EXCHANGE

Two Techniques for Program Evaluation

by Victor J. Ross

How does one evaluate a program? How do you find out whether what should be happening is really happening? There are many methods, of course, and here are two specific activities any child care administrator can put in an evaluation plan that will provide data and information to use in assessing program effectiveness, in separating theory from practice in your organization. Each one focuses on program, but each one can be modified and given other applications.

The Shadow Study

You may be too young to remember that old radio program "The Shadow," where every Sunday afternoon the hero Lamont Cranston made himself invisible in order to find out "what evil lurks in the hearts of men." Don't laugh. You won't be invisible as you conduct a shadow study, but the idea is the same.

The purpose is to find out what is really happening in your program, and whether or not it matches what should be going on. As Fenwick English (research director for Peat, Marwick, and Mitchell) pointed out, if you visit the high school physics class and expect to see a demonstration on Browning Motion, but find the teacher showing slides of the Superstition Mountains taken on his recent Arizona vacation, you see the "real curriculum," not the planned curriculum. It's good to know about it when there is an obvious difference. A shadow study reveals even more—it can show you how children are faring in your program.

To conduct a shadow study, all you need to do is select a child's name at random, and find a day when you can set aside your normal duties for at least three hours. Simply "shadow" that child, taking notes about his or her day. Do what the child does; go where the child goes—on the playground, to story time, to lunch. Try to imagine that you really are that child.

What happens during the period of observation? How often is the child involved in an activity? Not involved? Who speaks to the child—teachers, peers, neither, both? How often? Positively? Negatively? Not at all? What was the child supposed to learn? Was there evidence that learning occurred? Why or why not?

You get the idea. At the end of the observation, go back to your office and —alone, with no interruptions—write up in detail what you observed. Don't editorialize. Write it as though you were a news reporter. Then read it over. Now it is all right to set down your summary remarks and opinions as the final section of the written shadow study report.

Did the child have the kinds of experiences you expected and planned for in your program? If yes, how can you best share this positive news with staff? If no, what can you do about it? How? When?

The results of a shadow study can be very satisfying or very shocking, but in either case they'll assist you in your job of evaluation.

The Needs Assessment

For this one, the administrator is required to select a representative number of people (again, random selection is recommended), and invite them to participate in a needs assessment conference. The parents and staff members should be represented, and the group ought to number at least 12, but it can be as large as 200. The larger the better, but it depends on your operation. If you serve 50 children, for example, an assessment conference of 12 persons is adequate.

Schedule the conference for an evening or a half-day on Saturday, whichever you deem best. Plan for four persons at a table, and provide them with two large sheets of butcher paper, felt-tip pens, and 50 to 100 3 x 5 note cards. Plenty of coffee and rolls or cookies should also be included.

When your group has assembled, explain why they were invited, and that their task is to help you assess and plan overall improvements for your total operation. Then turn on the overhead projector (or put the question on the chalkboard), and give them 40 minutes to react to this question: "What are the things that are keeping our center from doing the job it should for children?"

Before they begin writing answers to this question on the butcher paper at their table, make it clear that no one at the session is to criticize someone else's suggestion. They are to write down everyone's ideas, brainstorming fashion, regardless of how crazy someone may consider a suggestion to be.

Also, advise them to keep the focus on problems. Solutions will be considered later. Let them go to work. Be assured they will. Have no doubts!

After about 40 minutes, stop all the groups and have them exchange their butcher papers with another group. Direct them as follows: "Read each suggestion from the other group, write comments or questions in the margins if you wish, and then —as a group— give each idea a number value: 5 if your table thinks it is an excellent thought, 4 for very good, and so on down to a 1 if you think it is a poor idea or irrelevant."

Allow about 15 to 20 minutes for this operation, and then repeat the exchange with a third table. As soon as the third round is complete, have the papers returned to the first group—the ones who originated them—and give these directions: "Look over your original suggestions and the other groups' reactions to them. Some will show agreement, but on others you may find that folks didn't see it your way about a suggestion. Discuss them again in your group if you wish. Then take each idea and put it on a separate 3 x 5 note card, writing it clearly so anyone can understand the concern. Place the two value ratings from the other tables at the top of the card and add your own. There will be three value numbers for each idea.

As each card is finished, have it brought to a central table and put it in an appropriate category. Some sample categories: Teacher attitudes; Communications; Discipline; Budget; Transportation.

When this phase is finished, take a break, and then introduce the same process, only the second time you begin with this basic question: "What are the things our school does that are good for children?"

For this one the participants cannot only identify what they like, but they can also be invited to suggest solutions to earlier identified problems, so long as they are positive solutions.

When you've finished—the entire process generally takes about three and a half hours—you will have more than 100 specific suggestions and ideas about your overall program, both positive and negative, from the people you serve and the people who deliver the program.

Each idea will have a point value total, so you can rank order them and determine relative importance. Some ideas will come from more than one table, and all you need to do is combine them and their point totals, and you readily see what is really considered important.

With this kind of data, you can evaluate what you're doing well, what are problems, and begin to consider solutions. It's from this data that you can develop goals for improvement.

The final bonus will be that those who participated will have a tremendously positive attitude about the process and your openness in involving them.

Victor J. Ross is assistant superintendent for instruction with Bettendorf (Iowa) Schools, and author of Fair Game, a novel on high school education (ETC Publications—in press).