Recommendations

My research began with the expectation of identifying weak evaluative methods and excluding them, in order arriving at something 'really good'. However, the examination has led me to the conclusion that there are many evaluative techniques that would produce useable results for both The Center and the field in which The Center operates.

While formulating recommendations the following criteria were used:

- How options rate against the program evaluation principles and biases
- Transactional cost
- Usefulness to The Center

(See Appendix II for a visual matrix of tradeoffs)

Main Recommendations

Considering the options, suggestions and information gained from the literature, interviews, existing surveys, and tradeoffs (above) in order to reach The Center's goals for this evaluation instrument (capture lessons learned, foster best practices and continually create process improvements), using the criteria above suggests that The Center:

1. Utilize a pre/post evaluation design in the form of surveys or questionnaires.
    a. One of the drawbacks of a post process only evaluation relying on participant feedback is that such feedback is often personal. Respondents may interpret questions slightly differently. Using a pre-process evaluation can help in two ways. First, it can be used to help passively coach participants in the values inherent in collaborative processes. Second, it can set a baseline of information for each respondent, which can be analyzed side by side with their post process survey responses. Because of the difficulty obtaining a comparison group, a pre/post design will help The Center draw inferences and attributions.

2. Gather feedback from both process participants and process practitioners.
    a. This is for two reasons. First, the practitioner questionnaire can serve a project management role by gathering project information such as number of meetings, hours spent in meetings, hours spent working on the project outside of meetings, and so forth. Second, practitioner feedback on the process and outcomes can be viewed alongside participant feedback, which helps create a robust view of the project by contrasting opinions from all sides of the table.

3. Focus evaluation surveys on four key elements:
    a. Process Substance
        i. Right questions, right people, right information, etc

   b. Process Procedure
      i. All participants had equal voice, information was informative, meeting structure supported dialogue, etc
   c. Process Transformation
      i. Trust gained, relationships altered, learning of key interests was broadened, etc
   d. Process Outcomes
      i. Agreements reached, participant approval, implementation prospects, etc

   These four elements capture several things. First, they loosely reflect a logic model framework. This is important because it allows easy conceptual interaction and analysis of the instrument, its results, and any adjustments made to it (which would make it a new instrument and cautions therein would be heeded). Second, it captures multiple types of outcomes. This is important because for any process in which The Center engages, there are multiple types of success that can be reached. Restricting evaluation to only certain types of success, or avoiding the issue entirely, creates less useful feedback from which The Center can learn.

4. Implement evaluation no later than three months after the final meeting of the project. Ideally, there would be a short delay after the final meeting to allow emotions to cool and outcomes to be apparent, but this may not always be logistically feasible.

5. Keep survey length to between 15 and 30 questions. Shorter would provide too little information, longer presents an obstacle to completion.

6. Remain flexible on whether the survey is administered by handouts or by an online tool such as Survey Monkey, and use either or both as needed and informed by The Center's experience.

7. Remain open to utilizing both survey/questionnaire feedback methods as well as in person semi-structured interviews. The former allows participants to respond on their own time and gives them a degree of autonomy, while the latter may be useful in creating more detailed responses as well as continue to foster positive relationships.
   a. In person semi-structured interviews should be administered by Ruckelshaus Center staff other than the practitioner of the project, to avoid conflicts of interest and create a potentially safer space for respondents. However, this is not a hard rule. There will be projects where the relationship between practitioner and participants is very strong and may increase participation in semi-structured interviews. The Ruckelshaus Center will have to exercise judgment in this matter.
   b. In the case of semi-structured interviews, the Ruckelshaus Center should begin with the survey, but ask participants if they would be willing to meet in person or via phone for the semi-structured interview.

c. The Ruckelshaus Center should analyze the results of interviews and surveys as complimentary to each other, not in conjunction with each other as they are different instrument types and combined analysis would be unreliable. However, semi-structured interview questions should categorically mirror survey questions.

Secondary Recommendations

The Ruckelshaus Center may wish to consider the following, allowing for time and effort.

1. Survey Community Members
   a. Ruckelshaus Center projects impact not only the participants of those projects, but the community at large. The Ruckelshaus Center could seek input on how the community affected by a project feels about that project's outcomes and how the community feels about the processes which the Ruckelshaus Center uses. The types of projects the Ruckelshaus Center engages in are frequently transformative and relationship building. The Center could seek to foster good relationships with the community as part of its evaluative efforts.

2. Follow up on Project Agreements
   a. The Ruckelshaus Center could monitor the implementation of agreements created as the result of its projects. Documentation of ongoing implementation of project agreements is in The Center's interest. Frequently and method would be best decided by Center staff, however a minimum of annual progress report is reasonable.

3. Focus Groups
   a. When possible and where the Ruckelshaus Center deems appropriate, The Center could reconvene project participants in a focus group in order to create sustained and dynamic discussion and reflection on the project. This would not be a quantifiable effort in the same manner as surveys. It would be purely qualitative and should be seen as such. Gathering participants in an open and warm environment and simply letting them talk about the project and process can deliver important insights into not only Center process, but Center clients and the surrounding community.

4. Case Studies
   a. The Ruckelshaus Center could consider writing case studies of its projects. This serves as another lens through which to view projects and thus creates a new venue from which to learn. Case studies are frequently written by graduate students. This aligns with The Center's goal of advancing the teaching and research missions of the two universities. Lastly, case studies can be distributed to other practitioners and centers in the field, adding value to the field's total knowledge.

Options not recommended:

a) Do not employ neutral observers. Observers are very expensive in terms of time and cost, but more importantly because their potential for disaffecting project participants.

b) Do not gather extensive feedback on practitioner quality. That information can be gathered just as effectively by other means while not creating the potential professional and political complications such feedback creates.

c) Avoid mid-point process interruptions for mid-point evaluations. Mid-point evaluations run the risk of damaging an in-process project. If the goal of a mid-point evaluation is to find the temperature of the group, make course corrections, identify loose ends, etc, the practitioner can accomplish the same ends with one on one participant check-ins, back channel communications, and individual meeting exist surveys.

d) Avoid take-home questionnaires. Take home questionnaires have a low response rate which creates both sample issues and data issues for The Center.