Evaluation, not just a matter of training or resources but a cultural change

DETA adopted its current Program Evaluation Strategy in August 2005. The strategy is part of the agency's corporate governance framework and outlines the requirements for the planning, conducting and reporting of program evaluations. The aim of the strategy is to deliver a robust and inclusive evaluation framework based on a rolling a three year schedule. It includes supporting documentation, advisory and governance mechanisms, and an integrated evaluation training package. The governance arrangements and communication strategy ensure that all staff are aware of the need for program evaluation as an integral part of project management. This paper will discuss the various approaches that have been used to increase the knowledge available to the Department of Education, Training and the Arts to enhance policy design and program delivery.

The primary responsibility for managing the evaluation strategy lies with the Governance, Strategy and Planning Branch (GSP) which also has responsibility for the agency's Annual Report, the Ministerial Portfolio Statement (budget statements), Corporate Business Reporting and the Strategic Plan.

Positive impacts of the adoption of the new framework on creating a culture of evaluation can be discussed by analysing key characteristics of this innovation in DETA. As Everett Rogers (2003) describes in *'Diffusion of Innovations'* there are five important characteristics to consider and understand when reflecting on an innovation such as this. These are: relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, observability and complexity.

Characteristics of the DETA Program Evaluation Strategy

DETA addressed the first of these characteristics – 'relative advantage' in 2004 when a discussion paper was written for the EMT, the key audience for major program evaluations. This paper identified the specific benefits to the agency of adopting a systemic approach to program evaluation:

- better information to support program decision-making

- greater capacity to evaluate the merit, cost effectiveness and cost capacity of programs

- delivery of programs that are relevant and focused on delivery of outcomes to the community

- increased capability to reprioritise in a climate of static funding

- production of data to verify results that can be used for public relations and promoting services.

The discussion paper also addressed Roger's second key characteristic of 'compatibility'. The paper described proposed evaluation processes in terms of their alignment with existing agency values and systems. Generally staff across the agency have a very strong commitment to delivering the highest quality services and products to Queensland's students. Staff in the education arm of the agency in particular also have a strong need for recognition of the value of their work which is often long term and the outcomes of which are challenging to measure. The EMT decided to promote a participative approach to evaluation as that most likely to align with existing agency values and meet the needs of program/project staff.

In 2005, the Agency developed a '*Program Evaluation Strategy*' and an annual rolling '*Program Evaluation Schedule*' based on the following principles of evaluation.

- **Utility -**Evaluations should be informative, timely and influential. They must provide the agency with practical information that is capable of informing decision-making about the impact of particular programs. Evaluation of agency programs is fundamentally an improvement process.

Evaluation, not just a matter of training or resources but a cultural change.

J. Hanwright & S. Makinson, 2007   1

- **A focus on clients and outcomes -** The focus of evaluations is to assess the impact of programs for clients rather than act as an accountability process to evaluate the performance of program staff.

- **Feasibility -** The practical aspects of conducting the evaluation must be considered in the planning phase. Feasibility requirements ensure that evaluations are able to identify and collect the necessary data to produce meaningful findings and recommendations.

- **Participation -** Multi-disciplinary teams reporting to the program manager will conduct most program evaluations, assisted by external resources where appropriate. Teams will include program staff, appropriate representatives from across the agency and external members if required.

- **Capacity building-** Acquisition and building of internal evaluation skills and ways of thinking will have a longer-term positive impact for the agency as opposed to using external evaluation sources. Ownership of the evaluation by program staff ensures that it becomes a reflective learning process where findings lead to improved service delivery and outcomes for clients.

- **Propriety -** The rights of the people influenced by the program must be protected throughout the evaluation. All agency evaluations will take into account legal and ethical issues including the welfare of program participants and those affected by the evaluation results.

- **Fair and balanced -** Agency evaluations are complete, fair and balanced in their presentation of the strengths and weaknesses of the program being evaluated, so that the strengths can be built on and weaknesses addressed.

- **Accuracy -** Agency evaluations produce valid and reliable corporate knowledge. Careful data management ensures that the key evaluation issues are addressed and that information gathered is technically sound with evidence-based recommendations stemming from sound data analysis and interpretation.

In late 2005, the agency addressed Roger's third and fourth characteristics of 'trialability' and 'observability' by selecting a small group of discreet but highly visible programs for evaluation, as a trial process. This enabled the GSP branch to work closely in supporting evaluation teams and observe the evaluation process in order to identify what additional structures, processes and materials were needed to support staff undertaking evaluations. By doing this we have been able to develop 'champions' across the agency who share with colleagues in their immediate work units the value of the evaluation process. As a result, whole work units now incorporate evaluation into the planning of new major projects from their inception.

To understand the various elements of this innovation, Roger's last key characteristic of 'complexity' can be used to discuss the development of supporting documentation and processes. These materials and processes are instrumental to allay staff fears and anxieties about the complexity involved in conducting an evaluation.

Managing the change process

As part of the change management process, the following six key activities have been undertaken. Firstly, a '*Program Evaluation Strategy'* document was published which outlined the purpose, scope and objectives of the strategy including the key deliverables and performance indicators. The document detailed why evaluation is important, the benefits of program evaluation, the elements of a quality evaluation, and the principles of good evaluation.

Secondly, a '*Program Evaluation Manual'* was developed which includes information to guide staff through the stages of an evaluation and a range of simple templates for completing an evaluation proposal, plan, and report; and the terms of reference for the development of an evaluation governance committee. As Patton describes in '*Utilization Focussed Evaluation'* *1997,* clearly identifying the primary intended users of the evaluation is critical to ensure a utilisation focus. The development of the templates and governance process ensures that each program team can identify exactly who the main audience for the evaluation is and make sure that the information needs of the primary evaluation users are met by the final report. In most

cases for the large programs, the primary evaluation audience and users are the Executive Management Team.

Acting on staff and management feedback, the GSP Branch has since also developed a number of attachments to the manual on topics such as 'developing evaluation questions', 'developing performance measures', 'engaging an external evaluation contractor/consultant', etc. These attachments have proven valuable to staff because they are brief and succinct and provide key advice about critical topics related to evaluation.

Thirdly, GSP implemented a rolling program evaluation schedule that identified programs to be evaluated over the coming three financial years was implemented by the GSP.

Fourthly, the agency designed and implemented a logic model process with associated user–friendly templates. This model was promoted as part of the agency's program evaluation framework to identify critical program issues, inputs, activities, outputs and three levels of outcomes (short, medium and long term). A second stage of the logic model was also designed to identify performance measures and data sources for each of the outputs and three levels of outcomes. This enabled evaluation teams to clearly identify program measures of success and the availability and reliability of data sources that could be used to answer core evaluation questions.

The introduction of the model reduced staff perception that program evaluation was too complex and time consuming to be integrated into their core program activities. The model and associated templates provided staff with an effective but simple program planning and evaluation tool that analysed the various program components by breaking them down into smaller, measurable parts, thus reducing the anxiety about evaluation, and providing them with an effective program accountability system. Anxiety about evaluation is often based on a lack of evaluation capacity and knowledge so that when confronted with an evaluation, staff attempt to evaluate a whole program at once rather than break the program into its various components

Abraham Wandersman et al in the 2003 periodical '*New Directions for Evaluation*' describes the framework and implementation of a program accountability system in a State Wide initiative "*South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness*'. The framework is titled 'Planning, Implementation and Evaluation (PIE)' Its components include program logic theory and ask 10 key questions about a program that include the following:
- o What are the underlying needs and conditions that need to be addressed?
- o What are the goals, target population, and objectives?
- o What science- or evidence-based models and best practice programs can be useful in reaching the goals?
- o How will the program fit with existing programs already being offered, the organisation's mission, and community values?
- o What organisational capacities/resources are needed to implement this program?
- o What is the plan for the program?
- o How will the program be implemented with quality?
- o How well did the program work?
- o How will continuous quality improvement strategies be incorporated?
- o If the program is successful, how will it be sustained?

Effectively, these types of questions are those asked when the design of a program logic model is workshopped. Once this model had become accepted throughout the agency for the purposes of evaluation, staff started seeing the benefits of using it for program planning and to inform program implementation. They became comfortable building formative and summative evaluation stages into program management from inception. The Branch even started receiving requests to workshop business planning sessions using the logic model process.

Fifthly, the branch developed and conducts regular two-day evaluation training workshops facilitated by a highly regarded evaluation consultant. We have received extremely positive

participant feedback about these workshops. There is now widespread recognition across the agency of the value of attending evaluation training.

Sixth, the branch held lunchtime evaluation forums to encourage skill development in evaluation. These forums are well attended and involve engaging internal and external presenters with expertise in evaluation to speak on a range of topics related to evaluation. In addition to these formal forums, the development of an informal evaluation learning community enables staff across the agency to share evaluation experiences and learning.

Key challenges

The branch faced two key challenges in 2005. Firstly, the branch proposed the development of an Evaluation Steering Committee (ESC). However, this was not endorsed initially by the EMT because it was considered to be a distraction to the delivery of core business by senior mangers. The branch considered it important to establish such a committee at this early stage in the implementation of the strategy for several reasons: to improve the level of commitment to evaluation across the agency; to ensure that program evaluations were well organised; and to provide an opportunity for evaluation findings to be shared across the agency. We saw the ESC's primary function as overseeing the implementation of the strategy and providing advice where necessary to staff conducting evaluations.

Another of the proposed ESC roles was to ensure that effective governance committees were established for internal evaluations with adequate external representation from other agencies and from stakeholder groups. This is critical to avoid internal evaluations becoming too introspective and prone to captured by agency culture.

Secondly, there was a strong commitment from the CEO to build evaluation capability within the organisation rather than creating an evaluation 'branch' where the evaluation skills and knowledge experts would carry out independent evaluations of programs outside the service delivery area. We agreed with the CEO's view because our research and experience indicated that internal evaluators find it very difficult to drive cultural change where agency staff are not required to participate in the evaluation process. The branch chose to position itself as facilitator and consultant to support mangers and staff to manage their own evaluations rather than attempt to conduct an independent process.

The CEO also held the strong view that the results of evaluations had to be able to be used. This had positive cultural implications for the agency. The agency had experienced a number of evaluation reports that had been conducted by external consultants that failed to meet the needs of the agency. As John Owen in *Program Evaluation Forms and Approaches 2007* points out, outsiders are perceived as threats by project managers, staff and even clients. There was a strong perception within the agency that external evaluators had been brought in to review not only the program but the performance of the program team itself. Therefore cooperation from staff in these evaluations was minimal.

Given the success of the implementation of the strategy across 2005-2006, the branch has continued to take a collaborative, supportive change management approach to further develop the strategy. This involved engagement with a broader range of staff across the agency, building relationships and offering evaluation support services. This approach resulted in a significant increase in requests from staff across the agency for assistance with program and strategy evaluations.

Demand for advice related to evaluation is now on the increase across the agency. Thus, in July 2006 the ESC that was originally proposed in August 2005 was endorsed after a significant external evaluation report was rejected by the EMT as unsatisfactory. The ESC consists of senior staff members from across the agency. The EMT endorsed the ESC's operation according to the following six general principles, namely:

- evaluation activities undertaken by the Agency are of high *quality*

- evaluation resources are focussed on identified areas of strategic ***priority***
- evaluation ***capability*** of agency staff is ***nurtured and shared***
- ***future planning*** is ***informed by evaluation*** findings
- the agency maximises its ***investment*** in educational and cultural programs
- program key performance indicators are **aligned** with program outcomes.

The ESC meets three times per year to review evaluation proposals, monitor progress of evaluations and review the final reports prior to them being submitted to the EMT. The committee meetings exhibit robust discussion and show a considerable level of commitment.

Towards the end of 2006, the branch conducted three focus groups to seek feedback from staff about the progress of the evaluation strategy and to identify potential improvements. The feedback from these groups has been incorporated into planning further activities to support the evaluation strategy and to continue to build the agency's internal evaluation capacity. The following four questions were asked of each group:

1) Having been to the evaluation workshop training, what skills from that training did you find most useful? What other areas would you like included in the training?

2) What support from the GSP have you found most useful? What other types of evaluation support from the GSP would be useful?

3) Have you had the opportunity to utilise the skills from the training? If not, why not? If you have, what type of skills did you find most useful?

4) In your opinion, what type of attitude do staff have towards program level evaluation, and why? In your opinion, has this attitude changed as a result of the introduction of the program evaluation strategy and if so, why?

In summary, the feedback indicated that the logic model framework and the Program Evaluation Manual templates had been very effective in allaying staff anxiety about evaluation, because they provided a valuable information guide together with effective user–friendly tools. In addition, there is now evidence that evaluation is becoming well embedded at the program and middle manager levels but there is still some resistance from the Director/Senior Manager level to the time required to build evaluation into program planning. The focus groups have yielded valuable information that has been now been incorporated into planning the next phase of the strategy.

Conclusion

In implementing an evaluation strategy for the Department of Education, Training and the Arts we have adopted a change management rather than a compliance model.

Our model aims to boost the evaluation planning and management skills of internal agency staff, but at the same time, encourage staff to acknowledge where external skills need to be engaged to manage key components of an evaluation - for example: survey design, analysis and interpretation of complex datasets.

The adoption of program evaluation has taken off. Managers and program staff are initiating evaluations and requesting support to use the agency's approved processes, structures and materials to undertake enquiries into issues of strategic importance to the agency. Although there is still more work to be done to be confident that managers and senior executives have as complete as possible an understanding of the ultimate effects and outcomes of major public policy initiatives, the evaluations currently underway have the potential to do so.

References

Owen, JM & Rogers, P 1999, *Program Evaluation: forms and approaches, 2nd* edn, Sage, London.

Patton, M. Q. 1996. *Utilization-focused evaluation: The new century text (3rd edition).* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Rogers, EM 2003, *Diffusions of Innovations,* 5th edn, Free Press, New York.

Wandersman, A. (ed). *Framing the evaluation of Health and Human Service Programs in Community Settings: Assessing Progress*. New Directions for Evaluation, no. 83. San Francisco: Jossey –Bass, 1999.

Wandersman, A., Imm, P., Chinman, M., and Kaftarian, S. "Getting to Outcomes: A Results-Based Approach to Accountability.".*Evaluation and Program Planning*, 2000, 23, 389 395.