

High Impact Strategies, by Jim Masters

One dimension of a high impact strategy is that you can prove it that is high impact, i.e. you can validate the results. This proof typically includes some kind of cost-benefit description -- how much did a unit of benefit (however defined) cost you in terms of money or other resources. In order to prove or validate that a strategy produces beneficial results for individuals, families, a neighborhood, or a community, you need: (1) a definition of what constitutes being better off, i.e. having results and impact measures, (2) the ability to measure the results against a starting point or a baseline, and (3) to make judgments about what those results mean usually through comparison with other approaches. You can compare your results against:

- (a) ideal 'industry standards' or performance standards for that strategy,
- (b) the results from similar agencies that operate the same strategy,
- (c) the results of other types of strategies that seek the same outcome, and
- (d) what you had planned e.g. planned versus actual,
- (e) trends over time, e.g. are the results getting better over a 3 or 5 year period.

Another element of proof is -- don't make big mistakes. For example NEVER use social indicators like the unemployment rate or poverty rate to assess the effectiveness of your programs or agency. The United Way and HEW tried this in the 1970's and it failed. There are way too many uncontrollable factors in social indicators.

One way to determine the degree of impact is through a formal evaluation. Using an outside evaluator lends credibility. Remember that Congressman George Miller used a handful of small-scale evaluations of the WIC program (about \$20,000 each in about 5 cities) to 'prove' that every dollar invested in WIC produces several dollars worth of health benefits and savings in the future. And Head Start has been riding the Perry Preschool Study for decades. Hook up with a local college; professors like to have their students help with evaluations. This is a good use of some of the discretionary money in your state. One credible evaluation can be used in many places -- in the legislature, with funders and with the press.

There are two basic kinds of evaluation designs, quasi-experimental and experimental. One quasi-experimental approach is to do a **before and after** comparison, i.e. to measure people at the start of the program to establish a baseline and measure them again at the end of the program. Are they better off as a result of participating in your program? In what ways -- and by how much?

Another question is -- are they better off than a similar group who did not participate in your program? This helps clarify how much of the change can be attributed to your program and how much would have happened anyhow. For example, our economic system is very dynamic. About 25% of the workforce churn out of and back into jobs every year, so it is a challenge to figure out if our program is making a difference in terms of people obtaining employment -- or are we just along for the ride? We can

compare what happened to our program participants to what happened **to a similar group** who did not participate. Compare your family development participants in terms of employment or any other variables with a group of similar families from WX or your transportation program who did not receive the family development services. (You need at least 30 families in each group. And to wind up with 30 after a year has passed -- you better start with 40 or 50 in each group.)

The most rigorous form of comparison is the experimental design -- to start with a group with similar characteristics and assign some at random to the program and some at random to a control group that does not receive services. Most of the evaluations that the Manpower Demonstration Results Corporation www.mdrc.org has done on AFDC and now TANF were done using an **experimental design**. There is no magic wand here. An experimental design takes 2 or 3 years to complete. To learn how to do experimental and quasi-experimental designs, get the evaluation pamphlet that Dr. Elaine Ader wrote for CSA from www.cencomfut.com You should also subscribe to the Harvard Family Research Project's free evaluation periodical, The Evaluation Exchange. <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval.html>

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