



Peel Region
Evaluation Platform

Understanding Developmental Evaluation

Developmental Evaluation is about evaluation processes, including asking evaluative questions and applying evaluation logic, to support program, staff and/or organizational development. The evaluator is part of a team whose members collaborate to conceptualize, design and test new approaches in a long-term, ongoing process of continuous improvement, adaptation and intentional change.

The evaluator's primary function is to elucidate team discussions with evaluative questions, data and logic, and facilitate data-based decision-making in the developmental process. Developmental evaluation is about rigorous inquiry for development. It's being intentional about using data in a meaningful way to inform innovation in progress. The product or result of a successful developmental evaluation process is informed changes to what is being evaluated. (Michael Quinn Patton, 2010)

Three key features of a Developmental Evaluation:

1. Framing the issue

Social innovators are mobilized by a powerful sense that something needs to change. They may have a new perspective on a historically stubborn issue, or may see, in a new way, the intersection between multiple issues. As innovators work on these issues, their understanding moves from a vague understanding to increased clarity. New learning may cause a shift in thinking which prompts another cycle of uncertainty and clarification. Developmental evaluation supports innovators in the conceptualization and articulation of the problem, by helping to frame the issue and its dynamics.

2. Testing quick iterations

Many people who develop and deliver social programs naturally experiment. New ways of doing something are tried, often based on feedback loops and perspective about changing needs and demands, which can lead to improvements. Developmental evaluation brings a measure of rigour to the learning generated from these experiments. As new programs roll out, leaders intuitively make observations and refinements. Developmental evaluation is intended to make visible the intuitive and the tacit. Applying developmental evaluation means being more systematic about subjecting relevant data and observations to interpretation and judgment.

3. Tracking the trajectory of the innovation

A standard characteristic of problem solving is that once the problem solver experiences the "eureka moment," the path to the solution seems obvious. Key insights about how something was successfully accomplished are often inaccessible, which doesn't help the next person trying to solve a similar problem, or the original innovator in trying to apply the learning process in other situations.

Developmental evaluation records the roads not taken, unintended consequences, incremental adjustments, tensions and sudden opportunities. The tracking reveals what it takes to create something new, which serves two purposes: 1) it makes the decision making along this path more transparent and 2) it generates valuable data useful for dissemination. Such documentation also supports accountability while allowing for a high degree of flexibility.

Source: J W McConnell Foundation: <https://mccconnellfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/A-Developmental-Evaluation-Primer-EN.pdf>

