Which Outcomes: Developing Consensus among Stakeholders

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We talk a lot about how critical it is to identify outcomes that are important to our stakeholders. And sometimes we talk about how to figure that out. One popular strategy these days is to use some kind of focus group. There also are other well researched techniques that may be more informative and may produce more socially valid outcomes. In fact, the outcomes that have endured as the core of the Pressley Ridge program evaluation project were identified using a method called the nominal group technique (NGT) (Delbecq & Van de Ven, 1971). NGT and some other techniques have been demonstrated to have utility for assessing priorities as determined by participation and cooperation by groups of people. The techniques are briefly described with illustrations. A more complete description can be found in Criste, Fabry and Blase (1981).

Nominal Group Technique

In essence, NGT is a structured meeting that attempts to provide an orderly mechanism for obtaining quality input from a group of individuals who are familiar with a particular area, are consumers of a particular service, or are experts in a particular area. The first step is silent generation of ideas. The group is presented with a question like, □what outcomes are important to you?□ Without discussion, each member spends a few minutes silently and independently writing as many options as possible. At this step the individuals are members of a group in name only, a nominal group. The second step is a round robin presentation of ideas. For this step the participants take turns presenting their ideas one at a time with each being written verbatim for the group to see. This taking of turns continues without discussion until all ideas have been exhausted. The output to this point is the total set of ideas created by the group. Research has demonstrated that these two steps produce the greatest number of novel ideas. The next step is open discussion. Each item is discussed for the purpose of clarification, elaboration and evaluation. Discussion occurs as in any interacting group meeting. The fourth step is a secret vote. Each participant, without interacting with others, selects and/or rank orders, say, the 7 to 10 most important items on the total list. The group decision is the pooled outcome of the individual votes. The discussion and secret vote steps can be repeated for multiple iterations until acceptable levels of group consensus are obtained. When we used this technique our participants identified four areas in which measurement of outcomes was important for programs serving troubled and troubling kids in out-of-home placements: where kids were living (restrictiveness of living environment), where kids were working or going to school (restrictiveness of education/work environment), how they played (negative social behaviors), and how they felt about their lives (satisfaction).

Delphi Technique

The Delphi technique was developed by Dalkey and Helmer (1963) and is conceptually similar to NGT. Rather than use actual groups of people, it uses anonymous responses to questionnaires. The first Delphi questionnaire is developed relative to a key issue and is distributed to individuals who have expertise, experience, perceptions, or perhaps a vested interest in the issue of concern. When the questionnaires are returned the responses are □content

analyzed to determine homogenous responses and to remove redundancy. A second questionnaire is then distributed to obtain additional suggestions and determine areas of agreement and disagreement by importance ratings. When disagreements occur, new questionnaires are be repeatedly sent out until acceptable levels of group consensus are obtained. We used this process to develop the restrictiveness of living scale we have used to quantify answers to our "where do kids live a year later" question (Hawkins, Almeida & Fabry, 1992). The scale provides a rank ordered exhaustive list of 26 categories of places kids could live as agreed upon by the participants.

Critical Incident Technique (CIT)

The critical incident technique uses actual groups similar to NGT, but tends to produce behaviorally more specific responses from participants. CIT was developed by Flanagan (1954) and refined by Borman and Dunnette (1975) to develop behaviorally anchored rating scales. A group is assembled to write specific behavioral episodes that illustrate both effective and ineffective critical incidents related to a chosen issue. The written vignettes are then qualitatively clustered into categories and tentative definitions are written for each category. A second meeting is then held for the purpose of reviewing the categories and definitions and generating additional critical incidents both for moderate and extreme levels of performance. The categories and definitions are refined and behavioral incidents edited to remove redundancy. A third meeting is held in which the participants sort each incident into the category that it most closely represents. Each incident then is rated on the degree of effective or ineffective performance that it represents relative to the category in which it was grouped. Incidents for which consensus was obtained are retained as defining anchors for the categories.

Involving stakeholders has been considered critical to identifying which outcomes to measure. The three techniques summarized here provide strategies that have been refined just for this purpose. The techniques lead groups to produce a wide variety of ideas and then achieve consensus on the most important ones. The only trick left is how to identify who ought to be the stakeholders.

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