PATHFINDER

ADVOCATE EDITION

A PRACTICAL GUIDE
TO ADVOCACY EVALUATION

We define advocacy as "a wide range of activities conducted to influence decision makers at various levels."

This definition intentionally includes not only traditional advocacy work like litigation, lobbying, and public education, but also capacity building, network formation, relationship building, communication, and leadership development.

Introduction

Who Does Advocacy?

Many nonprofit organizations these days are using advocacy strategies to meet their missions. Advocacy has become a common strategy across many different programmatic areas. Organizations focusing on education, health, the environment, children and youth, arts, and more, can all use advocacy techniques to sway public opinion, build support, and encourage policy change.

What Is This Guide?

Just like any other work nonprofits engage in, advocacy needs to be continually assessed, tweaked, and strengthened through a process of evaluation and learning.

This guide is an introduction to advocacy evaluation from the advocate's perspective. It is not a detailed how-to. Reading it won't mean you can go out and evaluate your advocacy work single-handedly. But it will give you a sense of what is involved in advocacy evaluation and help you get the most from an evaluation when the time comes.

Advocacy Evaluation: A Growing Field

In the past, advocacy work was considered too difficult to evaluate. However, over the past few years, an increasing number of individuals and organizations have driven the field forward: providing support, conducting research, creating resources, and building capacity. This guide builds on the strong foundation built by the field. It is Innovation Network's latest contribution to advocacy evaluation's continued advancement and enrichment.

Innovation Network has been involved in the advocacy evaluation field since 2005. We have worked with advocates to evaluate their work, and we want to share what we have learned. We have found that our approach—learning-focused advocacy evaluation—results in an evaluation that yields the type of information funders and advocates need.
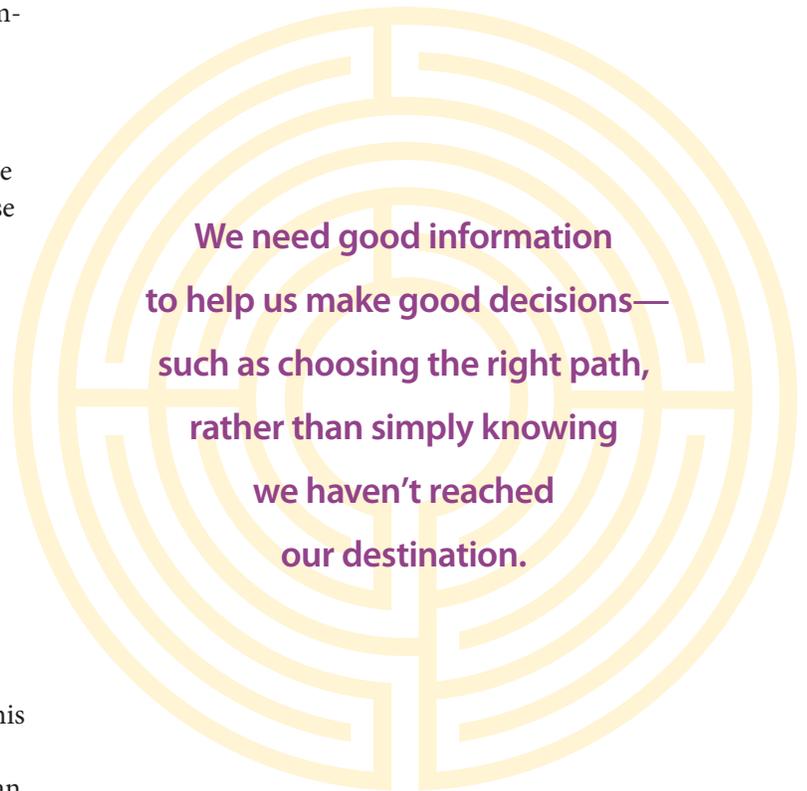
Learning-focused advocacy evaluation helps advocates understand their progress long before a visible, public success. It generates information that advocates can use to strengthen decision making. And through a deeper understanding of progress and enhanced

information, advocates are more likely to achieve success. There are also secondary benefits: Advocates can share what they learn about their work with stakeholders to be accountable, communicate success, and demonstrate effectiveness.

What's the Difference?

In many ways, advocacy is different from direct service or other nonprofit approaches. Some examples of those differences include:

- **Time frame.** Many advocacy campaigns—or even components of an advocacy campaign—take longer than the duration of a grant award to come to fruition. Trying to meet reporting requirements, advocacy organizations may overstate their ability to accomplish a "big win"—e.g., a new immigration policy, a cleaner river, an improved foster care system—within a single grant period, even though such a "big win" may take decades to attain.

- **Need for sustainability.** Advocacy organizations need to be sustainable over the life of an issue, which, as noted above, can be decades or more. This kind of sustainability requires strong infrastructure and robust capacity—qualities that will keep an advocacy organization viable for as long as it takes to achieve its ends.

- **Contribution, not attribution.** Proving attribution can be costly and difficult. Instead, in the field of advocacy, understanding your *contribution* to a win yields useful information without alienating partners or using up resources unnecessarily. Also, you may not want to be the one to "own" an advocacy win. Attributing a win solely to your organization could damage your alliances with like-minded organizations and other decision makers.

- **Documenting progress.** Since advocacy's long-term goals are relatively far into the future, advocates need interim measures of success. These serve as milestones to show work is on track, keeping you informed about progress and helping you share success stories on the way to the "big win."

We need good information to help us make good decisions— such as choosing the right path, rather than simply knowing we haven't reached our destination.

Since advocacy work is different, it makes sense that the way we measure it differs, too. In advocacy, we need to focus more on the journey than on the final destination. We need good information along the journey to help us make good decisions—such as choosing the right path, rather than simply knowing we haven't reached our destination.

Learning-focused advocacy evaluation generates the type of information critical to good decision making. It creates a culture of inquiry, learning, and striving to do the best possible work. Because we have found the approach useful with many of our consulting clients, we are sharing the following guiding questions to help you think through the basics of applying this approach to your own work.

Eight 8 Steps

to Learning-Focused Advocacy Evaluation

The primary reason to use

learning-focused advocacy evaluation

is to better understand your work:

to create a feedback loop

of information that leads to success.

1 Evaluation Purpose

Why are you conducting your evaluation?

Grant requirements or funder requests may be the trigger for embarking on an evaluation, but they shouldn't be the purpose. The primary reason to use learning-focused advocacy evaluation is to better understand your work: to create a feedback loop of information that enriches decision making, strengthens your approach, and leads to success. Defining what you want out of an evaluation is key to its value.

Who will be the audience(s)?

Other common purposes are to be able to show accountability, and to build communication. With whom do you want to share information? Consider your staff, board of directors, funders, the media, your community—these are all potential audiences for evaluation information.

2 Roles and Responsibilities

## What will your relationship be to the evaluation?

Advocates: Own the evaluation! Regardless of who initiated the evaluation, make sure the evaluation is structured to meet your needs. Make your voice heard in the planning stage, and stay involved throughout the life of the evaluation. Participate in the data collection and analysis. Learn about evaluation throughout the process to improve the design as the evaluation evolves.

What will be the balance between internal and external evaluation?

At the outset, consider the pros and cons of external and internal evaluation. An external evaluator can bring objectivity and evaluation expertise. An internal approach to evaluation—tasking organization staff to carry out evaluation roles—can build organization capacity for evaluation, and give advocates more influence over the evaluation process—but it can also be time-consuming. Reflect on the advocacy work and the evaluation purpose, and find the right balance between external and internal evaluation. An evaluation workgroup composed of staff, external evaluators, and other stakeholders is an effective way to unite, prioritize, and support an ongoing evaluation effort.

How involved can you be?

Think about what level of engagement and ownership could benefit your work the most. Consider how much influence you need to have in the evaluation design phase, especially if you are going through the evaluation primarily to satisfy a funder. At the same time, be realistic about how much time you can give to an evaluation process.
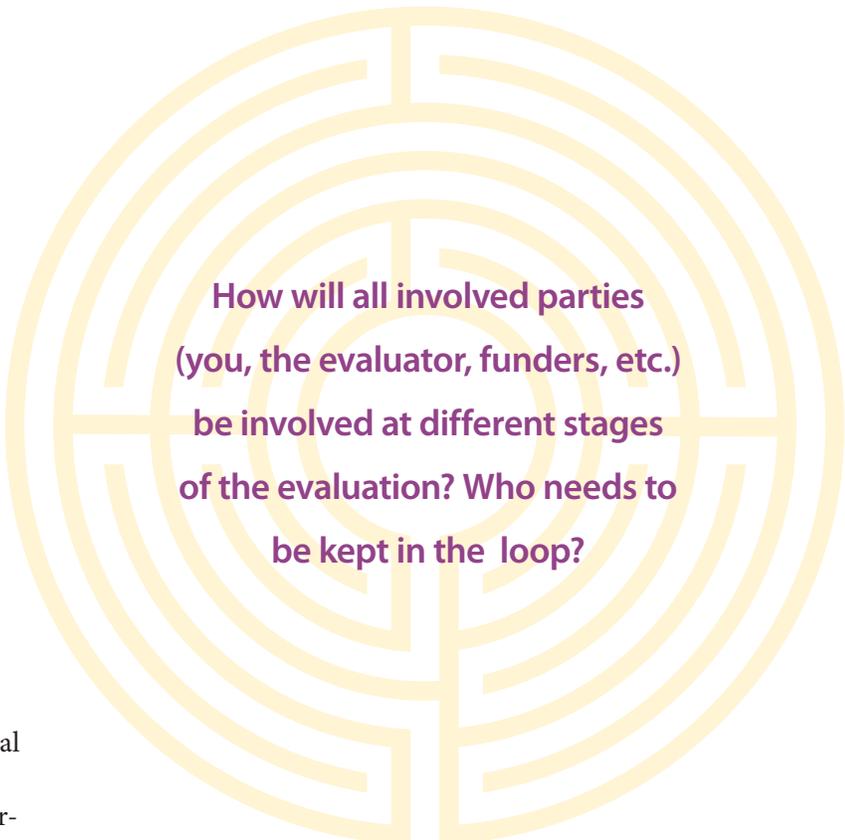
How will all involved parties (you, the evaluator, funders, etc.) be involved at different stages of the evaluation? Who needs to be kept in the loop?

How/when will key people involved in the evaluation communicate with each other?

Communication throughout the evaluation is critical. How will all involved parties (you, the evaluator, funders, etc.) be involved at different stages of the evaluation? Who needs to be kept in the loop? Don't be afraid to be a driver.

How can you involve and learn from your funder(s)?

Funders are uniquely situated to be your partner—not just a source of funding. Funders often have a broad perspective: They can see across many organizations working toward similar goals. Try to involve your funders as advisors. Keep them informed, and ask for their advice. Just as they are hoping to learn from your work, involve them and learn from theirs.

3   Theory of Change

**What are your longest-term goals?**

Which strategies will you use to get you there?

What are the changes that need to happen between now and when you get to your goal?

A theory of change, or any similar type of planning document (also called program plans, logic models, log frames, etc.), is the clarification and description of the changes you expect to occur as strategies unfold. The value of a theory of change is that it creates agreement on longest-term goals, intermediate goals that will signal success along the way, and strategies that will lead to success.

We all make assumptions. One of the biggest assumptions we've found in advocacy is about assessing progress. Often, there is agreement on Point A (where we are now, or the status quo), Point B (where we want to get to, or the change we want to achieve), and strategies that will get us from one to the other. But agreeing on these basics doesn't necessarily mean agreeing to what success will look like along the journey. If we agree to a media campaign strategy to achieve environmental policy reform, will interim success be signaled by earned media, changing public opinion, or new decision makers drawn to the cause?

A theory of change is a valuable tool, but the process of creating it is just as important. It builds consensus
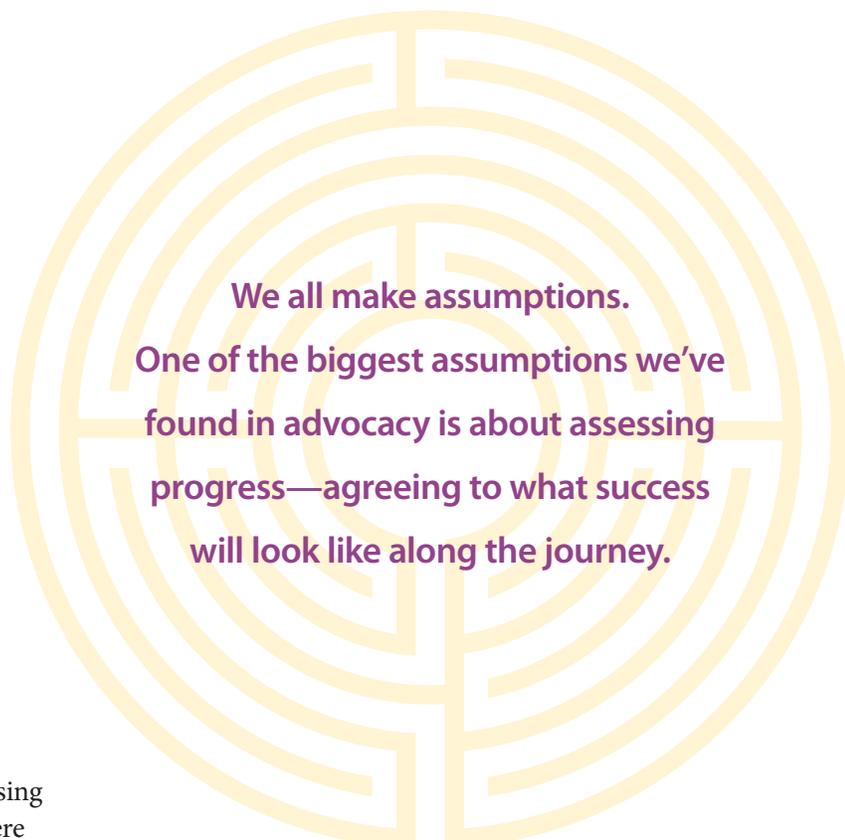
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about what you plan to do to move closer to Point B. Once you have a theory of change, you can use it to bring others on board with your idea. It's important to revisit your theory of change; don't let it stagnate. Check back on it as your work progresses, and don't hesitate to revise it to reflect changing strategies and anticipated goals.

4 What to Measure

Which external changes will the evaluation measure?

Which internal changes will the evaluation measure?

We've used the words "goals" and "success," but we haven't given a definition or examples. In the previous step we discussed how the theory of change process helps you describe what success looks like. Success isn't just your final goal; success is also incremental. It happens a little bit at a time. Consider these ways of talking about success:

■ **Build support/allies.** Since advocacy work is often grueling and long-term, your cause can gain strength by working with others. Enter into partnerships and coalitions, if it makes sense. Develop new generations of leaders. Recruit individuals and organizations with specialized skills, such as media strategy, web strategy, research, or grassroots organizing. You have a higher likelihood of achieving victory when you are not alone.

■ **Read/react to opponents.** Sometimes, a cause has clear opponents—for example, environmental advocates versus industrial interests, or pro-life activists against pro-choice activists. But there are other kinds of opposition that are less obvious. For example, you may be working on public school reform and another organization may be working on environmental reform, but you're both trying to get face time with the same legislator or donations from the same community. The environmentalist may ideologically support your issue, but just like you, they need to put their issue first. You need to be aware of all of your opponents, not just the obvious ones. Anticipate their moves and work to minimize any negative effects of their work on yours.

■ **Read/react to the climate.** The climate (in a political, social, and economic sense) influences your ability to be successful. In a favorable climate, you can make larger strides and set bolder definitions of success. In an unfavorable climate, success may be simply maintaining the status quo, or making sure things don't get much worse. You need to be aware of the changing environment to be able to take advantage of "opportunity windows"—times when the environment is aligned in your favor and success is more likely.

■ **Make progress with decision makers.** Begin by identifying the decision makers you want to reach out to. Be explicit: "Every Senator on the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works," or "Parents of children who attend public school in Greene County." Try to define each decision maker's current level of support for (or opposition to) your issue. Are they unaware, opposed, neutral, supportive, or a champion? Set targets for how you will change their support—such as informing them about your issue if they are unaware, or making a supporter into a champion. Once you have champions—use them!

Including an assessment of these types of changes—changes that happen outside of your organization—as part of the evaluation will bring new strength to your decision making and strategy. To be effective for the long term, advocates also need to build strength within their organizations and measure their progress.

Learning-focused advocacy evaluation assesses internal changes such as increased staff skills and know-how, lower staff turnover, and improved communications and knowledge sharing. Building and evaluating internal capacity is important, because your organization needs to be strong enough to see your cause through to the end.

What is the evaluation timeline through the next few months?

In addition to *what* you plan to measure, also think about *when* you should measure. Are there time-sensitive events for which you need to be prepared to gather information? Are there times like strategy sessions or board of director meetings when the campaign will need specific data for decision making?

5 Methodology and Data Collection

What evaluation methodology will meet your needs?

All of what you have thought through so far—assessments against the theory of change, the external and internal changes you plan to measure, and any important deadlines—goes into your evaluation plan.

The purpose of learning-focused advocacy evaluation is to have information at your fingertips—and to use that information to learn about your work. Some traditional evaluation designs work well for many types of programs, but are less suited to learning-focused advocacy evaluation. For example, a summative evaluation reviews a program when it is completed. That is good for learning about how to make a pilot program work better next time, but it is less useful for program adjustments on the fly. We recommend evaluation designs that are structured to collect and produce information during advocacy work. Two such designs are:

- **Formative evaluation** is conducted while a program or effort is being implemented. The evaluation assesses program results against a program plan, which is agreed to at the outset. The purpose of formative evaluation is to compare what really happens with what you expect to happen. This helps you adjust your strategy when something isn't working, or to focus more on an activity that is working well.

- **Developmental evaluation** holds particular promise for the fast-paced world of advocacy. Coined by Michael Quinn Patton (1994), developmental evaluation is specifically meant to support ongoing decision making as an organization's work unfolds. Developmental evaluation is distinguished by its flexibility in complex contexts. It is most suitable in contexts—like advocacy—that have many moving parts, and in which outcomes and pathways to success are unclear. It accepts that progress toward a goal may be the only measure of success, particularly in the short term.

How can you improve the data you're already collecting?

What new data will you need to collect?

After settling on an evaluation design, you will need to decide how to collect data. A good place to start is by looking at what data your organization already collects, and strengthening those systems to make them more systematic and rigorous. This will help determine what new data you will need to collect to support what you have decided to measure. Don't be tempted to collect data that would be nice to know; only collect what you *need*, and know you will use. Also consider how much time it will take to get a data collection system up and running, and to maintain it.

We commonly describe evaluation data in two categories:

- **Monitoring and Tracking** refers to ongoing, systematic data collection, such as media tracking, meeting tracking, etc. This type of information is helpful for generating trend data to gauge progress over time. You are likely already collecting similar information, and the evaluation will seek to build on and strengthen your existing systems.

- **Telling the Story** adds the context. If media tracking (as part of monitoring and tracking) reports that your organization is getting more earned media, you can review a sample of the media articles, analyzing the nuances and changes in the media portrayal about you/your issue over time. What has changed? What has remained the same? Telling your story and linking seemingly disparate pieces of information allows others to understand the complexities of your environment and work, and the choices you made along the way.

Using these two types of information together paints a more vibrant and clear picture, illustrating not only the what, but the how and why of what you do.

6 Analysis, Reflection, and Data Use

How often should you analyze and reflect on the data the evaluation has collected?

**Who should be a part of the group that regularly reviews the data?**

Which data is for decision making within the organization?

Which data should be communicated outside of the organization?

Collecting good data wins battles. Using that data for decision making wins campaigns.

It is important to be systematic when collecting data. It is just as important to be systematic when analyzing and using data. After all, data collection isn't the purpose of an evaluation. The purpose is what you do with the data after you have collected it—use it to guide strategy, allocate resources, or communicate.

An evaluation workgroup is a great way to keep a group of people with complementary skills, experiences, and responsibilities focused on the evaluation. Set up a regular meeting schedule—every two weeks, once a month, or another time frame that makes sense for the pace and structure of your work. The evaluation workgroup should be charged to use evaluation findings for course corrections. Empower the workgroup to use data—for decisions about activities and strategies, and changes to the evaluation as the advocacy work evolves. The evaluation workgroup should also decide how and with whom to share the information generated by the evaluation. Use evaluation results to keep your supporters informed.
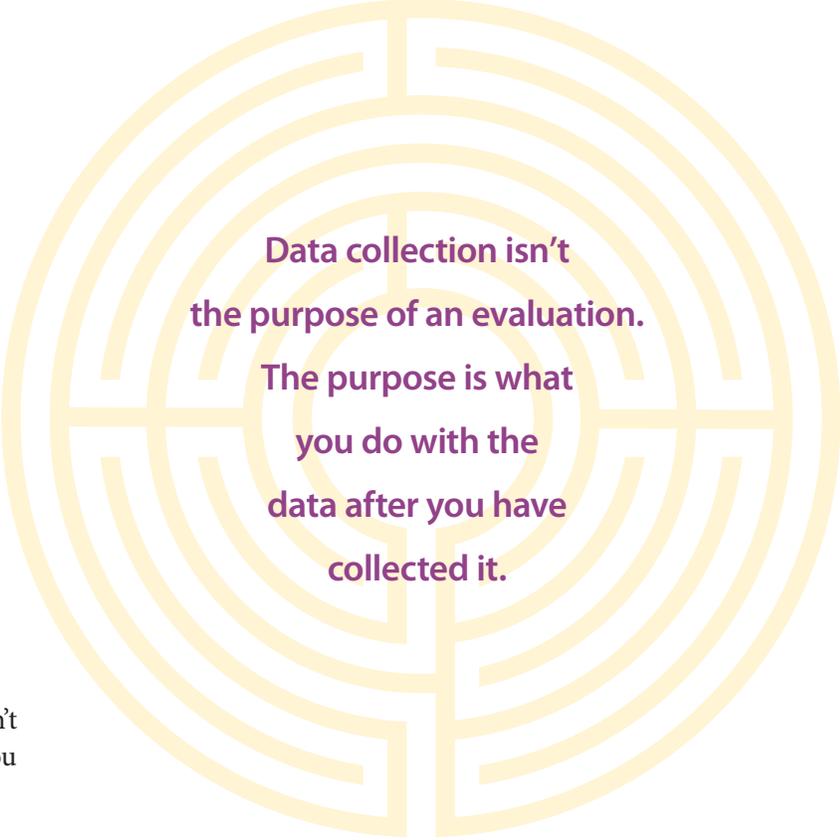
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7 Communications and Reporting

Who should be involved in regular evaluation check-ins?

How often should the group convene?

There are often three groups involved in an evaluation: advocates, evaluators, and funders. More often than not, the three groups lack regular, meaningful venues for communication. CC-ing your funder on an email is not enough. Ideally, an evaluation should convene representatives of all three groups regularly. What we're recommending are open (and often-used!) lines of communication between the three audiences. The easiest way to get started is to schedule regular check-in calls or meetings. A monthly or quarterly meeting to examine the evaluation data and review progress will let you improve the evaluation plan as it is implemented.

What reporting schedule best supports the work?

Annual reports can be great communication tools, but they present information too late for many uses. Instead of limiting yourself to an annual or quarterly report, devise a reporting schedule that meets the needs of everyone involved. Formal evaluation reports might not be necessary at all—unless that is what makes sense to the entire group. Don't be afraid to suggest more frequent, informal methods and venues for sharing evaluation updates. You can still have accountability without annual reports. In fact, we think more frequent and meaningful sharing of information is even more likely to bring about real accountability.

8 Checking the Big Picture

Do your responses for Steps 1 – 7 support each other?

Once you have addressed each of these sections (Evaluation Purpose through Communications and Reporting), go back and review your notes and thoughts. Reflecting on the evaluation purpose you identified, will your subsequent choices support that purpose? Do your colleagues agree with your theory of change? Are you striking a balance between ideal data collection—everything you'd like to know and be able to report—and the realistic—the most valuable and powerful data necessary for decision making and learning? Do you have a plan for how to analyze and use the data once it's collected?

If anything seems out of line, don't hesitate to modify the advocacy work or the evaluation. In fact, if anything seems awry during the course of the evaluation, bring it to the evaluation workgroup for consideration. The advocacy work will inevitably change over time, and so too should the evaluation.

Learn More

Evaluating your work is a challenge—we can't deny that. We hope this guide has shown you that it's a challenge you can meet. We are all working to change the world. Learning-focused evaluation gives us the knowledge we need to help see that change through.

Read about Innovation Network's advocacy evaluation work:
www.innonet.org/advocacy

Innovation Network maintains an online database of evaluation tools and resources, including more than 130 resources for advocacy evaluation. Free registration is required.
www.innonet.org/resources

Pathfinder: A Practical Guide to Advocacy Evaluation

This is the Advocate edition of the Pathfinder series. Tailored editions for funders and evaluators are also available on our website.

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