluation, covered in Chapter 3. In this phase, evaluators and key stakeholders design and apply the evaluation plan. Measuring and interpreting degrees of change are complex endeavors. It's at this stage that you will address research design considerations such as using multiple data-collection techniques. To manage the evaluation project's complexity, you can use the information stakeholders have provided during the focusing stage to explore the benefits, drawbacks, and caveats associated with different evaluation techniques.

The final phase in the cycle, communicating and using evaluation findings (see Chapter 4), is often overlooked. Typically, the results of the evaluation are compiled and reported by the evaluation team, which includes evaluators and key stakeholders (supporters, staff, and participants, for example), and this team may also make preliminary recommendations for action. Our position is that learning and action are the ultimate goals of a well-conceived and professionally produced evaluation. Delivering a report with recommended actions isn't enough to realize that goal. Implementing and monitoring the action plan that arises from your evaluation help ensure that such learning will take place.