

“A PROCESS EVALUATION OF A GROUP PLANNING FOR HUMAN SERVICE INTEGRATION - A CASE STUDY.”

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ABSTRACT.

This paper presents a case study of a nine-month process evaluation undertaken as part of a larger three year project that is tracking the impact of organisational change on health services in southern Adelaide in the context of continual reform. An action-research based approach was used to accommodate the constantly shifting ground of human service reform.

The focus of this evaluation was a group of human service managers and bureaucrats from the inner southern area of Adelaide who met on a monthly basis with the objective of developing integrated planning and service delivery systems for their common clients.

Key issues for the evaluation included the “opportunistic” way in which the evaluation was commissioned and the implications of this in terms of group participation. Also, the participants’ attitude to the evaluation and how this affected its utility, the nature of the evaluation as one of process rather than outcomes, the power relationships within the group and the influence of the evaluation on the group processes and progress.

This paper provides some insights into the challenge of evaluating processes that are subject to constant changes and highlights the need to make evaluation as meaningful as possible to its stakeholders in a climate dominated by uncertainty.

Keywords: process evaluation, human service integration.

1. INTRODUCTION.

In 1998, the Flinders University Department of Public Health was awarded a Strategic Partnerships with Industry-Research and Training (SPIRT) grant to carry out a three year evaluation of organisational change amongst health care agencies in southern Adelaide. This project is known as the “Health Care Reform in Southern Adelaide Evaluation”. Its focus is the collaborative working relationships between three public hospitals and a community based home care service since they began discussions about forming a regional alliance in 1996.

In late 1997, the South Australian Department of Human Services was formed, amalgamating health, housing and welfare into one portfolio. One section of this department, the Metropolitan division that oversees most community-based primary care services, decided to examine ways in which the three sectors could provide more integrated services. One strategy was to set up regional planning forums comprised of agency managers from DHS-funded health, housing and welfare services and bureaucrats from the Metropolitan Division. The “inner southern” group, one of four set up, began meeting monthly in February 2000. Their aim was to discuss ways in which service delivery and planning for their region could become more integrated. The group had as its initial focus, the proposed construction of a multi-agency centre (MAC) which would allow the co-location of many of their agencies. This was seen as one way in which clients could receive integrated services from a single location. It also offered a solution to some of the agencies who were experiencing problems related to their inadequate accommodation. This part of the proposal subsequently became known as the CLC or community link centre project.

In July, 2000, one of the “Health Care Reform in Southern Adelaide Evaluation project” team members met with a senior manager from the Metropolitan Division and suggested that the inner southern forum could be evaluated and included as a case study for the wider project, using the existing funding. The DHS hierarchy was consulted and agreed to this proposal. A research officer for this evaluation was appointed in October, 2000 under the direction of the Health Care Reform in Southern Adelaide Evaluation oversight committee. It was proposed that, as with the wider project, an action-research model of evaluation be used. This was to allow for the changeable nature of human services reform processes and to facilitate the involvement of the stakeholders in the evaluation.

Documentation relating to the proposed evaluation indicated that DHS felt it would:

“...signal to stakeholders a willingness for funder/planning intervention processes within Metro(sic) division to be critiqued- it offers a measure of reassurance that there is depth to the change management process as initiated from within Metro Division.”

DHS Internal Memorandum, July 2000.

Another identified benefit was that it would not require any additional money. This memorandum is one of the few pieces of documentation that existed about the group or its activities prior to the evaluation. No minutes were kept of the meetings before the commencement of the evaluation.

The evaluation officially began in October 2000. It was clear from the outset that it could only be a process evaluation as it was unlikely that any concrete outcomes such as the construction of the CLC would be delivered in the nine months then allocated to the evaluation. During the time that the evaluation has been running, there have been a number of system changes that have affected the group including the resignation of the Executive Director of Metropolitan Division, followed by a restructure of the division and turnover of key staff within the region. All these external events have added to the uncertainty felt by the participants about whether the group can in fact deliver any concrete outcomes.

When the research officer attended her first meeting and introduced an evaluation plan to the group, the main reaction from them was uncertainty that there was anything that could be evaluated. The little documentation available indicated that the group had been informed about the possibility of an evaluation some months before but their reaction indicated that this was either forgotten or not taken in. Nonetheless, those present indicated their willingness to be interviewed individually about their participation in the group. Initial observations of the group were not encouraging. Processes appeared to be dominated by the DHS participants with little contribution from the agency managers present. Those who did contribute appeared to be sceptical about the likelihood that the group would achieve anything concrete. It is possible that they extended this scepticism to the evaluation and what it could offer them.

2. RESULTS OF THE FIRST ROUND OF INTERVIEWS.

Each participant was interviewed using a semi-structured format for approximately forty-five minutes. Questions included their reasons for attending the group, their views on how it was functioning and what they saw as the main benefits of integration and the barriers to its achievement. They were also asked if they had previously been involved in planning integration initiatives and what the outcomes had been. Finally, they were asked about how they viewed the evaluation of the group and ways in which it could possibly be useful to them. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and analysed using a computer package.

Key results of the first round interviews included:

There was overall agreement between agency managers and DHS bureaucrats about the broader aims of the group and the perceived benefits to clients, agencies and the system from human service integration.

There was a range of motivations amongst the agency managers for their attendance at the group. Some of these coincided with the stated aims of the group, i.e. to plan for integrated service delivery to clients, but others were less overt. For example, many of the managers stated that they felt obliged to attend the group as they believed not to do so may jeopardise their agency's position with its funder, DHS. In addition to this, many participants felt pressure to appear positive about the integration proposals and reluctant to raise concerns or criticisms:

“there are a lot of people sitting around that table who do not want to go to the meetings but go because they do not want to be seen to be undermining the process. It’s not that they’re not supportive of the idea, it’s just that nothing happens”

The interviews also revealed that most of the thirteen agency managers had been involved previously in integration proposals. Some had put a great deal of time and effort into these, only to see them fall by the wayside when there was no funding allocated or a change in government policy. For example, one manager had been seeking new accommodation for their agency for more than ten years and had even had several sets of plans drawn up. Each time, nothing had resulted and this manager was understandably sceptical that the CLC would actually be built. The current proposals had no designated funding as yet and many participants felt this was a major barrier to the successful operation of the group.

The four DHS participants did not share these doubts. Their interviews revealed that they believed this initiative would succeed where others had failed because it was bigger and better than anything that had gone before it. Unlike the agency managers, integration was a relatively new concept to the bureaucrats and they did not have the experience of past failure to discourage them. Their perceptions were that some managers were worried about how integration would affect their own agency budget and power base- what they described as “turf issues”. They saw this as the major barrier to the success of the project:

“I think the barriers will be what they always are which is the nature of organisations and competitiveness....so we’ve got a lot of professional interest to work through.”

3. ISSUES FOR THE EVALUATION.

3.1 Building utility for the evaluation.

The fact that none of the group members had actively sought an evaluation of this forum had significant impact upon the research officer’s ability to carry it out, particularly in the early stages. In their interviews, some of the agency managers were sceptical about what a process evaluation could offer and a few had a “summative only” view of evaluation and openly questioned exactly what there was to evaluate. This meant time needed to be spent during each interview explaining what the evaluation was about and how it could potentially be useful to them. It also meant extra efforts were needed to get the stakeholders to participate in the ongoing directions of the evaluation and to consult carefully with them about the emerging results.

In such a situation, developing a “utilisation focus” (Patton, 1997) for the evaluation was a challenge. The stakeholders needed to see the evaluation in action and some of the results before they could envisage how it could be useful to them. Information about the proposed methodology and interview questions was given to the group but no feedback was received. Prior to the interviews, a strong emphasis was placed on confidentiality and de-identification of any material to be used. Also the group was assured that the report would be given to

them for input before proceeding further. This was to prove important given the sensitive nature of some of the information the participants shared about the groups' functioning and their reasons for attending.

When the draft of the first report did come back to them, the members were relieved to see that their information had been carefully used and their concerns reflected in a way that was constructive. This in turn enhanced the standing of the evaluation and facilitated future data collection. This improved standing of the evaluation was evidenced by the groups' request that the report be forwarded to the DHS Executive group to allow their views to be known.

3.2 The nature of the evaluation.

This process evaluation of the group began in the middle of the project rather than at the beginning and will finish long before there are any large-scale outcomes from the project. The fact that no minutes were kept of the group meetings prior to the commencement of the evaluation meant it was very difficult to trace the early development of the group. There were no clear timelines in place for the achievement of the group's objectives and this means that a focus on the processes was the only avenue possible for the evaluation.

These factors contributed to the feelings of some participants that the group lacked definite direction and that it was unlikely to achieve anything concrete. However, one positive aspect of the nature and timing of the evaluation was that its introduction allowed the group the opportunity to take stock and identify a possible new direction. For example, once the results of the first round were made known, the group was able to use these to move on from its first phase to a new one in which issues were discussed more openly and the agency managers were taking a more active role than previously. The DHS staff also used the recommendations of the report in drafting new terms of reference for the group and suggesting possible directions for the group to pursue in the coming year.

3.3 The power relationships within the group.

As mentioned earlier, it was observed in the first meeting that the research officer attended, that the group appeared to lack energy and that the DHS staff were the most active in terms of raising issues and running the meeting. The agency managers in their interviews agreed that they felt some members were attending the group out of a sense of needing to be seen to be there and that this adversely affected the groups' function. Once the first evaluation findings regarding this were released, there was a visible relaxation within the group and feedback from the members indicated that they were relieved that this information was now on the table and could be dealt with openly. Further evidence of this "opening up" came with subsequent meetings having increased levels of participation by members and more openness about their doubts and concerns. The perceived power differential between the DHS staff and the agency managers appeared to have become less problematic and the members seemed to have realised that they shared many goals and that this gave them some strength in the process.

4. CONCLUSION.

In summary, the key outcomes of the first round of the evaluation were:

Minutes began to be taken at each group meeting, making it possible to trace the development and resolution of issues.

Agency managers were empowered by the evaluation's airing of their concerns about the group and began to take a more proactive role within the group.

The evaluation moved from being seen as something of questionable utility to being a useful tool in progressing the groups' activities, reflecting their issues and opening up lines of communication between its members. In other words, it gained utility.

The evaluator was established as a person who could be trusted to handle sensitive information ethically and present it constructively. This in turn facilitated subsequent evaluation activities.

Overall, this process evaluation has evolved from appearing to have little utility and relevance to stakeholders who did not specifically request it, to a responsive and useful process that provided information and guidance to a diverse group, operating in an uncertain environment, with the common goal of seeking integrated human services.

REFERENCE.

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