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Using Behavioral Insights: Strategies to Effectively Communicate Evaluation Findings

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In partnership with the New York City Department of Education Office of Community Schools and The Leadership Program.

L&G works with the NYC Department of Education and various Community Based Organizations to evaluate their 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) grants. Evaluation is a mandatory component of all 21st CCLC grants and is intended to be a thoughtful, systematic collection and analysis of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs, for use by specific people to reduce uncertainties, improve effectiveness, and make decisions. As evaluators, we continually work with clients to improve the take-up of evaluation findings and recommendations. This is often not an easy responsibility, as stakeholders are concerned with a variety of tasks to ensure the success of their programs, often pushing evaluation of their programs behind more immediate calls for their attention.

L&G has learned from the field of behavioral insights to understand how people behave and make decisions. Behavioral insights research has a strong relevance in the evaluation field. Behavioral insights is an “inductive approach to policy making that combines insights from psychology, cognitive science, and social science with empirically-tested results to discover how humans actually make choices.” Research in this area has shown that human decision making is often imperfect and imprecise. People — clients and program administrators alike — procrastinate, get overwhelmed by choices, and miss important details. Consequently, they may not always achieve the goals they set for themselves.

Integrating behavioral insights strategies into evaluation communications can help stakeholders effectively utilize evaluation findings and recommendations to meet objectives and improve outcomes. L&G continues to improve our communication tactics that utilize research on how messages are perceived, habits are formed, and commitments are made. This research has helped us focus on best practices for increasing utilization of evaluation materials. As a result, L&G has increased stakeholder buy-in and improved the number of program sites meeting their program objectives.

One of the key behavioral insights strategies that L&G utilizes is the EAST framework, which was developed by the UK-based Behavioural Insights Team. This framework states that when recommendations are Easy, Attractive, Social, and Timely they are more likely to be taken up. The EAST framework is explained as follows:

- Easy - Simplify messages to transform complex goals into series of shorter, easier actions. This reduces the “hassle factor” people can associate with deciding a course of action.
- Attractive - Use colors, images, and personalization to draw attention to key findings and recommendations. This makes the actions seem more appealing to complete.
- Social - Use group commitment devices to help stakeholders “lock” themselves into something in advance and follow through on the action steps.

- **Timely** - Prompt people to complete a task when they're most likely to be receptive. Help them identify the barriers to action and develop a specific plan to address them.

Incorporating behavioral insights strategies does not require an overhaul of evaluation materials. Rather, by consistently reviewing how materials are communicated, evaluators can increase the likelihood that findings and recommendations are used for program improvement. To best integrate these strategies into your work, ensure you and your organization are do the following:

Define the outcome. Identify the main takeaways from evaluation materials for various stakeholder groups. Be sure to be audience specific and tailor your findings to the roles of the various stakeholders. Focus on defining what specific action steps need to be completed at various points throughout the evaluation period.

Understand the context. Visit the stakeholders and community involved in the evaluation and understand the context from their perspective. Use this opportunity to design communication strategies that they will be receptive to, while removing communications that can be distracting or confusing.

Build your intervention. Use the EAST framework to generate your communications strategy. This is likely to be an iterative process that returns to the two steps above. It's ok if the experience of building the intervention leads you to reconsider the feasibility of the outcome you defined.

Test, learn, adapt. Put your intervention into practice so its effects can be reliably measured. Determine whether the changes improved the saliency and take up of evaluation findings. Ask your stakeholders what is helpful and what isn't. Continuously refine to make further improvements.

L&G Research and Evaluation Consulting has integrated these key strategies into our own evaluation work with 21st CCLC grants in New York City public schools in a variety of ways. In collaboration with two of our clients, The Leadership Program and the NYC Department of Education, L&G has tailored our communication strategies that fit within three categories: Motivate People; Address Limited Attention; and Streamline Operations. Our reports and advisory meetings with stakeholders are first grounded in the vision for the community before specifics of evaluation findings are discussed. Our stakeholders are more likely to take up a recommended action if they can connect that action to their existing mission and values for the program. With the vision of the program in mind, possible action steps are simplified to eliminate potential options that are not reflective of the vision or would not suit the needs of the community. By focusing on a few options that are already feasible within each program's environment, our stakeholders are grounded and are more likely to develop plans to implement recommendations. These plans consist of clear action steps that simplify tasks, set manageable deadlines, and reduce barriers to implementation.

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