

Chari Smith. (2021). *Nonprofit Program Evaluation Made Simple: Get Your Data. Show Your Impact. Improve Your Programs.* Portland, OR: Author Brick Road. Paperback, 247 pages. (ISBN: 978-0-578-80388-3)

Reviewed by Lisa M. P. O'Reilly

In *Nonprofit Program Evaluation Made Simple*, Chari Smith has produced a summary guide targeting professionals working in nonprofit organizations who are beginning their understanding of what is, and how to undertake, an evaluation. The tone of the book is bright and positive, the author clear, engaging, and professional.

Content is shared in four parts: Get Ready, Make Your Plan, Collect Your Data, and Create Your Reports. Within these four sections the author introduces the reader to a path to complete their first program evaluation. This includes identifying expectations for evaluation budgets (10% to 15% of a program budget, whether undertaken internally, externally, or in a combination of the two), the logistics of undertaking an evaluation, and building an organizational culture supporting evaluation. Smith continues by laying out the tasks associated with how to complete an evaluation. Charts, worksheets, and templates for readers are shared for those who wish to undertake evaluative activities using existing staff and/or volunteers. Particularly useful for first-time evaluators in nonprofit or smaller organizations, these appear throughout the book and take the guesswork out of how to get started.

For evaluative tasks that require specialized training or benefit from an external perspective, Smith advises the reader to solicit outside professional support. Complex tasks that new-to-evaluation professionals are unlikely to undertake are then avoided. This is a useful way to bring the reader along the paths of both a straightforward and a more complex evaluation simultaneously. Readers who are not able to complete complex evaluations will know what to expect. This may be particularly useful for nonprofit board members and funders who have not yet, or not recently, been through an evaluation. Similarly, students of evaluation will find this book useful to envision the full cycle of an evaluation.

There is more than one way to centre an evaluation (e.g., participatory, co-created, facilitated, etc.). In *Nonprofit Program Evaluation Made Simple*, the author anticipates “one person at the helm of driving the evaluation process, from planning to implementation to using the results” (p. 18). It is the evaluator-led model that is explained here: Program participants are not expected to play a role in scoping the evaluation, collecting any data, helping to analyze the information, or onward disseminating and using the results.

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Throughout the book, the author references a short list of exemplar projects that she has completed with clients who have agreed to share related materials. In using the same short list of example projects, the reader gets to know the projects and clients. These example projects are used as a shortcut by which to explain a concept, asking the reader to extrapolate from the provided example. As new ideas and steps are described, the reader is asked to anticipate what that might mean for one of the exemplar projects.

A small number of concerns with the work can be identified. More than once the author references evaluation as a fundraising tool, which may not resonate with all target audiences. There are many things one can learn in an evaluation that will lead to program improvement but that may make poor fundraising tools. Think about evidence that ongoing data collection is insufficient, that those who benefited from the program did not need the service, that those who needed the service were missed, that there was no evidence of planned outcomes, or of negative or harmful results. This is all valuable to an organization for its program design and improvement.

While ethics are included in *Nonprofit Program Evaluation Made Simple*—for example, the author includes sample consent forms (in Chapter 13) and emphasizes anonymity and confidentiality (p. 188)—the book would benefit from a greater emphasis on the ethical choices and considerations related to evaluation. For instance, when collecting background data and demographic data, evaluators must decide what information is really needed, confirm who owns the data, and decide how that information will be solicited, shared, stored, and analyzed. These choices are not exclusively logistical and cost-related; they are also ethical. While many in the nonprofit sector can be expected to have an understanding of program ethics, I would rather have seen the author share more on how and when to incorporate those ethical practices into the evaluation. Similarly, how an evaluation may comply with local privacy and access-to-information legislation, or how to incorporate equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) better practices are notable by their absence.

This book is not intended as a stand-alone piece of work, and Smith has included a companion website that is referenced throughout the book. This solves two challenges for the author: how to include multiple colour visuals and examples within a brief guide, and how to reduce the likelihood of the book becoming dated. For the reader, it means that they will want to be online with a good monitor while reviewing the materials in the book.

My first reaction to the companion website was that it was an inspired decision on the part of the author. Readers have access to the most recent versions of the impact models, timelines, database architecture, survey design templates, permission forms, and reports available. For those who wish a closer look, they need only increase the zoom on their own monitor. As I moved through the book and wanted to read somewhere without a large monitor and wifi connection, I found this idea to be less inspired and more frustrating, particularly with visuals where the position of their content mattered, or where arrows are used. The

companion website is nonetheless an interesting feature. Smith has an opportunity to add links to resources on evaluation-related ethics, further examples of successful tools, guidance, or links for readers on how an evaluation will comply with local privacy and access-to-information legislation, EDI better practices, and related materials.

Overall, I congratulate Chari Smith on producing the guide and recommend it to nonprofit professionals, with the perhaps inevitable caveat that there is always more to know.