

Building Evaluation Up --- A Day in the Life of an Evaluator

One day I packed my “all you need to know about conducting a program evaluation” kit and was headed to yet another meeting with program staff who felt they were being “forced” to evaluate their youth program. It was on this road trip that I had an “ah-ha!” experience.

I was grumbling to myself about:

- ◆ Why people don’t “get” evaluation?
- ◆ How we evaluate as a part of our everyday lives.
- ◆ How logic models by name should be logical and therefore easy to understand.
- ◆ Why is it so difficult for so many program staff to understand these natural, logical things?
- ◆ How often do we have to have conversations about the differences between program outcomes and participant outcomes?
- ◆ How often do we have to have conversations about measurable objectives, a series of “if-then” statements, theories of change, and other kinds of “natural” ways of thinking about things—it’s...well, so logical!

Then it occurred to me. I live around kids-- lots of them. Kids are a part of my everyday life. But, throw me in a room with a 100 12-15 year old kids and see how “natural” it would be for me to keep them busy, happy AND help them achieve world peace. It was then that I decided that this time I would leave behind my logic models, indicator lists, “why do’s” and “how to’s” of evaluation and made a conscious decision not to use any evaluation-related jargon. No words like “outcomes,” “measurable objectives,” “inputs,” “outputs,” “indicators” and “data.” (Warning: for those of you faint of heart, don’t try this at home!)

The meeting started in a typical fashion. After sharing some pleasantries, I sat down with a couple of program staff in a small meeting room—they looked at me with wary, yet expectant eyes. One gave a little sigh then they shared a look between them that seemed to say, “See, I told you. She has that evaluator’s look.” Then I experienced a momentary sense of panic.

Where were my tools?

Where was my list of questions?

Where was my check-off list?

Where was my picture of the logic model?

I let my natural instincts take over—I pretended like I was at a grocery store talking with some poor soul who happened to be stuck with me in, of course, the SLOWEST

check out lane. Every once in a while my husband and I have this exchange—As I leave the grocery store I might say to someone, “Have a safe drive!” to which he inevitably asks, “Do you know her?” As usual my reply would be “No, I just met her.” I would go on to tell him all about how she grew up in South Carolina and her mother still lives there and they haven’t had a chance to visit her since she had a baby about a year ago...she’s hoping her kids are going to be ok on the car trip... she also has a four year old boy and etc. etc., to which he just shakes his head at what I learned...but, I digress!

So, I simply asked, “Tell me about the kids who come here.” Again a shared look between them, this time a little surprised. Nervously one starts, “Our grant says we...” and I interrupt quickly, “No, no, just tell me about the kids you see here.” “So far we have about 45 kids, boys and girls; they just finished up 7th grade...” again I interrupt, “Tell me about one of them... pick one.” I wait, not knowing where any of this was going, no clear outcome in mind, no clear path of getting there...again, not a comfortable place to be for an evaluator. The two confer briefly about who they should talk about... how about Tommy, no, Liz, no, Trisha- her story is great, how about Michael—and they both burst out laughing—a shared joke... making me wonder about Michael. So I quickly interject, “Yes, tell me about Michael.” They are still grinning...the small meeting room has taken on a different feel, warmer, all three of us visibly relaxed. And they start, “Michael? Well, he’s quite a character...” In the end I learn quite a bit about Michael. His home life, his background, how he started to get in trouble early in 6th grade, he wasn’t doing his homework, not paying attention, how his mom worried about him not wanting to get involved in anything anymore, even sports. And I ask, “What does he do here?” “Well, he led in our last production of ‘A Fiddler on the Roof.’ We found out that he’s a natural leader. You know, he’s been with us for a year now and we’ve seen quite a change. He’s not as moody. In fact, he has a great sense of humor. When he first came we couldn’t get him to say anything but now we can’t get him to stop talking!” I ask, “Do you know how he’s doing in school?” The answers were immediate, “He did really well this year. He got involved in his school play.” Again I ask, “How do you know this?” They look at me as if to say, “duh!” but politely said, “Well... we talk to him.” And I find out more about the conversations they had with his mom and also how one of them was at the school to pick up her daughter and he was there clowning around, seemingly enjoying being there...

The richness of the data they had, amazed me. The conversations they have with kids and parents on a regular basis we evaluators might call **INTERVIEWS**. Noticing how kids interact in various environments, we evaluators might call **OBSERVATION TECHNIQUES**. Talking to a group of kids about things, we might call **FOCUS GROUPS**. The difference is that evaluators think about things like validity of data, measurement error, systematic collection of data, program goals-implementation-outcome connections, while program staff thinks mostly about real kids in real-life settings.

So, I have been trying this new (at least for me) tactic at **getting program staff to think about evaluation**. I think of it as “building evaluation up” or an “upside down logic

model.” Call it what you want, the crux of this approach is to start the evaluation from where programs are in terms of any formal or informal information they already have or are gathering. While it is not well thought out yet, it goes something like this:

1. Without using evaluation jargon, get program staff to talk about what they know and how they know about the kids that access or participate in their program(s). In essence, you are looking for any source of potential data. The key here is getting out of the mode of what we might consider “legitimate” data and really looking for all available ways of knowing. This is often where my “natural instinct” takes over- it usually takes some probing to get the staff thinking about all they know about the kids.
2. Next, get program staff to accept such non-systematic, usually convenience sampled conversations, observations, etc. as potential evaluation data. Interestingly, this can be one of the most difficult hurdles. It often surprises me how many program staff hold fairly rigid views about what kind of evaluation data are acceptable to funders, evaluators, board members, and other constituents. And, if I might make a leap here, sometimes this rigid view can paralyze program staff and offer an excuse for not evaluating programs.
3. Finally, discuss with program staff ways that they might be more strategic and include thoughtful reflection as part of what they know and how such information might be used as evaluation data. For example, one can plan somewhat in advance one or two topics that they might include in their usual conversations with kids. Or, perhaps look for certain ways kids interact with each other, behave in various settings, etc. **The key is to get the program staff to think differently about what they already do.** This is where you might approach the topics of program goals, objectives, and outcomes. If possible, you should suggest more than one program staff do these things. This way, program staff can share what they know, reflect on what each has heard or observed, come to some shared understanding about where kids are in various outcomes, how far they’ve come, and how they might communicate such information to stakeholders.

What process can be used to improve conclusions based on informal, often non-systematic data? To date, I have simply encouraged dialogue between program staff about what they have seen and heard—sort of a quasi inter-coder/rater reliability method. However, I have been thinking about what I heard recently at the Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute (MESI). At one session, Ernest House discussed what he and Kenneth Howe call, “Deliberative Democratic Evaluation.” Quickly, it’s a guide for evaluators to utilize a democratic process within the evaluation to secure better conclusions.

The guiding principles that House & Howe mentioned were “inclusion,” “dialogue,” and “deliberation.” The **principle of inclusion** encourages one to consider all relevant interests, values and views of people involved in the program. The **principle of**

