Performance Evaluation in the Community Sector: a practical approach

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Abstract
Working in the community sector requires the evaluator to adjust to large variations in organisations and roles. I discuss some aspects of the sector and some of the strategies I use for delivering enabling, engaging and hopeful evaluations.

Working in the community sector presents particular challenges. There are the technical complications of process and the personal ones of working with people who are clients or workers in areas of grinding need without enough resources. Tissues are often an essential part of my evaluator's kit.

It is the personal challenges that have led me to think about what I want to deliver to organisations in the community sector. Lately, I have decided that it is not enough to deliver competent, well balanced reports based on sound evaluation processes. I always intend to deliver these, but I have been exploring how to design processes that are enabling, engaging and hopeful as well.

The sector
While the words community sector imply some sort of entity, if it exists at all it is a complex, diversified and growing one. In 2000 the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2001:7) found that there were approximately 9280 employing businesses, 2800 for profit and 5930 not for profit and 548 government organisations. While the number of government organisations had remained static, the other organisations had increased since June 1996 by 32% for profit organisations and 10% in the not for profit organisations.

The community sector organisations (CSOs) range from having budgets in the 10s of millions with excellent physical, organisational and human resources to those that have budgets of $200,000 or less with no one working full time in rented accommodation with few organisational resources.

The staff in community service organisations are increasing well qualified and the introduction of certificate level qualifications in Welfare Services and Youth Work have contributed to the opportunities for staff to get a base level appropriate qualification. There is also a move towards better qualifications for managers. The larger organisations and Local Government are increasingly stipulating that people taking up management positions have appropriate qualifications. In Victoria, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare are offering a Graduate Certificate in Business

Excellence in 2006 which will replace previous courses. In those, over 300 people have completed the Certificate 3 and 75 the Certificate 4 in Organisational Self Assessment.

Pressures of increasing accountability and towards developing better management practices are leading to organisations allocating resources to in house quality management positions.

These developments auger well for the larger organisations, but are considered to be just another impost on the smaller, more fragile organisations. The fact that they are delivering services at all is a testament to the high levels of commitment of the staff and volunteers.

Purposes of evaluation

There are many purposes for program evaluation. Morris and Fitz-Gibbon (1978:7) have listed six models of program evaluation, all trying to achieve particular purposes including measurement against goals, support for making decisions, identifying program processes, identifying effects for the purpose of program development, identifying effects apart from the program's conceptual framework and developing alternate explanations for observed effects.

My experience is that all of these are used as reasons to employ an evaluator, but most often organisations want evidence about the worth of a program or they want to make a change and the evaluator's work becomes leverage as part of the change management process.

For an evaluator working in the community sector, the differences between community service organisations and the purposes for which they are employed require a great deal of flexibility in both the roles they take on and the strategies they use to do their work.

Roles

The roles that evaluators take on are, in part, a response to these purposes and the resource base and sophistication of the organisation. Roles include being and expert, auditor, advisor, facilitator and mentor. The higher the resource base and sophistication of the organisation, the more evaluator's role is to be expert or auditor. In very fragile organisations, the role moves to being advisor, facilitator or mentor. An individual evaluator may be called on to act these roles in sequence or use different approaches with different groups within an organisation.

Individual evaluators may also have a preference for some of the roles.

Strategies

Three strategies that have been proving particularly useful are Bennett's Hierarchy, Goal Attainment Scaling and Directed SWOTS.

Bennett's Hierarchy

Program logic approaches are in current favour and one that I have found particularly useful was developed in North America in the 1970's in agriculture. Claude Bennett (1975) integrated the steps for program development with those for program evaluation. By focusing ion each in turn the evaluator is able to complete a through evaluation of the program, organisation of sector. The areas he suggests for designing a program are:

- the desired social, economic and environmental changes
- practice changes that will be needed to achieve these changes
- needed changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills and aspirations
- the expected responses to any changes and their management
- who will be involved
- what activities will happen
- what resources are needed.

I have found that people in organisations appreciate the clarity of the model. They contribute to identifying sources of information and finding it out because they have seen the logical necessity for it. Unlike some more sophisticated tools where the underlying program logic is not shared, people take ownership of the process early in the evaluation.

There is a lot of information about the uses of Bennett's Hierarchy and a subsequent development Targeting Outcomes of Program on the web. Start with http://citnews.unl.edu/TOP/synopsis.html which uses TOP in an educational setting.

Goal Attainment Scaling

The instrument for Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS) is laid out as an ordinal level measurement table. Across the top the goals or domains of activity are recorded. These can be ascertained from the literature or through negotiation with the CSO.

Down the side of the table are five levels of achievement. I use labels such as exemplary, excellent, expected, needs improvement and needs redoing.

In each box particular, detailed indicators are developed so that decisions can be reached about the current level of performance for each domain. Again, this can be done by the evaluator or with the stakeholders.

I initially used GAS with some trepidation but have found that people have a well developed sense of what differentiates performance that needs improvement from exemplary performance and are very happy to give even the worst assessment. I have also found that since, they themselves have made the judgment and there is information about what needs to be changed to improve, they are enthusiastic about masking changes.

Directed SWOTS

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis comes out of the management area. For information about its uses as the first step in organisational planning see http://www.quickmba.com/strategy/swot/.

I have found in CSO settings that the information that is revealed through this technique is often widely divergent, unreliable and needing a lot of interpretation.

After identifying areas that need further investigation, either through paper based or interview techniques, I use a focus group to develop a richer understanding of each area. I allocate each area to a sub-group and allow them time to do a SWOT for that area. When the groups have completed that, their responses are rotated to the other groups who also have a chance to contribute to that area. The quality of the information gathered is better and more easily used.

Part of a whole

By concentrating on these techniques I do not mean to suggest that they are complete in themselves, but rather that I have found that they contribute to the positive involvement of stakeholders and provide useful information that can be part of a high quality pertinent, enabling evaluation.

Bibliography

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