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The role of evaluation in a broad service excellence framework for multi-service organisations

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Abstract

Mission Australia is a large national provider of community services. These services encompass all age groups and cover a broad and complex range, from crisis to early intervention/prevention and through to sustained community capacity building. How can a 'Service Excellence Framework' be developed which is applicable to all services? How can the crucial role of evaluation be clearly articulated for this diverse group of services, and not confused with other quality processes such as systems review, accreditation and outcomes measurement? And how can the various evaluation methods/approaches be articulated, given service complexity and the ever present resource implications (both in terms of available funds and available time)?

Mission Australia has worked with ARTD Consulting to develop a Service Excellence Framework which responds to these business requirements, and which highlights the role of evaluation in its various forms. One of the key outcomes of this process is the development and implementation of a program of service evaluations, via the inclusion of an evaluation strategy in Mission Australia's National and State Business Plans; and the development of a Quality Database, which maps, among other things, evaluation requirements of all services.

This paper examines the development of the Service Excellence Framework, and works through the process of implementation of such a framework in a multi-service organisation, and the impact on organisational strategy. This will be illustrated with reference to the role of:

- An external evaluation of a long-term early intervention program and
- A service group evaluation of services for young people focused on drug and alcohol issues

and the roles of these respective evaluations in shaping future directions for service delivery, eg establishing and refining the ideal mix of services targeting risk and protective factors in early intervention programs; and shifting services models towards co-location and/or service integration. The efficacy of the Service Excellence Framework will thus be examined, both in terms of influence on individual services but also in terms of the wider organisational strategic planning processes.

Introduction

Mission Australia is a large national provider of community services, employment services and training. There are over 200 community services, and they are located across every state and territory in Australia. They are diverse in type, model and target group and hours of operation. These services encompass all age groups and cover a broad and complex range, from crisis to early intervention/prevention through to sustained community capacity building.

Services are delivered in inner city metropolitan and rural and regional areas across Australia and are funded in full or in part by Commonwealth, state and local governments, through corporate partnerships and private foundations. Some are, in part or fully, funded by Mission Australia.

All services are focussed on delivering high quality services to individuals and communities, and seek to engage, enable and enrich the lives of these individuals and communities.

Mission Australia was formally recognised as a single organisation in the late 1990s when a number of City Mission organisations, located around the country, came together as a national entity. Each City Mission had its own way of ensuring service quality and service delivery systems and, in fact, policies, processes and procedures were often further localised to the individual service level.

Mission Australia State and Territory offices continue to have differing approaches to quality management and planning. Funding program and jurisdictional requirements are strong influencers of how a State or territory office operates within Mission Australia. With 46% of our community service funding coming from State governments and legislation affecting the delivery of community services tending to be the province of State/Territory governments, there are strong forces operating towards the localising of quality procedures within State offices.

However, as Mission Australia continues to grow as a national organisation, the benefits of greater coordination, national processes, and sharing of information are very apparent. The Executive Team has identified a national approach to service excellence as a key plank in development as a national organisation. This paper looks at the role of evaluation within a service excellence framework and Mission Australia's work to date in this field.

The Challenge

As the newly formed national Mission Australia developed, management began to examine organisational quality assurance and improvement processes across the country. Findings of an informal audit revealed pockets of quality assurance, but not a consistent approach. A number of services had been evaluated but in a rather ad hoc approach, with no clear plans or criteria to guide decision-making in relation to which services would be evaluated. In general, evaluations were undertaken in a 'reactive' way, ie in relation to a local trigger such as budget overspend, staff issues etc. Even in places where there were strategies, they were generally developed locally. For example, in 2000 there were a strong series of evaluations in services for young people and homeless men in New South Wales. The drivers for both were the high cost of delivering the programs to Mission Australia combined with recognition that more appropriate service models needed to be developed for the client groups.

A common language for the various elements of the quality process was also lacking. The terms used to describe quite distinct elements of the quality processes and research were used interchangeably, indicating different levels of knowledge and understanding and no common agreement about the terms. For example, the term "action research" was sometimes used interchangeably with "evaluation"; terms such as "accreditation" and "review" were not clearly distinguished from "evaluation". This was overlaid with an historical, negative connotation associated with the use of the term "evaluation" - in

the 1990s, an evaluation was frequently the precursor to closure of a service, thereby leaving a legacy of a problematic association with the term.

Complicating the issue further was a lack of national documentation in association with service excellence. Certainly, such issues were articulated in the organisation's national Strategic Plan, and this cascaded down into State Plans; but documentation dropped away quickly after that – for example, there was no central database recording accreditation, evaluations, reviews, and thus reduced capacity for the organisation to manage knowledge in this area, and reduced capacity to ensure 'cross-fertilisation' in this key area.

Meeting the Challenge

Clearly this was an area in which improvements needed to be made and where there would be real benefits from a national approach. Mission Australia decided that a national framework that would clarify and articulate evaluation, in its various forms, for individual services, and for the wider organisational strategic planning processes was necessary; and that this should be embedded in a broader Service Excellence Framework, which would clearly articulate the various layers and elements which go to make up such a framework.

A quick scan of the environment was all that was needed to realise that there were no models of service excellence frameworks that we could easily pick up and adopt. There are few multi-service community organisations in Australia of similar size, scale and range. The focus of government community service funding agencies is somewhat different and their models, whilst interesting, did not translate well. An international literature review also did not reveal any suitable models. Community Services management made the decision to chart a custom-designed course for the organisation whereby a Service Excellence Framework would be designed specifically for the needs of a large, multi-service community organisation with a complex suite of programs.

In 2005 Mission Australia contracted ARTD Management & Research Consultants to review current approaches to performance improvement in community services and to locate them within a framework that would assist with planning and coordination.

The methodology adopted by ARTD included a scan of existing approaches to performance activities. The consultants carried out detailed interviews across a number of management/staff levels of the organisation – at national levels, at State-based management levels, and at service levels - gathering data about performance approaches and testing understandings across a broad range of performance terminology. Different approaches were noted, and later fitted into a framework.

Findings regarding Evaluation Practices

The ARTD scan identified a range of different evaluation activities in Mission Australia. The following section of this paper is largely drawn directly the ARTD Report to Mission Australia. As already noted, there were many different

interpretations of what an ‘evaluation’ actually is. ARTD defined evaluation as “an assessment, based on systematic evidence, of the merit or worth of the service.”¹

The scan found a range of different examples and forms of evaluation, with different patterns across the states. They included:

1. Self-evaluation studies

Self-evaluation, described as ‘studies controlled and conducted by the service being evaluated typically for internal management purposes’. In a number of instances, funding bodies require this type of evaluation. For example, services in a Commonwealth-funded program that works with young people and their families, Reconnect, are required to conduct and to provide an annual self-evaluation report that draws on client data, descriptions of activities, case studies, stakeholder views, action research, and reflections by workers.

The advantages of this approach are that it is relatively inexpensive and that people doing the evaluation often have good knowledge of the service and how it really operates; disadvantages are that people doing the evaluation can be too close to the subject and do not necessarily have the skills and training to design the methodological approach and analyse the information collected.

The ART D Report highlighted the need for developing Operations and Service Managers skills in evaluation as well as providing direct support.

2. Internal evaluations

Internal evaluation studies by Mission Australia, where Mission Australia controls, funds and conducts the study. Generally these studies are funded within existing budgets.

The review established that there is a growing model of evaluation across the organisation with management initiating evaluations of services, although not in a nationally consistent or co-ordinated way, so that only some services were regularly assessed and different methodologies were used in different States.

A Service Development Unit, part of the management structure in New South Wales, has conducts a number of evaluations each year, using a mixture of methods, including Program Logic and Balanced Scorecard frameworks, a mix of data collections as well as three and six month follow ups to see if recommendations have been implemented.

3. External evaluations – internally driven

Evaluation studies are sometimes conducted by outside contractors. In these instances, Mission Australia controls and funds the study but an external contractor, with specific evaluation experience, such as a consultant or university researcher, is contracted to evaluate the service.

There have been mixed results from the use of this type of evaluation by Mission Australia. For example, a youth training service in Victoria was regarded as being well evaluated and the evaluation recommendations influenced decisions about the program model and enhanced the service in the eyes of current and potential funders.

This example was in contrast to experiences in another state, where staff recorded an evaluation with ‘mixed effectiveness’, and where there were concerns regarding lack of detailed understanding of program logic and delays in providing reports.

4. External evaluations – externally driven

External evaluation studies where other agencies control and fund the evaluation study. The evaluation is controlled and conducted by the external agency or by a contractor to the external agency. In many cases, funds for the evaluation are included in the funding agreement.

In general, this type of evaluation has the potential to result in evaluations which are genuinely ‘arms length’ from organisational agendas and interests, and thus has the potential to result in truly ‘objective’ evaluations.

However, in practice, staff reported many a number of concerns in relation to this type of evaluation. For example, Mission Australia staff reported instances where internal pressures within the funding agency resulted in the interruption of the evaluation and risks of bias or a conflict of interest. Another set of issues raised by staff as having potential for impact on the success of an evaluation focused on familiarity (or lack thereof) of representatives of the funding body with the service under evaluation – it was evident that Evaluation Steering Committees sometimes bore the brunt of conflicting agendas!

On the other hand, in situations where funding agencies commissioned independent consultants to carry out evaluations, and where ‘politics’ did not interfere with the process, staff reported excellent results, with often unexpected insights into service delivery and service models which frequently resulted in service modifications which had in turn resulted in excellent outcomes for clients

A Framework for Service Excellence

Evaluation is clearly an important component of Mission Australia’s Service Excellence framework. However, other elements of the quality process also play a key role, and one of the major benefits of the work carried out by ARTD was that it

allowed Mission Australia staff to conceptualise and understand where evaluation fits in the overall approach to quality, and to understand its role as a valuable part of an overall approach.

ARTD grouped approaches to service excellence into four levels:

Systems - activities that ensure suitable systems are in place for the delivery of services, by ensuring agreed standards will be met and the quality is within acceptable risk parameters

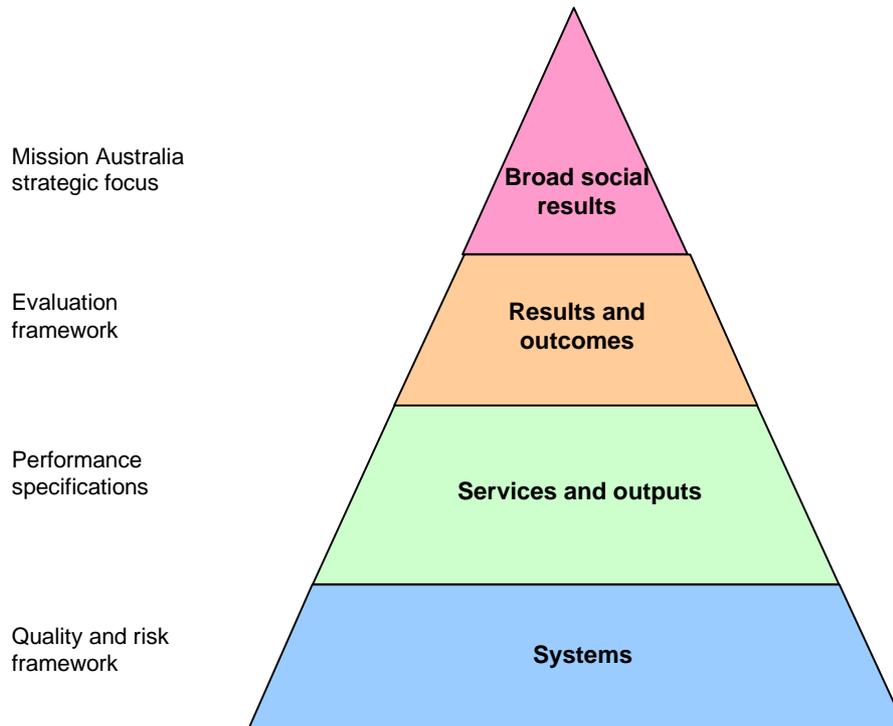
Services and outputs - activities for monitoring and reporting against service requirements. These activities focus on monitoring the quantity or quality of outputs for performance improvement or accountability

Results and outcomes - activities for evaluating intended results and outcomes such as the immediate impacts of services and the outcomes for clients, such as changes in awareness or behaviour

Broad social results - activities to identify emerging needs, evidence-based interventions and trends in government policy.

These levels can be represented as a hierarchy (Figure 1). The framework is useful for thinking about the different approaches but is not definitive, with some overlap between the different levels. For example, measures of service delivery and outputs

Figure 1: Performance improvement approaches



may also include information on service results and outcomes.

The details of the framework are encapsulated in the Table 1

The framework is an effective tool for Mission Australia management to clearly distinguish between the concepts of continuous improvement, monitoring and evaluation, by locating these activities under different levels of results from the operational to the strategic. It is also a useful schematic check list for locating where Mission Australia needs to locate resources to address any gaps in the area of evaluation throughout the organisation. At the same time it is easy to maintain the distinction between activities that were previously confused or had differing meanings assigned to them.

Implementing a Service Excellence Framework

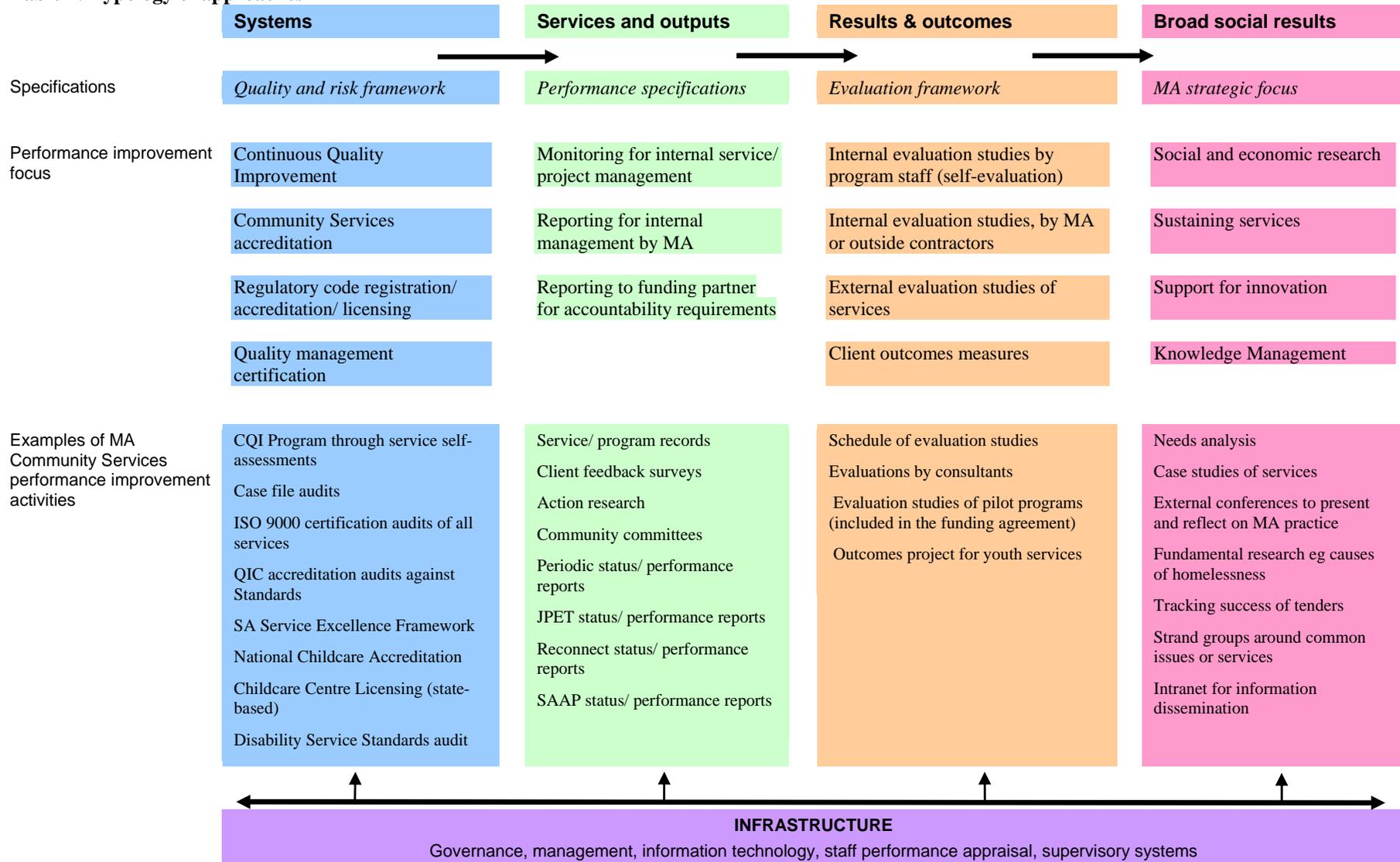
The Service Excellence Framework categorises the use of quality and evaluation terms more precisely and provides a framework for implementation across the range of quality activities across the organisation.

Since the ARTD Report was received, Mission Australia management has developed an implementation plan which includes:

- Developing consistency of approach across the organisation
- Developing and implementing a National Quality Framework – developed by the National Quality Committee in 2005/2006 and drawing on a range of resources including the NSW Government’s HSO (Human Services Organisations) Quality Framework
- Providing resources. Mission Australia’s Senior Management Team realised that it needed a national team to implement this framework and other quality measures. To this end, three staff were appointed to support the implementation of the National Quality Framework and the Service Excellence Framework. This team focuses on quality, compliance and assurance from a national perspective.
- Developing a Quality Database. This is being developed to enable a clear record and profile of quality requirements, including evaluation for each community service, to be easily available. Information has been extracted from the analysis of each service contract and work plan or service specifications. This will facilitate a national compilation of the specificity of evaluation requirements from funding partners and will improve the use of resources to meet those requirements.
- Categorising and defining quality and evaluation terminology more precisely and providing a clear and agreed language across the organisation.

Mission Australia Senior Management found the ART D Report a useful illustration of the diversity of approaches being used within the organisation (noting the strengths and weaknesses of what had been done in the past); and a clear and effective way to identify and plan national and State approaches going forward. A strategic focus on evaluation has been woven into the State Business plans and will continue to be developed.

Table 1: Typology of approaches



Impact on Organisational Strategy

The Service Excellence Framework can be used as a lens through which to view the quality activities of services. This enables Mission Australia to examine, on a service by service basis, strengths and weaknesses in terms of the performance improvement focus of services, for example, a number of services have been found to be strong in the 'Systems' and 'Services and Outputs' categories, but less well developed in the other two categories. Services can very easily self-assess using the Framework, and develop strategies to cover areas of weakness.

The following provide examples of findings as a result of viewing services through the Framework lens.

1. A Mission Australia Queensland service – the Pathways Project – is subject to extensive ongoing research and evaluation, largely due to ARC (Australian Research Council) grants, and the fact that the service is managed by a consortium consisting of Mission Australia and Griffith University. Viewed through the Framework lens, this service emerged strongly – as would be expected, given the research and evaluation resources and focus - in Categories 1, 2 and 3, i.e. Systems, Services and outputs, and Results and outcomes. However, it was clear that this service was highly innovative and had potential for broad social impact. There was strong evidence for this, for example, the service had been chosen as an example of Australasian best practice in crime prevention for presentation at a United Nations Conference in 2005; the service had been highlighted as a model for early intervention/prevention by the Prime Minister when launching the Federal Government's \$140 million Communities for Children program in 2004. However, though the evaluation and research work was well documented, it was not easily accessible in a consolidated format, and therefore practitioners (both within and external to Mission Australia) struggled to replicate the program. Therefore, to ensure that learnings from this innovative program would be more readily available, a new publication series is being developed by Mission Australia – Social Innovation in Action – and the Pathways learnings will be the first to be published in this series.
2. In Western Australia, viewing the service group as a whole identified the potential for a more integrated suite of services for young people. The services, focusing on various issues for young people including drug and alcohol, are separately funded, from different sources and with different funding agreements in different operating environments. These drivers create a tendency for focusing on the services as individual, stand-alone operations. However, viewing the service suite in terms of quality activities removed the more operationally driven focus, and initiated a set of steps which has resulted in an evaluation which seeks to inform our development of this group of services in order to provide the best possible service to individual clients and to the community of young people in WA who seek one or more of these services. The evaluation is currently underway.

Conclusion

Mission Australia's investment in understanding what we already do in the areas of quality including evaluation has been enormously valuable in determining the way forward. This approach has allowed us to understand why we evaluate in some ways, where each type of evaluation might fit within a broader framework and how we might further develop our evaluation capacity.

The challenge for Mission Australia will always be our resource constraints, yet we are also aware of the need to research, understand and evaluate the way we do things. Our focus must always be on clients and communities and their needs. A better understanding of the tools to achieve high quality services is a sound start.