

From Silos to Systems: Transforming an organisation's evaluative culture.

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Abstract

Following a series of reviews on the operation and organisational culture of the Victorian Department of Education & Training (DE&T), a number of initiatives were undertaken to enhance the operation and performance management capabilities of the organisation. One response was the formation in 2001 of an Evaluation Branch with responsibility for supporting the development of an evaluative culture. This paper describes the initial approach used by the Evaluation Branch to support a culture of continuous learning and improvement in programmes, projects and services. While different evaluation processes were in evidence across the Department, the implementation of the Evaluation Branch has highlighted a number of challenges. These include the focus of evaluation efforts within departments on accountability requirements vs. development needs; the project-specific focus of current evaluation practice rather than broader departmental objectives; the impact of Divisional “silos” on the development of cross sectoral evaluations; and the unevenness of evaluation experience and skills across the Department. Strategies employed to address these barriers are presented. These include the development of an evaluation framework for the Department; implementing a mapping process for project/programme development, evaluation planning and monitoring; establishing a communications framework to involve Divisional representatives; providing professional development based on identified areas of need in evaluation; and providing support at all stages of the evaluation process for all levels of coordination and management.

Key Words

culture, silos, evaluation, framework, strategies

Introduction

In the process of reform and change of the Victorian government, a number of models have emerged, become the leading model of government, and then subsided as a new framework replaced it. In the 1990s, the market bureaucracy of the Kennett era focussed on competitive tendering, competition, and cost-driven price-focused service delivery (Considine, 2001). Recently a new “network bureaucracy” has started to replace the market bureaucracy. This model emphasises culture, flexibility, and client-focused service delivery. Rather than competition being the driving force behind the model, as with market bureaucracies, the impetus is on developing and maintaining culture (Considine, 2001).

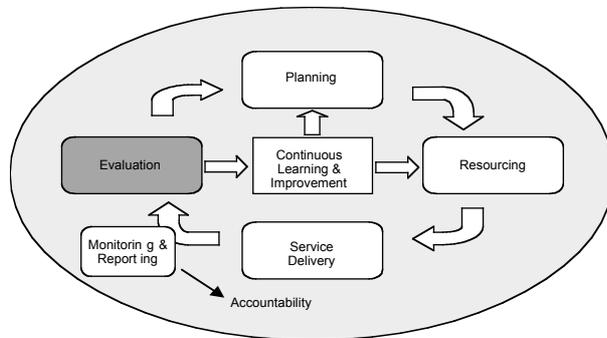
Within this context, a series of developments in Government policy have focussed on ensuring that the management of resources and the implementation of programs are directed towards servicing of client needs,

achievement of Departmental objectives, alignment with the Government’s identified goals and targets, fiscal responsibility, and value for money. One of the major criticisms that may be levelled at the public sector at present reflects the superseded market bureaucracy emphasis on competition; that is, the lack of communication between different areas, (e.g., units, divisions, offices and departments). This results in “silos” within Departments, where one Office may have rivalry with another, to the extent that there are separate divisions or branches in each Office that perform nearly identical functions.

In this context, a number of reviews have been conducted for DE&T. In 2000 The Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria (the Kirby Report) and the Report of the Ministerial Working Party – Public Education: the Next Generation (PENG) both gave strong support to the strengthening of the evaluation and review capacity of the Department of Education & Training (DE&T).

In 2001 the Secretary announced a new strategic performance management approach which embraced planning, accountability and resource allocation, supported by performance evaluation and review (DEET Circular 123/2001). Plans were outlined for the establishment of a culture of evaluation and review to develop a better balance between internal self-assessment and external review, and a greater openness to external scrutiny. The new Performance Review, Evaluation and Audit Division was created to foster this new culture and to monitor and evaluate the performance of the Department utilizing a whole of DE&T focus (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Integrated Management Cycle



A new Evaluation Branch within the Performance Review, Evaluation and Audit Division was developed and two shorter-term objectives and one longer-term objective for this Branch were set: the first to ensure strategic direction for evaluation activity consistent with Departmental goals, targets and priorities; the second, to support evaluation activity within the Department to ensure programs, services and activities are evaluated in a systematic and appropriate way; and third, to establish leadership in the provision of evaluative practice. This paper describes the strategies implemented within this framework to address the silos and to work towards developing a systems-based culture of communication about evaluation. This work is in its preliminary stages and as such this is a descriptive rather than empirical paper. It addresses the issues arising for the Branch and the Department of Education & Training in its implementation.

Through the use of an external consultant (Elvins Consulting), a range of strategies were developed to address these elements. Each of these strategies was intended to improve communication between units, Divisions, Offices, and the Evaluation Branch.

1. Evaluation framework

The first strategy was to develop an evaluation framework to provide an operational context for evaluation activities. This framework highlighted the importance of divisions and portfolio authorities preparing evaluation plans that complement their own business plans and responding to governmental and departmental priorities. This provided a structure by which the Department could develop its evaluative culture.

The framework proposed a continuous improvement model, embedding evaluation within the cycle of planning, resourcing, service delivery, monitoring and reporting, and continuous learning and improvement. It provided theoretical and practical background in a general format so that existing evaluations could be encompassed within the framework. An issue that made this decision particularly challenging was that the sector was unused to integrating evaluation and the other elements of programs. The evaluation framework laid down the background to the commitment to embedding evaluation into each unit’s work.

Included within the framework were descriptions of the integrated management cycle, links between evaluation and performance management, evaluation and program management, and the role and function of the Evaluation Branch. At present, the framework has been developed and submitted to the DE&T executive, and a qualitative evaluation is about to commence on management's commitment to implementing the framework.

2. Evaluation Technical Advisory Group

The second strategy was the instigation of an Evaluation Technical Advisory Group (ETAG) to act as a link with divisions. Historically there has been poor communication between groups within DE&T. Some form of meeting was needed to address this through providing communication channels between the divisions in conjunction with the centralised Evaluation Branch.

Alternatives considered included a series of "work groups" comprised of representatives across Offices that would work on a particular task for a specific amount of time and then disband, a seminar series for interested attendees, and a larger monthly meeting of representatives from all Divisions within DE&T. This latter sort of group relies on the members attending regularly rather than cancelling or sending a proxy. Given the possibility of perceived resistance to yet another committee, this was something the Evaluation Branch was aware might not be as effective as one would hope. It was decided to trial the larger meeting format initially to ensure broad interactions between representatives and to communicate messages efficiently throughout the Department.

Through discussion and consultation with the ETAG representatives, the roles of the representatives were defined and clarified. These are: to influence evaluative culture in the divisions wherever possible, be a conduit between the Division's evaluation needs and expertise in the Evaluation Branch, inform and inspire General Managers about evaluation activities and to act as sounding board and advisor to the Evaluation Branch. The Evaluation Branch provides support to the ETAG representatives in order to facilitate them performing this role.

Six meetings have been held to date and an evaluation of the percentage and number of ETAG representatives who regularly report to and from Divisions about evaluation will be assessed shortly, with the aim of achieving 80% of representatives regularly reported to their divisions.

3. Evaluation support

The third strategy to address silos in DE&T was to provide evaluation support to the Divisions through advice and professional development. This strategy was seen as a central role of the Evaluation Branch at least initially. It was thought that the support required might change in content and nature over time, as project and program managers enhance their evaluation skills. One of the elements of this strategy was to develop an evaluation guide. This became a practical guide to be used when developing an evaluation plan, providing details of the types of evaluation designs, some basic skills, and standards and ethical guidelines to inform evaluation design.

One issue that emerged as the Evaluation Branch staff started to provide support was the need for project and program design training. To address this need, a decision model was developed and included in the evaluation guide. During the development of the project and program design template a series of consultations were conducted with each division: people with expertise in program and/or project design were asked for feedback on an initial model. It became apparent that the template needed to address the differences in scale of designing a project and a program. These issues were resolved by including elements that were applicable for one or other of the types, which could be dismissed if not appropriate. In this way, a common framework could be tailored to the more specific needs of designing projects, and the more global needs of program design.

Another element to providing support was to address the evaluation professional development needs of staff. Across the Department the range of evaluative skills varied widely. A training needs analysis revealed that over a third of the branch managers and program staff in the sample had received no formal training in evaluation, with the remainder having done training ranging from a short course on evaluation or related subjects, to postgraduate evaluation or research methods. (see Table 1).

Table 1
Evaluation training of branch managers and program staff

	Branch managers		Program staff	
	n	% of staff	n	% of staff
No formal training in evaluation	9	39	34	37
Short course on evaluation or related	10	43	42	46
Undergraduate evaluation or social research methods	6	26	21	23
Postgraduate evaluation or social research methods	8	35	23	25
Other training	1	4	14	15
Total	23	*	91	*

*Total percentages >100 as multiple responses were possible.

It was challenging to develop evaluation messages in a format that was appropriate and useful to cater to the range of experience. At present, professional development courses have been held and are undergoing evaluation.

A third element to providing support to the Divisions was to provide guidance on Departmental evaluation practice when required, and to support Divisions in their evaluation practice. These elements will be evaluated for effectiveness based on clients' confidence with evaluation and their responses to the professional development or support provided.

4. Annual evaluation plan

The fourth strategy to address silos in DE&T was the development of an annual evaluation plan which would provide an overview of evaluation activity and recommend directions for future evaluations.

The Annual Evaluation Plan was a strategy designed to address the need for a systematic and open record of evaluations being planned, currently being conducted, and having been conducted in the previous year. The Branch, in conjunction with the Division, maintains a rolling plan of evaluations agreed annually by the Departmental Executive. The Evaluation Plan takes account of the outputs from the Department Business Planning process.

The Evaluation Plan contains details of timelines, resources and consultation procedures for all evaluation activities in the Department. Included are evaluations conducted or commissioned by the Department, as well as evaluations or reviews initiated by external bodies e.g. Auditor-General performance audits, Treasury output reviews, Public Accounts and Estimates Committee reviews and Commonwealth enquiries. A broad definition of evaluation was used in formulating the Evaluation Plans which includes the following evaluation methods:

- Monitoring for program quality and performance
- Stakeholder satisfaction surveys
- Business process re-engineering
- Program/policy/project/service reviews.

A document such as this allows the quality and extent of evaluation within a Division, Office, or the whole Department to become clear. Through allowing Offices, Divisions, and units to compare their evaluation plans with others, it is possible to develop networks within the Department. Over time, the quality of evaluation plans will be monitored. Recommendations can then be made about how to improve evaluation within each sector. This was a somewhat challenging task, as culturally the silos have made divulging information to central units dependent on individual units' willingness to do so. Measurement of this element will centre around the number of hours taken to complete the Department Evaluation Plan, and the percentage and number of programs over a particular size that are being evaluated.

5. Evaluation database

The fifth strategy to address the silos in the Department was to develop an evaluation database that would provide a record of evaluations and consultants. One of the issues within the Department is the lack of information exchange between areas of the Department with respect to evaluations and the consultants used for

the externally contracted evaluations. In particular, the repeated use of the same consultants to produce work, at times of questionable quality, was widespread. This could be addressed by developing a register of consultants and of evaluations accessible to all, that included information about the quality of each evaluation. This initiative is at the development stage, with plans to link it in with the already-online Research Database. The success of this venture has yet to be evaluated, but will focus on time taken to develop and update the database and the percentage increase in number of requests for information from the database.

6. Conduct evaluations

The final strategy to address the silos in DE&T was to conduct significant cross-portfolio evaluations. The Department has to date relied on external reviews and audits to gain a picture of issues that cross the different sectors. Aside from external reviews, rarely have there been internally generated cross-divisional evaluation projects. This is something that the Evaluation Branch attempted to address through the development of a programme of cross-sectoral evaluations, and encouragement of the Divisions to plan this type of evaluation where possible. The projects to be conducted include an evaluation of the post-compulsory reform outcomes across Divisions, a project examining the effectiveness of the disabilities program, and the development of a model for evaluating policy provision. These strategies are about to commence. Evaluation will address the performance indicators for each project, as well as the percentage and number of divisions that include a strategy to implement recommendations from the evaluations, as appropriate.

Discussion

The Department of Education and Training has a strong commitment at all levels to accountability for outputs and outcomes of its programs. However, in practice the focus of much reporting is a justification of the costs associated with a program in terms of the outcomes and outputs. While it is still too early to be able to assess which of the strategies employed has been successful, preliminary evidence suggests that the Professional Development activity was well received, as was the support provided to project and program staff. Somewhat less enthusiasm has been associated with the Evaluation Technical Advisory Group, where it was unclear what the purpose and benefits were to the attendees. The meetings where a high-profile speaker presented evaluation-themed information were the best received, suggesting that a seminar series might well be a more popular strategy.

The Annual Evaluation Plan was met with some resistance, probably because it demands the most accountability by Offices. The progress of significant projects listed within is now to be reported to Executive quarterly. While the sentiment expressed is at best wary, it is possible that this strategy might provide the greatest gains in quality of evaluation in the long term.

The Evaluation Framework and the Database are tools that will show their effectiveness in the long term. In retrospect, it may have been more useful to define the ways the framework would be used more clearly so that implementation required explicit action by the executive levels of the Department. This way it would have been easier to measure the effectiveness of the strategy. Time will reveal how much the culture of the organisation has changed consistent with the framework.

Possible future strategies that could be employed might address the continued need to link people in units, divisions and offices. Perhaps a seminar series in evaluation or workshops on a particular evaluation-related subject would be effective. At the planning and strategic level, it would be useful to formalise a requirement to embed evaluation planning in the strategic and business planning and funding application processes.

The evaluation strategy developed through the partnership between DE&T and Elvins Consulting breaks new ground in a number of ways. Where previously there was no system for evaluation within the Department, there is a strategic approach consistent with the direction in which the Department is moving. Secondly, the approach aligns with the Performance Management philosophy within the Department, embedding evaluation into a continuous learning cycle. Thirdly, emphasis is on empowerment, where the development of the Evaluation Branch was designed to support up-skilling of staff from community workers and project managers through to general managers. The systematic approach to evaluation described in this paper has already started to increase awareness of the need for quality evaluations throughout the Department. In time, the strategies outlined show promise of changing the culture of the organization.

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