

## **The Success Case Method: A Simple Evaluation Tool to Identify Critical Success Factors and Program Impact**

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### **1. Introduction**

Identification and reporting of critical success factors and program impact in an efficient, yet comprehensive manner is an inherent difficulty facing many evaluators of large-scale evaluations. This paper details how two evaluators encountered such problems in the initial review of a large-scale initiative and then successfully addressed these issues through the application of the Success Case Method in a subsequent evaluation of the same program.

The Success Case Method is a down-to-earth evaluation tool that can be used for:  
*finding out what is working and what is not, which also provides accurate and trustworthy information that can be used to make timely decisions (Brinkerhoff, 2003, p.3).*

This paper reports on the advantages of applying this approach to the evaluation of the Primary Welfare Officer Initiative (PWOI), a program that aims to improve the capacity of schools to support students at risk of disengagement and who are not achieving their educational potential.

### **2. The Success Case Method**

The Success Case Method was designed to tackle the problems being experienced by evaluators in using more conventional evaluation techniques. It is a simple and efficient method comprising two main components:

- a) a survey to identify a small number of potentially successful cases; and
- b) in-depth interviews to ascertain the nature of this success, including critical success factors.

In its truest form, the Success Case Method:

*'searches out and surfaces successes, bringing them to light in persuasive and compelling stories so that they can be weighed... provided as motivating and concrete examples to others, and learned*

*from so that we have a better understanding of why things worked and why they did not' (Brinkerhoff, 2003, p3).*

In addition to success stories, a typical SCM study generally explores some examples which could be described as being “least successful”, since understanding the impediments to success can be most enlightening.

Key features of the SCM include:

- It *'combines the ancient craft of storytelling with more current evaluation approaches of naturalistic inquiry and case study'* (Brinkerhoff, 2005).
- It is a simple step-by-step method of obtaining *'useful and accurate information about new initiatives'* (Brinkerhoff, 2003, p.viii); and
- It *'achieves efficiencies by purposive versus random sampling'...* based on the rationale that we learn best from exceptionally successful and unsuccessful cases (Brinkerhoff, 2005);

Interestingly, there appears to be little reference to use of this tool in evaluation literature apart from Brinkerhoff's own application of it in assessing the effectiveness of training programs in the USA. However, reference to the SCM in a psychology journal points to the potential for its application in other fields:

*"The Success Case Method is a tool that is well matched to the very difficult job of evaluating the effectiveness of change programs"*  
(Miller, 2004).

The SCM involves five major steps:

- STEP 1      Focusing and planning: in order *'to clarify and understand what the study needs to accomplish'*;
- STEP 2      Creating an “impact model” that defines *'what success should look like in order to understand what successful behaviours and results should be found if the program were working well'*
- STEP 3      Designing and implementing a survey to search for best and worst cases that may take the form of a written survey as well as interviews with key stakeholders;
- STEP 4      Interviewing and documenting success cases in order *'to capture and document the very particular and personal ways in which an innovation or intervention has been used to achieve successful results'*;
- STEP 5      Communicating findings, conclusions and recommendations *'that includes some sort of process to help stakeholders understand the results and reach consensus on the study's implications'* (Brinkerhoff, 2003, pp29-39).

### **3. The Success Case Method and PWOI Evaluation**

#### **3.1 Primary Welfare Officer Initiative**

In 2003, the Victorian Government Department of Education & Training (DE&T) introduced a student wellbeing initiative that funded the equivalent of 256 full-time Primary Welfare Officer (PWO) positions in 450 high needs Government primary schools across the State. This program is being phased in over four years.

Implementation of the PWOI is informed by a policy direction which aims to focus the work of the Primary Welfare Officers on reducing risk factors and strengthening protective factors for students. Specifically, the PWO's role is to work within a whole school wellbeing structure to enhance student behaviour and attitudes; increase student engagement and connectedness; and improve student attendance.

#### **3.2 Evaluation of the Primary Welfare Officer Initiative**

To date, two separate evaluations have been undertaken of the Primary Welfare Officer Initiative. These studies, both which were undertaken by a team of evaluators from the Centre for Program Evaluation at The University of Melbourne, focus on the implementation and impact of Phase One and Phase Two respectively.

#### **3.3 Phase One Evaluation**

The first study concentrated on the 110 schools that were involved in the introductory phase (July 2003-June 2004). The major purpose of this evaluation was to: establish objective information about the roll-out of the new program; find out what strategies schools had undertaken to establish the Initiative; and assess the effectiveness of these efforts. The evaluators were also asked to identify lessons learned that would help inform the development of forthcoming phases.

The selected evaluation method was based on the experience of the evaluation team in conducting studies with a strong focus on program improvement. It comprised three components:

- a) In-depth semi-structured interviews;
- b) Quantitative desktop analysis of school data; and
- c) In depth investigation at 12 "typical" school sites selected by a combination of advice from DE&T and application of the CLUSTAN specialist cluster analysis program<sup>1</sup>, leading to preparation of case studies.

#### **3.4 Clarifying Desired Scope and Content of Case Study Reports**

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<sup>1</sup> CLUSTAN specialist cluster analysis program was used to develop the typology and select candidate cases for case study. The CLUSTAN analysis starts by joining into one group, the two sites that are most similar in all the nominated characteristics. The next two most similar sites are then joined and so on. If an individual school is found to be similar to an existing group, it will be placed in that group rather than joined with another individual. Likewise, if two groups of sites are found to be similar, they will be fused. The criterion used by the program in deciding the order of fusion is to minimize the degree of diversity within groups that occurs as a result of the fusion. In this case, the process began with 110 schools and made a series of 109 fusions steps until only one large group of sites remained.

During initial discussion with the clients, the evaluation team endeavoured to clarify the desired scope and content of the case study reports. However, at this early stage, because of the exploratory nature of this first study and a level of uncertainty about the exact information requirements of senior government officials, it was difficult for the clients to clearly specify the most suitable content and format that was required.

Consequently the evaluators developed a broad set of interview questions which covered the wide range of issues included in the evaluation brief. The main problem that then emerged in terms of reporting related to analysing and collating the overwhelming wealth of information amassed about far too many issues. Eventually, based on the expansive set of data collected and in line with what had been gleaned during meetings with those who had commissioned the review, individual, detailed, narrative draft case study reports of 6-8 pages were prepared for each case study site. At a subsequent meeting to discuss these drafts it became apparent to the evaluation team that the clients' information needs had changed from favouring a broad, narrative description about the PWOI implementation at each case study site, to wanting a more targeted tabular report that identified the different implementation models developed by schools and listed the main strategies used by PWOs to achieve school level objectives and broader program level outcomes.

This changed focus resulted in a significant amount of the case study data (which had taken a great deal of time and effort to collect!) not being required for reporting purposes. This "superfluous" information was ultimately discarded through a protracted series of re-drafts of the case study scenarios and findings to ensure that the final product met the client's requirements.

This experience alerted the evaluators to the need to explore alternative ways of managing data collection in the subsequent study.

### 3.5 Phase Two Evaluation

The second evaluation reviewed the PWOI implementation in the 330 schools that were involved in the Initiative during Phase Two (July 2004 – June 2005). The objectives of this review were similar to the first but included assessment in two additional areas:

- the utility and effectiveness of existing management and accountability measures; and
- the impact of professional development programs and the need for any additional professional development support.

Based on the Terms of Reference and given their experience in the previous study, the CPE evaluators decided to use this evaluation to confirm and more precisely quantify aspects of the PWOI described in the Phase One review especially: perceptions of program outcomes; models of operation; and management and profession development issues.

Like the earlier study, this second evaluation included:

- a) Quantitative desktop analysis of school data; and
- b) Qualitative interviews.

An additional component was a:

- c) Quantitative survey of PWOs in all 330 schools involved in Phase Two implementation.

As in the first review, it was agreed to supplement these methods with:

- d) A detailed investigation at a small number of case study school sites (5) in order to extend and verify some of the apparent impacts of the Initiative obtained via the survey.

### 3.6 Factors Influencing Second Evaluation Design

Two key factors influenced the way in which this second evaluation was implemented:

- Greater familiarity with the parameters and challenges associated with the PWOI meant that the evaluation team were in a better position to distinguish the critical issues to explore. This helped them to target their data collection activities more precisely.
- A considerable amount of trust and goodwill had been built up with the client who was also now more familiar with the evaluation process. This helped to facilitate negotiations and increased collaboration about the purpose and desired end product of the case study component.

These factors, combined with the knowledge gained by the evaluation team in dealing with the wealth of data that was collected during the first series of case studies, led to the selection of an evaluation technique called the Success Case Method, to help guide interviews at the case study school sites.

## **4. Use of the Success Case Method in the Phase Two Evaluation**

While this second evaluation incorporated all five steps included in the SCM process, the main attraction for the CPE evaluators was step 4. This involved a simple process for the efficient capture of the most pertinent data to show what had been achieved and to provide insights into what specific activities had contributed to that impact. Incorporation of this step enabled the evaluators to structure and focus stakeholder interviews more appropriately; facilitate the collection and analysis of the most useful data; and identify critical success factors and areas for further program enhancement.

Typically, step 4 of the SCM process involves the collection of stakeholder input in five “information buckets”. The content of these buckets is shown in Table 1 below (Brinkerhoff, 2003, p142).

**TABLE 1**  
**Success Case Interview Buckets**

<b>What was used that worked?</b>	<b>What results were achieved?</b>	<b>What good did it do?</b>	<b>What helped?</b>	<b>Suggestions (optional)</b>
<i>How? With whom? When? Under what circumstances? What was most helpful?</i>	<i>What is the measurable difference? How do you know - what evidence?</i>	<i>What was achieved? Why was this important? What negative outcomes were avoided?</i>	<i>What contributed to the success?</i>	<i>What might have increased the level of success even further?</i>

The evaluation team used this format to shape the key questions developed for the collection of data from a diverse range of different stakeholders: the Principal, the Primary Welfare Officer, teacher representatives who had been “touched” by the PWO’s work, the School Council President and representatives from external welfare agencies engaged in supporting students/families identified by the PWO. These key questions are outlined in Table 2 below.

**TABLE 2**  
**Key Questions to Guide Data Collection in PWOI Evaluation, Phase Two**

**1. How has the PWOI been implemented at your school?**

What is the role/work of the PWO? What strategies were undertaken?  
Specific examples of activities that have been implemented.

**2. What has been achieved so far?**

How has this made a difference to the school? What has changed? How do you know that? Specific examples of achievements in terms of activities undertaken and/or student issues addressed.

**3. What is the value of what has been achieved?**

What has the PWOI contributed to your school community? Specifically what is the value of these achievements? Why are these results important? Have there been any unexpected outcomes? Has the PWOI helped the school to avoid any negative student outcomes that were of particular concern in the past?

**4. What helped?**

Are there any specific “critical success factors” that have contributed to the implementation of the PWOI at your school? What support have you received within/outside of the school that has been helpful?

**5. Suggestions?**

Do you have any suggestions about how the implementation of the PWOI at your school could be improved? Is there anything in particular that you could recommend to DE&T about ways in which this program could be improved?

In answering these questions respondents were asked to: provide some specific examples of how the PWOI had made a difference for individual children and their families; identify specific student and family level impacts of the work undertaken by the PWO in these situations; and list the broader impacts on the school community.

They were also asked to specify any progress being made towards the achievement of longer term student outcomes and to identify critical success factors and models of good practice, in comparison with the situation prior to the PWOI.

This data collection process, which was undertaken by two CPE evaluators in five different schools, covered a total of 36 respondents. It led to the systematic capture of “like” data in a form that could be readily analysed and reported, both for each separate school, as well as across the five sites.

## **5. Identifying Critical Success Factors and Program Impact**

As it turned out, the client subsequently decided not to include fully developed case study narratives in the final evaluation report, preferring the more succinct tabular presentation that had been developed in the first report. The data collection method used in this second review made it very easy and efficient for the evaluation team to extract this material from the interview reports and to present it in a format that readily satisfied the needs of departmental staff and was later found to have been very useful to them in reporting to more senior government officials.

So, in effect the full blown case study reports which are generally a central product of the SCM approach were not developed in this instance. None the less the method led to a very satisfactory and useful report being prepared, one which gave the client the pertinent information required for further policy development and further program enhancement. What more could a good evaluator want!

## **6. Strengths of the SCM process**

The CPE evaluators found that the Success Case Method had some real benefits over the methodological approach used in the Phase One review. These were:

- It gave a strong direction to interview question routes, ensuring that they were targeted to the information needs of the client;
- Respondent data was very easy to analyse and comparisons across cases could readily be made;
- Critical success factors were clearly apparent, an important matter, since these were of particular interest to policy makers, DE&T staff and schools in terms of the ongoing implementation and sustainability of the Initiative;
- The efficiency in reporting on the strategies undertaken by schools to implement the PWOI and concerning the overall effectiveness of Phase Two was greatly facilitated and met the needs of departmental staff to obtain verifiable evidence of the PWOI impact to satisfy Ministerial requirements.

## 7. Limitations of the SCM process

Brinkerhoff acknowledges that:

*The SC Method is not a comprehensive and “one fix” sort of approach. Rather it is a... useful tool that change leaders and others can use to help them get the information they need to more effectively guide change initiatives (Brinkerhoff, 2003, p. 24).*

He readily acknowledges that other techniques might be more thorough but cautions that these alternative methods would most likely be: more resource intensive; take more time to complete; and be more costly. He defends criticism of bias by claiming that although the SCM reports on only a small number of successful cases, it is based on the premise that it is very useful to learn from stories of success (as well as from particularly non-successful cases) and that:

*The success stories themselves are very objective and rigorously supported with confirmable evidence (Brinkerhoff, 2003, p. 24).*

But in fact the CPE evaluators did not identify any significant disadvantages associated with applying the SCM data collection method on this occasion. The only real limitation that they experienced overall was that budgetary constraints made it difficult to review some non-successful cases as well, something they have recommended be considered in any subsequent evaluation of this Initiative.

## 8. Summary

Difficulties in data management and reporting experienced by two evaluators during the review of a large-scale program, led them to explore alternative tools to enable them to meet their client’s information needs satisfactorily. Application of the Success Case Method in a second of two evaluations that they conducted of the Primary Welfare Officer Initiative in Victoria proved to be a most useful technique to capture and report useful information about why things worked and how the Initiative could be improved even further, in a format highly acceptable to policy makers.

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## References

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