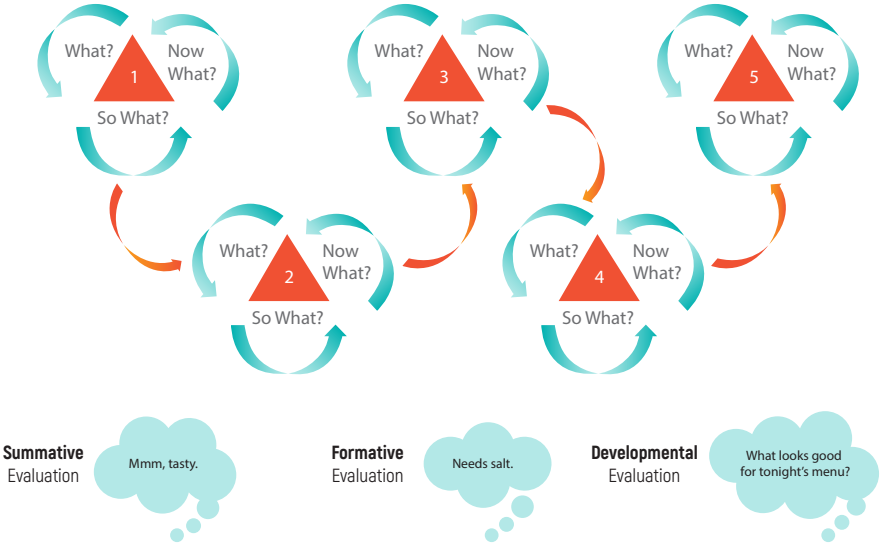
TOOL

DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION

ADAPTIVE REFLECTION AND ACTION



Adapted from Patton, 2010

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What is it?

Evaluation is a process of learning, adapting, and storytelling. Developmental evaluation (DE) is a specific evaluation practice that is well suited to work on complex challenges that do not have a clear, known path to impact, or linear cause-effect relationships. DE is a process of systematically collecting information about activities, effects, influences, and impacts to inform decision-making and action in an iterative cycle, often with a North Star orientation rather than having a specific outcome in mind. Evaluation works hand in hand with performance management, a more common practice in the public sector, which focuses on data, indicators, reporting, and accountability toward meeting clear and established outcomes.

Pawson (2013, p. 19) says that "every attempt to conduct an evaluation is beset with the impossibility of covering every angle... whether evaluation seeks to judge, describe, inspire or explain, there is an ever-present predicament in claiming to have achieved closure in covering all eventualities… There is no disguising the fact that the ideas driving an intervention are often multitudinous and compelling, no concealing the reality that the same intervention can trigger change in myriad ways, and no way of camouflaging the truth that the different contexts in which programmes are implemented are as wide as society is wide."

How is it used?

DE works alongside a complex social innovation process, and supports this process through asking a series of "what", "so what", and "now what" questions from beginning to end. This is so that initiatives can be adapted as they are underway in response to what is emerging as a result of action and learning. The evaluation design is user-focused, meaning that the evaluation process is designed based on the needs of the users, and the different ways that they will use the results. DE processes require robust and attentive planning and implementation, and it is often helpful to have someone working alongside a project team playing the DE role so that they can attend to the integrity and reflective nature of this type of evaluation. The canvas included here is a template that can be printed on 11x17 paper, and provides some prompts for an evaluative conversation.

More info:

BOOK: Developmental Evaluation, Patton
PAPER: Developmental Evaluation Primer
WEBSITE: Better Evaluation
WEBSITE: Here 2 There Consulting
PAPER: Principles for Evaluating Systems Change Efforts

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