

# Evaluation of collaborative work

Evaluation means to reflect on a process or its outcome and assess their quality. As collaborative planning is a comparatively new discipline where lots of experiences are yet to be made, careful evaluation of case studies can help establish a sounder theory and practice. Also, the nature of collaborative work as a process involving conflict and negotiation requires constant evaluation to ensure that everybody can follow and support the process at all times.

Speaking of collaborative planning, two types of evaluation can be distinguished:

- **Process evaluation** (also called process monitoring) addresses mostly the social aspect of collaborative planning which is always present. Process evaluation means assessing and controlling the way people work together and should be a constant part of a collaborative process.
- **Outcome evaluation** deals with what has been completed and what is yet to be done. It is mostly about technical (planning) issues, although a final evaluation of a project, classified as outcome evaluation, can also include social aspects.

Although these activities will often be mixed in practice, it is important to keep in mind that they refer to different facets of the process and that it may be necessary to address them separately.

Like documentation, evaluation can be said to have an internal and an external purpose: regular process evaluation is mainly for the benefit of the planning group itself and may be done in an informal way. Evaluation of the outcome, by contrast, should be performed (and documented) more formally.

## Process evaluation

### CHECK-IN AND FEEDBACK

It is a good idea to start group meetings with a talking round of some five or ten minutes called a **check-in**. During this round every participant in turn will have the opportunity to express their situation and expectations of the day: **how they feel** and **what they wish to achieve**. This will naturally include technical questions, thus giving a basis for subsequent outcome evaluation. If a particular group gathers for the first time, this is also the time everybody can briefly introduce themselves.

Later on, similar **feedback** rounds can be held in order to make everyone express their degree of **satisfaction** and address possible **problems**. Contrary to the check-in, feedback rounds should focus on the social aspect, while the technical outcome, being far less subject to anyone's mental state, should be evaluated separately.

Both activities profit from the presence of a skilled facilitator who will know when and how to launch a check-in or feedback round.

## A QUICK GROUP WORK EVALUATION METHOD

When speaking in front of a whole group, people are sometimes reluctant to be honest about communicative and interpersonal problems: they may for instance have a bad feeling but consider it premature to speak up; they may be intimidated by the impression of authority others convey or just fear that their opinion will be rejected.

The following quick survey can help overcome these problems. It has been designed especially for collaborative **groups of 5 to 15 members** and should be performed on request of any of the participants who may have the feeling that the group is experiencing problems. It consists only of two easy-to-answer questions (or rather, ratings) but these will reveal a lot about the situation inside a group.

### Quick group work evaluation

Please rate the applicability of the following two statements by any number from **1** to ***n***, where ***n*** is the number of members of your group.

A rating of ***n*** means: I fully **agree**.

A rating of **1** means: I fully **disagree**.

- Within the group, I am able to make myself heard and contribute my own ideas and concepts. (*Statement 1*)
- I am satisfied about the way the other group members act. (*Statement 2*)

With statement 2, please do *not* give one point for every group member you are content with but try to express a general degree of satisfaction.

The survey should be performed by secret ballot and evaluated anonymously, ideally by someone not involved in the discussion. That person will be responsible for interpreting and presenting the results for discussion. It is, however, important that **all group members take part** in the survey.

The statements address the social part of the process from every single participant's perspective. As conflict is natural with negotiations in collaborative planning, it is rather unlikely that both statements will receive a maximum rating from all participants.

What matters are both the **average rating** (sum of all ratings divided by the number of participants) and the **range of ratings** (maximum – minimum rating) for each statement.

With these figures computed, table 1 proposes some interpretations which are likely to be correct for cases where values of 'high' and 'low' can be established. **High**, in the table, means **more than  $3/4 n$**  (where ***n*** is the number of group members) and **low** means **less than  $1/4 n$** . Values in between will make interpretation more difficult.

Table 1: Interpretation of different survey results. Entries in brackets are likely to occur in connection with a scenario but are not decisive and may vary.

Statement 1		Statement 2		Interpretation
Average	Range	Average	Range	
high	low	high	low	The process seems to be well balanced. Everyone has a voice and uses it in a fair way.
low	high	low	(low)	A minority dominates most others which is not accepted by the majority.
low	high	high	(low)	A minority dominates most others but this seems to be generally accepted. Most likely one party has a major advantage in technical insight, creativity or experience and uses it for the benefit of the project.
high	high	high	high	A minority is dominated by a majority and does not accept it. The majority does not seem to care.
high	high	high	low	A minority is dominated by a majority but accepts it for the moment.
high	high	low	(low)	A minority is dominated by a majority which is not generally considered satisfying.

If one of the above interpretations is possible, it should be presented to the group and compared with what everyone feels. This will most likely launch a discussion on the situation inside the group. The advantages of the survey method over starting right away with a discussion are:

- Given that the survey is performed anonymously, participants are likely to give faithful assessments they would possibly have suppressed otherwise.
- Contrary to open discussion where politeness often requires it, the survey does not compel people to estimate their own faults which is generally very difficult.
- The method is somewhat objective and can therefore convince participants that they are right about their feelings.

However, every statistical interpretation is an abstraction from reality. The method presented here cannot establish for sure but only suggest what the situation may be.

# Outcome evaluation

## DURING THE PROJECT

Every event held during a collaborative process, including public meetings, is likely to have an agenda which will state what is to be achieved in its course. Additionally or alternatively, goals and expectations can be set during a check-in round as described above in a more informal way.

But while process evaluation during an event is a matter of everybody, outcome evaluation can easily, and often more efficiently, be referred to a single person. A **post-meeting outcome evaluation**, performed by that person, should then summarise what has been achieved and what remains to be done. That does not exclude discussions, but technical aspects can usually be traced and stated with less doubt and personal bias than social ones. Evaluation in this technical sense should enter the official documentation.

## WHEN THE PROJECT HAS BEEN COMPLETED

Unless the process was very short and the planning group very small, the final evaluation of a collaborative process should be performed through a written **report** which may include surveys where opinions or experiences rather than hard facts must be gathered. In this final instance, outcome evaluation may include a summary of how the process went on an interpersonal level, thus combining both technical and social aspects.

For the purpose of establishing a true image of interpersonal issues in the group, the above-mentioned 'Quick group work evaluation method' can be used. Some topics for a final evaluation can also be derived from the following two generic questions:

- Do you consider the plan or solution established **technically mature**?
- Does the plan or solution represent a **consensus**, meaning that everybody can at least accept it as a long-term stable basis for future planning?

More (and more concrete) questions will arise from the context of the project. If a planning project runs under a funding programme, the programme often defines its own standards of outcome evaluation.