

## STAKEHOLDER PRESSURES AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION

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**Abstract:** Stakeholder influence on program evaluations will vary with the importance of the program to target populations, their awareness of the evaluation exercise, and their perception of its likely impact. The organizational structure for evaluation within an institution provides a channel through which pressures exerted by stakeholders impinge directly upon the evaluation process. The author examines the evolution of the program evaluation structure within a federal government agency to illustrate the advantages and drawbacks of formalizing stakeholder involvement.

**Résumé:** L'influence sur l'évaluation d'un programme de la part des personnes ou des groupes qui s'intéressent au programme est reliée à l'importance du programme aux populations cibles, leur connaissance du projet d'évaluation ainsi que leurs perceptions de l'effet potentiel des résultats. La structure organisationnelle pour l'évaluation fonctionne comme un canal par lequel les tensions des groupes externes se heurtent sur le processus d'évaluation. Dans cet article, l'évolution d'une structure organisationnelle pour l'évaluation dans une agence fédérale est examinée afin d'illustrer des avantages et désavantages d'une inclusion formelle des groupes externes.

Program evaluation theorists of the 1960s and early 1970s tended to view the influence of clients, program beneficiaries, or other stakeholders as prejudicial to the scientific objectivity of evaluation work. However, initial concerns about the effects of stakeholder pressures on the scientific purity of the assessment process soon gave way to recognition of those forces as an essential feature of the program evaluation process (Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991, pp. 171-172). It is now widely appreciated that program management must be involved in evaluations to ensure that issues related to implementation and delivery are covered in evaluation studies and that management is committed to improving programs through careful consideration of evaluation results (Hegarty & Sporn, 1988; Fricke & Gill, 1989). Input from program clients, including both recipients of program benefits and groups that did not receive

program benefits, is necessary to provide a complete picture of issues related to program rationale, impact, and programming alternatives. Hedrick (1988) has commented upon the trade-offs involved when political intervention enters the evaluation enterprise. Political pressure will help render visible the critical issues in an evaluation; it can also tend to skew thinking in the direction of short-term issues as opposed to fundamental, longer-term considerations. Stakeholder pressure can in some cases be the stimulus of evaluation work and lead to the assignment of necessary resources to the evaluation function; it can also lead to a down-playing of the possible contribution of evaluation and a decrease in both enthusiasm and resources for the evaluation. Stakeholders can help identify programming alternatives and promote the implementation of useful recommendations stemming from evaluation work; they can also lobby for programs that are neither strongly rationalized nor indicated by the outcome of evaluation work.

Peach and Hirst (1989) suggest conditions conducive to the success of participatory evaluations. They propose that there must be an initial basis for respect among participants and that no one should be able to influence the views of another except through discussion and argument. They point out that the drawbacks of involving a large number of players in the evaluation process are increased costs and slowness in reaching consensus.

Many factors will bear upon the nature and extent of influence on the evaluation process. Some client populations are more vociferous than others; some programs touch upon highly sensitive issues; some managers may be deeply involved in their programs. In this article I look at the organizational structure for program evaluation as one variable in the relationship between stakeholder influence and program evaluation. Evolution of the evaluation function within a federal government agency will be traced from the 1970s to the present, and the pros and cons of various organizational arrangements will be discussed.

## THE AGENCY

The agency is responsible for distributing federal government funding for research and development in the health sciences in Canada. It is thus positioned between the scientific establishment and government and will be subject to pressures from both communities. Typically, the scientific community is especially concerned with issues related to the amount of funding for scientific activity, the rewarding of scientific excellence, and intellectual freedom. Government tends to be more concerned with

the efficient use of public funds and the targeting of research toward highly visible problem areas. However, concerns are not polarized, and there are scientists for whom efficiency and targeting are critical issues as well as government officials who recognize the fundamental importance of investigator-initiated research.

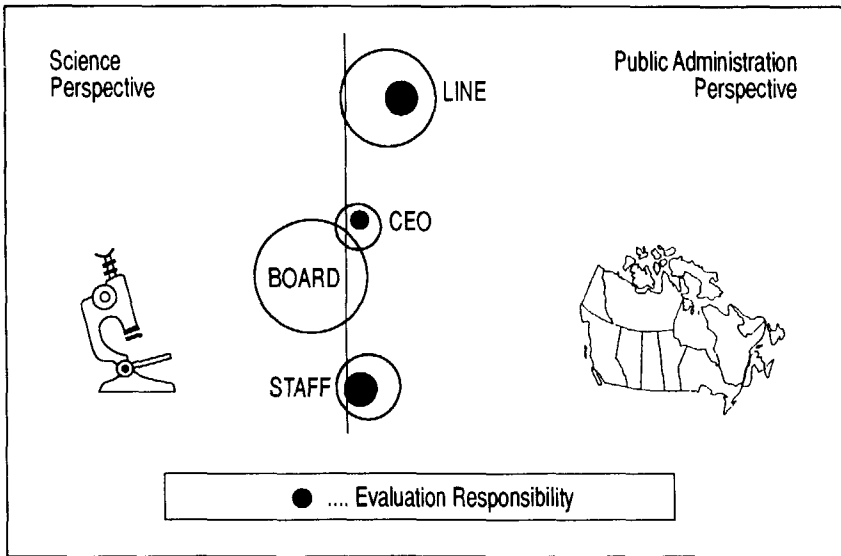
Major decisions on agency policies and the distribution of grant funds are taken by a board comprised primarily of scientists who have excelled in research and proven to be strong administrators in the academic environment. Their interests and concerns tend to be closer to those of the scientific community than to those of government. The board is headed by a president/chief executive officer; the position has always been filled by someone with extensive experience in the academic community. Like the board, the president has close ties with the scientific establishment but, by virtue of his or her position as a senior federal official, also has a good appreciation of issues of concern to government. The president heads a secretariat with a line branch responsible for operation of the agency's programs and a staff to provide service and advice to the board. Line managers tend to be slightly more attuned to governmental or administrative issues than to scientific concerns. Staff officers, some of whom were originally research scientists, tend to align more closely with the concerns of the academic community.

## EVALUATION STRUCTURE IN THE 1970s

Prior to 1983, when the agency developed a formal policy on evaluation of its programs, effectiveness assessment was directed by the president/ chief executive officer. Program issues were those that came to the attention of the president through day-to-day contacts with scientists or government colleagues. Evaluation was conducted by staff or line personnel at the discretion of the president. Figure 1 provides a schematic overview of the organization and the positioning of line managers, staff, the president, and the board relative to the two principal sources of stakeholder pressure—the scientific community and the federal government.

The strengths of the flexible arrangement for studies lay in its immediacy and impact on programming. Having been directly involved in the identification of program issues and the assignment of study responsibilities, the president was highly interested in study results and enthusiastic about using them to improve program policies and procedures. However, the unstructured approach to program evaluation also had serious disadvantages. As evaluation work was driven almost entirely by critical issues surrounding high-profile programs, programs with

Figure 1  
Evaluation Structure in the 1970s



lower visibility tended to receive little or no evaluation. There was no systematic linking of programs that served similar objectives. Evaluation work would focus on specific program activities rather than on the entire range of programming related to a given objective. For example, a research training award program was assessed without at the same time considering the training that was supported indirectly through stipends paid to graduate students from the research grants of their advisors. Another problem with the ad hoc approach to program evaluation was a lack of consultation in the planning phase of studies. Often the board's first exposure to a study would be a report on final results. New issues or questions arising at that late stage could necessitate a restarting of data collection. One further problem lay in the great dependency on one person, the president, as the driving force for evaluation work. One president might be more interested in program review than the next incumbent; the studies requested by an incoming president might overlap those commissioned by a predecessor.

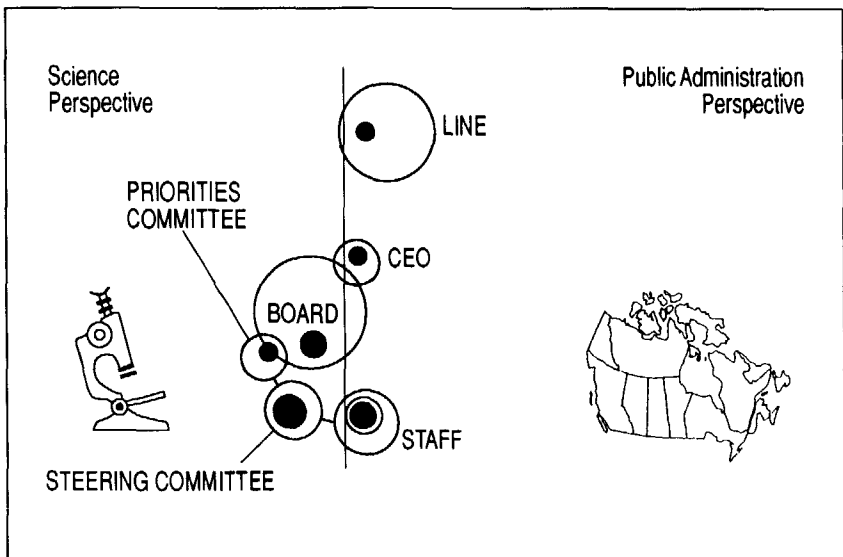
## EVALUATION ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE IN THE 1980s

In 1983, in response to suggestions from the Office of the Comptroller General in the federal Treasury Board, the agency developed a formal

policy on program evaluation and a long-term evaluation plan. Program evaluation was identified as a specific staff function, and a program evaluation officer was appointed. Line management was assigned an advisory role in the evaluation process. The board was named the principal client for evaluation, although the president retained ultimate responsibility for the program evaluation process. The two principal evaluation documents arising from the evaluation process, assessment reports and final study reports, would pass through at least two committees before reaching the board. An evaluation steering committee, comprised of members of the scientific community who were familiar with the agency's programs or possessed expertise related to program evaluation, was struck for each evaluation to provide community input and technical advice. A standing committee on priorities and planning was given the responsibility for analyzing documents submitted by the steering committee and advising the board on appropriate action. The distribution of program evaluation responsibility throughout the organization in the mid-1980s is summarized in Figure 2.

The new organizational arrangement dealt with the problems of the previous structure but introduced some additional complications. On the positive side, the evaluation function was more visible. Responsibilities were more clearly defined, and the evaluation product was greatly

**Figure 2**  
**Evaluation Structure in the 1980s**

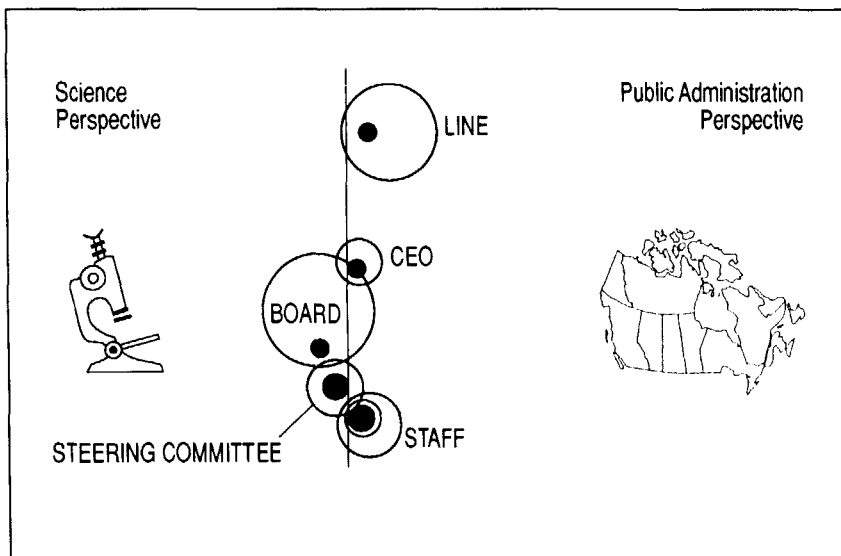


improved. Stakeholder input to evaluation work was enhanced. Issues that had been overlooked in previous evaluations were brought to the fore by the evaluation steering committee. For example, it was a steering committee member who insisted that a key issue in the evaluation of the agency's training programs was investigation of the link between the criteria used to select award winners and their subsequent research productivity, an area of investigation that yielded findings of considerable significance. However, the benefits of the more complex structure were counterbalanced by unexpected disadvantages. The reduction of the role of line management in program evaluation appears to have been accompanied by a lessening of the interest of managers in using study findings to improve their programming. By distancing program evaluation from the natural source of ideas for program development, the new structure may have decreased the short-term impact of evaluation studies. Also, the involvement of two committees and the agency board in the process, while increasing stakeholder input, slowed down progress considerably. The board meets only three times a year; coordinating meetings of the steering committee, the priorities and planning committee, and the board was troublesome. A surprising side effect of the extensive review process was that the evaluation product was in a sense trivialized. In effect, each committee performed a distillation of the ideas of the one that preceded it, so that an evaluation report with major implications for agency programming was eventually reduced to a four- or five-minute presentation to the board by the chairman of the priorities and planning committee. Thus, the opportunity for in-depth, long-range thinking afforded by an evaluation exercise was not well exploited at the board level. Another unforeseen weakness of the formal evaluation structure was that increased participation by the scientific community in the program evaluation process was not accompanied by a corresponding growth in participation by the government sector.

#### PROGRAM EVALUATION ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE IN THE 1990s

Over time, the unwieldy committee structure set in place in the 1980s has been streamlined. Program evaluation documents now pass directly from the evaluation steering committee to the board, and links between staff, steering committee, and the board have been improved. The steering committee is chaired by a former member of the board, and the evaluation staff officer is a member of the steering committee. Persons from industry, and academics familiar with public administration and/or program evaluation, have been added to the evaluation steering committee, thus ensuring that the concerns of the scientific community

**Figure 3**  
**Evaluation Structure in the 1990s**



are more evenly balanced by those of a wider public. Figure 3 portrays the current structure.

The structural streamlining has partially alleviated the weaknesses of the more complex arrangement in place in the 1980s. Evaluation documents move more quickly from staff to the board and, on being presented to the board, have a higher profile and are afforded a fuller discussion. The problem still to be dealt with is the relative lack of involvement of line managers in the evaluation process. Although program directors and managers are official observers of steering committee proceedings, the link between review of evaluation findings by the board and redesign of programs by line management remains tenuous.

## OBSERVATIONS

Adaptation of evaluation organizational structure is only one of many approaches to ensure that evaluations are appropriately sensitive to the external environment. Interviews with representatives of pressure groups and surveys of client populations, for example, are other essential means of keeping the evaluator attuned to stakeholder concerns. However, as organizational structure enables a systematic channelling

and controlling of stakeholder interventions, its design deserves special care and deliberation.

In the case of the agency herein examined, the evaluation structure was abruptly changed in the 1980s, from one in which stakeholder intervention was essentially random to one in which the evaluation product was exposed to extensive critical examination by representatives of the program target community at every stage of development. Since then the structure has been streamlined to minimize some of the negative effects of organizational complexity while maintaining the benefits of external input.

A few general observations may be made. The inclusion of more stakeholders in the formal evaluation structure, through committees or reporting relationships, will likely increase the cost and duration of studies. Committees are expensive to operate and require time for making arrangements, attending meetings, writing minutes, and so forth. The more people or committees that must be involved in the process the greater become the challenges of scheduling and coordinating. Within large organizational structures, responsibility for the evaluation may become diffused, with a resulting dilution of enthusiasm and commitment to the evaluation project. Also, flexibility may be reduced; changes to initial plans may require extensive consultation with multiple stakeholders. Counterbalancing the risks associated with a politicized structure are the obvious benefits. The more stakeholders involved in the process, the greater should be the depth, breadth, and impact of the evaluation product.

The best-designed organizational structure may fail to produce a high-quality, useful evaluation product if the persons involved do not understand the evaluation process or are not able to function effectively as team players. One of the evaluator's most important tasks is to continually keep participants aware of the objectives of the program evaluation exercise and the benefits of a systematic, step-wise approach to the illumination of issues, questions, data, and programming recommendations. Management of linkages is critical. The selection of members for evaluation steering committees should be treated as a high-priority assignment. The ideal committee member will be a unique person, someone who approaches the existing program with a highly critical attitude and yet remains intensely interested in devising studies to provide data that would put his or her views to the test.



## CONCLUSIONS

The development of organizational arrangements for evaluation requires a recognition of the benefits and drawbacks of external intervention in the evaluation process and a balancing of the pros and cons of formally integrating external influences in the structure. A tracing of the evolution of evaluation organizational structure within the agency described in this article suggests that adjustments to structure should be made with great caution and full recognition of the strengths, as well as the weaknesses, of existing arrangements.

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