Advocacy Evaluation Mini-Toolkit: Tips and Tools for Busy Organizations

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LFA Group: *Learning for Action* enhances the impact and sustainability of social sector organizations through highly customized research, strategy development, and evaluation services.

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I. Launching an Evaluation: Quick Tips on Developing a Roadmap and Identifying Questions

To launch your evaluation, you should engage in two foundational exercises: developing an advocacy roadmap, and identifying the evaluation questions that are most important for you to answer.

- **An advocacy roadmap.** A roadmap is a visual representation of what your ultimate policy goal is, and how you plan to get there. It is fine to think of it either as a logic model or a theory of change – the important thing is that it shows your tactics/activities, the interim outcomes that signal progress toward your ultimate goal, and your ultimate goal. Including in it various contextual factors that will support or hinder your progress can also be helpful. If you haven't already made one as part of your advocacy effort, it's time to make one now to kick off your evaluation!
- **Evaluation questions.** It can be tempting to want to know *everything!* Trying to answer every evaluation question that your model suggests is the quickest way to get overwhelmed and decide that evaluation is not worth it. Be sure to identify a limited set of evaluation questions, and answer just a few key questions at first – you can always answer more later as you get more comfortable with evaluation.

Here are a few tips to get you started.

Key Questions to ask Yourself as You Develop Your Roadmap

Here is a list of key questions for your organization to reflect on as you build your roadmap:

1) What is your ultimate policy goal (what will happen if your advocacy strategies succeed)?
2) What activities will you undertake to achieve your goal?
3) What are the interim outcomes – the benchmarks or milestones that indicate incremental progress toward your ultimate goal?
4) What contextual factors (over which we have limited or no control) will accelerate or inhibit progress?

Rad Resources

There are web-based tools that you can use to create your advocacy roadmap – go to http://www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/apep/tools to find the Advocacy Progress Planner, and also check out: http://www.organizationalresearch.com/publications_and_resources_theory_of_change.aspx

Questions to Ask Yourself as you Identify and Prioritize Evaluation Questions

1) What do you *really* want to know – what information will help to support your advocacy effectiveness?
2) How can we craft questions that are specific as possible in terms of identifying what we want to know? (For example, don't ask "Is our strategy working?" Instead ask questions like: "Has this set of advocacy activities helped us to get new policymaker champions on board?")
3) Are some components of the roadmap more important than others – are there certain goals that must be accomplished for many other goals to be reached? (It can be tempting to want to evaluate *everything* in the roadmap – resist the temptation, or evaluation will become overwhelming.)

4) Is there a particular strategy that could benefit from continuous feedback for the purposes of ongoing improvement? (There may be strategies that you already know are working well – you get less "bang for the buck" by concentrating your evaluation resources on those strategies.)
5) Is there a strategy in which the advocates are particularly curious about whether they are effective?
6) Conduct a thought experiment: what will you do with this information once you get it? Will it be truly helpful?

II. Tracking Advocacy Activities

Why track activities?

As you undertake evaluation of your advocacy work, you may feel as if only the *results* are truly important to track. This feeling is common: advocates deep in their work often feel that tracking what they do every day amounts to no more than "widget counting." But there are several important benefits of tracking your activities:

- You can account for your effort, developing a deep understanding of the effort that you need to expend in order to reach your advocacy goals.
- Having an accurate accounting of your effort helps you to communicate concretely to your funders the person-power needed for advocacy campaigns – and therefore the level of resources they should invest in the work.
- Keeping track of your activities is the first step in understanding which advocacy activities are most successful, and the circumstances under which they succeed. This is important feedback for your ongoing advocacy strategy.
- You will impress your funders when you communicate what you have learned about the effectiveness of your various advocacy activities – and they will feel more confident about investing in your activities in the future.

Examples of Activities to Track

- Number of grassroots events, number of people coming to advocacy events, meetings
- Number of meetings held with decision-makers
- Number of hearings at which staff testify
- Number of voter education materials developed and distributed
- Coalition building: number of coalition members, constituency types represented in the coalition
- Earned media: number of outreach attempts to reporters, number of meetings with editorial boards
- Number of research or policy analysis products developed

What to Track when Tracking Activities

You can set up some simple activity tracking spreadsheets, organizing them in ways that work for your organization. For example, you might want a tab for each activity type (e.g. a tab for organizing rallies; another for meetings with legislators, etc); or you might want a tab for different outcomes (e.g. a tab for activities designed to build coalitions; another for cultivating policymaker champions, etc).

Each activity may be in a row, and your column headings should include such information as: activity type, date, advocates present, number of grassroots constituents attending (for activities such as rallies, marches, or commission meetings). As you develop your own tracking workbook, you will discover what information is the most vital to track – the information that provides the most important learnings for *your advocacy organization* and *your particular advocacy effort*.

Tracking Technology

You can always use a simple Excel workbook, but you may also be interested in using slightly fancier technologies. For example, you can use Google Docs – this will make it much easier for advocates in different locations to use the same document and not worry about version control. You may also be interested in trying out SmartSheet, a work collaboration tool which looks very much like Google Docs but has more flexibility and is quite easy to use (and also exists in the cloud).

Both Google Docs and SmartSheet will require you to enter data manually. You also have the option of using software that can track your activities more automatically. One such app is Crisply. It will compile information from calendars (and reads Microsoft Exchange and Google calendars). The software is project-based so if you have defined categories of activities you are tracking, you can assign a numeric code to your meetings, and put that code into your calendars. It can also track emails that you send, and it recognizes domain names and email addresses. Finally, you can set up Crisply on your smart phone so that it reads your phone calls – whom you spoke to and for how long.

How to Make Activity Tracking Useful

Sometimes simply tracking activities makes advocates more conscious of their efforts, and generates real-time insights about what is working and what isn't – and which efforts are worth the time spent, and which aren't. But it is also helpful for the team as a whole to understand the efforts being made, and what results are generated. Here are a few tips for ensuring activity tracking stays relevant:

- **Assign a champion.** One person need not do all the data entry, but one person should ensure that *others* do the data entry to which they are assigned!
- **Do it often.** Just as "many hands make light work," "tracking activities often makes light work." If people wait a month or longer to track activities, they will be forced to go back to calendars, emails, and (dim) memories to figure out what to enter into the spreadsheet – and they will immediately want to give up. Ensure that advocates jot down what they did every one or two days – this way it will take just a few minutes each time they do it, and it will become part of the routine.
- **If "doing it often" doesn't work, use Crisply.com!** If it turns out to be just too much to do your own activity tracking manually, try a more automated process.
- **Set up your activity tracking so that it is useful when it comes time to reflect.** Reflection on activities is addressed in section IV of this mini-toolkit – but what is important here is that you think about how you can set up your data tracking now to maximize its utility later. This may mean doing things like aggregating information (counting the total number of policy-maker meetings conducted per month over the course of a year, etc). In Excel you can easily set up your tracking sheet to sum activities and chart them so that you can understand, at a glance, the efforts you have been expending.
- **Don't forget to include comments in your tracking!** You should have a column devoted to comments, where advocates can jot down their thoughts soon after they have engaged in the advocacy activity. They can quickly answer such questions as: What happened? What worked well? Is there something we would not do again? Etc. These quick reflections will make sure that in-the-moment lessons learned are not lost (it can be hard to reconstruct these lessons months later).

Rad Resources

http://www.smartsheet.com/

http://crisply.com/

III. Tools for Articulating and Measuring Interim Outcomes

In advocacy evaluation, ultimate goals (such as passing a bill, or changing an entire policy approach) can have very long time horizons – years or even decades. An important focus of advocacy evaluation, therefore, is **interim outcomes**, which:

- Are benchmarks or milestones that demonstrate incremental progress toward your ultimate goal (e.g. getting an important policymaker on board as a champion),
- Can be the direct outcomes of your advocacy activities or tactics (e.g. after meeting with an important policymaker, s/he commits to authoring a bill), and
- Are often outcomes that you must achieve *in order to* reach your ultimate goal (e.g. you need a certain set of policymakers on board in order to get a bill passed)

Measuring interim outcomes will pay off in several ways, allowing you to answer such important questions as:

- What is the progress that our advocacy efforts are making – where are we seeing evidence of progress toward our ultimate goal?
- Are we successfully reaching critical milestones on the way to our ultimate policy goal, or is it time to revisit our strategy? Which milestones are we *not* reaching?
- Which of our efforts are working the best – where should we redouble our efforts, and how might we conserve resources by diverting them away from less successful efforts?
- What critical interim outcomes are we achieving that demonstrate advocacy success (e.g. building organizational advocacy capacity, developing key alliances, cultivating relationships with policymakers, building grassroots constituencies) even if the ultimate policy goals are not (yet) achieved?

Among the key **types of interim outcomes** you may want to measure are:

- Awareness/understanding of an issue, problem, or solution
- Organizational changes
- Advocate and policymaker support
- Public will

There are many ways to measure these types of outcomes, including polling, media tracking, surveys, and key informant interviews. For advocacy organizations, however, these approaches will tend to be too labor-intensive; you are busy pursuing policy change, and generally do not have the bandwidth for the methods often used by third-party evaluators. Fortunately, as advocacy organizations, you have a critical advantage: you are on the inside, and have deep knowledge of how the advocacy effort is unfolding! This means that you can often track interim outcomes simply by collecting data from yourselves or your advocacy partners.

Because you have this insider advantage, you can track interim outcomes using truly practical approaches that you can build them into your organizational routines. By building data collection into your organizational routines, you may change your perspective on evaluation: you will see it far less as an extra burden, and much more as an integral part of the advocacy effort itself. **Integrated data collection approaches to track interim outcomes** include:

- Holding discussions of progress during all-staff meetings, advocacy planning meetings, and meetings with advocacy partners; and
- Advocates' efforts to record impressions of progress soon after engaging in advocacy tactics, to record how these activities contributed to interim outcomes.

The table below outlines how you might build measurement approaches into your organizational routines to measure specific types of interim outcomes.

Interim Outcome Type	Specific Interim Outcomes to Measure (Key Examples)	Practical Measurement Approaches			
		Notes from Staff Meeting Discussions	Notes from Advocacy Planning Meetings	Notes from Meetings with Advocacy Partners	Notes Made after Advocacy Activities
Awareness / Understanding of an Issue, Problem, or Solution	Problem salience	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Awareness of policy proposal or solution			✓	✓
	Media coverage of the issue		✓	✓	
Organizational Changes	Internal organizational capacity for policy advocacy	✓			
	Organizational visibility			✓	✓
Advocate and Policymaker Support	New partnerships/alliances with other advocates		✓	✓	
	New champions (policymakers)				✓
Public Will	Willingness of a (non-policymaker) target audience to act in support of an issue		✓	✓	✓
	Growth of constituency or support base		✓	✓	✓

In the remainder of this toolkit section you will find several very simple tools for tracking progress on each of the interim outcomes in the table above (with a tool for each outcome listed in the second column). Each tool has a 1-7 rating scale for progress on the interim outcome in question. **These rating scales are not set in stone – they are meant as guidance and inspiration only!** Please adjust the scales to reflect your own work, and how *your* organization envisions that progress will unfold.

Tracking Awareness / Understanding of an Issue, Problem, or Solution

Interim Outcome = Problem Salience
Target Audience for Problem Salience =
Salience Rating 1 = Target audience does not perceive the problem 2 = A small minority in the target audience perceives the problem 3 = A large minority in the target audience perceives the problem 4 = A minority perceives the problem, but those who do are a key constituency 5 = A majority perceives the problem, but not enough of the people in this group belong to key constituencies 6 = A majority perceives the problem and many in the majority belong to a key constituency 7 = A large majority perceives the problem and many in the majority belong to a key constituency

Problem Salience		
Salience Rating	**Date**	**Comments** (For example: the advocacy activities we believe that have increased salience; contextual factors that have increased or are suppressing salience; challenges to increasing problem salience)

Interim Outcome = Awareness of policy proposal or solution
Target Audience for Policy Proposal/Solution Awareness =
Awareness Rating 1 = Target audience does not perceive the proposal/solution 2 = A small minority in the target audience perceives the proposal/solution 3 = A large minority in the target audience perceives the proposal/solution 4 = A minority perceives the proposal/solution, but those who do are a key constituency 5 = A majority perceives the proposal/solution, but not enough of the people in this group belong to key constituencies 6 = A majority perceives the proposal/solution and many in the majority belong to a key constituency 7 = A large majority perceives the proposal/solution and many in the majority belong to a key constituency

Problem Salience		
Awareness Rating	**Date**	**Comments** (For example: the advocacy activities we believe that have increased awareness; contextual factors that have increased or are suppressing awareness; challenges to increasing awareness)

Interim Outcome = Media coverage of the issue
Media Coverage Rating 1 = Problem or solution is not covered at all in the media 2 = Problem or solution has limited coverage, and is only in outlets with small audiences 3 = Problem or solution has limited coverage, and is rarely covered in outlets with large audiences 4 = Problem or solution has moderate coverage, and is sometimes covered in outlets with large audiences 5 = Problem or solution has good coverage, but mostly in outlets with small audiences 6 = Problem or solution has good coverage, and is covered in outlets with large audiences 7 = Problem or solution has become a high-profile issue in reporting and/or op-eds

Problem Salience		
Media Coverage Rating	**Date**	**Comments** (For example: the advocacy activities we believe that have increased coverage; contextual factors that have increased or are suppressing coverage; challenges to increasing coverage)

Tracking Organizational Changes

Interim Outcome = Internal organizational capacity for policy advocacy

Advocacy Capacity Rating

1 = Our organization is in the early stages of building advocacy capacity
2 = Our organization has some knowledge about advocacy, mobilizing, or organizing tactics
3 = Our organization has moderate knowledge about advocacy, mobilizing, or organizing tactics
4 = Our organization has strong expertise in advocacy, mobilizing, or organizing tactics
5 = Our organization has strong advocacy expertise and some media skills and contacts
6 = Our organization has strong advocacy expertise and moderate media skills and contacts
7 = Our organization has strong advocacy expertise and strong media skills and contacts

Advocacy Capacity		
Advocacy Capacity Rating	**Date**	**Comments** (For example: where we have seen advocacy capacity grow recently; areas of advocacy capacity in which we would like to grow)

Interim Outcome = Organizational visibility

Organizational Visibility Rating 1 = Our organization has no visibility among policymakers 2 = Our organization has minimal visibility among policymakers 3 = Our organization has some visibility among policymakers 4 = Our organization has moderate visibility among policymakers 5 = Our organization is well-known among policymakers, but they are the policymakers we expect to support the cause 6 = Our organization is well-known among policymakers we expect to support the cause, and has moderate visibility among policymakers across the aisle 7 = Our organization has broad-based visibility among policymakers

Organizational Visibility		
Organizational Visibility Rating	**Date**	**Comments** (For example: where we have seen advocacy capacity grow recently; areas of advocacy capacity in which we would like to grow)

Tracking Advocate and Policymaker Support

Interim Outcome = New partnerships/alliances with other advocates

New Partnerships/Alliances		
New Partners, Allies	**Date**	**Comments** (For example: whether the new partners are "unlikely allies;" whether the new partners or allies can bring in new constituencies to the advocacy effort; whether new partners or allies can bring in new policymakers as champions; what assets the partners or allies can bring to the advocacy effort)

Interim Outcome = New champions

New Champions		
New Champions	**Date**	**Comments** (For example: whether the new champions are from the other side of the aisle; the realm and extent of influence of these policymakers who are new champions; how the champions could support the advocacy effort)

Tracking Public Will

Interim Outcome = Willingness of a (non-policymaker) target audience to act in support of an issue
Target Audience =
Willingness to Act Rating 1 = The target audience is in opposition to our cause 2 = The target audience's opposition is neutralized, but is not supportive 3 = Target audience has no willingness to act 4 = Target audience has minimal willingness 5 = Target audience has some willingness 6 = Target audience is moderately supportive of our cause 7 = Target audience is strongly supportive of our cause

Willingness of Target Audience to Act		
Willingness to Act Rating	**Date**	**Comments** (For example: the advocacy activities we believe that have increased target audience willingness to act; contextual factors that have increased or are suppressing target audience willingness to act; challenges to increasing target audience willingness to act)

Interim Outcome = Growth of constituency or support base

Constituency Growth Rating
1 = There is no constituency for the cause
2 = There is minimal constituency for the cause
3 = There is some constituency for the cause
4 = There is some constituency for the cause, but it is among groups we expect to support the cause
5 = There is moderate constituency for the cause, among groups we expect to support the cause
6 = There is a large constituency, among groups we expect to support the cause
7 = There is large and broad-based constituency for the cause

Constituency or Support Base Growth		
Constituency Growth Rating	**Date**	**Comments** (For example: the advocacy activities we believe that have led to growth in the constituency; contextual factors that have increased or are suppressing support from key constituencies; challenges to greater growth in constituencies)

IV. Guidance for Integrating Reflection into your Advocacy Evaluation

Advocates are too busy working for social change to waste time on data collection that does not result in learning. To maximize the utility of your data collection efforts, remember that:

Findings + Reflection = Learnings

Certainly some reflection is built into the approach in section III on collecting interim outcome data – you need to engage in some collective reflecting in order to even *collect* the data in the first place. But there are additional ways to ensure that evaluation results in learning for your organization: remembering to use activity tracking as fodder for reflection; institutionalizing regular "reflection sessions" with the advocacy team; and engaging in "intense period debriefs."

Activity Tracking as Fodder for Reflection

Data on activities constitute measures of effort, and – in their simplest form – do not say anything about how *effective* the activities were. Ultimately, advocates want to know whether a particular activity is advancing their advocacy strategy.

If advocates have jotted down their impressions of the activity and its success immediately after it happened, you have already won half the battle. But you may also want to engage in more structured reflection with the whole advocacy team in the room. Good reflection questions are:

- How well did the activities go?
- How could they have been gone better?
- Did we achieve our intended outcome? Why or why not?
- What can we change next time to improve on the activity?
- Might we conserve resources by using a different activity to achieve a similar outcome?

Institutionalizing Regular Reflection Sessions

If reflection becomes part of your organizational routine, it is much more likely to happen on a regular basis. To institutionalize reflection sessions:

- Put reflection meetings on the calendar at regular intervals (every 2-4 months),
- Put one person in charge of aggregating the data collected (data can come from activity tracking, from the interim outcome worksheets, or from other data collection tools you have developed), and putting together meeting packets, and
- Have a list of reflection questions to answer at the meeting.

Reflection Questions

Bring your roadmap to your reflection session – you can compare the roadmap to where you have been in the past 2-4 months. Here is a list of generic reflection questions that you can tailor to your own advocacy effort:

- Where did we expect to be by this time?
    - What did we accomplish?
    - Does our progress reflect our expectations?
    - Are we ahead or behind of where we expected we would be?
- If we're "ahead of schedule," what were the factors that made that possible?
    - What was beyond our control?
    - What was within our control, and potentially something we could do again?

- If we're "behind schedule," what were the challenges to making more progress?
    - What was beyond our control?
    - Which challenges might we have been able to mitigate? How might we have done that?
- Did we learn anything that would lead us to revise our roadmap?
    - Do we want to change tactics?
    - Do we want to target new grassroots constituencies, new potential partners, or new policymakers?
    - Are there key milestones we now realize we must reach in order to achieve our policy goal?
    - Have external events transpired that block off certain avenues we planned to pursue?
    - Have external events transpired that open up new windows of opportunity?
- What would the world look if we had *not* engaged in this advocacy effort?

Intense-Period Debrief

An "intense-period debrief" is an approach to advocacy evaluation that capitalizes on the nature of advocacy itself.[1] As part of their work, advocates often engage in a flurry of activity as windows of opportunity open. These intense periods often contain lessons for advocates, if they explore what caused the window to open, how they were (or were not) able to take advantage of the window, etc. However, once the intense period is over, advocates need to take the time to actively process what happened – otherwise these lessons are likely to be lost. If advocates gather to debrief what happened, they can codify their lessons, and base future strategy on what they have learned.

As part of an intense-period debrief, advocates can meet and hold a discussion that addresses:

- The events contributing to the policy window,
- Advocate actions contributing to the opening of the policy window,
- The actions that advocates took to move their agenda forward,
- The outcomes that were achieved,
- The outcomes that advocates hoped for but were not achieved, and
- Whether the advocates might have done something differently to achieve a more favorable outcome.

[1] The Innovation Network developed the intense-period debrief method.

V. More Rad Resources

There has been a great deal of innovation in advocacy evaluation over the past 5-10 years. Only five years ago, funders and practitioners tended to see advocacy as something "too hard to measure." In 2013, a thousand flowers have clearly bloomed! Someone new to advocacy evaluation can quickly become overwhelmed by the huge array of resources out there. We suggest sticking to just a few seminal works:

- **Harvard Family Research Project: A User's Guide to Evaluation Planning.** If you consult only one resource, this should be it! This guide is highly user-friendly, helps evaluators and advocates keep things simple and straightforward, and points the way to what to measure and how to measure it. There are two especially helpful tables: one on pp. 9-10 that provides operational definitions of policy goals, tactics, and interim outcomes; the other on pp. 14-16 that provides sample metrics for each of these. The guide is available at: http://www.hfrp.org/evaluation/publications-resources/a-user-s-guide-to-advocacy-evaluation-planning
- **Innovation Network: A Practical Guide to Advocacy Evaluation.** This publication provides an introduction to advocacy evaluation, and is designed to be read from the perspective of the advocate. It lays out "eight steps to advocacy evaluation." You can download it from: http://www.innonet.org/resources/files/pathfinder_advocate_web.pdf
- **Innovation Network: Speaking for Themselves: Advocates' Perspectives on Evaluation.** This is a research brief that highlights how advocacy organizations how they integrate evaluation into their work, and then use findings to inform strategy. It gives you a chance to learn about what *other* advocates what they have tried, and what is working for them. You can download it from: http://www.innonet.org/client_docs/File/advocacy/speaking_for_themselves_web_basic.pdf

You may also be interested in checking out Point K: a site hosted by the Innovation Network. It can be found here: http://www.innonet.org/index.php?section_id=4&content_id=16 This site has links to multiple types of evaluation tools, and an area of specialization is advocacy evaluation. But be careful – it's easy to get lost in all the tools and approaches available there!