

RESULTS FROM **10**  
**ACTION**  
**RESEARCH**  
**PROJECTS**

SUMMARY  
REPORT



**BUILDING EVALUATION CAPACITY  
IN ONTARIO PUBLIC HEALTH UNITS**



**WHAT WAS  
THE GOAL OF  
OUR PROJECT?**

Using an action research methodology, this project sought to increase evaluation capacity in PHUs across Ontario by testing out some of the themes and strategies outlined in the scoping review.

## BACKGROUND

Under the Ontario Public Health Standards, Public Health Units (PHUs) in Ontario are required to evaluate their programs and services. Despite these expectations, many PHUs across Ontario lack the capacity to do evaluations and use evaluation results for decision-making. This is why building evaluation capacity in PHUs across Ontario is so important.

This Locally Driven Collaborative Project (LDCP) was led by the Eastern Ontario Unit in partnership with eight other PHUs and an academic advisor. It continued the work from an earlier project where we assessed the evaluation capacity in 32 of 36 Ontario PHUs. We also conducted a scoping literature review (Hotte, Simmons, Beaton, & the LDCP Workgroup, 2015) to determine effective evaluation capacity building (ECB) strategies for use in a public health setting.

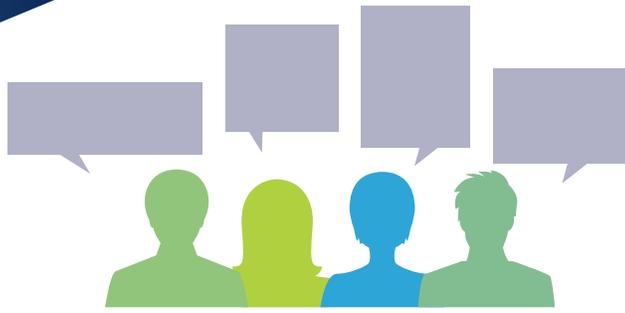
These strategies are grouped within six key themes, which are necessary for building evaluation capacity (EC) in an organization..

These **6**  
themes  
are

1. Leadership support for evaluation
2. An organizational environment conducive to evaluation
3. Adequate resources for evaluation
4. External supports such as technical assistance, fellowships, and partnerships
5. Building individual skills, knowledge and attitudes
6. Comprehensive organizational evaluation frameworks

WHAT DID WE DO?

12  
PHUs



A call for participation was sent to all interested PHUs and 12 PHUs agreed to participate. Participating PHUs were required to select an ECB strategy (for example: improve skills, or develop a knowledge translation framework), use action research methodology to conduct research based on

this strategy, and submit an implementation plan, progress report and final report to the Project Coordinator. PHUs were also required to re-assess their own ability to do and use evaluation as well as undergo key informant interviews. The project, from consent to completion, lasted approximately ten months.

## THEMES AND STRATEGIES SELECTED

### LEADERSHIP

Increasing leadership for ECB at the organizational level.

### ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Piloting a standardized process for the dissemination of evaluation results and follow-up with intended users.

Increasing staff capacity to understand, share, and utilize evaluation results using a Knowledge Translation Framework.

### BUILDING SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE, AND ATTITUDES

Internal professional development workshop focused on logic model development.

Development of a resource hub to support the evaluation component of agency annual program plans.

Re-establishment of a Community of Practice (CoP) focussing on evaluation as a method to increase staff knowledge and skills related to basic evaluation concepts.

Building the evaluation capacity of staff through an internal Research Community of Practice.

Development of a PHU wide communication campaign around evaluative thinking.

### COMPREHENSIVE ORGANIZATIONAL EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Building evaluation capacity through the development of evaluation guidelines for PHU staff.

Monitoring self-reported evaluation capacity, support, and buy-in after the introduction of a standardized evaluation and research process.

# Key Findings

## MAIN FINDINGS

Most projects achieved their stated objectives | Most PHUs plan to continue to build evaluation capacity within their organization beyond the project timeframe | Most PHUs saw increases in evaluation capacity within their organization

## FACILITATORS OF ECB

It is important to engage the target population when planning | Management buy-in at all levels (middle and upper management) is critical | Having all or the majority of staff participate in the ECB intervention was seen to positively influence the success of the ECB initiative | The organization's enthusiasm for ECB and the social and organizational context of the organization contributed to success

## BARRIERS OF ECB

Staff turnover | Enough time to do the project correctly | Negative perceptions of evaluation reduces the potential implementation of new practices | Lack of specialized staff in evaluation

## PROJECT LIMITATIONS

Only having 8 months to complete the project | Not having enough staff working on the project

## LESSONS LEARNED



### Understand the needs of staff and managers

Many projects employed surveys or focus groups to get a better sense, right from the beginning, of the existing knowledge, attitudes and expectations of staff towards evaluation. This ensured that the project was clearly aligned with PHU needs. It was also mentioned that investigating current staff knowledge and competencies regarding evaluation was essential to meeting staff needs. Not all staff members share the same level of competency in evaluation; the strategy should reflect the differences found within the group and highlight the competencies to be developed through the intervention.

**Ensure flexibility** It is important to implement the project in a flexible manner in order to meet the needs and schedules of all staff. Ensure that the intervention is accessible to staff members by offering different times, locations, or ways to participate.

**Promote ECB at all levels** Projects that promoted evaluation and ECB at all levels of the organization encountered less resistance; therefore it is important for project leads to be proactive when it comes to the promotion of their projects. Lack of promotion, in one case in particular, led to reduced involvement/participation by staff in project activities.

**Feasible and realistic timelines** ECB generally occurs over a longer period of time and this should be considered in the design of the project. One suggestion might be to consider ECB as a series of strategies to be implemented over time, each one building on the previous and reaching multiple levels of the organization.

### Ensure sufficient resources

Projects should have sufficient resources to achieve their objectives. This requires careful planning and ongoing project monitoring.

### Identify staff and management perceptions concerning evaluation

It is possible that evaluation might not be well understood by staff and managers in the organization, and that the announcement of an ECB initiative may not be well received. It is important to first identify staff and management's perceptions regarding evaluation and address these before starting an ECB initiative.

### Resistance to change

Understanding that resistance to change among staff is not uncommon. Breaking down the project into smaller components, implemented over a longer period of time, may help with this resistance and acceptance of change.

## KEY MESSAGES

**Leadership at all levels is critical:** The success of an ECB initiative is dependent on having strong leadership and buy-in for evaluation and evaluation capacity building at all levels.

**Staff members at all levels are interested in doing and using evaluation and in developing the skills necessary:** There was a lot of interest and enthusiasm for evaluation and evaluation capacity within PHUs. Staff members were eager to increase their skills and knowledge in these areas and saw the benefit increased capacity would provide.

**Engagement of the target audience is essential, especially at the outset of the project:** Understanding the needs and wants of the target population will ensure the strategy implemented is used and valued. Keeping the target audience engaged throughout and after the intervention ensures the uptake and sustainability of the initiative.

**Action research is a useful framing methodology to design, implement and monitor an ECB initiative:** Using an action research methodology allows PHUs to design, implement, and assess their own research projects. It is also a type of real-time research which allows for changes and modifications to be made throughout the implementation. Finally, it can be used for both simple and complex interventions.



## NEXT STEPS

The LDCP will be publishing, in addition to this summary report, a full report as well as housing a repository of practice on the Community of Practice for Public Health Evaluators (COPPHE) website. The repository of practice will include the description and results of each of the ten projects as well as any tools or documents developed by the PHUs. The LDCP team hopes these results and subsequent publications of the project findings provide PHUs and other organizations with useful information on evaluation capacity building and how it can be implemented within organizations.



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For a copy of the full report, please contact [lsimmons@eohu.ca](mailto:lsimmons@eohu.ca) or click on [www.publichealthontario.ca/LDCP](http://www.publichealthontario.ca/LDCP)