

Approaching Evaluation Developmentally

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Evaluation done in a developmental way can unlock potential for learning and improved practice, yet we struggle to make evaluation the vehicle for positive change in development. This article explores the elements that will enhance the role of evaluation in our work.

Slow down and enjoy life. It is not only the scenery you miss by going too fast – you also miss the sense of where you are going and why. (E. Cantor)

Evaluation is a means to slowing down and appreciating, not only the scenery, but the outcomes, the effect of your labour and how it is that some areas have flourished while others have not.

In our world, where we value learning outcomes as much as we do the more conventional products of social development, we see thorough evaluation as the best way of building and sustaining good practice. When the process of evaluation is used as a development tool, learning and accountability go hand in hand. Where learning and accountability is used to inform practice, profound social change is sure to follow.

External evaluations, those facilitated by an outsider, have the benefit of a skilled practitioner, who rather than playing the role of chief investigating officer, firstly invites the organisation to slow down and listen to itself. This model does not exclude the external voice, but rather integrates it in a process that is primarily to do with self-assessment and learning.

External evaluations are an excellent opportunity for organisational learning. However, to ensure that they are more than simple paper-exercises, a report destined for the bin (or a donor), you may need to take the following methodological considerations into account.

Learning and accountability

External evaluation should enable both learning and accountability. Learning is to search out understanding, insight, knowledge or skill through reflecting on experience. Accountability is a transparent story of one's successes and failures. When working with small-scale social change (where work occurs in the realm of the invisible, personal and inter-personal), organisational learning is the most reliable route into external accountability. In CDRA, we have discovered that when we share our own field experiences for the purpose of learning and improving future practice, accountability happens. It flows naturally. But we also know, that when the spotlight is on 'Accountability' (with a capital 'A'), the liberty to be vulnerable shrivels, and the need to prove success or failure dominates. The outcome? Superficial learning and accountability; a neat report for the donor; a tick in the manager's to-do column.

Quantitative and qualitative measures

In this approach to evaluation, quantitative and qualitative measures are combined. Ideally, if organisations have mechanisms for feedback and data collection, basic quantitative information on "outputs" is available as a starting point for the evaluation. If not, the evaluation needs to begin with generating some of the needed information, and if time allows, recommend systems for future use. However, where feedback on "quality" and strategic appropriateness is sought and where different strategies are valued in different ways, quantitative measures are insufficient. Qualitative measures and an approach that draws on the understanding of all involved are far more effective in providing a meaningful indication of impact and value.

Measuring impact - evaluation or research?

Measuring the impact of developmental interventions is critical to the process of learning and accounting. It is possible and necessary to collaboratively measure impact, quantitatively and qualitatively, on those directly involved in and directly impacted by the intervention, and from which one can strategically argue or anticipate the likely contribution of that intervention to change downstream. But measuring or proving impact *downstream*, scientifically for governments, on the ultimate "beneficiaries" and wider, is considerably more complex and not a task that practitioners can be expected to take on as part of their direct evaluations in practice.

Practitioners may be able to demonstrate and illustrate impact downstream through following up particular case studies, but scientifically measuring impact downstream requires developmental research, requiring skills, resources and time that they do not normally have. Donors need to be funding research for this impact on ultimate and wider "beneficiaries", relieving the pressure on M&E systems, but contributing the research to their learning and enabling practitioners to focus on evaluation for practice development.

Participation

Essentially, evaluation for learning does not substitute for facts and figures – but goes beyond it. It is quite literally "formative" as participants' understanding of their work or experience is deepened - formed - through the process of evaluation. An evaluation "finding" is arrived at through a form of structured conversation, a process of questioning, listening, making meaning and deepening understanding. This kind of "finding" is both a valuable and valid one. It builds on the logic of 'doing is knowing', and validates the knowledge generated by considered experience.

The central and most important source of information in developmental external evaluation is people themselves. Their perceptions (be they reflective of a majority viewpoint, or not) are valid material for the evaluation. The processes being evaluated are human processes, thus the measures must be human too. Seen in this way, a "perception" of impact is a form of impact in itself.

The external evaluator's role is to create an environment that is conducive to real engagement. Engagement in self-reflection, group exchanges and in one on one interviews. It is his/her role to help participants listen, to themselves and others, as both a form of accepting and for asking why. It is his/her role to help participants to view their scenarios from different perspectives, and to spark their dynamic for change. The evaluator is required to sink deeply into each perspective being offered, yet retain a critical and independent stance. This is what frees her/him to incorporate all contributions towards providing a whole picture of the organisation's functioning and impact.

Internal and external foci

Exploration for the reasons behind things working, or not working requires bringing the internal organisational aspects into play with the external factors.

The internal aspect of evaluation is helpful because it addresses those things that can be changed or improved upon. It frames both problems and solutions in such a way that they are within the reach of the organisation.

An evaluation addressing only the external might conclude that an organisation failed simply because of a shift in the external environment. However, viewed from the inside out, the evaluation could conclude very differently: perhaps that the organisation did not have adequate environmental scanning systems...or that it never reviewed its strategies...or that its leaders were not fulfilling their duties...or that there was poor team work.

You can do something about setting up effective scanning systems. You can do something about that struggling leader. But you cannot control the outside world. In other words, if you make space to consider the internal questions alongside the external ones, the conclusions will be different and they will hold insights which are organisationally do-able.

Strategic connection

Finally, evaluations should be conducted with an eye on the future. If you want the evaluation to be of real use to your organisation, the implications of all the findings and potential solutions must be teased out. So, team work is poor, how might things be done better? What needs to change? What would that mean for individuals and for the organisation?

Final recommendations should incorporate the outcome of this reflection and learning and specify the subsequent “ideal” goals (strategic and organisational), as well as the processes and paths to be followed in order to begin reaching those ideals.

Conclusion

One way of motivating for a developmental approach to external evaluation is to link it to both learning and accountability. If your organisation intends to have a social impact, it needs to conceive of itself as a developing part of a developing society all needing to continuously learn their way. Evaluation as a development tool, centred on learning, is the best way of slowing down and ensuring that your organisation remains socially relevant and sound, building and sustaining good practice.

Outcomes mapping