

Murphy, Nietzsche and the art of managing external evaluations

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Introduction

While much effort has been made to build internal evaluation capability within Victoria's Department of Primary Industries (DPI) over the last two decades, demand for external evaluations remains strong. These are generally called for in situations where there is a perceived need for impartiality, where a high level of credibility is required, where the required expertise is not available internally or cannot be spared, or where the risk to the department's reputation is great.

However, no evaluation is completely external. The commissioner retains responsibility for managing external evaluations, and as with all good project management, must ensure completion on time, within budget, and to an agreed quality standard. The scope, focus and intended use of the evaluation must be clarified internally before contract negotiations begin, and the commissioning agency is required to provide information and access to key program staff. They must also ensure that the evaluation results address the organisation's information needs for decision making.

The evaluation literature is full of advice for managing external evaluations, broken down into easily digested stages such as commissioning the study, monitoring the activities, and using the information, with many authors recommending that an experienced staff member be appointed as evaluation manager to handle all aspects of the evaluation process. But where is such an experienced person to be found? How is this experience gained, and at what cost in terms of mistakes made during the learning journey?

This presentation follows the formative learning adventures of the author as she accumulated experience managing external evaluations for DPI over a ten year period. It explores the pitfalls and pratfalls encountered along the way, and shares the hard won key learnings that have made it all worth while. The presentation is firmly founded on Murphy's Law which states "Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong", while paying due respect to Nietzsche's "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger".

Formative adventures

In this section, five 'case studies' are presented. A brief description of the evaluation task is provided, followed by a 'Murphy' moment, paired with a 'Nietzsche' strengthening insight. Names, dates and specific project details have been avoided to either protect the innocent or avoid litigation. The author remains unavoidably identifiable, as does her employer, although they are often cunningly disguised as the 'commissioner'. While there are technical differences between the terms 'contractor' and 'consultant', the latter term has been used throughout for simplicity's sake.

Case one

The author's first exposure to external evaluation management occurred in 1998 when DPI commissioned the development of a management strategy on behalf of a community group. This was a proactive form of evaluation designed to inform decisions about future planning. The strategy was required to incorporate broad community consultation, and to include an economic analysis of various intervention options.

Murphy

A selection panel assessed each proposal against a clear set of key selection criteria, and agreed a decision. Unfortunately, these criteria had not been detailed in the Request for Proposals. It was therefore difficult to communicate reasons for the decision made to the unsuccessful proponents, one of whom remained dissatisfied and became a vocal critic of the project.

Nietzsche

Key selection criteria must be clearly detailed in Request for Proposal documentation, and rigorously adhered to when assessing proposals. Assessment comments should be recorded, and used to provide honest, comparative feedback to unsuccessful proponents.

Murphy

The successful proponent sub-contracted the economic analysis component of the project, the first draft of which contained numerous arithmetic errors and poorly informed assumptions. The sub-contractor proved resistant to being corrected, and relations remained strained for the rest of the project.

Nietzsche

Referee checks are conducted as a matter of course for proponents, but are often overlooked for any sub-contractors. While management of sub-contractors remains the responsibility of the consultant, it is worthwhile to check into the work history and expertise of any proposed sub-contractors.

Murphy

Following production of the first draft, an article appeared in the local newspaper promoting the project and the good work being done by the consultants. The article contained the spurious, uncorrected economic figures, and caused some measure of community concern. It had been submitted without the knowledge or permission of the commissioner, and this was in clear breach of the contract. Complaints were made, apologies received, but the damage had been done.

Nietzsche

Contract conditions can be difficult to enforce. While penalty clauses exist, applying them can be ineffective in terms of damage control and counter-productive for consultant - client relationships. A better approach is for both parties to discuss all contract elements during the negotiation stage to ensure awareness and understanding of acceptable practices.

Case two

The second case involved commissioning separate baseline and follow up surveys to ascertain changes in land managers' attitudes, behaviour and involvement in pest management resulting from a DPI compliance program.

Murphy

The consultants for the baseline study presented a paper based on the project to an international conference, without permission from the commissioners, and more importantly, without any acknowledgement of DPI. Again, this was in breach of contract.

Nietzsche

Publishing or presenting findings of an evaluation is a valid way to disseminate learnings, but the commissioner must retain control over what material is released, and when release is appropriate. It is worthwhile adding a contract clause stressing that permission must be obtained before publishing, and describing conditions for co-authorship of papers.

Murphy

Electronic data files for the baseline study were not stipulated in the contract documents as a project deliverable, and were not handed over to the commissioners before final payment. Despite numerous requests over the next few years, the data files were never obtained. This had serious implications for the (different) consultant undertaking the follow up study. All baseline data had to be extracted from the published report, and re entered for statistical analysis. Numbers in the baseline report had been rounded to one decimal place for presentation simplicity, which severely limited subsequent significance testing.

Nietzsche

In most evaluations, any data generated remain the property of the commissioner. Data files should be stipulated as a contract deliverable, and the commissioner should ensure all deliverables are handed over before final payment.

Case three

The third case concerns an external evaluation commissioned by DPI to investigate the effect of prosecution on landholders' pest management behaviour.

Murphy

Based on the learnings from the previous evaluation, SPSS files were stipulated as a project deliverable, and were obtained by the commissioner before final payment. Unfortunately, or perhaps carelessly, receipt of a CD containing SPSS files was considered satisfactory. It was only well after the project had concluded that the commissioner realised that rather than data files, they had been given SPSS output files, a very unsatisfactory alternative.

Nietzsche

Always stipulate and check the format of any electronic deliverables before final payment. Where particular skills are required to tell the difference, it is better to consult an expert than assume the files will be in a useable format.

Case four

The fourth case concerns a DPI pest awareness and behaviour change initiative, and the external evaluation commissioned to establish baseline data.

Murphy

Because this project had a large awareness raising focus, a communications company was engaged in the project development stage. Their involvement extended to securing proposals for the baseline data collection. Consequently, the process to seek Request for Proposals targeted marketing rather than evaluation providers, and a market research company was awarded the contract. Their apparent lack of an evaluative inquiry approach to the project resulted in a pretty set of numbers but poor process and data analysis practices.

Nietzsche

Request for Proposals for external evaluation projects should be targeted towards evaluation professionals, and preferably those who are members of the Australasian Evaluation Society. This maximises the chance of securing an evaluative inquiry approach for the task.

Murphy

The consultants consisted of a team of four, all apparently operating independently of the others. All tended to contact the commissioner, but information provided to one team member was not necessarily shared with the others, causing confusion and long delays.

Nietzsche

Communication between consultant and commissioner should be on a one to one basis. One member of the consultant team must be responsible for project management and for all communication with the commissioner via their responsible project manager. Many to one, or one to many communication process are not productive, and should be avoided.

Murphy

Recruitment of an evaluation officer to manage the baseline project on behalf of the commissioner suffered long delays, and management initially fell to an already overstretched staff member. She (mea culpa) took her eye off the ball, and the planned regular progress contacts with the consultant lapsed. She deluded herself that 'no news must be good news', and by the time management responsibility could be handed over to the star recruit, they inherited a huge mess.

Nietzsche

Managing external evaluations takes time and attention. Outsourcing the evaluation task does not remove the need for input and resources. Regular, weekly contact between consultant and commissioner should be maintained through the life of the project to maintain relationships and ensure no 'problems' have time to fester or grow.

Murphy

The product delivered by the consultant suffered delays and quality issues. Reports were late and messy (no proof reading), spurious correlations were made, no significance testing was conducted for differences claimed, 'don't know' and 'no answer' responses were combined (in an awareness survey!), there was little attention paid to feedback or questions raised by the commissioner, and the consultants were reluctant (or unable) to provide details of sampling, response rates, or dates and type of interviews conducted.

Nietzsche

Quality and timeliness standards are usually stipulated in the contract, but this does not guarantee cooperation. Relationship management is much more important than contract management, and is critical to the success of the project.

Case five

The fifth and most recent case involved a large, complex DPI science and technology initiative, and the impact / process evaluation commissioned via public tender.

Murphy

A formal DPI Request for Tender package comprises up to nine separate documents. Once a selection recommendation has been made, another seven document package must be submitted to DPI's Accredited Purchasing Unit for certification before engagement of the preferred consultant. All of these documents have critical, cascading dates, times and approval windows, (for example, advertising deadlines), and the process requires high level sign off. In this case, contracting was delayed by a State Government election, with no contracting allowed during the caretaker period, then further delayed while a new Minister and Department Secretary familiarised themselves with their new responsibilities.

Nietzsche

It is important to become familiar early in the contracting process with critical dates and approval windows, and to forewarn high level managers when signatures will be required. This allows them to set aside time to review documents, and serves to minimise inevitable delays.

Murphy

High value contracts generally attract a large amount of interest from the legal departments of both parties, and tenders often contain proposed alterations to the legal conditions of standard Government contracts. Unfortunately, in most cases, the legal departments don't communicate directly with each other, but through their respective project managers. With this project, interpreting the consequences of some of the proposed alterations would have required the opinion of an expert in Constitutional Law. This is not a comfortable area for the inexperienced operator.

Nietzsche

It is impossible to become expert in every field, and legal negotiations are best left to the legal experts. Good legal advice is essential to interpret the consequences of any proposed alterations to the terms of a standard Government contract.

Murphy

Once the preferred consultant had been selected, negotiations continued around the evaluation scope, level of engagement desired, and project deliverables. In these negotiations, Government representatives were striving to maximise value for money on behalf of Victorian taxpayers, and there was a strong temptation to attempt to ‘squeeze’ more interviews, larger sample sizes, and more outputs from the consultants. In this situation, it was easy to lose sight of the purpose of the evaluation, and focus too heavily on outputs rather than the more important evaluation outcomes.

Nietzsche

Outputs are a means to an end, and while it is important to maximise value for money, it is equally important to remember that value is best achieved through outcomes, not outputs.

Murphy

This evaluation project was overseen by a multi agency Steering Group, whose role was to guide the evaluation and ensure that key stakeholder requirements were met. Establishing a Steering Group takes time, especially when seeking high level representation from investor agencies. The Steering Group for this project was formed in time to participate in the selection of the preferred consultant, but not before the evaluation project brief was developed. Their involvement in the selection process ensured confidence in the choice made, but their lack of ownership of the project brief meant members had different expectations of the evaluation, which only became apparent as the evaluation unfolded.

Nietzsche

The involvement of a Steering Group can achieve stakeholder engagement in, and ownership of, an evaluation project. Ideally, they should be involved in the development of the evaluation project brief, so expectations of scope, purpose, and intended outcomes are agreed from the very beginning of the project. To achieve their involvement at such an early stage, the establishment of a Steering Group should be the first task within the evaluation project.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this ‘warts and all’ recounting of how one particular evaluator gained experience managing external evaluations for a Government Department will directly increase the understanding and effectiveness of those who may find themselves in a similar role, while minimising the need for everyone to learn from their own mistakes. And while Murphy’s Law guarantees that there will be mistakes, it is heartening to know that they are usually not fatal, and only serve to make us stronger and therefore better evaluators.