Evaluations that "go bump in the night": Using forensic program evaluation to identify causal factors in stalled or problematic projects—

Post-project Debriefings: Approaches to finding "joy in the morning"

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Health Evaluation TIG

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DISCLOSURES

I have no conflicts of interest nor other disclosures.

Presentation Objectives

- We will present an overview of evaluation issues and strategies, including:
  - The value of conducting a quality post-project debriefing
  - Understanding retrospectively what factors might have derailed a project or an evaluation
  - Development and use of post-debriefing approaches to identify pitfalls to avoid and lessons learned to guide future projects and evaluations

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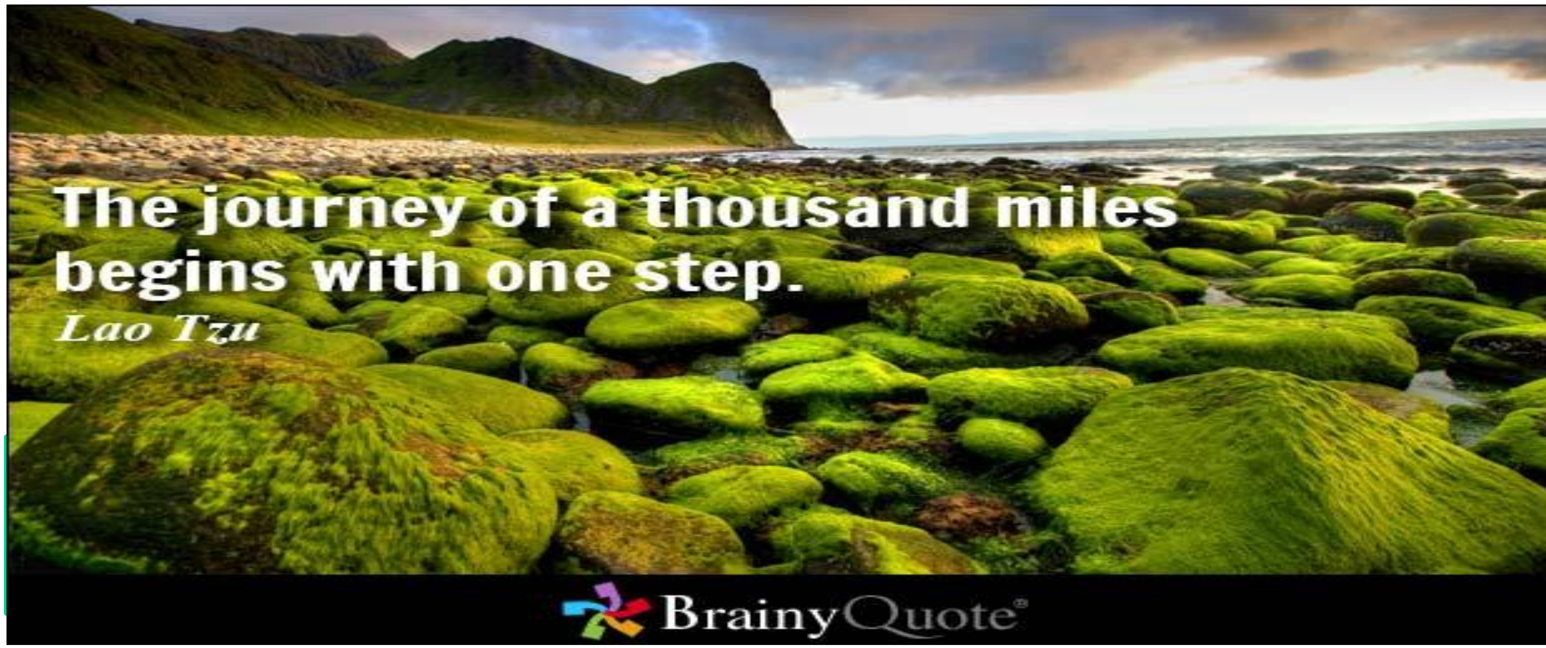
Learning Objectives

As a result of this presentation, participants will be able to:

- Identify two reasons to conduct post-project debriefings when a project stalled or an evaluation failed
- Identify at least two issues to pursue post-project about a stalled project or failed evaluation
- Describe a logic model approach to conducting a post-project debriefing for a stalled project or failed evaluation
- Identify at least one aspect of an evaluation in which they were/are involved that could be improved to avoid “failure” pitfalls



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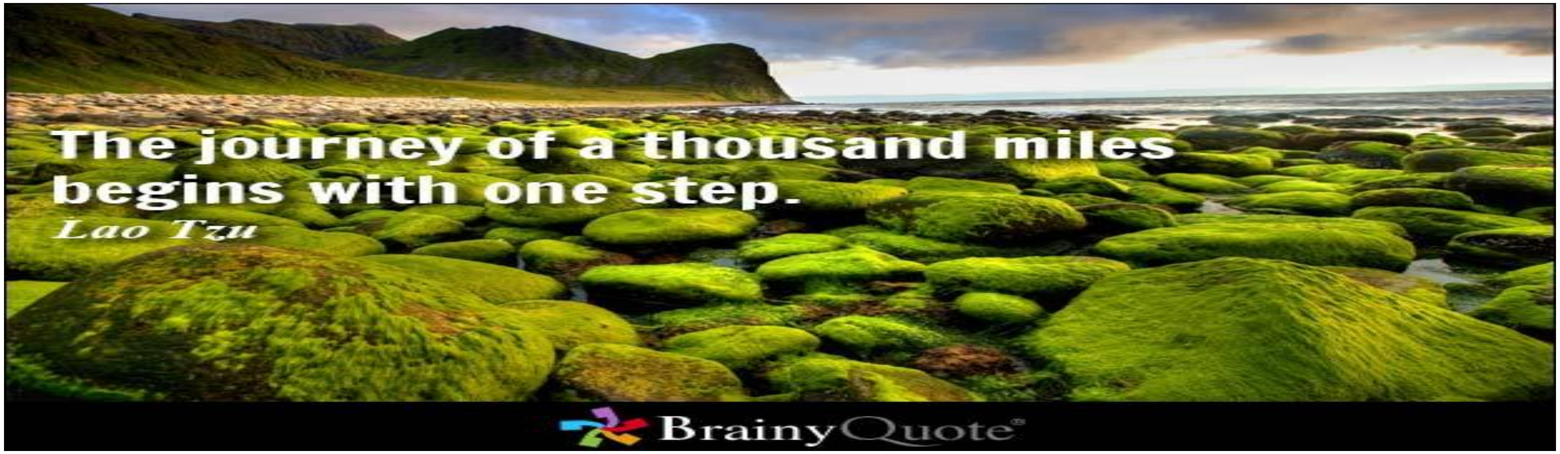

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...but if you don’t get there as planned:

- Will you know which step(s) took you off course?
- At which mile marker? and
- How to get back on course or stay on course the next time you start out?

The Value of a Quality Post-project Debriefing: Taking a Retrospective Look

- **A retrospective look during a post-project debriefing can help answer questions such as:**
  - What worked well?
  - What did not work well (or at all)?
  - What *conditions** changed?
  - What *skills** were needed but were not developed?
  - Who/what did not benefit?
  - Were there *systems changes** that affected the project?
  - Were there *systems changes* that affected the evaluation?

**See slide notes for examples*

A post-project debriefing can also assist with identifying "failed" aspects related to:

- **Accountability for funds**
  - How were funds allocated for the evaluation?

    As a line item in original budget or afterthought?

    By payments for deliverables or a regular payment schedule not tied to deliverables?
- **Program operations**
  - What was the level of staffing for the evaluation?

    Individual or team? Was routine recordkeeping part of data used?

    Were project staff expected to perform evaluation functions? If so, were they provided with an orientation/training, feedback, corrective actions?

    Did they understand their roles? Perform roles as expected?

Value of Post-project Debriefings (*cont'd*.)

- **Organizational-level factors**
  - Where did evaluation fit within the organization?
    - Was there an organizational chart that reflected whether the evaluation was internal, external, or a combination?
    - Was there a communication plan for how evaluation findings were communicated or with whom the evaluator/evaluation team communicated to the organization?
    - Was there a "corporate" monitor (someone other than the project director who monitored program and evaluation progress)?
- **Sustainability planning**
  - Was sustainability considered as a part of the evaluation activities?
    - At the outset or anytime prior to the end of the program?

Approaches for Conducting a Quality Post-project Debriefing

APPROACH 1:

Use the conceptual framework or logic model that guided the project or evaluation to reflect on what went well and can be sustained; and on what went wrong (when and why) and how to avoid the pitfalls in the future

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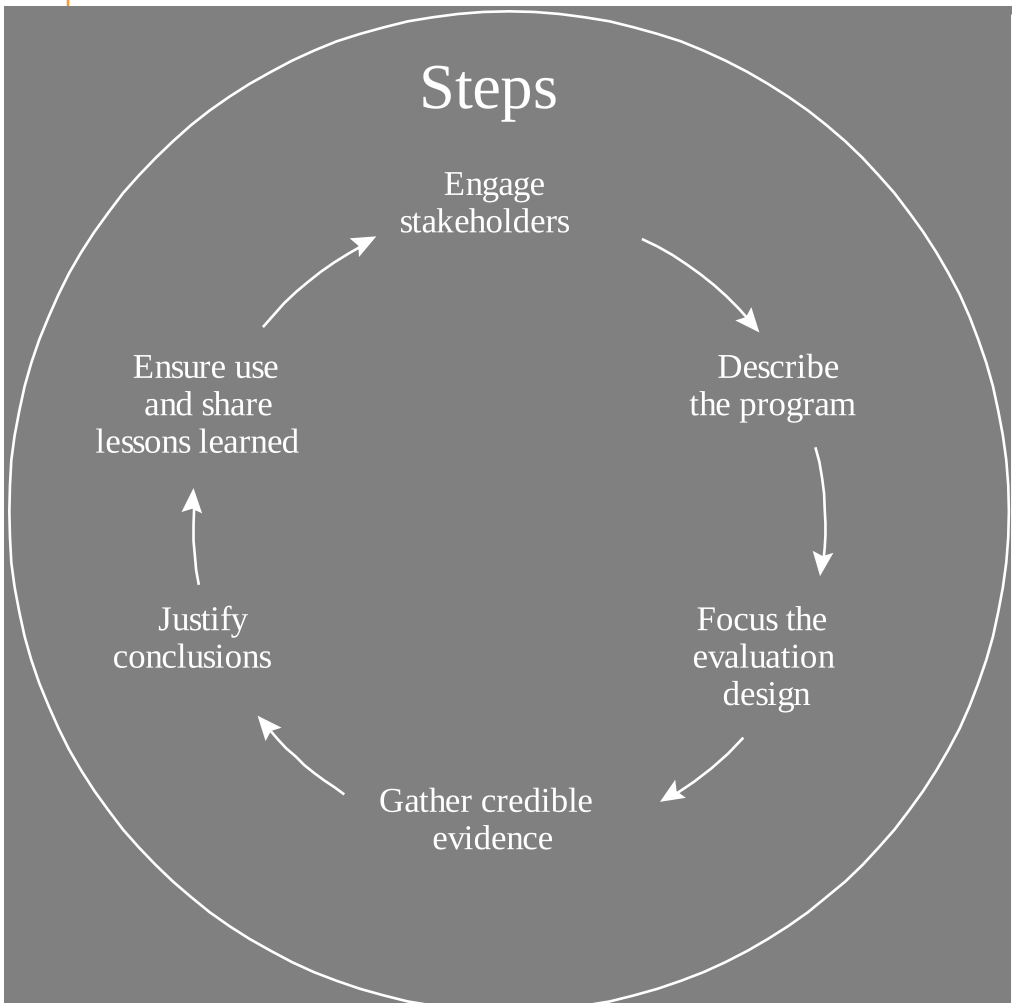
AN EXAMPLE

The Logic Model Approach to Post-project Debriefing

Example: CDC's Public Health Evaluation Framework*



1. **Engage stakeholders**
2. **Describe the program (logic model)**
3. **Focus the evaluation design (methods, data map)**
4. **Gather credible evidence (methods, data collection)**
5. **Justify conclusions (analysis and interpretation)**
6. **Ensure use and share lessons learned (dissemination)**

<u>**Source*</u>: www.cdc.gov

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Inquiry using Logic Model Approach

Inputs
- Were the resources adequate? Allocated as planned? Right stakeholders Engaged?

→

Activities
- Implemented as planned; with best practices?
- Stakeholder engagement done with best practices?

→

Output
- Realized as projected?
- What was a missed projection?

→

Outcomes
- Were these stated as SMART objectives?
- Did what was accomplished fall short, meet targets as projected, or exceed targets?

Contextual and Cultural Factors
What programmatic, organizational, policy, or other systems changes influenced program or evaluation activities?
Were the activities culturally competent, gender-responsive?
Were there competing demands for staff 's or evaluator's time?

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Logic Model Approach *(cont.)*

- **Inputs**—Ask questions about program resources and target population or community characteristics, for example about:
  - Demographics, risk/protective factors, or other characteristics of the target population/community (planned vs. actual, representativeness)
  - Funding amount and sources (adequacy, appropriate allocations)
  - Technical assistance and training needed and received or not
  - Technology, existing/acquired (Web sites, e-mailing lists)
  - Surveillance or other needs and assets assessment data used
  - Existing policies, regulations, laws influencing operations
  - Facilities, equipment needed and available or not
  - Staff and volunteers in organization or partner organizations
  - Membership in/participation with partnerships (perceived quality of relationships—yours and partners' perceptions)

- **Activities**—questions about the actions taken, for example about:
  - Perceived attributes—relative advantage of what was implemented vs. options available; compatibility with participants’ lifestyles; evaluability; observability of changes; simplicity or complexity of implementation; project staff or evaluators would recommend others try the approaches
  - Engagement strategies with key stakeholders
  - Use of needs assessments or asset mappings
  - Extent to which needs of culturally and linguistically diverse priority populations were addressed
  - Strategic communications used or not
  - Leadership development and training opportunities
  - Use of organizational assessments (e.g., Board self-studies, readiness to implement program)

- **Outputs**—questions about immediate results of activities, for example about progress on:
  - The number and type of stakeholders engaged
  - The number of participants reached/served
  - Characteristics of those reached/served
  - Work plans (quality, realistic, consistent with statements/scopes of work for project and evaluation)
  - Inventories of policies and environmental factors that supported or impeded progress (what and when)
  - Documentation of stakeholder input, including feedback on interpretation of findings
  - Documentation of corrective actions/adjustments
  - Dissemination plan (quality and timing of products)

- **Outcomes**—ask questions about levels and direction of changes documented and for whom?; for example about:
  - At individual level—were there changes (and directional indicators—i.e., increase, decrease, or no change) documented for participants' awareness, beliefs, practices, behaviors, knowledge, cultural competency, etc.?
  - At organizational level—is there documentation about improved leadership or organizational capacity, strengthened financial and management systems, institutional policy changes to achieve objectives?
  - At community level—is there documentation for policy changes, improved community norms, effective policy implementation, enhanced social determinants of health
  - At population level—is there documentation of improved overall community health indicators related to SMART outcomes

APPROACH 2.

Use the stages of an evaluation to frame questions for the inquiry and reflect on what went well and the pitfalls

Evaluation Stages

- Pre-planning
- Planning
- Implementation
- Interim Reporting
- Analysis
- Final Reporting and Dissemination

Inquiry by Evaluation Stage: Pre-Planning

- What decisions were made about aspects of the evaluation before proposal development—e.g., was either end selected or did you land somewhere along continua such as:

Internal←---------→External?

Paid←---------→In-kind?

Non-participatory←---------→Participatory?

Utilization-focused←---------→Documentation?

Publishable products←---------→No interest in publications?

Inquiry by Evaluation Stage: Pre-Planning

- Was an evaluation required by the funder?
- Did funder provider evaluation guidance?
- Was the evaluator selected prior to proposal development?
- Was the evaluator involved in the proposal development?
- Was the evaluator who was involved during proposal development, expected to be the same as the implementer?
- Was IRB/OMB requirement determined?
- Were resources to be allocated to pay the evaluator as part of the proposal budget or contributed in-kind by the applicant organization or one of its partners?

Inquiry by Evaluation Stage: Planning

- What decisions were made about the evaluation—e.g., either end selected or somewhere along continua such as..:

Internal ←---------→ External?

Qualitative ←---------→ Quantitative?

Non-experimental ←---------→ RCT* (*randomized control trial)

Paid ←---------→ In-kind?

Single point ←---------→ Multiple data point?

Cross-sectional ←---------→ Longitudinal?

Non-participatory ←---------→ Participatory?

Utilization-focused ←---------→ Documentation?

Inquiry by Evaluation Stage: Planning

- Did the plan follow the funder’s evaluation guidance?
- Was the proposed evaluator identified in the proposal?
- Was the proposed evaluator involved in the proposal development—at what level: wrote plan, reviewed plan, provided letter of commitment and supporting materials?
- Were resources allocated for the evaluation as part of the proposal budget or identified as in-kind (fees, supplies, participant incentives)?
- Was a full evaluation plan written prior to implementation? [including a conceptual framework, design, questions, measurable objectives, methods (sampling plan, measures, procedures, data matrix, analysis plans), reporting, dissemination plan, and timeline]

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Inquiry by Evaluation Stage: Planning

- Was there an agreed upon Scope of Work for the evaluation with deliverables and schedule of deliverables?
- Was there a contract, purchase order, or memorandum of agreement for the evaluation?
- Were biographical information and references for the evaluator collected during planning –e.g., included in the proposal?
- Was a data matrix developed that included what data were to be collected for each objective, data sources, persons responsible (staff or evaluator), and when/how often?

Key Q: Were Measurable Outcome Objectives Stated?

- Use the SMART acronym to assess the "measurable" nature:

  S-specific: Was only one outcome stated in each objective?

  M-measurable: Was there a way to get data to evaluate each outcome?

  A-attainable: Could the outcomes be realistically achieved by the project within the grant/project period?

  R-relevant: Were the outcomes relevant to the project's aims or evaluation's scope of work?

  T-time-based: Was each outcome time-based (i.e., framed in terms of when they would be reached—e.g., within 1yr?)

Inquiry by Evaluation Stage: Implementation

- Was evaluator involved during proposal development the same as one who revised/implemented the evaluation plan?
- Were proposed resources allocated/available as planned?
- Was IRB/OMB approval required; if, so obtained?
- Were there checkpoints for monitoring evaluation activities?
- What were the procedures for quality assurance (training for reliable data collection, selection of samples, research integrity)?
- What factors facilitated/impeded evaluation activities?
- Were there contextual factors that adversely affected the evaluation (e.g., cultural competency issues, policy changes, funding cuts)?
- Were there competing demands for the evaluation?

Inquiry by Evaluation Stage: Interim Reporting

- Was there a plan for interim reporting (e.g., a timeline, audiences, format of reports for each audience—oral, written or both)?
- Was the reporting plan implemented as planned?
- What factors affected timing or quality?
- Did the interim reporting meet project staff's expectations?
- How were interim reports used?
  - Make midcourse adjustments
  - Continuous quality improvements
  - Inform stakeholders

Inquiry by Evaluation Stage: Analysis

- Was there an analysis plan that reflected the scope of data collected and objectives to be assessed?
- Was the analysis plan executed as planned?
- Were the analytic techniques appropriate for the data collected (sample sizes; types of data—categorical, interval, etc.)?
- What were the quality control/assurance measures used to ensure reliable data analysis (e.g., coding and entry of qualitative or quantitative data)?
- Were stakeholders engaged in the interpretation or justification of conclusions based on the analyses?

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Inquiry by Evaluation Stage: Final Reporting and Dissemination

- Was there an outline for the final report?
- Was there a dissemination plan for products?
- Were Reports/Products implemented as planned (who produced the reports, when)?
- What factors affected timing or quality of reports and other dissemination products?
- Did the final report and other dissemination products meet project staff’s expectations? Best-in-industry standards?
- How were reports used?
  - Inform stakeholders, sustainability activities

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RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

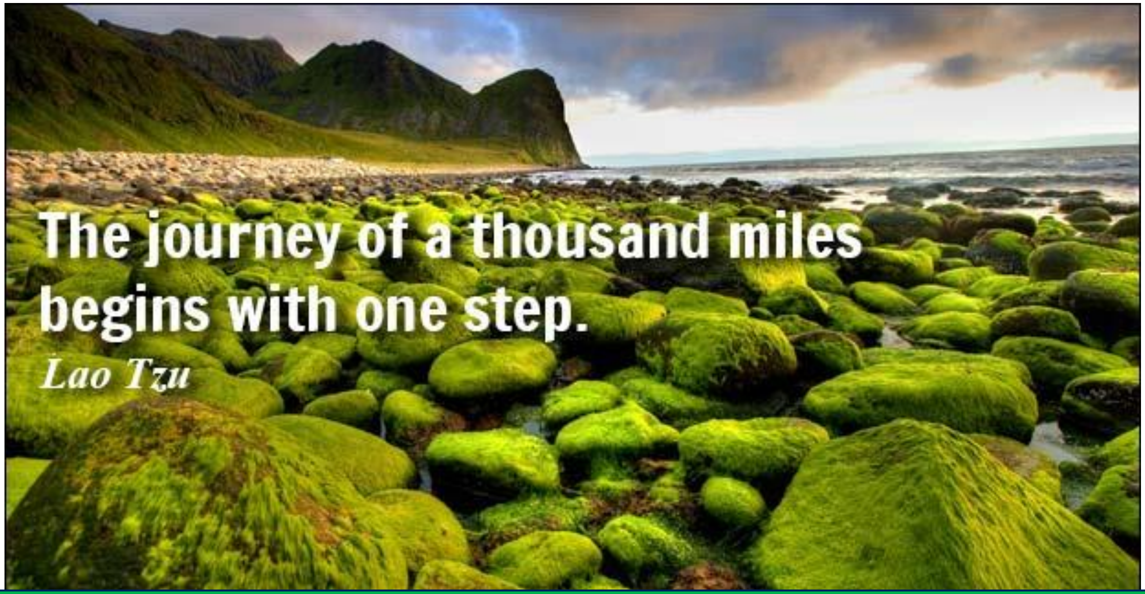
- Formally, within 60 days of project end (and informally during each stage), implement the approaches here or use other tools such as an "After- Action Review"* or other reflective approach to produce a report that helps your team better understand and sustain what went well and identify what went wrong (when and why) and improve
- Consider using a third-party facilitator
- Center your discussion on four key questions*:
  - "What was expected to happen?"
  - "What actually occurred?"
  - "What went well and why?"
  - "What can be improved and how?"

*Source: *Guide to the After-Action Review. (2010). Available at:*
https://www.cebma.org/wp-content/uploads/Guide-to-the-after_action_review.pdf

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS-cont.

- Do not place blame; all perspectives should be encouraged
- For advance planning, consider a few questions to stimulate
  thinking of participants; could be used to triangulate perspectives during the debriefing (e.g., do all agree on the expectations or objectives for the project/evaluation?)
- If using an oral discussion, during or immediately after the debriefing create a document that lists each “failure”/pitfall and specific actions to correct now or avoid each pitfall in the future
- Produce a written executive summary of your approach(es)
- Share the findings within as well as outside your organization or evaluation team to “help future teams learn your successful strategies and avoid pitfalls you have worked to overcome”

Questions?



If you ever find yourself making a mis-step, we hope these approaches can give you a jump start to get back on course.

Thank you.