Program Evaluation – You Have to Find It First!

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As a community of scholars our goal must always be to promote discourse about our interpretations, not to advance them as authoritative pronouncements (Richard Wuthnow)

Introduction

What happens when you are commissioned to undertake a program evaluation and the funded organisation and funding body both acknowledge that after four years the "program never got off the ground"? What type of evaluation should be undertaken? What is the best methodology? Can evaluation provide any added value to the funded organisation or the funding body? And, how did this happen?

In May 2003, a Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) entered into a four year funding agreement with a respected funding body for a *Koori Community Capacity Building Initiative*. The aim of the project was to ensure Koori communities throughout Victoria have the capacity to design, manage, support and deliver sport and active recreation strategies and infrastructure at local and regional levels to improve Koori health and well-being.

In terms of the key objectives of the initiative being met, it was apparent that over the four year period processes around planning and implementation of the project were never firmly established and outcomes, when measured against the objectives, were poor. Notably, at the point of signing the funding agreement, the ACCO had very low levels of capacity and then decreasing levels of capacity through the first two years of project implementation. This became a telling finding during the course of the evaluation. But the first question the evaluator needs to address is what methodology will best serve both the commissioning organisation (the ACCO) and the funding body (seeking to find out what is the return on investment).

Methodology

Within the original funding agreement the evaluation component of the project was specifically outlined as "*external evaluation of and documentation of the process of establishing community sport and active recreation programs using a capacity building framework*". The aims of the evaluation were to:

1. Assist with monitoring the progress of the project;
2. Provide support and skill development of the ACCO staff regarding evaluation processes;
3. Identifying key learnings;

4. Report on project outcomes; and
5. Provide knowledge for building the capacity of Indigenous communities.

Evaluation was to take place on an annual basis but again due to certain circumstances relating to the ACCO's own capacity and the broader challenges in terms of project implementation, no evaluations had taken place by the time the project closed in September 2007. Clearly, without the annual evaluations taking place, meeting the stated evaluation aims becomes difficult.

Therefore, establishing the terms of reference for the final evaluation and in ensuring the evaluation could be informative and meaningful for all stakeholders, a consultative approach was used where the ACCO, the funding body and the evaluators developed both the key evaluation questions and then came to an agreement on methodology.

There were three phases to the evaluation methodology. These were:

Phase 1: Content analysis of documentation

This was a detailed analysis of all the key documentation with regard to the broad aims of the *Koori Community Capacity Building Initiative* and included all ACCO documentation directly and indirectly associated with the *Koori Community Capacity Building Initiative* as well as all relevant documentation held by the funding body. The analysis took place between May - August 2007 and involved a number of site visits. This analysis provided a framework for the development of an interview guide to be used for Phase 2 of the methodology.

The *Koori Community Capacity Building Initiative* was a project where outcomes that are consistent with either the project timelines and/or the performance indicators had been difficult to secure - though that is not to say that there may not have been other unintended outcomes. Accordingly, despite the original evaluation aims, the process required at the end of the project was one that allowed for an examination of the successes and challenges and the influences and impacts on project implementation and outcomes. Such an evaluation needed to investigate the dynamic processes, interrelations, communication, feelings, opinions and experiences of those directly and indirectly involved in the project. As such, a qualitative approach (in depth interviews) was deemed most appropriate.

Phase 2: Key stakeholder interviews

A representative sample of in-depth interviews with key stakeholders associated with program implementation were undertaken where the interview guide was developed designed around a series of questions related to the projects key objectives and a series of sub-questions aimed at identifying common themes and issues for both the ACCO and the communities of interest.

A representative sample of interviews was secured and included staff and board members of the ACCO (including the current CEO), staff and CEOs from partnering corporations in three Victorian communities and Board and staff from one metropolitan

organisation. The data was saturated early with very high consistency in terms of the history, current operations and future potential of the ACCO and the organisation's ability – past and present – to build community capacity.

Phase 3: Data Analysis

The critical component of this evaluation and qualitative data collection was the ability to 'make sense of the data', given the project had never been fully realised. The evaluators aimed to draw from the data common and generalised themes across the interviews addressing the key evaluation question: Which, if any, of the key objectives for the *Koori Community Capacity Building Initiative* have been met? What were the success factors? What were the limitations to success?

The methodology employed for this evaluation therefore aimed to examine, through a qualitative approach, the key questions and challenges that had the ACCO struggle to fully develop even the implementation process of the *Koori Community Capacity Building Initiative*.

Findings

The evidence from the document analysis was suggestive that from the very start of the *Koori Community Capacity Building Initiative* the ACCO was challenged to deliver on the objectives set down in the funding agreement. Given the scope of these objectives, with a slow start the project struggled even under new leadership and direction to gain momentum and make up lost ground to meet the expectations contained in the objectives. If the capacity building theory is right, then time alone would determine that the ACCO was always likely to fail to meet the key objectives and measuring outcomes would be difficult since capacity building is a long-term project that demands high commitment to time and resources.

Also, capacity building is a complex in both theory and practice and securing an agreed definition is itself difficult. Implementation of capacity building projects is clearly challenging and demands certain skills and knowledge to ensure it is done well. It should not be surprising that the concept of capacity building was something the ACCO sought to clarify at the beginning of its project and in some respect struggled to determine throughout the life of the project.

Further, an organisation is said to have capacity if it has the following six components, with components being hierarchical from most important to least important:
1. A conceptual framework reflecting the organisation's understanding of the world;
2. An organisational attitude that incorporates the confidence and ability to act in a way that the organisation believes is effective and has an impact and takes responsibility for the social and physical conditions of the external environment;
3. A clear organisational mission statement and strategies;
4. Defined organisational structures and procedures that reflect and support the mission statement;
5. The necessary skills and competencies in place; and
6. Adequate material resources.

Certainly at the commencement of the *Koori Community Capacity Building Initiative* the ACCO was poorly positioned to be building the capacity of others given that the documentation highlighted the paucity of material evidence within the organisation for any of the six components listed above.

Analysis of the documentation proved important in terms of identifying the inputs and outputs of the project. However, the methodology adopted here aimed to inform an understanding of process and the qualitative interviews secured such understanding. Indeed, it was only through the qualitative interviews that the parlous state of the organisation, during the first two years of the *Koori Community Capacity Building Initiative*, became apparent. Indeed, by June 2005, one staff member suggested:

> *To give you an idea of what was happening... there was no CEO for a period of time and the finances were a real mess with tax and superannuation not having been paid for over 18 months. The staff had lost motivation and felt let down and were looking for jobs...capacity building was not a priority for staying alive... we were in survival mode.*

Analysis of the data from the documentation review and the interviews demonstrated that the critical limitation to achieving success was low levels of capacity at project commencement through to June 2005. At this point the organisation appears to be in survival mode with extremely low levels of financial, physical, social and human capacity/capital. Limitations to success were further evidenced in the fact that many of the organisations the ACCO aimed to 'engage' in the *Koori Community Capacity Building Initiative* were themselves, by definition of the project aims and objectives, organisations with low levels of capacity. Certainly an organisation that has limited capacity itself is hardly well positioned to build the capacity of another – or a community.

Importantly, while not a salient finding in the documentation, the interviews provided substantive evidence that under the direction of a new CEO, the ACCO increased its reputation and internal capacity over that last two years of the project.

Planning took place to ensure the organisation was sustainable with a vision to be a community based organisation that exists to provide opportunities, empower, support and encourage Aboriginal participation in sport and active recreation at all levels. Internally, the organisation actively sought to build the confidence, skills and competencies of staff and it is surprising that given the events of 2005 no staff left the organisation. Most were – by September 2007 – undertaking professional training and development.

> *We have come a long way. In 2005 we lost the funding ... and the staff was relieved in some way that [the program] was not going ahead... Since that time we have now have staff doing Cert IV and diplomas in Frontline Management, Cert III and IV in Fitness and Personal Training and we are looking at succession planning the next CEO.*

The evidence from this evaluation suggests that the two major outcomes were the survival of the organisation and then some increased organisational capacity. This is consistent with the changed scope of the project whereby, in 2006, the organisation itself became a site for the *Koori Community Capacity Building Initiative.*

However, it should not be forgotten that having emerged from the parlous state of 2005, the evidence from the interviews suggests the organisation has an increased reputation through a perceived increase in professionalism, developed a more defined strategy around planning and implementation of sports carnivals (with higher rates of participation) and is entering into an increasing number of partnerships (evidenced by those willing to partner with the ACCO on grant submissions). Further, the organisation has worked closely with one community, who attributed the establishment of a Sports and Recreation Committee and its own increased capacity to working with the ACCO.

In the end, these might be described as the unintended outcomes of the *Koori Community Capacity Building Initiative*. While many of the intended outcomes have not been secured, the funding body of course must determine the level to which it has secured a return on its investment.

Finally, capacity building is not an easy exercise. It has been noted it takes time, skills, resources, knowledge and persistence. Understanding what the concept means and for whom is a critical first step for those designing and funding capacity building programs. Where a body is funding an organisation to build the capacity of others it is of course critical to be certain that the funded organisation has itself the capacity to deliver at the beginning, the middle and the end of the project. Without support and some kind of monitoring of progress, evaluation becomes difficult and the expectations of key stakeholders will not be met. When these expectations are high, the disappointment and anxiety is only increased (and the ACCO had a good quantity of both over the life of the project) but as one interviewee (internal stakeholder) suggested:

> *We have all learnt a lot from this project (…) maybe even the funding body has learnt some things.*

Discussion

> *We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them"* -
> Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955).

Given the lack of outcomes and impacts, when measured against the program objectives, it would have been easy to take some aspect of evaluation theory, measure the program against such theory and determine that the project had failed – with perhaps some valid reasons provided for such failure. However, in taking an innovative and bold approach the evaluation 'added value' and identified some important learnings for both the funded organisation and the funding body. These learnings allowed for improved decision making. That is, the evaluation did more than simply 'report' the very limited program success against stated aims and objectives. In both the funding body and the funded organisation willingly and honestly acknowledging at the commencement of the evaluation the limited success against program objectives, new ways of thinking about the evaluation were opened up.

First, it was clear that the concept of capacity building needed to be explored in much more detail than it had before if understanding was to be developed around how one organisation can (potentially) build the capacity of another.

Second, telling the story of the funded organisation, charting the journey and including the voices of those directly and indirectly involved in, and challenged by, program design, implementation and measurement allowed for the unintended outcomes to emerge. The unintended outcomes emerged in ways that better informed program and policy design in the important area of Aboriginal health and well being. Further, capturing 'the story' of the organisation was something many of the interviewees responded very positively to and allowed for rich and dense data to emerge.

Third, when project objectives have not been met and the program itself cannot be evidenced, there are clearly some risks for organisational stakeholders in the evaluation. A collabourative approach to the final development of the evaluation plan and methodology ensured ethics and the needs and integrity of the various program stakeholders were not compromised. All stakeholders agreed transparency needed to be a critical component of the implementation and reporting of an evaluation conducted without fear or favour.

Fourth, the terminology associated with evaluation was rarely used in the development or the implementation of the evaluation. In the development stage discussions were not centred on whether a formative, summative, process, or impact evaluation would best meet the requirements. Program Logic models were not discussed nor were methodologies for distinguishing between efficiency, effectiveness, consistency and impact. Of course with so few 'inputs', negligible 'outputs' and no obvious 'outcomes', much of the language and concepts associated with evaluation becomes redundant. The key question was what happened and what can be learnt?

Had such 'standard' evaluation discussions driven the development of the evaluation – for this evaluator – it is questionable whether the findings would have been so substantive. Also, whether the integrity of all stakeholders could have been enhanced – as it rightly was - rather than diminished. The ability to name the type of evaluation we are conducting will never make our evaluations valid and/or reliable - the conditions that should, of course, drive our discipline.

In the end 'telling the story' – honestly – as it occurred and forfeiting the search for intended and unintended impacts, allowed both to emerge in ways that strict adherence to evaluation theory may not have permitted.