8.3 Harvesting Learnings and Adapting Your Work

The main purpose of evaluation is to inform future work. However, that rarely happens on its own. Like most learning, it helps to be intentional.

SHARING INFORMATION WITH COLLEAGUES AND PARTNERS

Often, one person or a small team is in charge of collecting and analyzing data, but a larger group is tasked with making decisions based on the results. In such cases, it's important to be thoughtful about what data is shared and how that is done. Presenting too little can leave your partners questioning the value of the evaluation effort or lacking enough context to make decisions. Too much information can leave partners feeling overwhelmed and unsure about what is truly important.

To get started, it can be helpful to think back to your original learning questions that guided your data collection (see Section 8.1: Approaching Evaluation with a Learning Mindset). Consider what data will help answer those questions, and pull that specific information from your qualitative and quantitative studies. For example, if your learning question was about barriers to action and you have action rates and a handful of landowner interviews, consider looking at action rates related to each intervention and pulling one or two quotes from landowners who did and did not take the action. These quotes should be illustrative of the reasons that most felt they could or couldn't take the action. Similarly, If your learning question was about the effectiveness of a how-to workshop, the number of attendees is less important than their post-workshop evaluations of the workshop, your six-month follow-up with them checking in about how things are going, and any new questions they have.

See the box below for more tips on how to organize and present evaluation data so that your colleagues can absorb it and use it to make good decisions.

REPORTING EVALUATION RESULTS TO COLLEAGUES AND PARTNERS

- Use a format that aids in learning and decision-making; consider a webinar, one-page executive summary, or a PowerPoint presentation. Consider creating tailored reports for different stakeholder groups, if their roles (administrator, leadership, investor) and the data they need are different.
- Front-load the report with information most relevant to inform decision-making.
- Include enough data and background to be transparent about your methods and limitations, but remember that an evaluation report is not a scientific report and does not need to include all the data you collected.
- Ensure ideas and decisions are recorded and referenced when planning future projects.
- Include questions that lead your partners to reflect on the data and arrive at their own conclusions and recommendations. Allow time for the group to discuss questions such as the following:
  - What findings surprise you?
  - What findings will be most useful as you make decisions? (This will also give you insights into what information is valuable to collect in the future.)
  - What new questions do the findings raise for you?
  - With this information, how might we do our work differently?
- Encourage your partners to ask their own "what if" questions and challenge assumptions.

USING EVALUATION DATA

One of the biggest benefits of evaluation is that it helps you prioritize where to invest resources in future interventions or supports for landowners. For example, if indicators show that not enough people are receiving your message, you'll know to change or step up your outreach activities. If enough people are being reached but they are not taking the desired actions, then you should revisit your message strategy or the action you're asking people to take. And finally, if people are taking the recommended actions but you're not seeing the expected impacts on the land, then it is time to take a hard look at the desirability of the recommended action or explore other factors that might be affecting your conservation goals.

In particular, tracking landowners as they progress along the Ladder of Engagement (see Section 2.2: From Project Goals to Landowner Actions) allows you to identify barriers and bottlenecks along the way. When you identify a step that landowners often aren't taking, you can focus additional evaluation efforts there to understand barriers to action and possible solutions to these barriers. For example, if you know that you are reaching plenty of landowners with your outreach message, and getting a sufficient number to invite you for a consultation on their land, but you see that few of them are completing the work you recommend, you could put some of your evaluation effort into figuring out why not. Is it that they don't believe your recommendations are tailored for them? Is it that they don't have the skills to do the work themselves? Are they unsure of how to hire someone to do the work? Or did they simply forget?

With this additional information, you can adapt your programming to focus on the supports that are most needed—e.g., building trust, hosting how-to workshops, providing guidelines on choosing qualified contractors, or sending email reminders that say, "October is the perfect time to cut and treat your honeysuckle." You don't have to remove every barrier for every landowner, but you can conduct a survey or several interviews to find the one or two supports that will facilitate action by more landowners.

Use your learning questions to think about how to analyze evaluation data to yield useful, usable information. And remember to make the time and space for your partners to reflect on this information and what it means for your work.

TRACKING LANDOWNER RESPONSE ACROSS CAMPAIGNS

The usefulness of evaluation data is multiplied many times over when you combine your tracking across different outreach efforts and programs over time. Collecting data on the landowners in your project area over time can help you see cumulative progress across different outreach efforts, and understand how to approach different landowners more effectively in the future.

For example, let's say your goal is to increase the number of acres being sustainably managed within a given landscape. This will require multiple touches over time, with different campaigns to different landowner types who are at different stages of readiness for action. Knowing that a postcard about improving turkey hunting got a 15 percent response rate, or that a workshop about how to hire a forester resulted in 25 follow-up phone calls, helps you evaluate each of these efforts individually but doesn't say much about the progress you're making on your landscape goal.

The solution is to use a database or tracking system that includes all the landowners touched by your various campaigns and then monitor their engagement over time. With this, you can see how landowners are progressing along the Ladder of Engagement (see Section 2.2: From Project Goals to Landowner Actions) and calculate useful metrics, such as:

- Across all outreach mechanisms (e.g., direct mail, workshops, and fair booths), we have contacted 500 unique landowners in the region, accounting for 20,000 acres.
- 40% of these landowners have been contacted two or more times.
- 30% have requested management plans.
- 10% have conducted some management activity on their land, cumulatively affecting 2,500 acres.

The information in your database gives you valuable information about actions landowners are taking, how engaged they are with you, and who might be prepared to take the next step. It can also help you to get a sense for a trajectory of action that you can then compare with the Ladder of Engagement that you thought was most typical. Armed with this data, you can make informed decisions about where to focus your efforts next (e.g., should you try to reach an entirely new audience, reach non-responders with a different message or action, or continue to follow up with responders and move them to the next step?).

It also tells you which landowners responded to which campaigns and messages. This allows you to reference the same landowner or family to see how you have reached out to them in the past, and what sort of outreach or programming engaged them. It also helps you to see patterns—for example, families with young kids tend to like weekend events over week-day; or landowners with smaller acreages tend to respond well to do-it-yourself programming. If you have any landowner data (such as acreage size, education level, age, memberships in partner organizations, or absenteeism), you can compare responders and non-responders to see if there are any factors that seem to make a difference. This information can help you tailor future efforts. If you're getting data that doesn't quite make sense to you, it may be time to conduct a few informational interviews or small focus groups to understand what's going on.

Over time, this kind of database-level information can help you establish benchmarks for your work. As an example, let's say that you know from past efforts that 25 percent of the people who request additional information take the next step of hiring a contractor. This year, if 100 people request additional information, you have a good indication of how many will take action. Moreover, if your expectations don't match with what you see, you can look into the reasons why you got an exceptionally high or low follow-through.

Finally, a database can also help you maintain communication with your audience (e.g., through a newsletter or website), to keep a relationship with them even if you aren't asking them to take any immediate steps.