The Art of the Possible

Reflective practice, continuous quality improvement and program evaluation on a budget

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Evaluation: Finding Purpose

All program or projects aim at bringing about some desired change in state of the world. Properly designed evaluation processes can greatly assist and enhance this process.

Evaluation activities can usefully be seen in terms of two (different but complementary) functions:

1. **Auditing**: Periodic formal review:
   - Based around strictly objective, rigorous and predominantly quantitative measures
   - Primarily designed as an ‘after the fact’ – often end-of-project - test of adherence to contractual obligation and agreed Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).
   - Can be antithetical to program flexibility
   - Often structured around keywords in objectives/aims

2. **Continuous quality improvement (CQI)**: Continuous reflective monitoring of purpose, process, performance and direction
   - Supports continuous flexible learning, adjustment and refinement
   - Can utilise a wide variety of data forms
Two Questions to Address:
What do you want to do with the data?
What data (form and content) will best meet those needs?

1. Finding, maintaining and building project resources

*Mostly about money/process/efficiency/outputs and requiring an audit focus. Clear numerically measurable goals most useful*

- To convince funding bodies that your program is:
  - Worthy of continued funding – reporting requirements
  - Deserves more funding
- Finding funding for new initiatives. This means building a case:
  - Providing the evidence
  - Providing the model: workable, effective, efficient.
    - Persuading bureaucrats, political operators at all levels, clients, community and service providers
2. Making your program as good as it can be

Mostly about outcomes and requiring a continuous, monitoring, reflection and quality improvement focus

• What is working well in moving towards achieving program goals?
• What isn’t working as well as it could?
• What could be done better/differently to improve the program?
• What needs to be abandoned?
• What needs to be added?

• Absolutely dependent on clarity around what is important to you within the program; what you want to change
• Can tolerate ‘fuzzy goals’ - dialogue more important.
• Best set up at the program planning stage – reciprocal benefits
• Continuous: beginning early and ongoing
• More about developing an understanding than building a case
• Small numbers of key measures
‘Good’ evaluation and continuous quality improvement begin with, and are inextricably linked to, ‘good’ project planning.

Program Logic provides a structured way of thinking about a project that is indispensable for:

- Clarifying the purpose of a project – what change you want to bring about (Aims or Goals)
- Planning how to go about bringing about this change (Strategies)
- Allowing you to explore and test the assumptions underlying your approach (Reflexive Practice)
- Testing how well your approach is working and what if anything needs changing (CQI and Process Evaluation)
- Finding ways of demonstrate to the rest of the world that you approach is working (‘Audit’ and Outcome Evaluation and Reporting)
Program Logic – Some cautionary notes

- Don’t get mesmerised by the mechanics of models: they are only a tool to help you structure your thinking
- Don’t get sucked into definitional games – outcomes ain’t necessarily outcomes
- Acknowledge the social complexity of teams: embrace ‘fuzzy’ thinking and goal diversity
- Program logic can provide a ‘road map’ but there are multiple journeys in any map: keep your eye on the prize, on your purpose and direction
- You need to keep in mind both the wider context for your program – the big picture - and the particular contribution that your program will make – you can lose focus by thinking too widely or too narrowly.
Program Logic

A systematic way of thinking through

- **Purpose:** what are we trying to achieve - what change(s) in our world do we want to bring about.
- **Direction:** how are we going about effecting those changes

**A Simple (Simplistic) Model**

Current State → Activities → Desired State

Resources

The two basic questions:

**Why** are we doing this? – a desired state question

**How** can we do it? – a resources and activities question
The Theoretical ‘Ideal’ Model (with jargon)

Resources

Input

Issue Identified

Goals Defined

Strategies Formulated

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) Defined

Activities Planned

Activities Undertaken

Outputs Delivered

Outcomes Achieved

Issue Addressed
Theory into practice

Issue Identified

- Resources
  - Almost always inadequate
    - Will change/evolve as you go
    - Can include interim outputs and outcomes
- Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) Defined
  - Goals are often broad, but vague, aspirations; and not everyone on the team necessarily has the same goals
  - The things you want to achieve aren’t always measureable so KPI can be difficult to formulate or end up being about what you can measure not what you really want to achieve.
- Strategies Formulated
  - Issues are rarely neatly definable and/or occurring in isolation. Need to deal with a complex context and relationship to other events and factors.
- Activities Planned
  - Usually don’t all happen exactly as planned – need to be flexible and responsive to on-the-ground ‘realities’
- Outputs Delivered
  - Can be very hard to measure, especially outcomes which may be widely dispersed and/or not evident for years
  - Can sometimes also act as strategies for the next phase of the project
  - Can be confusing as to which is an output and which is an outcome
- Outcomes Achieved
  - Rarely clear-cut and final – usually one small step on a long and difficult process towards a distant goal.
Working through the Issues: Aims/Goals

- Without a reasonably clear and shared understanding of what the project is trying to achieve it is difficult to:
  - Plan an effective pathway
  - Know if you are actually getting there

- Dealing with ‘Fuzzy’ goals:
  - Engage, don’t ignore – dialogue, reflection, negotiation
  - Find the common core: what do you really care about
  - Acknowledge/accept diversity/fuzziness around the edges
  - Follow a ‘change logic’ to:
    - Clarify your ‘ultimate’ purpose
    - Map your chosen pathway(s) to that goal – among the many possible pathways
    - Make explicit the choices you made
    - Explore the assumptions and conditions that underlying those choices
Project Aims: working examples

1. To provide a professional, accessible and timely assessment, treatment and on-going support service to target population with problematic drug use in XXX area.

2. Support increased sector cohesion and uptake of evidence-based organisational and clinical governance in XXX sector through implementing targeted quality improvement activities at a policy service and sector level

Note:
• That each of these already encompasses within it a decision about strategy (with underlying assumptions)
• Each has key words that can lock in KPI’s – e.g. ‘timely’, ‘cohesion’
A ‘Change Logic’ Example

**Ultimate Desired State**
Little, if any, Individual and community loss and harm arising from drug use

**Current Problematic State**
Individual and community loss and harm arising from drug use in area X

**IF WE**
Employ a fully qualified and/or experienced counsellor

**IT WILL**
Ensure that drug users have access to professional, accessible, timely assessment treatment and ongoing support

** WHICH WILL **
Lead to a reduction in drug use and associated the individual and community loss or harm

** WHICH WILL **
Other Strategies

**Assumptions to be tested/measured**
That:
The project will be able to appoint an appropriately and professionally skilled and competent counsellor

The local presence of a such counsellor will lead to increased and more timely help-seeking among drug users

That help-seeking by, and treatment and support for, drug users will reduce the level of drug use and/or individual and social harm in area X

That drug use is a significant contributor to individual and community harm in area X
Evaluative Measures: Finding the compromise

Evaluation is really about testing how your strategies, and therefore the assumptions underlie them work out in the real world.

- What would you like/do you need to know to do what you want/need to do?
- What can you actually feasibly measurable given your program and your resources?
Measurement: The Issues

• Differences, fuzziness and/or tensions around goals within the program
  – Use a program logic to support a dialogue to identify shared understandings about what really matters in terms of a ‘desired’ change
  – Allow goals to come into focus, emerge and change by supporting ongoing dialogue through CQI/evaluation

• Mandated ‘audit’ measures
  – Don’t make a rod for your back. Audit measures are frequently negotiated as part of the funding application or program planning so don’t overburden yourself by setting too many and/or difficult to measure goals (and therefore KPIs) – KISS Principle
  – Be keyword sensitive – these attract measure requirements
  – Negotiate audit measures that are based around existing operational data – mainly process data

• Evaluative measures consume scarce resources needed to deliver the program
  – Measure only what is clearly useable and necessary
  – Build CQI/evaluation into the program from the start – minimise special purpose data collection
Measurement: The Issues (2)

- Much of what you most want to achieve/care about in a program is often not easily or feasibly measurable.  
  - Use process and output measures while making any untested output → outcome assumptions transparent  
  - Look for de facto or indicative measures – creativity  
  - Make provision for long-term beyond-end-of-project measures

- Goals and strategies can be shaped by what is measureable rather than what really matters to the team.  
  - Develop and maintain for clarity around purpose - and fight for it.  
  - Don’t conflate ‘audit’ and CQI evaluative processes

- You cannot measure change without a baseline  
  - Avoid ‘change’ terminology (increase, improve’) if baseline data collection is not feasible  
  - A zero baseline assumption is often supportable
Evaluative/CQI Measures

• **Process Measures**: *Is the program operating in the way it was designed to operate:*
  – E.g. Infrastructure in place, appointments made, administrative processes in operation
  – Activities being performed, services in place, reviews underway
  – Includes measures of efficiency - resource usage and costs, CQI
  – Mainly quantitative measures

[Merging into]

• **Output Measures**: *What immediate/short-term effects are flowing from the program?*
  – Products
  – Policy
  – Services or occasions of service
  – Knowledge
  – Includes measures of effectiveness - CQI
  – Qualitative and quantitative measures
Evaluative/CQI Measures (2)

[Merge into]

- **Outcome Measures:** *To what extent is the program effective in bringing about the desired change(s)*
  - Effectiveness measures
  - Usually longer term - often well beyond the life-span of the project
  - Frequently represents only one step towards a wider, more distant, goal therefore:
    - No clear end-point measure available
    - Difficult to untangle program effect or lack of effect from the effects of a range of other (uncontrolled) variables
  - Can use interim, de facto or indicative measures – consider publicly available aggregate data sources
  - Qualitative data often most feasible and informative
Data, Information and Evidence

• **Data**: the raw measures, quantitative and qualitative
• **Information**: data that is used to inform practice
• **Evidence**: A quality *judgement* about data that is used to inform practice
  – Reliability: are results replicable/repeatable? – less relevant to qualitative data
  – Accuracy: to what extent do the data represent a ‘true’ measure of the phenomenon under study?
  – Validity: to what extent do the data measure the dimension that they purport to measure?
  – Transferability: to what extent can the results be applied to other like phenomenon?
  – Evidence needs to meet ‘fitness to purpose’ not absolute criteria
Data: Forms and Functions

• **Quantitative Data:** finding patterns by counting
  – High *perceived* credibility – esp. for auditing functions
  – Mostly ‘process’ data generated as part of day-to-day operation
  – **Statistics**
    • Not as scary as they seem
    • Mostly simple descriptive: Counts, percentages, means and cross-tabulation tables or charts.

• **Qualitative Data:** using rich description to build understanding
  – Lower *perceived* credibility but informative and persuasive
  – Also generated in day-to-day practice but often not systematically captured
  – Can work with very small samples – sample size not relevant

• **Mixed Method:** combines the strengths of both.
Data: Quality Measures

Does it inform – that is, does it tell you what you need to know, to do what you want to do?

– No point in collecting data you are not going to use

– Simple measures are usually adequate, as long as they are the right measures

– Is it of a type or in a format that is suited to the job you want it to do
Data: Quality Measures

Does it provide an accurate, credible and valid picture of the phenomenon of interest.

Threats to data quality:

– Methodological Bias:
  – Largely systemic/unconscious
  – Bias in:
    – Sampling - what data you collect and from whom
    – Measurement – what you chose to measure and how
    – interpretation - how you make sense of the data
    – reporting - what you chose to talk about in your reporting

– Lack of system and rigour.
– Lack of reflexivity
– Lack of transparency
Data Sources – the art of the possible

• **Published Data and Research:** *It’s never been easier to ‘stand on the shoulders of giants’ (and others)*
  – Government and quasi government reports
  – Specialist agencies and professional bodies

Published work can provide much of the quality evidence needed to justify models/programs without the need for additional data collection especially for ‘outcome assumptions’.
Primary Operational Data

- **Process - text documents**: project plans, policy and procedural documents, meeting notes, records of activities

- **Process - numerical data**: Spreadsheets and databases such as items of service delivery, activity attendances, financial records

- **Products and practice data**: case and field notes, policy and practice documents, course documentation, reports.

This often requires only slight design and procedural modifications to systematise and ensure data:

- Integrity – protection against bias
- Completeness
- Accessibility i.e. can you find it when you need it
- Appropriateness
Collecting purposive primary data

- Match methodology to intended use of data:
  - **Surveys:**
    - Quantitative and semi-qualitative data
    - Wide ‘what’ overview for modest resource expenditure
    - Requires considerable skill to do well
    - Sampling methodology and sample size important
    - Does not answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions well
  - **Interviews:**
    - Can provide rich individualised ‘how’ and ‘why’ information
    - Sample size not an issue
    - Resource intensive
    - Similar data often available in process/output documentation if accessible
  - **Focus Groups:**
    - Rich ‘what’ ‘how’ and ‘why’ data
    - Shaped by group dynamics
    - Resource intensive