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**EVALUATION-CAPACITY BUILDING:
THE THREE SIDES OF THE COIN**

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Abstract: I share my experience as a Canadian evaluator who is starting out in the field and new to the process of evaluation capacity building. I draw on three metaphors to describe what I believe are abilities of an effective evaluator. The first is an ability to be like playdough—to mould to external requirements. The second is an ability to be like a spider—to build webs or networks based on an understanding of the global context of the intervention. The third is an ability to be like Buddha—to cultivate a Zen-like attitude during stormy times. I illustrate each metaphor with some of my own evaluation experiences. I also discuss the possible disadvantages of each of these abilities.

Résumé : Comme jeune évaluatrice au Canada développant ses compétences, trois grandes métaphores se dégagent de plusieurs expériences. La métaphore de la pâte à modeler où l'évaluateur doit se modeler en fonction des contingences externes, la métaphore de l'araignée où des réseaux doivent être développés pour comprendre la globalité de l'intervention évaluée et la métaphore du Bouddha où une dose considérable de zen et de réflexivité est requise dans les situations tumultueuses. Les avantages et inconvénients liés à ces trois positionnements sont discutés.

■ This article focuses on building evaluation capacity, from the perspective of a young evaluator. It is based on my own personal experiences with evaluation. I will spare the reader long descriptions of the actual evaluation processes in which I have been involved, and instead will structure my presentation around a form of linguistic imagery—metaphors.

Metaphors are tropes that invoke both partial analogies and partial differences between phenomena (Morgan, 1980). The metaphori-

cal transfer operates between a source and a target (Indurkha, 1991): the source is the “object” used to make the comparison (in this case, the image), while the target is the object under comparison (in this case, the evaluation process). The use of metaphors to understand organizational or individual change and behaviour is somewhat controversial (Cleary & Packard, 1992). One researcher notes: “There are no instructions for devising metaphors; there is no manual for determining what a metaphor means ... there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention” (Davidson, 1978, pp. 31, 46). Another acknowledges that metaphors are one-sided (Morgan, 1980), casting light on some characteristics but relegating others to shadow. I agree with Bergman’s assertion that the richness of metaphors and their multiple possible interpretations do not preclude their use, provided the author fixes the context of the metaphor (Bergmann, 1982; Morgan, 1980) and the shared and unshared properties between items (Pinder & Bourgeois, 1982). I have therefore chosen to use metaphors to represent what I see as key abilities required by an evaluator based on my experience with evaluation-capacity building.

This experience includes PhD research, participation in various evaluation processes, and teaching. I was introduced to the field of evaluation through my PhD program. I had the opportunity to conduct research on the theoretical basis of evaluation and to be involved in the practical process of implementing evaluations. I participated in and directed evaluations in a number of different settings—in both developed and developing countries, for both private and public organizations, and as both an internal and an external evaluator. Finally, I have been called upon to transfer the knowledge and experience that I have acquired through teaching.

This process of building my own personal evaluation capacity, along with my experience of the evaluation capacity of other individuals and organizations with whom I have worked, has shown me that the evaluation practitioner needs to possess (at least) three abilities—three ways of being, as it were. The first is an ability to be like playdough, able to adapt (mould) to external requirements. The second is an ability to be like a spider, able to build webs or networks based on an understanding of the global nature of the intervention at stake. The third is an ability to be like Buddha, able to keep a calm, open, and reflexive mind.

WHAT IS REQUIRED? BE LIKE PLAYDOUGH...

Remember playdough, that colourful modeling material that you used to play with? That smelled and even tasted like candy? That you used to fashion little cartoon people and wacky structures? That you moulded and changed and added to as you created? During the evaluation process, sometimes you have to be like playdough. You have to change colours or techniques when designing your data collection methods, or build new characters, even modify existing ones, when designing your evaluation questions.

I recall an experience with program evaluation for a not-for-profit organization whose main concern was impact measurement. The program's regional manager and fund providers were convinced that significant health and social benefits were generated. The other local managers were divided: some felt that the program led only to the target health benefits and that the social impacts were an unexpected side effect, a kind of positive externality (if such impact effects even occur at all). Others felt that the program led chiefly to social benefits. This divergence of opinions resulted in a confused evaluation proposal that centred only on health benefits. I sought clarification and, after several meetings with practitioners, managers, and funders, decided to highlight the divergence of opinions by drawing up a logic model in a participatory way. I included the diversity of opinions on what constituted the program's objectives and what ought to be the focus of evaluation. An obvious fallacy emerged because the activities were unilaterally focused on health issues, with absolutely no evaluation activities targeting social impacts. In the end, the evaluation committee decided to evaluate the program's impact on both health and social integration in the target population. The managers themselves had not seen any reason to rethink their program evaluation, despite the absence of any planning around social impacts, the absence of a logic model that included social-related activities, the absence of any consideration for documenting the attainment of "social" targets, and evidence for their failure to reach the social "target." For me, having to adapt the evaluation process in response to the program managers' requirements was like being playdough myself!

The positive aspect of being like playdough is that you eventually gain more respect. You are seen as an evaluator who is willing to understand and adapt to the given field or intervention. In the above case, such flexibility during the consulting process led to the integration of some indicators that were more pertinent to the reality of the situation.

The disadvantage of being like playdough? You may melt in the process! In the above case, I had to make sure the data collection related to the program's particular spheres of activity—the activities under the direct control of the program versus activities that were independently developed (both health and social related). I also had to integrate social impact measurement as requested by the funder, even though there were no actual social-related activities planned under the program. While being open to moulding, I did in fact “half-melt”: I agreed to assess social aspects but I could not “melt” to the point of attributing the social effects to the project.

WHAT IS REQUIRED? BE LIKE A SPIDER ...

A spider constructs filaments between the levels of its web, extending the existing network outward, making hubs, and creating and reinforcing connections. The silk net follows organized patterns. At times, an evaluation practitioner is much like the spider: knitting nets between actors and stakeholders—between the beneficiaries and the providers, managers and fundraisers, clarifying links, and restoring broken links in the web.

I recall working on organizational capacity-building for a monitoring and performance measurement project. We had to develop a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system to be applied across all departments. We decided on a participatory approach, with the evaluators responsible for providing advice on the process—for example, tools to manage the choice and design of indicators and a quality control checklist. The purpose of the M&E system was to inform both local managers, who provided services to the population, and regional managers, who supported and planned local interventions. Decisions on what dimensions to evaluate were made collaboratively with practitioners, planners, analysts, and evaluators, and were informed by both local and regional needs. As the project extended to other departments, key actors at the local and regional levels in the department had to be consulted and uniformity across departments achieved. This was the first time in years that the organization had organized activities aimed at bringing different departments together around a table, not only to share individual departmental decisions and discuss progress, but also to decide on future actions. This led to the exchange of tools, information, and ideas between departments with different degrees of knowledge and experience of a given aspect of the M&E system.

Being able to reinforce and reinitiate networks is certainly quite an achievement; so too is facilitating the sharing of complementary information between providers and managers. As an evaluator who, on occasion, has had to reimplement networks and build interconnections between units, I can say that the experience engenders a greater understanding of the bigger picture.

The disadvantage of being a spider? To the extent that you favour certain connections and networks over others, you may end up promoting favouritism, creating privileged connections, and fashioning unbalanced networks. Such ethical challenges may arise because of the evaluator's need to access different stakeholders in order to gather data, or because of certain stakeholders exerting pressure on the evaluator to act in a partisan manner. Such situations threaten the neutral position required of the evaluator, not to mention the credibility of findings. When you serve as a hub in a network, you may be asked to go beyond the assigned role of evaluator. When working across several units in an organization, a unit may try to use the evaluator to transmit messages that it does not want to do itself. You may, for example, be asked to transmit messages to upper levels of the hierarchy—a task that is the responsibility of the unit, not the evaluator. Or you may be asked by a particular unit to propose and apply a tool that it has developed, rather than wait and use a common tool approved by top management. The unit is thus able to ensure that its tool is used and that it can move forward quickly as a single unit, without spending time and energy waiting for all units to agree upon the tool collaboratively. I myself have experienced this situation; it forced me to reiterate the role of the evaluator and consider some important ethical issues. I had to be firm and refuse to participate in such internal power struggles. This is an awkward situation for the evaluator: it can be challenging to avoid overstepping the evaluator role, to avoid slipping into a managerial role, and to avoid ending up being a unilateral advocate for one particular unit.

WHAT IS REQUIRED? BE LIKE BUDDHA ...

The Buddha: well-intentioned, trusted, balanced in judgement, inspiring, Zen-like, speaking only clear and helpful words. The evaluator is generally called upon to be nonpartisan with intervention groups, to get to the bottom of the intervention under investigation, to gather different points of view, to triangulate informants and methods, and to be trustworthy enough to inspire confidence in interviewees.

Of the roles that I have been called upon to serve, that of internal evaluator has required the most self-control and reflection. In one particular experience, some of my colleagues had been involved in reengineering an organizational activity across units. The new organizational structure was intended to favour better communication and more efficient use of evidence in decision making. Curious about the benefits of the reorganization, the manager asked me to evaluate it several years after its implementation. While in the process of deciding on an evaluation plan, I ran into the project's developer, a colleague. This person made obvious attempts to obstruct and orient the data collection (for example, suggestions about what individuals to interview). The colleague also exerted pressure on me to divulge the names and opinions of interviewees. This was a colleague with whom I was required to work on other projects, so the situation was very uncomfortable. Any improper decisions or actions would have had serious repercussions on the evaluation, not to mention other current and future collaborations and the teamwork atmosphere. Keeping my "objectivity" in my role as internal evaluator required a considerable amount of self-control, a Zen-like attitude, and significant listening and explanation capacities.

The limitations of being like Buddha? None come to mind. Perhaps being Zen-like could be taxing? Certainly a junior in the field of evaluation may experience more unease in difficult situations than would a more senior evaluator, and these feelings could affect the execution of the evaluation.

CONCLUSION

Evaluation is a demanding field and a demanding practice that needs to be exercised with prudence. Successful evaluation requires a fundamental knowledge of both methodology and context. To understand, practice, and teach evaluation, one needs a sound theoretical base and an ability to consider both micro and macropolitics, and dynamics at the individual, group, organization, and institution levels.

Starting an evaluation is an exciting—and sometimes destabilizing—time in the process. You have to familiarize yourself with the intervention, the human resources and their interactions, and the specificities of the context. And as the evaluation process proceeds, great care in manoeuvring and staying within the role of evaluator is required. I believe that rigour and curiosity are two major ingredients required by the evaluator throughout an evaluation process.

I must say that I have found it wonderfully rewarding being like play-dough, a spider, and Buddha. I hope these metaphors will encourage discussion on how young evaluators perceive themselves, their work, and their progression in the evaluation field.

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