

## Asking Useful Evaluation Questions

Dr. Bernadette Wright & Dr. Ladel Lewis, July 23, 2014

### So What?

“So what?” is a question that any effective evaluation must answer. Unlike some purely theoretical studies that researchers might conduct to satisfy their own curiosity or add trivial facts to a field, evaluations must center on their purpose of providing information that decision-makers can use for planning and action. The *American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles* note, the “primary aim” of evaluators is to provide “the best possible information that might bear on the value of whatever is being evaluated.”

Funders often want to see certain measures of effectiveness and impact to show how projects are worth their investment. However, your staff and leadership team and stakeholders may require different information for planning and decision-making. In conversations with stakeholders, a few considerations can help you identify questions that will lead to useful findings:

- What questions do you think are especially important to address?
- How do we plan to use the findings? Who else might use them and how?
- What if we find the answer we expected?  
What if we find no evidence?

Related studies and initiatives are another source for identifying questions that your evaluation might answer that could enable you to become a national model. What do we know from what

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*American Evaluation Association  
Guiding Principles for Evaluators,  
<http://www.eval.org/p/cm/ld/fid=51>*

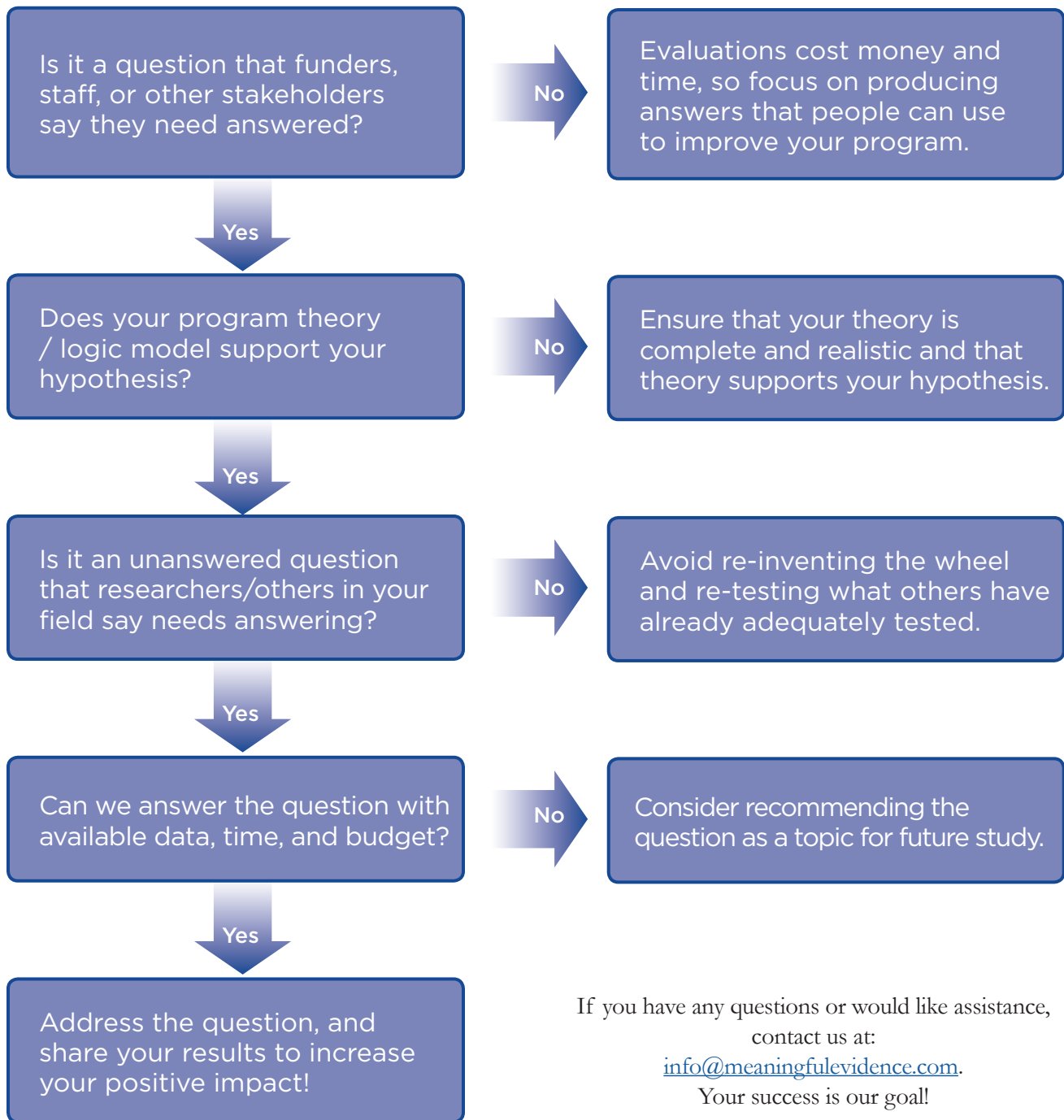
others have done? What are the knowledge gaps and recommendations for future research that your evaluation might fill?

An agreed-upon program description and logic model showing how your idea will work is another source of potential questions. Which of your activities and strategies are based on well-researched effective practices? Which parts are new and have not been tested before? What are the areas of uncertainty?

Your available data, time, and budget will determine what questions you can answer in a meaningful way. For example, if you want to better understand the problem you are addressing, a large national survey or literature synthesis may provide the data you need. For assessing effective strategies and effects of a new initiative in your neighborhood, a case study would be better. To measure long-term effects, you will need longitudinal data collected over several years.

The flowchart on the following page will help you decide if a question would be useful to answer.

### Flowchart for Choosing Useful Evaluation Questions



Meaningful Evidence, LLC  
1069 West Broad Street #141  
Falls Church, VA 22046  
703.348.0061 | [info@meaningfulevidence.com](mailto:info@meaningfulevidence.com)