

## SUCCESSFUL EVALUATION MANAGEMENT: ENGAGING MIND AND SPIRIT

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**Abstract:** The key to a successful or unsuccessful evaluation is often the quality of the relationship between evaluators and their clients. This article examines the social rather than technical aspects of evaluation and how this can affect the outcome. The author discusses the critical interactions and responsibilities of the evaluation manager and the evaluation practitioner when an evaluation is contracted out. Practice guidance is offered in how to manage an evaluation contract to a successful conclusion.

**Résumé :** La clé d'une évaluation réussie ou d'un échec repose souvent sur la qualité de la relation entre l'évaluateur et son client. Cet article s'intéresse à l'aspect social plutôt que technique de l'évaluation ainsi qu'à son impact sur le résultat de l'évaluation. L'auteure aborde l'enjeu critique que représentent les interactions et les responsabilités respectives du gestionnaire de l'évaluation et de l'évaluateur praticien lorsqu'un contrat est attribué. Des lignes directrices sont proposées sur la façon de gérer le contrat d'évaluation jusqu'à sa conclusion réussie.

### INTRODUCTION

█ In pursuit of successful evaluations, evaluators and those with whom they interact in the process of practicing their art must overcome many hazards. The quality of this interaction often holds the key to a successful or unsuccessful evaluation. This article will examine aspects of the social rather than technical processes involved in undertaking evaluation and offer some reflections on evaluation management practice. In particular, the main focus will be on the interaction between evaluation practitioners and their clients and how this relationship can unfold during an evaluation process. Those involved in the management of an evaluation have to address a number of challenges that are manifest at different levels. A common thread between them is that they are all, in the end, about human behaviour and relationships.

A critical determinant of the success of an evaluation is how it is managed. Yet the evaluation literature mainly covers only the technical aspects of undertaking evaluation and, despite the large management literature, not a lot has been written on the topic of managing evaluation per se. This is surprising, given that many experienced practitioners would agree that inept management can turn a technically sound and potentially successful evaluation into a confused failure; hence there are specific aspects of evaluation management that deserve attention.

This article has three sections. The first section sets out some of the guidance gleaned from the literature. Second, an exemplary case study is described and compared with some of the guidance available. Third, an attempt is made to open the evaluation management black box and touch on some of the reasons and behavioural incentives that could underpin less positive interactions between the evaluation manager and the evaluator. Finally, some pointers are offered on how to enhance the chances of a successful evaluation process.

## EVALUATION MANAGEMENT PROCESS

The management of an evaluation proceeds in stages: planning, commissioning, undertaking, reporting, and follow-up. However this process is conceptualized, each of these aspects contains elements critical to a successful evaluation. The focus of this article is on the two stages of commissioning and reporting—stages when the relationship between the client and the evaluator is usually at its most intense. It is assumed that the evaluation is carried out by an external evaluation contractor or consultant, as this is most often the case. This has been the practice in Australia, New Zealand, and other OECD countries in the public sector for the last two decades and also worldwide in the field of international development evaluation.

In delving into the details of evaluation management practice, it is important to first clarify the roles and key responsibilities of the various players. In this case the focus is on the evaluation manager, who is working for the commissioning agency, and the evaluation contractor, who is responsible for carrying out the evaluation.

### The Evaluation Manager

The evaluation manager is responsible for managing the whole process comprising the stages outlined above. Different organizations

group these responsibilities in different ways. In its practice toolkit, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA; 2007) uses three groups to describe these responsibilities: preparation, implementation, and follow-up. Whichever way the tasks are grouped, there are key points in the process where the relationship aspects come into play in an important way. The first is up front at the commissioning stage and especially during the contract negotiation, and then again after the fieldwork is completed, the draft report is submitted, and its quality assessed.

### Commissioning

It's probably true to say that agreement on the Terms of Reference, the conduct of the evaluation, and the contract milestones and payment schedule is what most evaluation managers think important in the negotiation of the contract. However, as Fortgang, Lax, and Sebenius (2003) pointed out in their insightful article in the *Harvard Business Review*, "cultivating a shared understanding of the spirit of the deal can be every bit as important as agreeing on the letter of the deal" (p. 68).

Unfortunately, this aspect of the contract is often neglected with sometimes disastrous consequences for evaluations, particularly when the going gets tough. In essence the difference lies between the "What?" or the explicit contract and the "How?" or the implicit contract. The latter has been described as the "social contract." Some task managers view a contract as the starting point for a collaborative relationship. Others seem to view it more legalistically as simply a description of the contractor's obligations. If, at the beginning of the evaluation contract, views differ between the contract manager and the evaluator, and none of this has been discussed and made explicit, problems are more likely to occur down the track.

Getting to the heart of this issue involves an exploration of the values underpinning the contracting relationship. Do both parties see the arrangement as a partnership in which both sides work together on equal terms to achieve a successful outcome? Or are they coming together from different value bases and working to different principles? The evaluation contract manager may view the evaluator as someone whose job it is to simply deliver a good quality report, with their own responsibility being to set up the contract, receive the evaluation report, and make judgements on its quality. This approach could be described as the "servant and master" model. The power resides with

the evaluation contract manager, and if it all goes wrong the evaluator can shoulder all the responsibility and ultimately take the blame. The “letter of deal” is usually paramount in this scenario. One of the consequences of this approach is that if there is a disagreement, an impasse can result and a successful evaluation then becomes much harder to achieve.

### A Good Quality Process Leads to a Good Quality Product

In its online evaluation guide, the EU sets out two different points of view concerning evaluation quality:

In the first place, quality can be considered a *characteristic of the process* through which the evaluation activities are performed. In the second place, quality is a *characteristic of the products* of the evaluation process....

In theory the two aspects of the process and the product are linked: a good process should generate a good product and the reverse is also true, in the sense that a good product should be the result of a good enough production process. (Evalsed, n.d.)

These two characteristics of quality point to the need for a shared responsibility between the evaluation contract manager and the evaluator as the parties that contribute to the quality of both the process and the product. It would therefore make sense for the principle of *partnership*<sup>1</sup> to underpin this relationship. This entails answering the question “How will we work together?” at the outset, properly and explicitly negotiating the *processes* as well as determining the products to be delivered.

### EVALUATOR-CLIENT RELATIONSHIP

An important prerequisite of a successful evaluation is the establishment of a positive working relationship between the contract manager and the evaluator. If this does not happen, there is a risk is that through either lack of awareness or simply neglect, the two parties can hold different expectations that can result in conflict when one or the other doesn't get what they thought had been agreed. The critical aspects of the deal that need to be made more explicit and that need to be well managed are

- Communication: formal and informal and how it is expected that this will occur throughout the evaluation;

- Decision-making: informal as well as formal governance and management decision-making processes;
- Dispute resolution: how will any conflict be handled? (informal discussion; mediation, etc);
- Contract variation and renegotiation: how will unexpected obstacles or unforeseen changes be dealt with, and what flexibility is there to vary the contract to address these?

As Fortgang et al. (2003) state:

It can be tempting to regard the social contract as unwritten and psychological and the economic contract as written and tangible. Yet the two can be productively dovetailed, with elements of the economic contract directly tied to the social one. (p. 73)

To illustrate how critical this is for evaluation, I will outline a case example. This example describes a series of events in an evaluation process involving a public sector organization and a team of two evaluation contractors over a four-month period.

### A Scenario

The evaluation contract was set up in the usual way with an evaluation Terms of Reference that set out the purpose and scope of the work as well as the key questions to be answered and a description of the program to be evaluated. The timeline, milestones, and payments were detailed in the contract. Both parties signed the contract in good faith. The two evaluators had both successfully done previous work for this organization and so did not anticipate any significant risks.

In line with their usual practice, the evaluators delivered the draft report on the date agreed along with an invoice for this milestone payment. As this event occurred during a national holiday period, they had expected some delay. They received neither an acknowledgement, nor any other response, for the next six weeks. During this time the deadline for submission of the final report passed, as did the invoice payment date. Consequently, the evaluators contacted the client by e-mail, expressing concern regarding the need to renegotiate the contract dates due to significant lapsed time. An automated e-mail response was received with the information that the contract manager was on an extended period of leave. After trying several

times to contact the evaluation manager's office via telephone calls and e-mails, the contractor was eventually informed that another contract manager had taken over who would, however, be out of the office for the next two weeks. No mention was made of the draft report or contract milestone payment.

About a week later, the evaluation contractor was advised that the draft report was being reviewed. Then a letter was sent to the contractor advising them that payment of the invoice was being withheld as the quality of the draft report was considered unacceptable. This came as a shock to the contractor, who raised concerns about the contract management process—specifically that they were not informed of this earlier and within the agreed time frame. A telephone conversation between the two parties a week later failed to achieve a meeting of minds. At this point, more than 12 weeks after the draft report was delivered, and following the subsequent series of events, the spirit of the deal was severely damaged. In addition, the evaluator had work commitments to other clients and informed the evaluation manager that they would be unavailable for further work under this contract for the next few weeks. Later that same week, a letter was sent to the evaluator from the client demanding a revised report within two weeks or the contract would be cancelled.

In the above scenario, what the evaluators didn't know at the outset was that there would be a change of contract manager part way through the process. And of course the "social contract" wasn't made explicit by either party so there were no clearly agreed expectations about communication, decision-making, dispute resolution, or opportunities for renegotiation should problems occur. Whereas in the past the evaluators had experienced shared understanding and flexibility with other evaluation managers in dealing with unexpected obstacles, the new evaluation contract manager appeared to take the view that any negotiation ceased as the written contract was signed. A situation of this type can easily precipitate conflict, and what was a potentially successful contracting relationship then has the potential to dissolve into a costly legal battle resulting in significant losses to both parties, both economic and social.

At the reporting stage there may also be incentives for evaluation managers to behave in particular ways. Consider an evaluation contract manager who is also the person responsible for managing the program being evaluated, as can occur in many organizations. Whether it is conscious or unconscious, resistance to negative find-

ings is not uncommon in this situation. None of us like our performance to be judged by others, and so complex psychological defence mechanisms come into play. In an evaluation process these are often manifested through rebuttal of findings, requests to change the content of the evaluation report, and/or unduly harsh criticism of the quality of the report and the evaluator's performance. Speaking the truth to power requires resilience and has its hazards!

### Mutual Responsibilities

To minimize the potential for adverse behavioural effects, it can be helpful to make explicit the responsibilities of the evaluation contract manager as well as those of the evaluator. Elsewhere, Hawkins (2005) outlined the responsibilities of the evaluation contract manager as

- keeping the goals and objectives clear;
- maintaining ownership of the study;
- prompt decision-making;
- being open to negotiation if changes are needed;
- delivering the findings to the relevant audiences.

Cumulative practice experience over the subsequent seven years points to a few more items to add to this list of the contract manager's responsibilities along with others identified in some of the guidance documents produced by organizations in recent years (e.g., Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development-Development Assistance Committee, 2010; United Nations Development Programme, 2006; United Nations Population Fund, 2007):

- Discuss and agree communication protocols before the evaluation starts;
- Ensure that evaluators have full access to all relevant documents and other information as early as possible;
- Follow the progress of the evaluation and provide feedback and guidance to evaluators during all phases of implementation;
- Arrange for a meeting with evaluators and key stakeholders to discuss and comment on the draft report and agree on any changes/revisions;
- Approve the final report and arrange a presentation of the evaluation findings.

The evaluator's responsibilities are different from but complementary to those of the evaluation contract manager:

- Ensure that the contract, terms of reference, and the client's business processes are well understood;
- Design and, once the evaluation plan is approved by the client, conduct the evaluation within the allotted time frame and budget;
- Provide regular progress reports to the evaluation contract manager;
- Participate in discussions on the draft evaluation report and correct any factual errors or misinterpretations;
- Respond to reviewers' comments and finalize the evaluation report on time.

As well as being clear about responsibilities, evaluation managers need to be aware of the specific competencies required for good evaluation practice, including management of the various processes. The Canadian Evaluation Society recently published *Competencies for Canadian Evaluation Practice* (2010). This useful document includes the competencies that are required for successful evaluation management: identification and mitigation of problems/issues; listening, negotiation, conflict management; and collaboration and partnering skills. All of these are relevant to the case example outlined above.

In this short article there is insufficient space to describe in detail the errors in the events described in the case example and unfortunately no space to present another example. However, a quick comparison between the good practice pointers and the process in the case outlined above illustrates the importance of the need to carefully manage all stages of the process to enhance the potential for a successful evaluation. At the stage reached in the case example, there is still a chance for the evaluation to reach a satisfactory conclusion, but this success hangs on restoration of the relationship and renegotiation of the contract to allow the work to be completed.

#### A FINAL CAUTION

In light of all of these challenges involved in evaluation management, I offer a final cautionary comment. At the present time, given the worldwide shortage of experienced and competent evaluators, evaluation contract managers simply cannot afford to jeopardize a contracted evaluation through neglecting the "spirit of the deal" and

the relationship. A consequence of poor evaluation management is the creation of a significant risk to their organization's reputation as a preferred client. A positive and constructive relationship, based on a partnership between the evaluation manager and evaluator, is a prerequisite for successful evaluations, which in turn can lead to more effective initiatives. Success involves both the mind and the spirit!

## NOTE

- 1 In New Zealand, this principle resonates with the Treaty of Waitangi, the nation's founding document, and is echoed in the principles and values of many public sector organizations that commission evaluations.

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