

*RESEARCH AND PRACTICE NOTE / NOTE SUR LA
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THE FIVE CS FOR INNOVATING IN
EVALUATION CAPACITY BUILDING: LESSONS
FROM THE FIELD

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Abstract: Innovation is essential in addressing complex evaluation capacity building (ECB) efforts that include a host of interacting, nonlinear, adaptive, and dynamical individual and organizational level factors. This article highlights five key ingredients in fostering innovation in ECB, based on evaluation capacity building efforts of the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health. For the past 5 years, 87 organizations have participated in an integrated ECB program combining funding, training, and coaching support. The five key ingredients to fostering innovation in ECB are curiosity, courage, communication, commitment, and connection.

Résumé : L'innovation est essentielle pour aborder les efforts complexes de renforcement et de développement des capacités d'évaluation (RCÉ) qui comprennent une gamme de facteurs uniques et organisationnels en interaction, facteurs non linéaires, adaptables, et dynamiques. Cet article présente cinq ingrédients clés pour favoriser l'innovation dans le RCÉ basés sur les efforts de renforcement des capacités d'évaluation du Centre de l'excellence de l'Ontario en santé mentale des enfants et des adolescents. Depuis 5 ans, 87 organisations ont participé à un programme RCÉ associant le financement, la formation, et les services d'accompagnement. Les cinq principaux ingrédients pour favoriser l'innovation dans le RCÉ sont la curiosité, le courage, la communication, l'engagement, et la connexion.

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Evaluation capacity building (ECB) refers to guided processes and activities that build and enhance an organization's ongoing capacity to do and use evaluation (Stockdill, Baizerman, & Compton, 2002). A recent synthesis of the literature on evaluation capacity building highlights individual and organizational factors influencing outcomes (Labin, Duffy, Meyers, Wandersman, & Lesesne, 2012). For example, various ECB frameworks indicate that enhancing evaluation knowledge and skills among staff is insufficient to build and sustain evaluation capacity, and requires efforts directed at the organizational level, such as a learning culture and leadership (Bourgeois & Cousins, 2013; Preskill & Boyle, 2008; Taylor-Ritzler, Suarez-Balcazar, Garcia-Uriarte, Henry, & Balcazar, 2013). ECB efforts can vary due to a wide range of programs within an organization; staff with varying knowledge, skills, and attitudes; limited financial resources and demanding funding environments; and evolving information and outcome measurement systems, to name a few contextual drivers.

Having a broad range of nonlinear, adaptive, and dynamical relationships among factors puts ECB beyond the simple or complicated zones and into the complex zone (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Patton (2010b) describes complexity as involving "nonlinearity (small actions can produce large reactions), emergence (patterns emerge from self-organization among interacting agents), and dynamic adaptations (interacting elements and agents respond and adapt to each other." For complex programs, traditional evaluation practices do not adequately capture various systems at play (Eoyang, 2007; Preskill & Beer, 2012). Instead, innovative approaches that respond to rapid, adaptive, and emergent conditions are needed (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2006; Zimmerman et al., 2011).

Innovation is defined as "a new idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption" (Rogers, 2003, p. 12). In this article, we share experiences on how we have fostered new ideas, practices, and processes in our evaluation capacity building efforts with agencies in Ontario that provide mental health services to children, youth, and their families. Innovation in ECB is presented through five themes (or "Cs"): curiosity, courage, communication, commitment, and connection. Examples in these five themes or ingredients show how innovative approaches can address the complexities in ECB efforts.

Since 2008 the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (the Centre) has been working to build and enhance the evaluation capacity of agencies providing child and youth mental health programs (Danseco, Sundar, et al., 2009). Features of the program and its ongoing development are described in this article to illustrate the five Cs of innovation in evaluation capacity building efforts. More information on this program is available from the author and from the Centre's website (<http://www.excellenceforchildandyouth.ca>).

CURIOSITY

The first ingredient in innovating in ECB is curiosity or an openness to learning and growing. Without curiosity, evaluation findings can be foregone conclusions and ECB efforts will not fully undergo continuous improvements. Openness to learning includes using evaluation findings, listening to stakeholders, and learning from one's mistakes. Curiosity and openness to learning is important at the individual and organizational levels.

At the Centre, fostering organizational learning in our stakeholders is our first strategic goal, as we believe it is essential to being able to adapt and thrive in an increasingly complex environment. We work with community-based agencies to implement and evaluate evidence-informed practices; an organizational learning approach facilitates their long-term capacity to meet today's continually evolving knowledge base and stakeholder needs (Preskill & Torres, 1999). We share and use the ECB and organizational learning framework by Preskill and Boyle (2008), which highlights strategies and areas of focus for our work. An organizational learning approach provides a policy that agencies can adopt to sustain their evaluation as well as being useful for our own staff learning on ECB.

We have purposefully adopted the term evidence-informed practice to include the importance of context when putting research into practice (Lomas, Culyer, McCutcheon, McAuley, & Law, 2005). Evaluation findings that situate research into the real world setting are a source of evidence in working toward improved outcomes (Wandersman, 2009). We also strive as an organization to lead by example and work toward having an organizational culture with staff engagement, ongoing professional development, and active use of evaluation.

In 2007, an internal review of evaluation grants from 2005 to 2006 showed sporadic and limited evaluation capacity among recipients. We then developed and presented a proposal on an evaluation capacity building program to our senior leadership. We envisioned it as a phased approach so that agencies that did not have an evaluation framework would have the opportunity to learn by doing; for those that did have a framework we offered another path for the actual conducting of the evaluation. In contrast to the previous evaluation grants that provided only funding, the proposed ECB program had an integrated approach that included funding, training, and coaching for one to a maximum of four years, recognizing that it can take up to four years for an innovation to take hold in an organization (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005).

With staff and senior leaders being curious about ECB, our stakeholders being open to learn, and using evaluation findings, we were thus able to innovate. We developed (and continue to revise) our own theory of change, designed indicators and measures for our evaluation capacity building efforts, and use the feedback to continually improve our activities. Each year, there are new processes that we embark on to be able to respond to the needs of our stakeholders.

COURAGE

A second ingredient in innovating in ECB is courage in dealing with uncertainty. Complex situations by definition are unpredictable and have a high degree of uncertainty. What works for one organization or community may not necessarily work for another. Moreover, the systems influencing an organization's efforts to enhance or sustain its evaluation capacity can fluctuate with a single event such as the departure of a long-serving senior manager or an unforeseen critical incident (e.g., a youth suicide that can make agencies shift program resources from evaluation). ECB efforts require courage to try out new solutions, especially nonformulaic approaches; such courage includes a high tolerance for ambiguity, particularly when outcomes are unknown, and a willingness to take risks (Gandz, Crossan, Sejits, & Reno, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2011).

We asked ourselves back in 2008: Now that we've built this program, will they come? We did not know if our agencies would be willing to participate in our ECB efforts, if they found the funding amounts too limited, or if they found the training activities too onerous. We also tried out new technologies such as webinars and online learning

modules as efficient and cost-effective methods to providing training on evaluation when these were just emerging in 2008.

Up to today, we have worked with 87 agencies across Ontario in building and enhancing their evaluation capacity. Each agency and each evaluation is unique; we needed our ECB activities and parameters for deliverables to be flexible to be responsive to our stakeholders' needs. Such flexibility reflected a tolerance for ambiguity, rather than the employment of stricter controls and the simplification of program components, which is a response appropriate for simple or complicated situations (Snowden & Boone, 2007).

As Ontario undergoes a transition in the child and youth mental health system in the near future (Government of Ontario, 2012, 2013), many agencies across Ontario will be experiencing change due to government funding requirements, yet are not certain on what these changes might entail for service delivery, staffing, or governance. Centre programs and services, including our ECB program, need to be poised for change and adaptation so that we can continue to meet our stakeholders' needs. Typical of complex situations, our ECB program will not just have to improve but will also need to significantly shift in activities and processes (Patton, 2010a).

COMMUNICATION

A third ingredient is clarity in communicating the innovation using multiple strategies and formats. Communication of the innovation includes articulating the idea or new practices to senior managers, program staff, and stakeholders. Documentation plays an important role for capturing historical information and organizational memory, as well as keeping staff on the same page in real time. Communication is an ongoing activity and helps ensure shared goals and clear understanding of the innovation.

For our ECB activities, we use project management software (SmartSimple software: <http://www.smartsimple.com>) that contains several databases that capture information on the funding and application process, our consultations or coaching activities with stakeholders, and monitoring and evaluation activities. Each program consultant working with an agency is able to document their activities and contacts with the agency, with an opportunity to see agency involvement in other Centre programs and services. We are able to attach the evaluation documents of the projects we are working on, and we can

produce a summary snapshot of the agencies we are working with. We also use this database for our internal evaluation and the broader performance measurement scorecard of our Centre (Danseco & McGee, 2011a, 2011b; McGee, Danseco, Fergusson, & Sundar, 2012). To complement the documentation, we conduct weekly meetings focused on discussing the evaluation projects each consultant is assigned, to enhance internal communication and for peer support and group problem-solving on particular issues. At the end of an ECB cycle, results from the annual exit surveys from participating agencies (with initial feedback from agency project leads) are communicated to all Centre staff for further reflection and identification of improvements to our ECB efforts.

COMMITMENT

The fourth ingredient is commitment to carry the innovation from idea to fruition. Commitment involves the discipline required to put in the “10,000” hours (Gladwell, 2008) and to build staff and organizational expertise for evaluation in a range of programs and contexts. Innovation is more than just a singular eureka moment; it is a process that involves hard work, working steady and working for the long-term. The vision or specific activities may not be fully developed or articulated, so the process of working and communicating in a team approach further clarifies the common goals and the shared vision. A team with committed, competent staff and complementary skills is helpful in carrying out the innovative idea.

Developing innovative tools and resources for our ECB program required commitment and shared vision in meeting our stakeholder needs. The team regularly meets to discuss issues, build on each other’s strengths, and learn from each other. Through the team’s commitment and ongoing innovation, we have been able to build many tools and resources on evaluation (available for free at our website) such as webinars, a toolkit with worksheets, and a measures database. We have online learning modules on planning, doing, and using evaluation (Sundar, Kasprzak, Halsall, & Woltman, 2010), with new modules added each year to this online library. We have methods mini-kits that provide brief synopsis of methods such as focus groups, interviews, or surveys. We developed a readiness assessment for evaluation (Danseco, Halsall, & Kasprzak, 2009) and have recently revamped this so that agencies can do an ongoing assessment of their evaluation capacity that is more integrated to our theory of change (Danseco, 2013).

CONNECTION

The fifth ingredient in innovating in ECB is to connect, since innovation is seldom an individual process (Abele, 2011). Connection refers to engaging and collaborating with stakeholders, relating with fellow evaluators and interacting with team members to flesh out the innovation. As evaluators we know that we need to engage our stakeholders so that there is buy-in for evaluation. Conferences, learning circles, or “lunch-and-learn” events are important in learning from each other and knowing we are not alone in our evaluation work (e.g., Kishchuk, Gauthier, Roy, & Borys, 2013). An innovative idea will not be adopted if it remains within the control of a single person. While a leader is important in keeping focused on the vision for the innovation, connection in the innovation context involves a group process that engages staff and stakeholders to provide meaningful input and, more importantly, co-create the innovation.

At our Centre, we value the input of our stakeholders, who are integral to the development of our materials, resources, and processes. For example, in 2011 we convened a working group to review our evaluation capacity building activities and asked them to provide feedback on what is working and not working, and provide suggestions for improvements or additional activities to better respond to their needs in enhancing or sustaining evaluation. When we develop our tools and resources, we seek input from our stakeholders during their development, implementation, and evaluation.

In addition, youth and family engagement are core Centre programs, together with our evaluation capacity and implementation capacity building efforts. We are constantly finding ways to integrate youth and family engagement in the evaluation frameworks and activities among agencies participating in our ECB efforts. For example, we recommend that project leads obtain feedback from youth or families on their evaluation frameworks, and that feedback from youth and families on preliminary findings be obtained and integrated into action plans or recommendations.

In summary, evaluation capacity building is complex and requires innovative approaches to adequately respond to emergent, rapid, and adaptive demands. Through our experiences at the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health in developing and implementing our ECB program in over 80 agencies in Ontario, we highlighted five key ingredients in fostering innovation in ECB: cu-

riosity, courage, communication, commitment, and connection. These elements reflect shifts in our approach from working in a simple or complicated context that utilizes a formulaic approach, to one that is innovative and adaptive to the emerging and changing needs of interacting systems. These key ingredients are interrelated rather than part of a linear process. As we know from systems theory, developmental evaluation, and the evaluation of social innovations, it is relationships and patterns from relationships rather than causal chains that best capture complexity (Eoyang, 2007; Patton, 2010a; Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2006; Wheatley, 2006; Zimmerman et al., 2011).

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