# the interpretation workshop

## a collaborative approach to data interpretation in program evaluations

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### Purpose

The purpose of an interpretation workshop is to bring multiple stakeholder perspectives to bear on the interpretation of data in a program evaluation. This approach deepens collective understanding of the data, clarifies the conclusions, generates actionable recommendations, and ignites the ownership needed to implement them. The guide below is written for the person who will facilitate the workshop.

### Participants

Participants include the primary intended users of the evaluation, with the aim of engaging a broad range of relevant expertise and perspectives around the table (e.g., program administrators, front-line staff, board members, partners, funders, and representative program participants). This approach is designed for 10-15 people, though it can be adapted for smaller or larger groups, as well.

### Advance Preparation

About a week before the workshop, participants receive the results of the data collection to review in advance as a springboard for the workshop. This can be a brief, focused report of interim data, or a larger final data summary depending on the type of stage of the evaluation being conducted. To avoid influencing the participants, the evaluator's preliminary thoughts on emerging conclusions and recommendations are not included in the review material.

### Process

The interpretation workshop is adapted from the Consensus Workshop Method[1], and guides participants through objective, reflective, interpretive, and decisional conversations around the data. The basic flow looks like this:

**Step 1: Introduce and Engage All Voices (15–30 minutes)**

Because all voices at the table are given equal value in this process, it is important to prepare an opening activity that not only introduces the participants, but also engages each participant in speaking and reflecting aloud. This is also the time to orient the group to the overall aims and process of the workshop.

**Step 2. Review the Data Together (45–60 minutes)**

The assumption is that everyone has read the report in advance, so this is intended as a high-level discussion of the data, rather than a nitty-gritty walkthrough. Two good questions to get the conversation started: What piece of information stood out to you the most in the report? What did you find most surprising? In this step, it important to give each participant the opportunity to respond in a go-around, to clear up any confusion about the data set, and to address emotional responses and gut-reactions to the data. This helps set the stage for reaching consensus together about the meaning of the data.

**Step 3. Interpret the Data (45–60 minutes per evaluation question)**

The overarching evaluation questions provide the frame for this step, and it is cleanest to repeat steps 3 and 4 for each evaluation question rather than addressing the questions all at once. There are several parts to this step:

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[1] Stanfield, *The Workshop Book*, 2002.

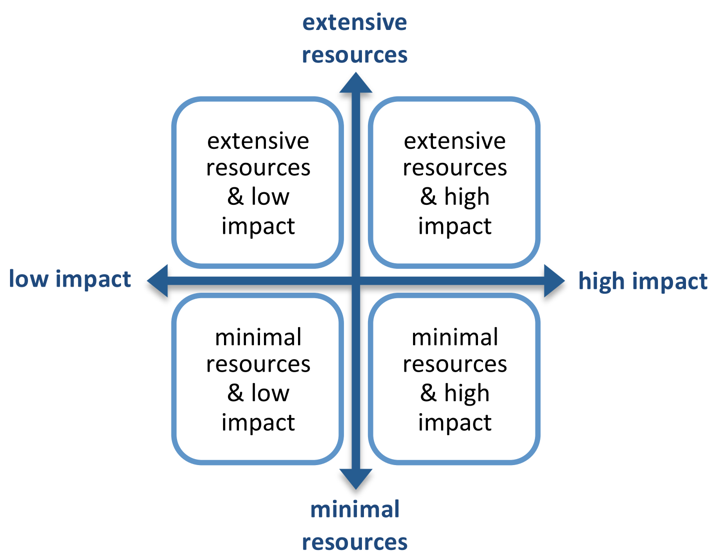
- Post the evaluation question for the group, read it aloud, and ask for clarifying questions to ensure that everyone is on the same page about its meaning.
- Invite participants individually to brainstorm 5–8 concrete responses to the evaluation question Allow fewer responses for very large groups, or it gets hard to manage the volume of answers.
- Ask them to turn to a partner, discuss their lists together, and identify their joint top 5 responses to the evaluation question, narrowing down their combined list. Ask them to consider which responses are best supported by the data.
- Have the duos write their top 5 answers on big sticky notes (6 x 8 inches). It's clearest to write in printed upper case letters, large enough to be read from a distance, and in simple, concise statements. Three guidelines: one idea per sheet, write big, and about 7-10 words per sheet.
- The next step involves posting the collective answers and organizing them into emerging themes. Start by inviting each team to hand you the sheets with the two responses that they feel are most clearly supported by the data—assure the group that all 5 of their ideas will be shared in this process. Read each sheet aloud as you place it on the wall. As the ideas begin to accumulate, ask the group to identify which sheets share a common theme or conclusion, and begin to create clusters of sheets.
- Work through all of the ideas in this way, until you have everyone's top 5 ideas posted and clustered. There is a tendency to see similarities and collapse everything together, so use clarifying and probing questions (or even just push back a little) to help the group draw distinctions between ideas and clusters, as needed. At the end of this process, there is sometimes an idea or two that just doesn't fit with a cluster, and that's okay—if the group feels that the idea is important to keep, just leave it up as it's own category.

**Step 4. Articulate the Conclusions (15–20 minutes per evaluation question)**
Now it's time to name the clusters and, in doing so, articulate conclusions that are being drawn by the group.

- Remind the group that the conclusions should be worded as direct responses to the research question under consideration. Start by re-reading aloud each sheet in the cluster, and ask: What conclusion statement might encompass these responses? If wordsmithing becomes tricky for a particular cluster, take note of the key words and phrases suggested, and move on to the next cluster. You can return to this cluster later, or ask a small team to work on that one during a break and share back with the group. It's important to keep the momentum going in this step.
- Once the draft conclusions are up for a particular research question, ask the group to briefly identify where they see each conclusion supported in the data. This will provide some insight in preparation for Step 6, when the evaluator rechecks the data to for confirming and disconfirming evidence for the conclusions after the meeting (see below).
- Repeat steps 3 and 4 for additional research questions, as needed.

**Step 5. Develop a Set of Working Recommendations (45–60 minutes)**
With the conclusions drafted for all of the research questions, the group can now engage in a preliminary discussion of the implications for the program. This can be done using the same brainstorming/naming process in Steps 3 and 4, or through a more traditional discussion using chart paper to document the recommendations that emerge. (Note: This step may also be done with a smaller subset of program leaders in a subsequent meeting, if desired.)

- Ask the participants: Based on these draft conclusions, what changes would strengthen the program design? What changes would improve implementation? Where do we need more information or analysis in order to draw a conclusion? Ensure that all voices continue to be encouraged and engaged around the table, as some may defer to authority figures in this step.
- Once the recommendations are drafted, it is valuable to take a first pass at prioritizing them. For example, the group can use a 4-quadrant method on chart paper, in which the x axis is "Impact on Program Outcomes" and the y axis is "Resource Requirements (e.g., time, money, staff)" (see figure below). Reinforce the understanding that this is a *preliminary* set of recommendations and priorities that will be confirmed based on a final comb through the data.




**Step 6. Confirm the Conclusions and Recommendations**
Sometimes Step 5 gets the group so fired up that they are ready to charge ahead with implementing the recommendations immediately. For this reason, it is very important to clarify next steps at the end of the Interpretation Workshop. A key next step is for the evaluator to conduct a final check of the draft conclusions and preliminary recommendations against the data in order to weigh confirming and disconfirming evidence. The group should agree to a reasonable turnaround time that includes this important step without losing the momentum and buy-in generated by the Interpretation Workshop. Once the final check is complete, the evaluator presents the final set of confirmed conclusions and recommendations to the client.

## Useful Materials

- A large empty wall space on which to post ideas, ideally 4 feet high by 8–10 feet wide of work space
- Sticky chart paper for documenting key discussion points in Steps 1, 2, and 5
- Small notepads and pens for individual brainstorming in Steps 3, 4, and 5
- Big sticky notes (6 x 8 inches) and black markers for writing a posting "top 5" ideas in Step 3
- Even bigger sticky notes (12 x 12 inches) for writing a posting conclusions and recommendations in Steps 4 and 5 (alternative is copy paper and tape)