Action-Oriented Evaluation in Organizations

CANADIAN PRACTICES

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Effective Communication

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The impact of evaluation studies can be improved significantly through effective communication—a process of presenting findings and recommendations to the client and audiences of concern to the client (often groups affected by the program such as users) and listening to their reactions. The communication process is successful if the evaluation is well understood and is perceived as credible. Producing the final written report is the last step of a highly labour intensive process and represents only a fraction of the reporting that must be done in carrying out a useful evaluation.

Enhancing study value through effective communication involves using an *evaluation reporting strategy.* The elements of a good strategy are:

- using client time effectively (making every second of client contact count);
- recognizing the importance of reporting as an integral part of conducting useful evaluations;
- giving the report a clear focus and identifying key message(s) for the audience(s); and,
- reporting in ways that convey messages clearly and forcefully.

Each of these strategies is dealt with in this chapter.

Using Client Time Effectively

In communicating evaluations, the attention of the evaluation client and user groups is a precious commodity to be appreciated and used to the fullest. People are constantly bombarded with demands on their time and attention. Good communication, therefore, respects the value of audience time.

In order to save client time, empathy is essential. The evaluator must understand how the reported messages are likely to be perceived and understood and consider where possible or likely misunderstandings may arise. In other words, evaluators must do as much of the listener's work as possible so that no client or audience time is wasted trying to figure out what messages the evaluator is attempting to convey and how these messages relate to the client's top priorities. The evaluator as communicator must be as concerned with perceptions as with content. Each reporting event must make a clear impression and convey a clear message. Resist the temptation to demonstrate all the complex work involved in the evaluation study. Be prepared to summarize the report orally in thirty words or less. Consider it unlikely that more than ten minutes will be given for presenting evaluation results. Keeping these things in mind during the preparation of a report will enable evaluators to make a more effective impression on busy clients.

Reporting as a Tool for Maximizing Impact

Reporting is a key step in evaluation and one of the most important factors affecting the use of evaluation analysis, findings, and recommendations. Developing a reporting strategy to communicate findings and recommendations to key audiences in a credible and action-oriented manner is an essential part of conducting practical and useful evaluations.

Doing good measurement work and analysis is just the first step in producing value for the client. As pointed out by Schalock and Thornton (1988), no matter how well a study has been implemented, no matter how innovative the recommendations, no matter how valid and reliable the measurements, or how accurate, meaningful, and interesting the findings, the evaluation will be of limited value unless it is well understood and believed by the client and key audiences. It must be seen to be both balanced and practical. Thus, for example, highlighting success, as well as pointing out problems, is important if stakeholder audiences are to accept the study.

Bringing about changes in a complex organization is much more difficult than keeping things the same. As Peters (1989) has noted, for people to accept changes, they must understand and believe in the potential for improvement and must be motivated to pursue improvement through implementation of the proposed changes. Simple, accurate, and disinterested evaluation reporting is usually not enough to lead to significant change. If the study recommends changes to the status quo, effective marketing of the findings and recommendations is essential. In these circumstances, there is no clear line between reporting and marketing. Marketing requires much more than a valuable product (i.e. excellent measurements, analysis, and recommendations). Marketing requires that the benefits of using the excellent product be understood, believed, and acted upon by those concerned. The evaluation must therefore be packaged correctly. The analysis and recommendations must be situated correctly and introduced in a manner sensitive to the user environment.

If evaluation work is not reported to the right audience in a timely and user-friendly manner, its chances of being used are greatly diminished. Corbeil (1989) and Mowbray (1988) have pointed out that reporting and marketing of the evaluation should start in the planning phase and continue throughout the evaluation project and at completion of each phase of the study. Lipps and Grant (1990) have discussed the advantages of using evaluation methods which allow for continual, active participation of clients and stakeholders in all phases of the study. When this type of participative evaluation approach is used, reporting events are key to successful implementation. Hendricks and Papagiannis (1990) discuss how it is often essential for decision making to understand how implementation of recommendations will affect the various parties involved.

The final written report is only one aspect of evaluation reporting. Much reporting occurs before the final report is prepared and submitted. A number of reporting events may be used depending on the stage in the study and the nature of the audience. These may include:

- formal presentations to relatively large groups of stakeholders;
- progress reports to advisory committees established for the study;
- one-on-one meetings with individual key stakeholders;
- more informal "town hall" type meetings with small groups of stakeholders; and,
- letters, articles in newsletters, and other media with a demonstrated ability to reach the target audiences.

In some cases, oral reports with visual presentations may make preparation of a final written report merely a housekeeping step aimed at preserving evaluation findings and recommendations for the record. However, even when decisions have been made on the basis of oral reports, written documentation is still an important output of the evaluation team. For most studies, good documentation is essential in order to defend findings and analysis after the study is concluded. Most studies are intended to be available for others either to challenge the findings or to learn from the experience. Communication to these other parties may include oral presentations, but final written reports are usually essential. Studies must be well documented if they are to be used by the program managers as a consultation tool with program clientele. Often the value of an evaluation study is to document program impacts and effects in a credible and rigorous manner. In all such cases, well-organized written documentation is essential. The time required, the value of alternative uses of that time, the value of a written document, and the role being played by the evaluation are all factors that must be considered in deciding how and when to report.

Regardless of whether a report is to be in oral or written format, in order to enhance evaluation utilization, two main considerations should guide the reporting strategy: *identification of the audience(s) and selection of the appropriate type of reporting to use for each audience.*

Identifying the audience(s) is a process of determining which groups are interested in or affected by the program and considering their expectations about the program and the evaluation. At the earliest stages of the work, evaluators should determine and then communicate how the evaluation findings might to be useful to each particular audience.

Strategic Reporting

Keep It Simple: Focus on the Essence of the Study

Evaluation studies often uncover a great deal of interesting information and many potential program improvements. The number of "reportables" is greatly increased when the study attempts to evaluate many unrelated evaluation issues. Some studies attempt to use all information and present a long list of recommendations, covering many aspects of the program in question. In some cases, these studies do have an important impact on the program, but this is more often the exception than the rule. There is usually a limit to the amount of information or change a program can absorb in a given period of time. When many unrelated messages and recommendations are presented, often only a small number are even discussed or acted upon; therefore, those that do get implemented may not be the most important or have the highest payoff. In fact, when no clear theme is apparent in a long list of recommendations, the tendency is to implement only those that become someone's pet project or are seen as the easiest (least costly, least challenging, requiring fewest changes to procedures or resource allocation).

To ensure that the evaluation makes a valuable contribution to improved programming, the evaluation team should undertake a strategic analysis of all potential items that could be reported and to whom. Look for the key theme or message emerging from the study and determine which of the potential recommendations are likely to be accepted and implemented, given the current operating environment. One way to reduce clutter is to identify recommendations which can be acted upon at a lower level in the organization—and then report them there.

The key theme emerging from the study must be kept clear and uncluttered. This is often difficult, and the evaluation team may have to work through several drafts to distil a clear and concise message. Once developed, the task then becomes one of communicating this message convincingly at every reporting event. No matter which reporting method is used, the key message or messages should be conveyed in the first page or at the beginning of the meeting. Sometimes this approach must be adapted to the client or to the specific environment of the event. However, when in doubt about how soon to present the key message, act on the assumption that only the minimum time and attention will be granted. This means that even when there is only one central message in the report, it still must be presented in a condensed and simplified way.

Defining and Refining Key Messages

Preparing an evaluation report is easy. Being clearly understood and ensuring that the evaluation is used for decision making are much more difficult. Several techniques make this more possible.

First, avoid unneccesary complexity. Even the most complex material can be communicated in a simple manner. Avoid the temptation to demonstrate to the client the cleverness of the evaluation team and sophistication of its study design. If a solution seems complex to the evaluation team, chances are it will seem extremely complex to anyone else. *The more complex the message, the smaller its chances of being understood.*

Choose one theme or message. Save the rest for the next study or for a second report to the client after the first report has been absorbed and implemented successfully. *The greater the number of themes or messages in the report, the less likely any will be understood or acted upon.*

Having one clear theme will assist the evaluation team in formulating its key recommendations. Resisting the temptation to cover the program from wall to wall is often difficult. The more complex the program, the greater the difficulty in thinking through the impacts and practicality of a wide range of recommendations. *The greater the number of unrelated recommendations, the greater the chance that some will be seen as conflicting.*

Evaluations sometimes recommend major changes or challenge a widely held belief of stakeholders. Reporting the basis for such recommendations requires more detailed explanations than findings that confirm what was suspected by program staff or stakeholders. When a study does discover a surprising result, it is essential to hold more one-on-one progress reporting and small group meetings in advance of a final report. There is usually not enough time to make detailed explanations of evaluation findings at a large group meeting, nor to allow participants to pursue matters requiring clarification. Participants may be intimidated or unwilling to show their lack of understanding or lack of agreement with the evaluation team at this point. Some participants may be unwilling to show support or disagreement with others at the meeting. In these cases, many smaller meetings are the preferred vehicle for effective reporting and communication. Also, as stakeholder understanding (and modification of existing understandings and beliefs) is the goal, the evaluation team usually learns how to communicate their findings more successfully as they make repeated presentations on several occasions. The point to focus upon is that *the greater the number of points that the evaluation team must make, the less likely they will be communicated successfully.*

Furthermore, when a controversial finding is presented, it is usually prudent to report it in a qualified, nonthreatening manner, accompanied with a recommendation to carry out a pilot test or some other implementation analysis, rather than a wholesale program change. Reporting in this manner, by offering a way to make a small, reversible change and assess the results, is usually a more acceptable approach. It allows the evaluator and client to recognize the threats to the validity of what has been measured and promotes action rather than further study. Marketing of the finding is facilitated since approval of a pilot project or implementation analysis does not require the same level of understanding or commitment from the large number of stakeholders who must be onside for a major program change. No matter how well presented in oral and written reports, understanding of study findings always improves if the worth of proposed program changes are replicated or confirmed in a subsequent pilot test. Pilot testing also allows for more controlled experimentation than would usually be possible in an evaluation study and therefore allows for fine-tuning (or if necessary, correction) of the evaluator's analysis and recommendations. Finally, pilot testing gives decision makers, program staff, and stakeholders time to warm up to innovative ideas that may seem threatening when first introduced.

Sometimes improvements to programs are identified by considering problems or difficulties being encountered by a program. While the ideas for change may be rooted in finding a solution to a problem, it is often necessary to refine the message in order to suit an audience and to get the attention of the audience in a cooperative rather than in a defensive manner. This means adopting a positive perspective for reporting evaluations. Focus on success. Situate any problems identified in a positive light, pointing out how addressing identified problems will improve program results. Evaluation studies should produce information and analysis to facilitate decision making. By highlighting the successes and identifying the obstacles to success, evaluations can become effective change agents for improving programs.

When reporting evaluation results, evaluators should not oversell their product. If an evaluation product becomes incorrectly perceived as the perfect scientific solution, the evaluators should correct this misperception. Studies reduce uncertainty; they do not provide irrefutable proof. There is always some threat to the validity of measurements or findings. Both the strengths and the weaknesses of the evaluation must be understood by the client. The manner in which an evaluation is reported will therefore affect whether it is perceived as reliable management information, whether it is used for decision making, and whether its recommendations are acted upon.

Conveying the Message Clearly and Forcefully

Pretesting the Report

Oral and written reports are one of the evaluator's key outputs and are most visible to the evaluation's client and users. Perceptions about the work's quality and credibility are often formed at the reporting points that occur throughout the study and on completion.

Just as the measurement instruments used to conduct a study are pretested to see how well they serve their intended purpose, so too should each reporting event and product be checked to make sure it is effective.

- Talk with people who have reviewed your draft report before presenting the report.
- Make trial presentations of the report, checking on perceptions.
- Ask colleagues or clients for advice.
- If key messages were not received clearly, rework the report.

This pretesting of the report can be done very quickly, often in a matter of a few hours. It is usually well worth the time spent.

Communicating Your Message in a Written Report

Written reports must respect the information needs, key concerns, and limited time of readers. To achieve brevity, written materials must squarely address the issues likely to arise from any decisions taken as a result of the evaluation findings. To be clear and concise, reports must also be written with a minimum of jargon.

Attractive professional presentation, printing, and copying are important in conveying the quality of the evaluation work underlying the written report. An investment should be made in necessary time and resources to produce a high-quality physical product. The typeface selected for the report should be clear, clean, and large enough to be read with ease. The report should be easy to skim and contain clear headings and subheadings. Headings should be used that summarize the main message (much like a newspaper headline), rather than neutral headings that require reading the text to understand the message. For example, the heading *Improved Skills Training Required* conveys a clear message while headings like *Skills Training* or *Findings and Recommendations Concerning Training* require the reader to read the section to discover the evaluator's message. A surprisingly large part of any audience will skim the report rather than study it. For this group especially, everything should be done to present an impression of quality, professionalism and clarity.

When reporting to senior management or to stakeholders, evaluators must understand their needs and expectations. They usually have little time to consider technical distinctions. Also, few readers will care about the evaluators' skills in overcoming methodological difficulties. They want to understand quickly what was found, what successes are to be emulated, what pitfalls are to be avoided, and whether there are any key caveats to bear in mind. When problems are identified, clients usually expect advice regarding solutions and the degree of support to be expected from program stakeholders. The details of interest to researchers or specialized audiences should be easily available in an annex to the report or in a working file, but they should not clutter the message being delivered to the client. The only exception to this is if the client requests this material and learns by spending time reviewing technical documentation.

In the interests of clarity and brevity, complex ideas or points, such as statistical trends, should be illustrated using graphs, tables, and other visual exhibits. However, while some types of evaluation findings lend themselves well to statistical presentation, others do not. As discussed by Zeisel (1985), judgement must be exercised in deciding whether and how graphs and tables can streamline the presentation of ideas. An evaluation of a social program that reduces the value of the program, its costs, and benefits to a set of numbers invites the reaction that the evaluators are "number crunchers" who do not understand the nature of the intended social intervention. However, even if numerical graphs and tables are not suitable for summarizing findings, tables highlighting the key points in the text using narrative "bullets" or dash-points are often effective.

Conclusions and recommendations must appear early in most reports intended for nonresearcher audiences and must be based upon and linked clearly and logically to what was measured. Because of their link to the recommendations, the analysis and measurements upon which conclusions are based must be available in (or with) the report, but this is not generally the focus of most readers' attention. One way to accomplish this and report clearly is to separate the conclusions and recommendations from the descriptive and measurement data. Using this approach, a condensed discussion of measurements can be presented in the report and elaborated upon in an annex or companion document.

Using an Executive Summary to Highlight Messages and Facilitate Consultation

An essential ingredient of any evaluation report, be it the final report or an interim or progress report, is an executive summary. The summary must contain the key messages and the basis for the recommendations.

In the interest of getting a report out on time some evaluators issue a progress report or draft version of a final report without an executive summary. This is poor practice because it fails to put the correct value on readers' time. Even more important, it is simply not prudent to expect clients to read an entire evaluation report carefully from cover to cover. Also, issuing progress reports without an executive summary may not be an effective timesaver. Lack of an executive summary has sometimes been the cause of misunderstandings about the contents of a report. This can occur if a reader is under time pressure to formulate a reaction to a report (and skims or reviews only key parts of the report) or if the client is given a summary of a report prepared by an interested party. In general if a report is more than a few pages long, an important percentage of readers will look for a shortcut to quick understanding of the evaluation results. If there is a summary, it probably will be reviewed in order to formulate first impressions. If it is absent, the most frequent shortcut is to turn immediately to the recommendations or conclusions. If the key messages are not self-evident in these sections, misunderstandings can arise for this part of the audience.

The executive summary of evaluation reports should be written first, before the complete report is written. It should be kept short and to the point, and include the main recommendations and the key points upon which they are based. The result is usually a much clearer, more focused report. If the aim is to speed consultations on the report, or provide quick feedback on the findings at the earliest possible time, circulation of an executive summary while the longer report is being prepared is a certain timesaver.

Circulation of the executive summary, prior to the complete report, was used in reporting the results of an evaluation of one of the administrative requirements of the federal government's Motor Vehicle Policy (Treasury Board Secretariat, 1990). The first of a series of evaluations, started in 1990, to provide input for streamlining federal administrative policies, the study considered the continued rationale for requiring federal departments to participate in a government-wide information system.

Once data collection had been completed (and expectations for change raised), stakeholders were impatient to find out about the study findings and recommendations. Although the final report was in its early stages of preparation, in assembling their presentation the study team found that they had, in effect, written a clear, focused, two-page executive summary. The essence of the recommendations was that it was no longer necessary for the policy to be mandatory, because of the availability of a wide range of alternatives. The recommendation was that participation in the centralized system should be voluntary. This summary document was distributed at the meeting and allowed for full discussion of the study findings and recommendations. Following this meeting, the availability of the executive summary permitted rapid consultations with a range of stakeholders. With the executive summary in hand, and consensus among virtually all users of the information system that the recommendations were practical, the final evaluation report was written within a very short time.

Tips for Oral Reporting Events

Regardless of the mechanism selected, all reporting events must be carefully planned. The evaluator must think through how the event will take place and how the study can be advanced. The use of overheads, slides, and handouts helps convey the message accurately and concisely. Often, extracting the key words or ideas from the report or putting findings and recommendations in graphic form is an effective method of focusing attention during a reporting event. Fact sheets, diagrams, pictures, and graphs can all serve to alert attention to essential findings and assist in the difficult task of communicating with the audience.

When using fact sheets, overheads, slides, and similar materials in meetings, text should be used sparingly. Using complete sentences and narrative will only divert attention from what is being said. Use the word or words, or graphics on the overhead to pique the audience's curiosity or to capture the essence of a key idea. Make them listen to the speaker; do not invite them to read text on an overhead. Keep the messages simple and lean. Use big, bold print. Present only one point per page or slide; otherwise, people will read ahead and not pay attention to the speaker.

Essential in planning for these meetings is finding a means to get quickly to the heart of the matters to be communicated. One of the best ways to do this is by strategic use of a meeting agenda. This is an important document and deserves the attention of the evaluation team well in advance of the meeting. The agenda should highlight the key points to be discussed. If something is important, or if it must be considered in a broader context rather than completely on its own, put it on the agenda (with the other issues). Pay attention to the ordering of issues to be discussed. Use the agenda to manage discussion time at the meeting. Also, use the agenda as a type of consultation document by circulating it in advance. This also allows people to give some thought to specific issues in advance of the meeting.

Involving Stakeholders in Analysis of Findings

Effective reporting of evaluations involves good listening and recognizing opportunities for incorporating client and stakeholder input in reports. As interim results become available, each audience should be briefed and invited to assist in working through the implications of findings. As has been pointed out by Wye (1989) and Fricke and Gill (1989), audience involvement in thinking through the various ways that findings can be translated into recommendations increases the probability that recommendations will be practical and able to be implemented. Also, the process of involving stakeholders can be useful as a management tool in itself, quite apart from its value in producing a better final report. When carried out in a sensitive manner, this involvement can secure a commitment to action from the persons who will be responsible for implementing the study's recommendations. Two good examples (Canadian Evaluation Society, 1990) of this are provided in the

Transport Canada (1987) and the International Development Research Centre (Sokoine University, 1985) evaluations.

Transport Canada's 1987 Study of Internal Communications

A case where "town hall" meetings were used effectively to facilitate discussion of study findings and to improve the acceptance of the final conclusions was the *Internal Communications Evaluation* conducted in 1987 by Transport Canada. As part of a larger review of the department's communication methods and practices, this study was undertaken to assess ways to improve internal communication practices in the organization. Among the evaluation methods used were a mail survey of more than 1600 managers and almost 150 personal interviews with managers across the country. An interim report was prepared on the principal findings and potential strategies to bring about improvements. Twenty-five town hall meetings were held across Canada, with some 350 managers attending. The final report presented a set of recommendations based upon the results of the various information collection methods, including these meetings. The result of this interactive process was a final report with high credibility and broad ownership.

An International Development Evaluation

Another example of a study where stakeholders were involved in synthesizing study findings and formulating recommendations was the *Evaluation of International Development Research Centre Supported Projects,* which was undertaken by the Sokoine University of Agriculture in Tanzania, from January to August 1985. The purpose of the work was to assess the technical and management issues involved in the university's projects receiving support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Twelve such projects had been supported between 1972 and 1984. The key methods used to conduct the study were interviews with research personnel, a review of secondary sources, case studies, and project reviews. At the end of the study, 53 people from government, national agricultural and scientific research institutions, and Sokoine University participated in a workshop to consider the study findings. The workshop succeeded in making recommendations on how to improve a variety of agricultural research projects. This process has clear benefit in terms of gaining broad ownership of recommended changes.

Where different audiences come to different conclusions about interpretation of findings or logical recommendations, the evaluator has an obligation to sort through the arguments and consider their merits. In these cases, evaluation clients generally expect to be briefed fully about the plausible alternative conclusions, as well as receive the evaluator's independent judgement.

Using the Evaluation Report as a Marketing Tool for the Program

At times, the line between evaluation reporting and program delivery can become blurred as the reporting of the evaluation may serve to market basic program concepts. An example of such a case is the *Evaluation of the Alternative Funding Arrangements Program,* carried out by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada in June 1989. The program was launched in 1987 to give Indian communities more local control over the administration of programs. Bands with effective management systems and procedures could sign multi-year funding arrangements, covering a wide range of federal programs, in place of separate annual agreements for each program. Although it was anticipated that many communities would be interested in this program, only 12 of the 600 Indian bands in Canada had signed an alternative funding agreement (AFA) at the time the evaluation was started.

The evaluation concluded that AFAs had a positive impact on all 12 bands that participated. The bands found that an AFA gave them the ability to modify and redesign programs, and some of the bands did so to respond to specific situations in their communities. The evaluators found that these modifications improved the results achieved by the programs in their communities. The study made a number of recommendations, building on the best practices in use in the various regions. Among the recommendations was one focusing on improving the marketing of the AFA program. The purpose of the recommended marketing initiatives was to make more communities aware of the advantages of participating in the AFA program.

Although it was not among the evaluation recommendations, program management quickly recognized that some of the work done for the evaluation could be used as an effective marketing document. Case studies of the three bands with the oldest alternative funding agreements had been conducted. The case study reports demonstrated clearly the flexibility and program improvements that could be made by these bands, and (after obtaining permission from the three bands) program management sent copies of the reports, as well as the final evaluation report, to all bands in Canada. In addition, the study findings and recommendations were reported in the department's internal and external newsletters.

Conclusions

There is much more to effective reporting than simply writing a balanced and accurate final report. Reporting starts at the planning stage of evaluation and is an integral part of conducting any useful evaluation. Effective and credible communication is essential. To be successful, evaluators must give as much time and attention to their reporting strategy as they give to the study research design and analysis.

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