

LEARNING FROM EVALUATION MISADVENTURES: THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: Good communication is a key factor affecting the success of evaluation in many ways. This article presents four examples from a variety of government and international organizations illustrating communication-gone-wrong, and often evaluation management-gone-wrong. The article discusses what can be learned from these situations in order to provide for more effective communication in other evaluation contexts, and thereby enhancing the relevance, quality, and use of evaluation. This article highlights the implications of these experiences for effective project management of overall evaluation functions as well as of specific evaluations.

Résumé : Une bonne communication constitue l'un des facteurs clés du succès d'une évaluation et ce, à plusieurs égards. Cet article illustre des ratées de la communication et de la gestion de l'évaluation à partir de quatre exemples puisés d'une diversité d'organisations gouvernementales et internationales. L'article s'intéresse également aux leçons dégagées de ces situations de façon à pouvoir générer une communication plus efficace dans d'autres contextes d'évaluation, et de là, améliorer la pertinence, la qualité, et l'utilisation de l'évaluation. Enfin, cet article met en lumière les implications de ces expériences pour une gestion efficace de projet dans les fonctions générales de l'évaluation ainsi que dans des démarches particulières d'évaluation.

What can be learned from less-than-successful evaluations? From my experience, good communication is one of the key factors contributing to the success of evaluation. This article presents four examples of communication-gone-wrong, in a variety of contexts and in different types of organizations. I then indicate what can be learned from these vignettes to facilitate improved communication—and more effective evaluations. What also emerges from these

examples is the importance of how well the evaluation process is managed, and I identify some of the implications from these examples for evaluation project managers.¹

VIGNETTE 1

In one large organization, the commissioning unit (in this case, acting as both evaluation manager and client) viewed the report submitted by an evaluation consultant for a complex evaluation as substandard and refused to accept it. A standoff ensued, and I was asked to provide an expert opinion (my own terms of reference were limited to a review of documentation and contact with the project manager) with respect to the quality of the evaluation. I concluded in essence that this was not a brilliant evaluation, and it was not how I would have gone about doing it myself. However, it did respond sufficiently to the terms of reference, which struck me as weak. What emerged as the real issue was the manner of communication between the commissioning unit and the evaluation consultant. For example, when there were concerns about the interim report, the project manager did not make a telephone call or send an e-mail to raise these concerns and to discuss how these could be addressed. Instead, the head of the unit in the agency sent a very formal letter, some two months after the report had been submitted, stating that it was unacceptable, while providing just a vague indication of what was wrong with it. A similar scenario occurred after submission of the final report. There was never any meaningful communication throughout the process, and thus it is hardly surprising that the evaluation did not appear to address the needs of the client.

This vignette illustrates, by default, the importance of good communication and how things can go wrong in its absence. From my own experience, a key factor to the success of an evaluation is a no-surprises approach, with ongoing communication between the evaluation manager and consultant, both informal and formal. This is a key tenet of a utilization-focused approach (e.g., Patton, 2008). Such contact can help in clarifying expectations, making sure that things are going in the right direction, and agreeing upon changes to the work plan or methods while it is still possible to do so. This can also help the project manager to be au courant with the inevitable nuances and trade-offs that are a part of any evaluation activity. Perhaps more importantly, this close interchange can help facilitate a collaborative and collegial, rather than an adversarial, approach between the external evaluator and internal project manager that

invariably leads to synergies, cooperation, maximizing institutional knowledge, and greater relevance and use.

VIGNETTE 2

The procurement office in a large government department indicated that although the consulting team could begin work on the evaluation pending (the prolonged) preparation of the contract that was under way, no contact was permitted between the project manager and consultant except with respect to logistical matters. In another evaluation in the same organization, a consulting team was required to undertake a week-long mission without being able to discuss with the client beforehand the expectations for this field trip and how its value could be maximized. In another case, contact was not permitted until just about the time that the inception (design) report was submitted—which then was not accepted, requiring considerably more work for everyone and an extension of time with an increase in the budget to complete the evaluation.

Perhaps the situation above represents an extreme case. But it is related to a common practice wherein any contact of potential bidders with evaluation and program staff is forbidden once the Call for Proposals has been released. This is often justified on the grounds of fairness, although in reality it can do exactly the opposite.² This approach rarely helps in getting the evaluation off to a good start.

The lesson learned from Vignette 2 is the importance of good and ongoing communication. This is particularly important at the beginning of an assignment: to clarify purpose and expectations, to ensure that the evaluation is addressing the right questions, and to ensure that the right people are involved or consulted. In my experience, terms of reference (TOR), by themselves, rarely can do this. Often some of the most significant issues underlying an evaluation are not explicit in a TOR. And in most cases it is appropriate in the design or inception phase to identify some modifications to the original TOR. Similarly, a formal written proposal is one, but not the only nor necessarily the best, indicator of how well the evaluation will eventually be carried out. A key competency of a good evaluator is being able to ask good, probing questions—and being a good listener. The questions asked by potential contractors, and how responses are incorporated into a proposal, often can tell far more about how they will approach the evaluation in practice than a formal proposal or presentation.³

Perhaps one might think that bureaucratic requirements such as these are beyond the control of the evaluation manager. But all bureaucracies have their own ways of working, and an important role of an evaluation manager is to know these, and how to work around them. Very frequently, “rules” may be open to considerable interpretation, even within the same organization and sometimes by the same procurement officer. When I worked as a project manager, I developed a personal relationship with the procurement officer, checking in advance about any potential procedural concerns and how these could be addressed to minimize any delays or other problems. In many cases, such as with respect to the delays in issuing contracts, the solution might be to build this into the critical path and to initiate the evaluation planning and contracting process earlier. A common complaint of many evaluation consultants is that the time required by “the system” to launch the evaluation has been underestimated—yet nevertheless the evaluation consultant is still expected to carry out the evaluation in a shorter period of time than initially envisioned in order to meet the original expected completion date.

VIGNETTE 3

In a recent review of the quality of evaluations commissioned by the evaluation department of a large organization, I identified situations where managers of programs that were evaluated used Track Changes or other means to attempt to rewrite reports, or otherwise attempt to soften or remove findings and conclusions that they did not welcome. On a number of occasions, “steering” committees over-extended their role from providing strategic guidance to “suggesting” what evaluation reports should say. I have found similar situations arising in many other organizations situated in different parts of the world. Few experienced evaluators have managed to avoid being put in a position where they were “requested” to modify findings and conclusions. Such situations represent, at best, inappropriate attempts of interference with the integrity of an evaluation.

Nevertheless, it is fully appropriate, as is normal practice, for evaluators to submit drafts of reports for comment and feedback. This represents good practice and a way of enhancing the quality and usefulness of the evaluation. It is rare for even the most competent of evaluators to get every detail right the first time. Sometimes it is a matter of fact checking; in other cases, of providing editorial guidance to improve readability as well as quality control. How an evaluation report is positioned, and how its findings and conclusions are

presented, often can make the difference between outright rejection and acceptance and use.

It is also appropriate, and generally adds to the quality and likely use of an evaluation, to engage stakeholders in the evaluation process, in particular those who may be in a position to act upon the implications of the evaluation. This is recognized as an important step to maximize the relevance of evaluation activities, to aid in buy-in and subsequent action. This can help facilitate a constructive rather than a defensive reaction to evaluation, even in the case of challenging findings (e.g., Patton, 2008). I have found from my own experience that it can be helpful to involve stakeholders in discussion of the interpretation of findings and *potential* recommendations. Engagement such as this can be invaluable in helping an evaluation provide information that is most likely to be viewed as credible and can result in actual use.

But what form of “comment” from stakeholders represents appropriate feedback or quality control, and when does this represent instead inappropriate interference with the integrity and independence of the evaluation? As this vignette suggests, there can be a fine line separating appropriate feedback and quality control from interference. An important role of an evaluation manager is to protect the integrity of the evaluation and to make it very clear to all stakeholders, right from the beginning, that while feedback and comment are welcome, final authority for how the evaluation is done and what its report says must rest with the evaluator. But in many organizations, signoff of some form is required from the program area.

There are various ways in which some organizations act to minimize this danger. One way is to be very specific about the authority of reference groups, program managers, and other stakeholders and the processes through which they can provide feedback. Some organizations provide a format for comments on drafts, differentiating between factual errors that the evaluator should address, and other comments, such as with respect to interpretation, that the evaluator can take under advisement. It is often best to distribute drafts in PDF format, to discourage attempts at rewriting. An independent quality assurance review can sometimes help provide protection for the integrity of the evaluation, as well as a check on its quality. Nevertheless, evaluation frequently does take place in a political context, and it is naïve to pretend otherwise or to ignore this in how evaluation findings are presented. To the extent possible, the role of

the evaluation manager responsible for overseeing the integrity of the evaluation should be separated from that of the client or program area whose work is being evaluated.

On the other hand, in some organizations I have witnessed a contrasting problem where to protect their “independence,” evaluators refuse to engage appropriately with stakeholders. This invariably leads to an adversarial situation where evaluations are resisted and where action is less likely to take place (e.g., Patton 2008). In these cases, independence should not mean isolation (e.g., Picciotto & Feinstein, 2005). But this is not always fully appreciated.

Involvement of stakeholders need not compromise the integrity or independence of the evaluation, provided that it is well managed. Indeed, this has many advantages. Managing the process places a premium on the communication skills, and on the integrity and authority, of the evaluation manager. Rejection of evaluation findings and inappropriate requests for changes can be minimized through appropriate communications and interaction during the course of the evaluation, and in particular when there may be some challenging findings emerging. This is illustrated in my final vignette.

VIGNETTE 4

When an evaluation was coming up with some challenging findings, the evaluation team attempted to organize a workshop to give stakeholders within the organization an opportunity to validate the findings, to discuss what was behind these, and to identify some ways in which the challenges identified could be addressed. However, the manager responsible for this particular program (who kept on referring to the evaluation as an “audit”) was resistant to this, and the evaluation manager did not assert his authority and acquiesced. The result was resistance to the ultimate evaluation report and attempts to discredit its findings and recommendations.

Contrast this situation to another, equally challenging, evaluation in the same organization (indeed, of a related program in the same unit). In this case, it was possible to arrange a day-long workshop involving senior managers across the organization. This workshop, which took an appreciative inquiry approach (e.g., see Preskill & Catsambas, 2006), generated lots of energy and also validation of the weaknesses as well as strong points identified by the evaluation. It also resulted in conclusions and potential future action steps that

the evaluator team was able to incorporate in its own report. This in turn contributed to the acceptance of the evaluation report, challenging findings included, with follow-up action on its conclusions and recommendations.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

The examples referred to above, all highlighting in various ways how effective communications can make or break the success and use of evaluation, are consistent with my own experience in other contexts as well as with the literature. Engagement with key stakeholders is increasingly recognized as a factor important for evaluation credibility and use, and this represents a vital evaluator competency (e.g., Perrin, 2005; Stevahn, King, Ghere, & Minnema, 2005; Zorzi, McGuire, & Perrin, 2002). In contrast, situations where there is insufficient contact and engagement of stakeholders frequently results in an adversarial situation, misunderstandings, often irrelevant approaches to evaluation, and resistance throughout the evaluation to its findings and conclusions.

The above vignettes represent different forms of communication, at different levels, and with different groups. What is common in all these situations, however, is the evaluation manager. Most of the communication issues that have arisen, in a variety of different organizational contexts, have resulted mainly from how the evaluation process was managed. From my experience, the role of the evaluation manager is not well appreciated. There is frequently a tendency to blame the evaluator for a less-than-perfect evaluation process or outcome. While sometimes this may be appropriate, it is often forgotten that it is the project manager who is responsible for designing the evaluation process in the first place, for selecting and guiding the evaluation consultant, and for making sure that key stakeholders are appropriately involved. What emerges strongly from various reviews of evaluations and evaluation organizations I have undertaken, and only hinted at in the above vignettes, is that where communication and other issues arise, this is most often a reflection of an evaluation process that has not been well managed, often reflecting systemic organizational considerations.

Management of the evaluation process, and of evaluation consultants, is often taken for granted. Indeed, a senior evaluation manager in one organization I was recently involved with—one constantly complaining about the need to rewrite what they considered sub-

standard reports submitted by consultants—described the process of managing the evaluation and working with consultants as “common sense.” One might observe that true “common sense” would suggest that when a problem such as this is repeated, a systemic management issue is at play. Often managers of evaluation are inexperienced, both in project management and in evaluation. The result too often is inappropriate management of the evaluation process, with overreliance on checklists and mechanistic application of “internationally accepted standards” that frequently lead to irrelevance and other issues such as illustrated in the above vignettes.

There is increasing attention internationally to standards and competencies required by practicing evaluators (e.g., Russon & Russon, 2005). On the positive side, there is increasing recognition of the importance of “soft skills” such as communications and listening (e.g., Perrin, 2005; Stevahn et al., 2005; Zorzi, McGuire, & Perrin, 2002; Zorzi, Perrin, McGuire, Long & Lee, 2002). Yet there is very little attention in the literature to the competencies required by evaluation *managers*, and about how best to manage the evaluation process (e.g., see Perrin, 2005). Much of the literature that is available is quite old (e.g., Perrin & Boschen, 1991) or published in a volume (e.g., Hawkins, 2003; Lunt, Davidson, & McKegg, 2003) that is little known or readily available internationally.

As I have tried to illustrate in this short article, effective communication is an essential part of a successful evaluation process. And key to this, and to ensuring relevant, high quality, and useful evaluation, is the underappreciated role of the project manager.

NOTES

- 1 A note with respect to terminology: In the examples that follow, “the evaluator” is either an individual or a group external to the organization, although many of the issues identified may also apply to internal evaluators. “Evaluation (or project) manager” refers to whoever is responsible for selecting and managing the evaluator and the evaluation process. In a large organization, this typically would be a stand-alone evaluation unit of some form. Generally in the context of this article, the client or stakeholder would be the manager or other representative of the program or initiative that is being evaluated or with a particular interest in it. Sometimes, in particular in smaller organizations, the evaluation manager and the client are one and the same.

- 2 For example, there is no rule (or if there is, it is almost impossible to enforce) preventing communication before the official release of the Call for Proposals, and it is quite possible for project staff to discuss this informally with a favoured supplier. While this may appear (or be) nefarious, it can also represent a good way of getting cost-free input into the development of a terms of reference that may save considerable grief down the road.
- 3 Another common, but in my view questionable, approach is to share questions asked by any potential bidder with all others, again with the stated intention of “fairness,” so that everyone has the same information. The practical consequences of this, however, are to discourage probing questions and discussions about the pros and cons of potential approaches to the evaluation, exactly the type of questions that a good evaluator should be asking. An alternative approach, that in my view is more equitable, is to give all potential bidders an opportunity, if they wish, to ask questions in confidence of the evaluation manager, with a commitment to respond as honestly and openly as possible to the questions that are asked.

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