

REPORTING EVALUATION RESULTS TO SENIOR MANAGEMENT: A SUCCESSFUL CANVASS

Daniel J. Caron
Indian and Northern Affairs Canada
Hull, Québec

Abstract — The presentation of evaluation results to senior management is a key element in the utilization of evaluation findings. This article presents an approach to reporting evaluation results that provides clear messages to senior management, enhances credibility of evaluation studies, and improves utilization of evaluation findings. Two program evaluations that were undertaken at Indian and Northern Affairs are presented. These studies were conducted using multiple lines of evidence in a decentralized environment. The characteristic of these studies is that the final evaluation reports presented to senior management were short and focused on senior management's areas of interest.

Résumé — La présentation des résultats d'évaluation à la haute gestion est un élément clé dans l'utilisation des constatations des évaluations. Cet article présente une approche qui permet de faire rapport des résultats des évaluations en s'assurant que les messages livrés à la haute gestion sont clairs; que la crédibilité des études d'évaluation est accrue; et, que les constatations de l'évaluation sont utilisées de façon plus intensive. Deux évaluations de programmes effectuées au Ministère des affaires indiennes et du nord canadien y sont discutées. Ces études ont été menées en utilisant plusieurs sources de preuves dans un environnement décentralisé. La caractéristique de ces études est que les rapports finals présentés à la haute gestion étaient brefs et axés sur les zones d'intérêt de la haute gestion.

CANADA'S FEDERAL DEPARTMENT OF Indian and Northern Affairs, using the reporting approach outlined in this article, has completed several program evaluation studies, including *Evaluation of the Youth Entrepreneurship Program* (Canada, Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, 1988) and *Evaluation of the Alternative Funding*

Arrangements (Canada, Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, 1989).

Areas in which senior management showed interest when approving the evaluation's terms of reference were the basis of the reporting approach used for these evaluation studies.

This approach has proven to be very successful in increasing utilization of evaluation findings because it increases the ease with which senior management is able to understand the messages carried by the evaluation report. Understanding is facilitated because findings are clearly related to the evaluators' mandate and the evaluation report clearly shows the lines of evidence upon which findings relied. These factors have a positive impact on the credibility of evaluation studies.

The only disadvantage found in using this approach was the time required to aggregate results in a very concise format.

Three key issues are addressed. First, this article suggests that senior management is more interested in having clear statements on each issue addressed in evaluation studies than in looking at disaggregated results obtained from various lines of evidence and detailed methodologies used by evaluators. This has a major impact on the manner of reporting the results. Second, this article discusses the advantages of respecting the evaluation planning report in reporting results. It is suggested that, in reporting evaluation results, evaluators should refer to the evaluation planning report and terms of reference and should aggregate those results from lines of evidence (methodologies) that relate directly to the questions and issues. Third, the article proposes a format for presenting findings, recommendations, and evidence to senior management. This format is designed to satisfy everyone's interest in evaluation studies. It allows for quick references on any aspect — findings, recommendations, or methodologies — that can interest managers or researchers and emphasizes utilization by senior management.

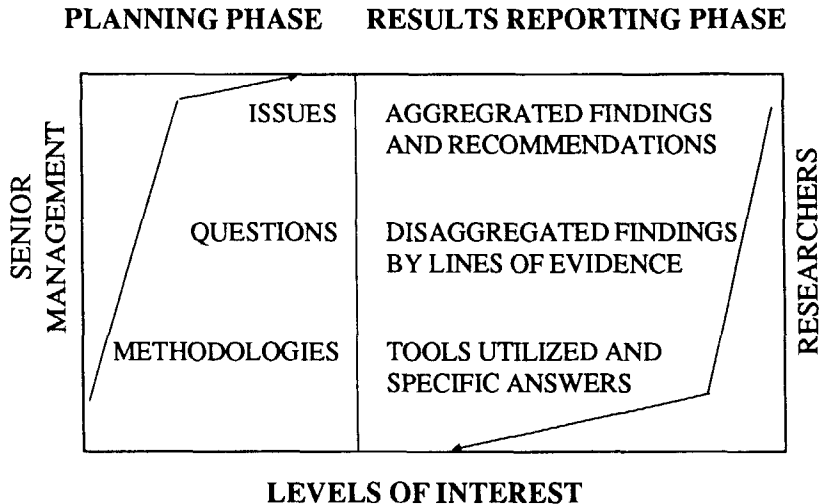
EVALUATION'S TERMS OF REFERENCE: A SIGNAL OF SENIOR MANAGEMENT'S AREAS OF INTEREST

Before one conducts field work to gather the information necessary for reporting on the various issues of an evaluation, it is generally accepted practice to prepare terms of reference, an evaluation planning report, and tools (questionnaires, interview guides, etc.) to perform the evaluation work. At the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs

Canada, senior management is heavily involved in two stages of the evaluation process: first, they approve terms of reference, and second, they review and approve the evaluation report.

The focal point for discussion with senior management is the issues to be addressed in the evaluation. Senior management's interest in other topics decreases as those topics become more detailed and technical (e.g., methodologies; see Figure 1). Although senior management wants to ensure that methodologies will be properly designed, it relies on evaluators to do so. There are primarily two reasons for this.

Figure 1
Comparison of Senior Management's and Researchers' Levels of Interest in Dealing with Evaluation Content



First, senior managers are there to make decisions. The role of evaluation is to support this decision-making process (Weiss, 1975). The main interest of senior management during the planning phase is the *guarantee* that evaluation studies will cover their concerns. This interest is served by discussing evaluation issues. *Terms of reference become the signal of senior management's areas of interest in evaluation.*

Second, senior managers are not researchers, they are decision makers. They need to be provided with short and clear messages. This is most important when one is reporting results. Whereas researchers (including program planners and program designers) will be more

interested in finding out how evaluators dealt with issues in terms of questions and methodologies, senior managers will be looking for answers to issues addressed in the evaluation. This is what evaluators must have in mind when reporting results. One way to ensure that this concept is not lost is to clearly understand how the evaluation planning report was constructed (top - down) and then to build the evaluation report reversing the steps (down - top).

EVALUATION PLANNING REPORT: A TOP-DOWN APPROACH

After senior management has approved the terms of reference, the next step is to develop an evaluation planning report. This report includes a statement of the purpose of the evaluation, a profile and status of activities of the program, evaluation issues, questions and methodologies, and a schedule for the conducting of the evaluation.

The focal point of the evaluation planning report is the section dealing with issues, questions, and methodologies. *This section proceeds from the general to the particular.* When issues have been approved by senior management, the next task for evaluators is to translate them into more specific questions. Each issue will be broken down into several questions designed to cover all aspects of the issue, taking into consideration the nature of the program and the environment in which it has evolved. When this exercise has been completed, evaluators will decide which lines of evidence they will use to answer these questions. In general, multiple lines of evidence are suggested in order to enhance the credibility of evaluation studies (Winberg, 1987). Each line of evidence represents a methodology (focus group, survey, case studies, file review, etc.) that can contain many tools (questionnaires, interview guides, file review guides, etc.). This process of disaggregating an issue into tools may be illustrated with a triangle (see Figure 2). There are as many triangles as there are issues; there is a specific number of questions and tools for each issue, and there can be an overlap among the tools utilized. For instance, a file review guide could be designed to cover the third question of the second issue and the second question of the fourth issue. Having said that, we may conclude that there will be as many triangles as there are issues and that these triangles are built on a common base of tools (see Figure 3), as they can be used to cover more than one question and/or more than one issue. As we will see, this has direct implications on how we can report evaluation results.

Figure 2
Evaluation Planning Report: A Top-Down Approach

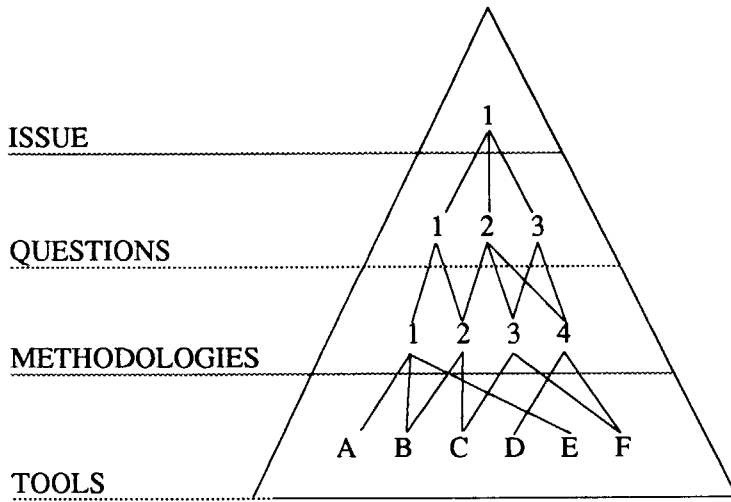
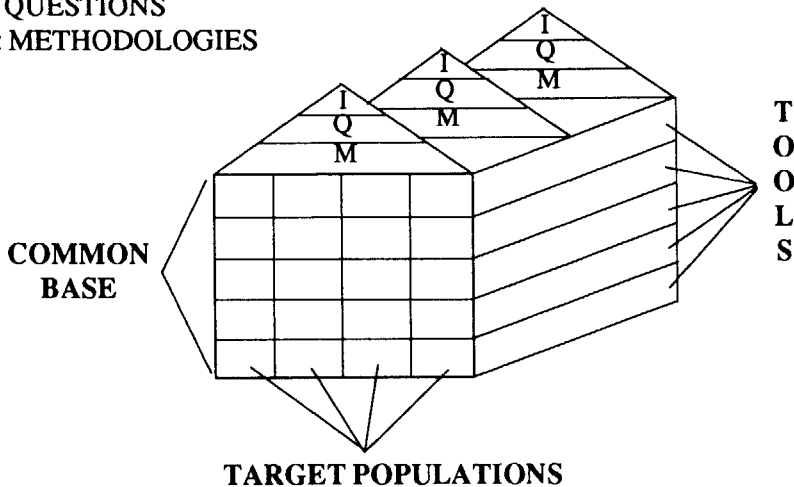


Figure 3
Common Base of Issues, Questions, and Methodologies

I: ISSUES
Q: QUESTIONS
M: METHODOLOGIES



REPORTING EVALUATION RESULTS TO SENIOR MANAGEMENT: A REVERSE MODE

Evaluation results can be presented in two different ways: they can be organized following methodologies, or they can be aggregated by issue. The crucial factor to take into consideration in deciding on a method of reporting results is *the client of evaluation* (Morris and Fitz-Gibbon, Chapter 3, 1978). Results reporting is a question of marketing. In the case of evaluation, the product serves two groups of clients — senior management and researchers — and, as discussed earlier, the two groups have different interests. Senior management focuses on decision making and action and researchers are more concerned with methodologies and validity, but both groups must be satisfied for two reasons. First, if senior management does not understand the contents of the evaluation product, evaluators will not have achieved their primary objective, which is to support decision making. Second, if researchers are not satisfied, they may discredit the evaluation product for senior management.

From the point of view of senior management, the evaluation report must be short, provide clear statements on each issue, and briefly discuss the rationale supporting recommendations. For researchers, the evaluation report must demonstrate that the information collected is reliable, valid, and sufficient to draw the conclusions presented in the report. To satisfy the two clients, this article proposes that evaluators refer to the terms of reference and the evaluation planning report, in order to report results that focus on areas of interest for the two clients and to increase the likelihood of utilization by senior management.

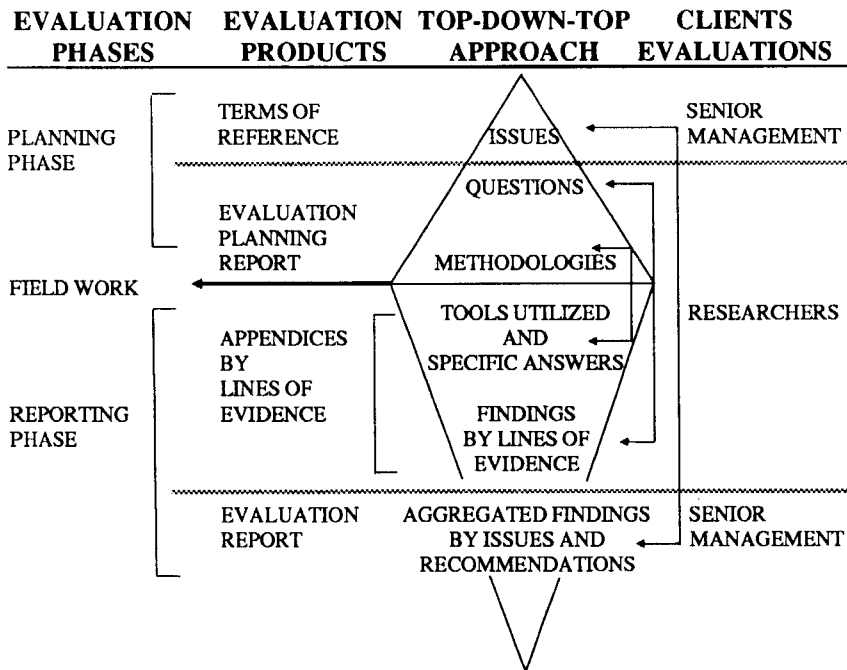
In short, the planning phase is where clients "pass their order." The reporting phase is where evaluators deliver these orders. To ensure that the products delivered meet clients' expectations, it is suggested that evaluators return to the "order book" (terms of reference and evaluation planning report) to prepare these products.

The principles that guide the approach presented in this article are illustrated in Figure 4:

- The clients of evaluation show their areas of interest during the planning phase of the evaluation.
- The evaluation results have to be presented in relation to these areas of interest in order to satisfy the needs of the two clients.

- The first group of clients is senior management, whose area of interest is issues. These are expressed in the terms of reference of the evaluation during the planning phase. This fact must be reflected in the evaluation report at the reporting phase.
- The second group of clients is researchers; their areas of interest are questions and methodologies. These are expressed in the evaluation planning report. This fact must be reflected in the appendices of the evaluation report.
- The evaluation report is short and clearly states findings in relation to issues. The appendices demonstrate the validity and reliability of the findings and present the detailed results.
- The evaluation report and its appendices are presented in separate documents in order that senior management is not overloaded with detailed information. This increases the probability that they will read the report, thereby encouraging utilization.

Figure 4
Reporting Evaluation Results: A Top-Down-Top Approach



EXAMPLES

To illustrate the process of constructing the evaluation report and its appendices, I will use two studies undertaken at the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs.

Example 1: Evaluation of the Youth Entrepreneurship Program

In 1987 the Evaluation Directorate undertook the evaluation of the Youth Entrepreneurship Program. This program had just begun using a pilot-project format. Five regional offices received funding to test their own delivery mechanisms. The terms of reference approved by senior management addressed two issues:

- Should the Youth Entrepreneurship Program be continued, and, if so, in what form?
- What lessons can be drawn from the pilot projects and applied in an ongoing program?

A series of questions was developed to properly address these issues, and a set of methodologies was selected to address the questions. Methodologies included

- a file review at headquarters,
- a file review in each region,
- informal focus groups in each region with departmental representatives and the delivery agent,
- interviews with trainers,
- an analysis of hard data on participants' background and progress, and
- a survey of participants by pilot project.

After the field work was completed, an analysis of results began. One characteristic of this evaluation was that specific tools were used in each region. Because pilot projects were, by definition, different one from another, there was no common basis on which to organize the tools nationally. The results obtained with the various tools were then grouped, by region, and five case studies with common indicators were written. These five case studies presented the tools utilized and the specific answers obtained by the methodologies specified in the

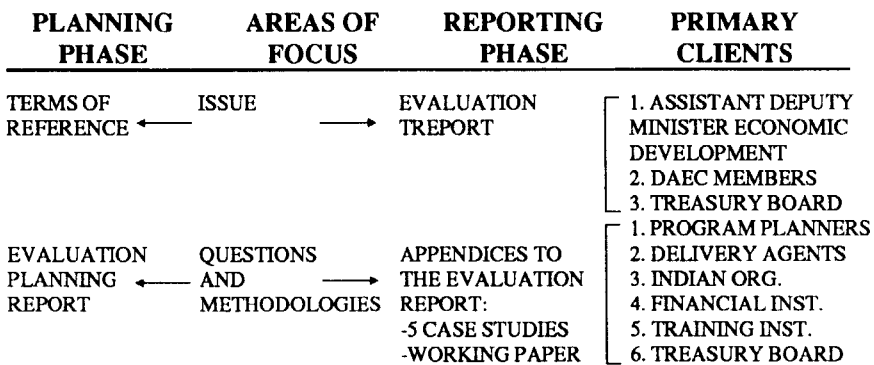
evaluation planning reports. The next step was to address the questions outlined in the evaluation planning report. This was done by preparing a working paper that addressed the questions by comparing the indicators presented in each case study and detailing the various practices in delivery processes. At that point, evaluators were in a position to clearly address the issues approved in the terms of reference. They did so by selecting the most relevant results drawn from the working paper and writing a fifteen-page evaluation report with findings and recommendations supported by concise evidence.

The case studies and the working paper were presented in separate documents entitled "Appendices for the Evaluation of the Youth Entrepreneurship Program." The evaluation report was reviewed and approved by senior management, and all of its recommendations were implemented. The Directorate received many requests for the appendices from organizations dealing with similar programs, primarily owing to their interest in the detailed results on the strengths and weaknesses of the delivery mechanisms used in the pilot projects.

Both clientele were highly satisfied, as the reports met the needs they had expressed during the planning phase of the evaluation. Figure 5 illustrates the overall process.

Figure 5

Example 1: Evaluation of the Youth Entrepreneurship Program



Example 2: Evaluation of the Alternative Funding Arrangements

In 1988 the Evaluation Directorate undertook the evaluation of the Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFA). This program began two

years prior to the evaluation, and was a national program with common guidelines to be followed in all regions. The terms of reference approved by senior management addressed the following two issues:

- The effectiveness of the process of implementing AFA
- The short-term impacts of AFA, both intended and unintended

The following methodologies were selected to address the questions derived from these issues:

- Interviews with headquarters and regional staff
- File reviews at headquarters and in regions
- Interviews with representatives of all Indian bands that had signed an AFA agreement
- Survey of representatives of Indian bands in the process of signing an agreement
- Survey of representatives of non-AFA-signatory Indian bands
- Three case studies of bands with the oldest AFA agreements

In this evaluation, the tools utilized in each region were the same, making it possible to present the results by methodologies on a national basis. The overall process is illustrated in Figure 6. The results were grouped by lines of evidence in nine documents that constituted the appendices for the evaluation report. The evaluation report addressed the two issues by presenting the main findings with evidence and recommendations, in a thirty-page report. Again, the report was thoroughly reviewed and then approved by senior management, and most of the recommendations presented were implemented. The appendices were utilized to promote the program and were sent by senior management to all bands in Canada.

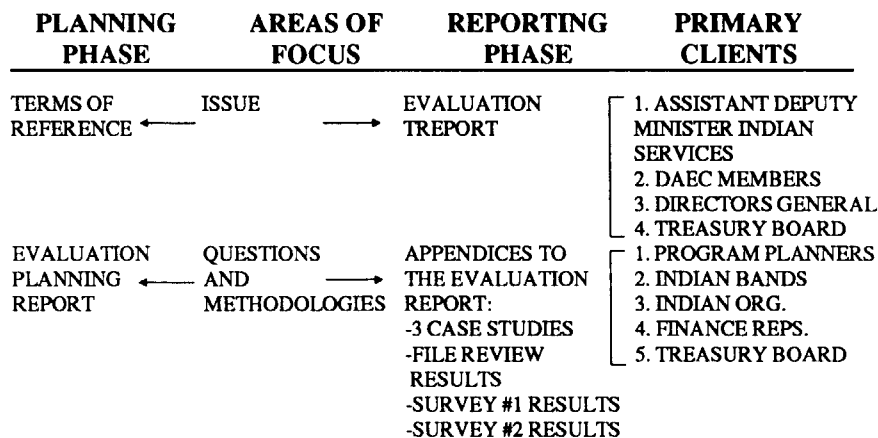
CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

The main objective of evaluation work is to support the decision-making process of senior management. To do so, evaluation studies must be provided on time, be strongly supported by evidence to clearly demonstrate their reliability, and *meet* the needs expressed by users during the planning phase. The complexity of data gathering in evaluation work sometimes leads evaluators to deviate from the original demands of the two clients. Using a top-down-top approach to report

evaluation results has proven to be a guarantee that both senior management and researchers will be satisfied with evaluation reports.

Figure 6

Example 2: Evaluation of the Alternative Funding Arrangements



This approach, by encouraging evaluators to be honest and to avoid drawing conclusions that are not supported by evidence, enhances the objectivity of the evaluation function. Where the approach has been used, it has also proven to be a major determinant of utilization of evaluation findings. Senior management took the necessary time to read the reports of these two studies (because they were short and accessible) and supported the implementation of the recommendations made in the report. They relied on evaluators and their program researchers — who reviewed and discussed the contents of appendices with evaluators — to ensure that conclusions had been properly drawn.

The only disadvantage encountered in using this approach is that it requires a major synthesizing effort, along with two kinds of analyses. The first kind of analysis is horizontal (by tools and methodologies); the other is vertical (from methodologies to issues). Thus, preparation of the final evaluation is more time-consuming than in more traditional approaches, but our experience has shown that the extra time spent largely pays off in terms of utilization.

To summarize, the top-down-top approach provides all the elements to satisfy the two clients of evaluations and increases the probability of utilization of evaluations by senior management.

REFERENCES

- Canada, Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. (1988). *Evaluation of the youth entrepreneurship program*. Ottawa: Author.
- Canada, Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. (1989). *Evaluation of the alternative funding arrangements*. Ottawa: Author.
- Morris, L.L., & Fitz-Gibbon, C.T. (1978). *How to present an evaluation report*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Weiss, C. (1975). Evaluation research in the political context. In M. Guttentag and R. Struening (Eds.), *Handbook of evaluation research*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Winberg, A. (1987). Using multiple lines of evidence and independent teams to enhance the credibility of evaluations. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 10, 119–123.