FINAL ADVICE
ON SOME FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Here are three frequently asked questions about evaluating staff development programs from Taking Measure readers, followed by my final advice.

FAQ #1: I’ve been talking for nearly a decade about the need to get serious about systematically evaluating our programs. I just realized that I’ve mainly been talking to myself or to my fellow staff developers. No one in the district can take on another challenge, so everyone avoids the topic. What am I doing wrong?

Most staff development leaders can empathize with that frustration. Despite where we all might have hoped the topic would be in 2006, the immediate challenge in most organizations is not how to evaluate staff development programs well, but how to introduce the topic in a positive way. Try two different approaches to move beyond talking to yourself. In terms of effort, these two suggestions are at the opposite ends of the continuum.

My first suggestion takes both expertise and effort: Take action yourself and make this topic real. The concept of program evaluation is obtuse and unreal to many people. Despite talk among staff developers over the past decade, most educators outside of our circle still do not understand it. Many educators see program evaluation as an artificial set of activities to please funders or as busy work of the worst kind — time-consuming, messy, and confusing, to be avoided if at all possible. Many educators peripherally involved in staff development hope for an easy, coloring book-style evaluation that can be filled in quickly so they can move on. Because the topic is so abstract, you can help as a change facilitator by making the concept of program evaluation concrete and real.

Experiment with a program evaluation effort on your own so that others can observe what you are modeling. If you have a specific program to be evaluated, you can begin there. If not, work collaboratively with another district leader who needs to evaluate a special program. As you launch this first effort, model the best evaluation practices you have learned. Demonstrate how you wish others would do it, including sharing interim results along the way. Emphasize the lessons learned so others can see that the evaluation is useful and not just another headache.

My second suggestion: Offer to facilitate a study group or series of informal seminars for those who show interest in program evaluation. A collegial setting with individuals who actually need the information can be an ideal, almost effortless way to begin building a critical mass of people who understand the power of doing good program evaluation.

Depending on your collegial group’s motivation and background knowledge, you can achieve various positive outcomes. At a minimum, participants can emerge with broader and deeper knowledge of the topic that can lead them to ask the hard questions about the programs they lead. Or group members could become collaborators who support and inspire each other to tackle program evaluation.

Armed with their expanded knowledge, your study group also could morph into a steering committee to guide learning program evaluation in your district.

Your role in the seminar or study group likely will need to go beyond merely facilitating the discussions. You may need to serve as the in-house resource for information, journal articles, and evaluation models.

FAQ #2: What’s the point of evaluating a staff development program that I know is basically bad staff development?

Don’t waste meager program evaluation resources underscoring the errors of a program that didn’t do what it was supposed to do. The program already has taken more than its share of resources, and the reasons for its failure probably are complicated and numerous. You might find it useful to use a project notebook to reflect and record the critical incidents of the project’s life to serve as lessons for future efforts. Now move on.

Next time, design staff development programs in phases. Phase I, Phase II, Phase III each should have specific milestones to guide the activities. The original plan, whether you inherited it from your predecessor or developed it yourself in a time crunch, often is less effective than you had hoped. Most plans need revision, so that the next phase of the program benefits from those painful, costly early mistakes.

Instead of watching a poorly conceived program use
limited resources with no chance of reaching the intended results, end this phase of the program’s life. Reconceptualize the program. Use the lessons learned from Phase I to make Phase II better. As part of planning for the next phase, develop a good program evaluation design. Rather than waiting for “oopses” — the plan’s obvious or even subtle weaknesses — to occur, institute a results-driven practice of evaluating the draft of any staff development plan on paper before the program is initiated. Level 0 evaluations, as I call them, often have people other than those who developed the original plan systematically scrutinize the draft to offer a different perspective (see Taking Measure in the Spring 2004 JSD).

FAQ #3: I have read about program evaluation for years, but I still don’t feel competent to conduct any real evaluation of professional development. Where can I learn more?

Knowledge, both broader and deeper, along with hands-on experience can help you develop the confidence you need to think like a good program evaluator. Try this five-prong learning plan:

1) Target NSDC Annual Conference sessions in which presenters tell how they conducted a major program evaluation. If the session impresses you with the evaluation practices and tools used, network and ask questions.

2) Hire a capable program evaluation company to help you develop and implement an evaluation. Investigate the company carefully to find one that can do the kind of work you need. Many companies do studies that are qualitative or descriptive. Few are able to help with quantitative studies, and even fewer can do the work and produce the written reports that you may need. Instead of just turning over the project to the pros, look over their shoulders to learn how they think.

3) Attend training in the return on investment (ROI) model of evaluation offered by the American Society of Training and Development. Although you may not want to use the ROI approach, you will deepen your knowledge and learn to think like an evaluator.

4) Take a university course on specific measurement techniques or tools of interest to you. You may find courses in various departments, such as anthropology, engineering, statistics, or marketing.

5) Read journals geared to the corporate and business worlds, such as Training magazine and Training and Development. These periodicals publish articles on best practices in program evaluation in companies such as Federal Express, Motorola, and top hospitals.

THIS IS MY FINAL TAKING MEASURE COLUMN

Retirement beckons. It’s been an honor and pleasure for me to write Taking Measure and the earlier column, Skill Shop, for JSD since 1999. I wish you all breakthroughs or at least good success in your efforts to improve staff development program results through more thoughtful program evaluation. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s advice on living seems to fit here: “Finish every day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; begin it well and serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your nonsense.”