

## ORGANIZATIONAL CONSTRAINTS ON THE INTRODUCTION OF PROGRAM EVALUATION: THE "SELF-EVALUATING" ORGANIZATION RECONSIDERED

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**Abstract:** This case study suggests that organizational constraints on the introduction of program evaluation often have more to do with problems of organizational learning than with the "political" problems dealt with by Wildavsky (1979) and other students of the evaluation/organization interface. Faced with expanding needs and declining resources, the Montreal Jewish Family Services Social Service Centre attempted to introduce program evaluation as a tool for ensuring more efficient resource allocation. Instead of reflecting the needs of resource allocation, however, the evaluation framework the agency developed was based on compliance-oriented concepts of quality assurance. As was discovered during the first attempt to apply the model, the framework had to be substantially modified in order to serve as a useful tool of program evaluation. The case study thus suggests that the introduction of program evaluation is analogous to the introduction of other kinds of technological change: such changes must be carefully tailored to the needs and constraints of the organizational settings where they are being introduced.

**Résumé:** Cette étude de cas propose que les contraintes organisationnelles lors de l'introduction de l'évaluation de programme s'associent plus souvent aux problèmes de l'apprentissage organisationnel, plutôt qu' à la résistance «politique» étudiée par Wildavsky (1979) et d'autres spécialistes des rapports entre les organisations et les évaluateurs. Face aux besoins croissants et des ressources en décroissance, le Centre des services sociaux juifs à la famille a décidé de procéder au développement d'un système d'évaluation de programme. Ce système devait permettre une allocation de ressources plus efficace, mais le modèle mis au point pour atteindre cet objectif se référait aux notions de la conformité plutôt que celles de l'efficacité. Lorsque le moment arrivait d'évaluer un programme en fonction du nouveau système, il fallait procéder par des modifications majeures. Cette

expérience suggère que l'introduction de l'évaluation de programme est similaire à n'importe quel autre changement technologique; de tels changements doivent souvent se référer aux besoins spécifiques de chaque organisation.

■ The introduction of new organizational practices, according to Hedberg (1981), Kim (1993), Yin (1979), and other students of technological change, usually involves processes of organizational learning. Organizational learning in this sense is different from individual learning, in that it requires the modification of an organization's "standard operating procedures." Such procedures, which make up what Hedberg as well as Kim refer to as the organization's "memory,"<sup>1</sup> are passed down from one generation of organizational participants to the next. Organizational memories, in this sense, are by their very nature resistant to change. As Hedberg observes:

Members come and go, and leadership changes, but organizations' memories preserve certain behaviours, mental maps, norms, and values over time. For example, standard operating procedures constitute behaviour repertoires which are available to many members and which are frequently inherited between office holders. (p. 6)

To the extent that technological change requires the modification of organizational memories, according to Hedberg, difficulties may be encountered not only with respect to the learning of new practices but also with respect to the "unlearning" of old ones. As he puts it:

Understanding involves both learning new knowledge and discarding obsolete and misleading knowledge. The discarding activity — unlearning — is as important a part of understanding as is adding new knowledge. (p. 3)

However, the reprogramming of an organization's memory is often problematical. Such memories include a great deal that is not written down in official manuals and procedures, and much that organizational members themselves may be only dimly aware of.

Even in the most bureaucratic of organizations, despite the preponderance of written SOPs and established protocols, there is much more about the firm that is unsaid and unwritten; its essence is embodied more in the people than in the systems. Comparatively little is put down on paper or stored in computer memories. The in-

tangible and often invisible assets of an organization reside in individual mental models that collectively contribute to the shared mental models. The shared mental models are what make the rest of the organizational memory usable. (Kim, 1993, p. 45)

The absorption of new practices into the organizational memory often takes the form of “routinization” of the new practices (Tyre & Orlikowski, 1993; Yin, 1979). In other words, the “newness” that is associated with new practices disappears as they become part of the organization’s conditioned reflexes, what Kim (1993, p. 45) refers to as its “automatic pilot”:

Individual routines that are proved to be sound over time become standard operating procedures. [As in] an individual driving a car, the routines become the organization’s auto-pilot reflexes.

Precisely because of the “unconscious” nature of some standard operating procedures, however, both learning and unlearning may encounter significant obstacles. There is usually conscious awareness of new routines that are being assimilated, but such conscious awareness is often lacking in the case of routines and procedures that exist at the level of reflex. It is difficult to eliminate practices or habits of mind, in other words, that are so automatic that organizational members are not even aware of their existence.

As a result, organizations that try to introduce change may end up attempting to function in terms of two quite contradictory sets of practices: one that has been defined in terms of conscious organizational policy, and one that has been inherited from an earlier era. Hedberg (1981, p. 19) describes this situation in the following terms:

Organizations that face the double problem of learning both new questions and new responses cannot unlearn overnight. Their unlearning takes time and resources, and in the meantime they are quite disoriented or paralyzed. Such organizations may appear naive and incompetent to outside observers who watch them issuing inconsistent problem statements and implementing various strategies for recovery.

The existence of tangible charts, forms, and procedures may, of course, facilitate the process of unlearning. Yin, for example, ar-

gues that organizations can facilitate the learning of new procedures by eliminating the forms, procedures, and manuals on which the earlier practices were based. He cites the example of a computerized information system in a municipal government in the U.S.A.:

In Indianapolis, as new applications were automated and new forms created, specific orders were given to destroy the old forms still in inventory, and to cease printing the old forms. This was an explicit action that prevented the staff from returning to the previous practices. Similar actions included the removal of old equipment or the reassignment of specialized personnel associated with the superseded practice. (1979, p. 103)

Where the established practices are invisible and intangible, however, the process of unlearning is much more difficult. Such practices may continue to exist in spite of a general impression that a new technology has been introduced. This is not so much a problem of “incomplete learning” (March & Olsen, 1976) but rather one of “incomplete unlearning” (Hedberg, 1981, p. 19):

There is ... unlearning that is role-constrained or superstitious, unlearning that happens in individuals but that fails to spread to audiences in organizations, and unlearning under ambiguity. Organizations' myths or strategies ... can remain, although individuals realize that their organizations must unlearn. Also, organizations can unlearn and discover that their members have not. Incomplete unlearning cycles are problematic in that they frequently add to dysfunctional organizational inertia.

In this article I argue that the introduction of program evaluation can be seen as a specific example of technological change, requiring both the learning of new practices and the unlearning of earlier ones. The introduction of program evaluation, as with other kinds of technological change, requires partial “reprogramming” of an organization's memory. Such reprogramming, however, may well encounter significant obstacles.

The case study considered here suggests that the main organizational obstacle to the introduction of program evaluation is often not the “political” resistance to evaluation described by Wildavsky (1979) and other students of the evaluation/organization interface,<sup>2</sup>

but rather the “resistance to learning” maintained by many organizational memories. The introduction of program evaluation, from this point of view, encounters the same obstacles as any other kind of new technology that requires the modification or replacement of existing operating procedures.

This hypothesis will be discussed by examining a specific attempt to introduce program evaluation, undertaken between 1987 and 1993 at the Montreal Jewish Family Services Social Service Centre. The organizational leadership of this agency was strongly committed to the “performance-oriented” values that were thought to be associated with the introduction of program evaluation. However, the methods and procedures devised to implement these values turned out to reflect the “compliance-oriented” values that formed an important part of the organization’s memory.

This example, it will be argued, illustrates the fact that organizations that are unsuccessful in unlearning their established practices may find it difficult to introduce new ones, regardless of conscious commitments to do so. The inability to eliminate existing practices may produce what March and Olsen (1976) refer to as “incomplete learning cycles.”

Although this case study thus emphasizes the difficulties involved in unlearning established practices, it also suggests that continued experimentation with new practices may in time lead to more complete cycles of organizational learning. Specifically, attempts to implement the new practices may demonstrate those practices’ incompatibility with the tasks they are meant to perform.<sup>3</sup> This may lead to new episodes of organizational learning, especially if there is a favorable balance of forces between those committed to the new technologies and those committed to previous ones.

#### INTRODUCING PROGRAM EVALUATION AT THE JEWISH FAMILY SERVICES SOCIAL SERVICE CENTRE: AN EXPERIMENT IN TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

At the time of its decision to develop a program evaluation system, the Jewish Family Services Social Service Centre was responsible for providing social and family services to Montreal’s Jewish population and to the non-Jewish population of the area served by the agency. It was one of three social service centers serving the Island of Montreal, the others being Ville Marie Social Services (which

served most of Montreal's anglophone population) and the Centre de services sociaux de Montreal Métropolitain, which served the majority of Montreal's francophone population.

The services provided by the Jewish Family Services Social Service Centre (JFS) ranged from institutional services for the elderly, the handicapped, and the chronically ill to services for children who were victims of family problems. The agency offered a broad range of services to a number of different client groups. Although it received funding from a variety of different sources, including \$3.8 million in 1986–87 from the Quebec Ministry of Health and Social Services (out of a total budget of \$5.3 million), the wide range of services it provided meant that most of its programs were chronically short of funds. Like many other social service agencies, the organization was confronted with pressures to expand its services while its resources remained constant or declined.

This context of diminishing resources relative to needs was part of the reason for the agency's decision to introduce program evaluation. As the president of the agency stated in the 1986–87 *Annual Report*:

As resources continue to be limited and caseloads continue to grow, the identification of priorities for the [agency] has become a very key concern. Last year, as you know, a document recommending changes in our priorities was tabled for our collective consideration. That document allowed us to clearly examine ourselves and made us realize that before we can make major decisions as to our priorities of service, we need a more appropriate information and evaluation system. (JFS, 1987, p. 2)

At the time, as this comment makes clear, the agency saw its needs in terms of the development of a "more appropriate information and evaluation system" rather than in terms of a totally new system of program evaluation. Specifically, the agency's leadership felt that attempts should be made to develop further the three information systems already in place: a client service information system, a quality assurance information system, and a workload information system.

The president thus commented in the 1986–87 *Annual Report*:

This past year, the Department of Professional Services ... has been able to identify three basic areas for expanding our information system:

- a client service information system which will hopefully simplify the collection and recording of information;
- a quality assurance information system whereby we will try to develop and implement a systematic program review using multiple dimensions within each program. This could then be used as a basis for planning and resource allocation;
- a workload information system to try and establish workload expectations for all units. (JFS, 1987, p. 2)

Shortly after the 1986–87 annual report was published, however, a new agency document (JFS, n.d.a) demonstrated quite a different perspective on the problem of resource allocations. According to this document, the agency's previous attempts to introduce "rational" resource allocation had failed because "the decisions had to be made on information that was questioned as to its validity and reliability" (p. 1).

At about the same time, another new document (JFS, n.d.b) announced that the agency had decided to prepare a more ambitious program evaluation system, one that would help in the development of agency-wide priorities that could then be used as resource allocation criteria. It was now being proposed, in fact, to:

conduct regular program evaluations of all major units. Units will undergo such an evaluation every three years on a cyclical basis. The results of evaluations will be used to determine future program priorities. (p. 1)

The new evaluation system, it was stipulated, would carry out the following tasks:

1. Describe the resources, programs, and outputs of the various units
2. Examine the rationale for each unit and its mandate(s)
3. Assess the effectiveness of the services provided
4. Assess the efficiency of the units and their various programs

5. Examine changes related to the recommendations of previous evaluations
6. Recommend future directions and resource requirements for each unit

This new proposal thus went beyond the earlier objective of improving the existing information systems. What the agency was now seeking was not simply better information, but also a set of decision-making criteria that could be used to judge the efficiency and effectiveness of the agency's programs. The idea was to improve resource allocation and to develop planning procedures with respect to the agency's long-term resource commitments.

This decision to undertake the preparation of a new, performance-based program evaluation system, however, was followed by a period of wide-ranging discussions, consultations, and negotiations extending over nearly three years. Much of this time was taken up in deciding which "parameters" should be included in the new system.

This activity must have required extensive organizational learning because, although the meanings attached to the various parameters of the existing information systems seemed to be firmly rooted in the organization's memory, this was not true of the new parameters of program evaluation. Agency documents demonstrate much uncertainty about the operational meanings of these new terms.

The parameters finally included in the JFS model of quality assurance are shown in Table 1.

It seems clear that this first attempt to develop a new program evaluation system reflected a felt need to fit the concepts of program evaluation into the more familiar concepts of information systems. The design of the new system consisted largely of expressing the new parameters in terms of the quality-assurance vocabulary with which the agency was already familiar.

#### IMPLEMENTING THE JFS MODEL: EVALUATING THE "QUALITY OF LIFE PROJECT"

The JFS model of quality assurance, as already noted, reflected the belief that existing information systems could be expanded and modified in order to respond to the agency's decision-making and resource

allocation needs. This led to a new system based on compliance-oriented evaluation criteria, rather than on the decision-making criteria outlined in the 1987 statement of objectives. The compliance-oriented character of the new model was quite clear from its statement of objectives:

This Model is ... designed to assess direct services in a systematic fashion, namely, to determine whether these services comply with recognized standards — legal, agency, and professional — and to modify services and policies according to the results of the evaluation. (JFS, 1991, p. 1)

The JFS model placed primary emphasis on concepts and values that were widely accepted throughout the agency and were familiar to most members of the agency’s decision-making coalition. The parameter of “client-centredness,” for example, reflected an ideal espoused by most agency staff. Similarly, staff members were proud of the “high quality” tradition of JFS services. Hence the prominence

**Table 1**  
**The JFS Model of Quality Assurance**

**Incorporation of Results into the Planning, Organization, and Management of Services**

<b>GOALS OBJECTIVES</b>		
<b>Service delivery</b>	<b>Service process</b>	<b>Service delivery, service process, and service outcome</b>
<b>Primacy of the individual</b>	<b>Primacy of the individual</b>	<b>Primacy of the individual</b>
<b>accessibility</b>	<b>pertinence</b>	
<b>competence</b>		<b>effectiveness</b>
<b>continuity</b>	<b>satisfaction</b>	
<b>satisfaction</b>		<b>satisfaction</b>
<b>conformity</b>		
<b>productivity</b>	<b>efficiency</b>	
<b>Evaluation of the quality of service delivery</b>	<b>Evaluation of the quality of service process</b>	<b>Evaluation of the quality of service outcome</b>
<b>Results of the evaluation of quality</b>		

*Source.* JFS (1990, p. 5).

given to “service quality” in each of the three sets of evaluation parameters.

Clearly, however, the JFS model had to be more than a statement of values. Starting in 1991, the first attempts were made to employ the JFS model as a tool for evaluating agency programs.

The first evaluation dealt with the “Quality of Life Project.” This was a volunteer program aimed at providing social, recreational, and autonomy-sustaining activities to elderly persons in foster homes administered by the agency. This program was to be evaluated during a three-month period in 1991, and the evaluation was to serve as a test of the JFS model’s usefulness. The objectives of this first evaluation were defined as follows:

- (i) To do a comprehensive evaluation of the Quality of Life Project based on the JFS Model of Quality Assurance;
- (ii) To assess how the conceptual model was applied “*in practice*” with respect to a specific agency program.” (JFS, 1991, p. 1)

For those who were called upon to evaluate the Quality of Life Project — essentially, a group of staff members from the agency’s Professional Services Department — this first test of the JFS model clearly demonstrated its shortcomings as a tool of performance-oriented program evaluation.

First of all, the evaluators had difficulty in understanding what the different parameters implied in terms of concrete evaluation tasks. Those who had developed the model, for example, had specified that each evaluation parameter should have a separate and distinct meaning. Thus, “primacy of the individual” was to be interpreted differently depending on whether it was service delivery, service process, or service outcome being evaluated. It was not at all clear what these three different definitions should consist of.

In many cases, the information necessary for operationalizing the parameters simply did not exist. The committee tried to fill this void by administering several questionnaires. As described in the evaluation committee’s report:

The process was a lengthy one, with the committee not always having the necessary information and/or means available to provide "objective" analysis about the different indices of quality. For example, it was decided to elicit direct feedback from the (1) foster home residents, (2) foster home managers and (3) project animators (volunteers) by designing specific questionnaires which would be discussed with or responded to by each of the above mentioned sub-groups. (JFS, 1991, p. 3)

It was soon decided, however, that some parameters of the JFS model would have to be eliminated or substantially modified if the framework was to be an effective instrument of program evaluation. The evaluation committee noted, for example, that:

additional work has to be done in terms of differentiating the parameters of service delivery, service process and service outcome. Certain operational definitions such as *efficiency* further require clarification. (p. 3)

These difficulties were compounded, according to the evaluation committee, by the large number of parameters included in the model, which created considerable confusion:

we felt obligated to say something about all 10 indices. However, in future evaluations we should deal with only those indices which are likely to provide significant feedback to program managers or administrators. (p. 5)

Members of the evaluation committee thus undertook to modify the parameters formulated in the JFS model. They saw this as a process of "adapting" the JFS model to the specifics of the Quality of Life Project. The committee justified these changes in the following terms:

The theoretical model as initially conceived was very detailed and it was understood that not all aspects of it could be fully applied to all JFS departmental programs. Adaptation of the model would have to take into account specific departmental idiosyncracies. (p. 5)

The parameters that were actually used for the evaluation of the Quality of Life Project were, however, quite different from those found in the JFS model. They are presented in Table 2.

In addition to creating a new category called “service delivery, service process, and service outcome,” the evaluators reinterpreted the nature of the second category, “service process.” Previously, the two main service process parameters (apart from “satisfaction,” which was found in all of the categories) were “pertinence” and “efficiency.” Pertinence had been defined as a “compliance” issue: it was to be a judgement about the “appropriateness” of the means chosen to attain program objectives. Similarly, “efficiency” seemed to signify a judgement about the “reasonableness” of the results attained, given the expenditure of resources. It too was thus defined as a compliance issue.

In the evaluation of the Quality of Life Project, however, it was recognized that efficiency would have to be defined differently if the evaluation was to make sense. In particular, the evaluation would need to assess the extent of effective utilization of agency resources as compared with other possible uses of the same resources. As a result, the resources used by the Quality of Life Project were estimated as a way of determining whether the program was a good investment for the agency.

In addition, as “efficiency” was now found in the same category as “effectiveness,” the whole meaning of the service process category was transformed from a compliance issue to a program performance issue. Whereas the JFS model had initially focused primarily on service process, now it was clearly redefined in terms of outputs and effects.

**Table 2**  
**The JFS Model of Quality Assurance (as Employed in the Evaluation of the Quality of Life Project)**

<b>Service delivery</b>	<b>Service process</b>	<b>Service delivery, service process, and service outcome</b>
<b>accessibility</b>	<b>pertinence</b>	<b>primacy of the individual</b>
<b>competence</b>		
<b>continuity</b>	<b>productivity/efficiency</b>	
<b>conformity</b>	<b>effectiveness</b>	<b>satisfaction</b>
<b>Evaluation of service delivery</b>	<b>Evaluation of service process</b>	<b>Evaluation of service delivery, service process, and service outcome</b>

*Source.* JFS (1990, pp. 10–23).

Nevertheless, the evaluation committee encountered numerous problems in attempting to measure “service outcome.” The evaluators did not have the information necessary for reliable judgements on impacts and effects. Consequently, this category was simply eliminated.

The parameter of “effectiveness,” which had previously been an important component of the service outcome category, was now transferred to the service process category. In addition, the two parameters of “client satisfaction” and “primacy of the individual” were greatly simplified. In the original JFS model, these two indices were included in each of the three sets of program parameters. In fact, however, the evaluators were unable to distinguish between the three different meanings of these terms. Consequently, evaluators decided to measure client satisfaction only once. It was thought that the opinions clients expressed would reflect their satisfaction, or lack of it, with the program as a whole.

The parameters of “client satisfaction” and “primacy of the individual” were now combined to form a new category called “service delivery, service process, and service outcome.” This new set of parameters replaced the old one entitled “service outcome.”

Thus, whereas the JFS model of quality assurance had assumed that issues of program outputs and impacts could be treated simply as particular kinds of quality assurance issues, those who carried out the evaluation of the Quality of Life Project understood clearly that outputs and impacts could not be treated as quality assurance issues. They pointedly emphasized the need for better information about program outcomes and better definitions of program objectives; recommending, in particular:

that the Quality of Life Project staff build in indicators which are closely linked to the objectives of the program, so that one can better measure progress, or a lack of progress, in terms of desired outcomes.

It was accepted, of course, that this first attempt to apply the new program evaluation system would be a test of the JFS model. It was not fully appreciated, however, that the JFS model would have to be substantially modified if it was to be of any use at all. Ironically, the three-month process of evaluating the Quality of Life Project provided more insight into the relevance of various program evaluation parameters than had the three-year process of consultations involved in preparing the JFS model.

## CONCLUSION

Jewish Family Services' attempts to introduce program evaluation illustrate the ways in which technological change depends on organizational learning, and also the ways in which organizational learning can be prevented by unconscious adherence to established values and procedures. Tyre and Orlikowski's (1993, p. 13) conclusions in this respect appear to be relevant:

The full advantages of such technologies cannot simply be purchased off the shelf; they are won by patiently and carefully tailoring the technology to fit a given firm's organizational and strategic context.

As with other kinds of technological change, some of the new routines associated with program evaluation can probably be "added on" (Yin, 1979) to existing organizational procedures. Others, however, cannot be effectively introduced without displacing existing norms, routines, and habitual ways of seeing things. Organizational learning cannot proceed, in other words, unless there is also organizational unlearning.

This case study also illustrates the extent to which the *implementation* of a new technology may lead to greater organizational learning than more theoretical, prolonged attempts to design new, "perfect" technologies. In spite of three years of planning, the JFS model was defined in ways that were found to be quite dysfunctional when an actual program evaluation was attempted.

Finally, this study also suggests that organizational learning is more likely to occur where there is long-term commitment to technological change and improvement. In the case of Jewish Family Services, the evaluation of the Quality of Life Project accelerated the process of organizational learning. This might well have continued through future evaluation efforts but, unfortunately, in 1993 a major reorganization of Quebec's health and social service agencies eliminated the agency, together with the province's other social service centers, thus bringing to an end this experiment in organizational learning.

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## NOTES

1. Organizational memories are composed, according to Hedberg (1981, p. 6), of myths, customs, and symbols, as well as standard operating procedures: "Customs and symbols are bearers of organizations' traditions and norms, and they help to perpetuate organizations' social pattern ... Myths and organizational sagas function as organizational long-term memories from which strategies are derived and in terms of which consistency arguments are voiced."
2. Students of program evaluation have studied at length the various obstacles that may prevent the institutionalization of program evaluation. Weiss' 1972 framework of six primary conflict-producing factors has been widely cited in the literature (e.g., Conner, 1979). In addition, many authors have sought to facilitate the institutionalization of program evaluation within organizational contexts. For example, Conner (1979), Myers (1992), and O'Brecht (1992) have all proposed ways of eliminating or limiting the relevant sources of conflict. Much of the literature on stakeholder-based evaluation, including the utilization-focused variant developed by Patton (1986), has sought to eliminate such obstacles through the representation of stakeholder interests within the evaluation process. Other writers, however, such as Stake (1983) and Gold (1983), have suggested such expectations are too optimistic. Similar doubts have been formulated by Corwin and Lewis (1982) and Hennessy and Sullivan (1989), who argue that such strategies required a high degree of stakeholder stability, which is lacking in many organizational contexts.
3. In contrast to much of the management literature on organizational learning through total quality management, the point of view outlined here follows that of Tyre and Orlikowski (1993), who argue that organizational learning takes place in sporadic or "discontinuous" fashion rather than in terms of the "continuous improvement" model favored by many management theorists. See, for example, Senge (1990), Cohen and Brand (1993), and Anderson and Brazil (1995). The Japanese industrial organizations studied by Tyre and Orlikowski, for example, tended to promote short periods of "intensive" technological change followed by longer periods of "institutionalization" in order to bring new technologies to a level of maximum performance. In the absence of such "periods of routinization," they argue, organizations will be confronted with confusion and chaos rather than with "continuous quality improvement."

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