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A PARTICIPATORY MODEL FOR EVALUATING SOCIAL PROGRAMS

written by

Yehekel 'Zeke' Hasenfeld

Katherine Hill

Dale Weaver

THE JAMES IRVINE FOUNDATION

Foreword

The James Irvine Foundation believes in the importance of evaluation as a tool to help improve the work of nonprofit organizations. This publication reflects that commitment.

Written by a team from UCLA's School of Public Policy and Social Research, the report describes a unique approach to evaluation that is gaining momentum in the nonprofit sector. The team's leader, professor and professional evaluator Dr. Yehekel "Zeke" Hasenfeld, calls the approach "participatory," because it emphasizes client participation in every aspect of the evaluation process. The idea makes sense: by including the client organization in the design and implementation of an evaluation, there is a better chance that the organization will be committed to and use the evaluation results.

With rising interest in building grantee capacity and increasing nonprofit effectiveness, foundations are looking to evaluation for purposes of accountability and to support the broader purpose of organizational learning and improvement. This continues to be a primary goal of evaluation activity at the Irvine Foundation, and we are proud to support this research and share it with the field.

Part case study and part instruction guide, this report is intended for use by nonprofits, foundations, and professional evaluators alike. We hope you find it useful, and we welcome your thoughts.

Marty Campbell
Director of Evaluation

A PARTICIPATORY MODEL FOR EVALUATING SOCIAL PROGRAMS

There is little dispute that social programs **should** be evaluated.

There is less agreement about **how** to evaluate them.¹

Any evaluation involves many challenges. First, programs often involve multiple stakeholder groups, which can range from policy makers to direct service recipients. *How does the evaluation remain relevant and useful to these different groups?* Second, social programs operate in a socially, economically, and politically dynamic environment. *How can the evaluation be sensitive and responsive to these changes?* Third, there are inevitably differences between the program as it was originally designed and the program as it actually operates. These differences arise because of resource constraints, unanticipated complexities related to the participants' attributes, uncertainties about the service technology, and unexpected organizational and staffing difficulties. *How can the evaluation be attuned to the actual workings of the program?* These questions are about more than the technical aspects of the evaluation, such as data collection and analysis. The issue at hand is much broader—it is about how the evaluation is carried out, how it affects the program, and what roles the evaluators assume.

We present here a participatory model of evaluation that responds to the distinct challenges of evaluating social programs and promotes evaluation as a means for organizational learning. In developing the model, we have drawn on our experiences as evaluators while benefiting from the burgeoning body of literature on this type of approach. To illustrate the model, we present examples from two programs that we evaluated.² Challenge is a medium-sized employment services program for homeless men and women. STEPS is a large, multi-service organization specializing in education, training, and employment for persons with multiple employment barriers.

¹ By “social program,” we mean an organized set of intervention strategies designed to bring about some prescribed changes or outcomes in a defined target population.

² To maintain the anonymity and protect the confidentiality of the staff and participants in these programs we have given them fictitious names.

The Participatory Evaluation Model: Twelve Principles

The participatory model of evaluation can be summarized in the following twelve principles:

1. In an evaluation, there are often multiple stakeholders with multiple objectives. The views and interests of all stakeholders should be articulated, understood, and taken into account.
2. In response to both external and internal pressures, programs are always changing. Evaluators should understand these changes and incorporate them into the evaluation.
3. Rather than taking a program's design as given, evaluators should focus on the actual service delivery system as it is enacted by line staff and experienced by participants.
4. Evaluators should draw on the whole range of research methods available, using different methodologies when appropriate to the evaluation.
5. Evaluators should not merely be neutral recorders of program processes and outcomes. They should be catalysts for organizational change by providing regular feedback, facilitating discussions of their findings, and offering alternative solutions to issues raised by their findings.
6. Evaluators should partner with program managers and front-line staff and involve them in the evaluation design and implementation.
7. Involving program managers, front-line staff, and participants in the evaluation can foster a "learning organization," in which staff continue to evaluate their performance after the evaluators leave.
8. Development and refinement of the MIS system is crucial to the evaluation, and provides key learning opportunities for program managers.
9. The trust established and nurtured between the evaluators and all stakeholders is for the working relationships that are critical for a successful evaluation.
10. Protecting the rights and respecting the dignity of everyone involved, especially through confidentiality, is essential to establishing and maintaining trust.

11. Whether formal or informal, frequent information sharing sessions among evaluation participants are central to success and often provide direction for program improvement.
12. In addition to their expertise in research methodologies, evaluators should be experienced in facilitating program changes. They should also have the sensitivity and skill to develop and maintain trusting relationships with a range of stakeholders in an ever-changing program.

Assessing Effectiveness, Stimulating Change

Program evaluation is important not only because it informs decision makers about whether the program is successful, but also because it is a major tool for learning. Evaluation can identify ways to improve the quality of the program, structure it more effectively, and make it more responsive to the needs of its users. As such, it can also be a catalyst for program innovation. However, by focusing mostly on measuring program outcomes, standard models of evaluation limit evaluation's contribution to organizational learning and program change. In simplified terms, standard evaluation models:

- Assume that there are clearly defined and measurable program outcomes, and that once the program is in place, its attributes and especially its intervention strategies remain stable;
- Generally fail to open the program's "black box," by which we mean the substance and form of the interactions between staff and participants through which the services and intervention strategies are administered; and
- Expect the evaluators to distance themselves from the program, to limit their interactions with staff and participants to the data collection only, and to minimize exchanges with program managers and operators about the management or practices of the program.

The participatory model is based on a different vision of the purpose and conduct of program evaluation. While participatory evaluators remain fully committed to accurate, objective, and impartial accounting of the program's operations and effects, they also use these findings, when appropriate, to stimulate program changes, innovation, and organizational learning. The success of the participatory model requires that evaluators accept the goals and objectives of the program while the program stakeholders accept the principles guiding the evaluation. As such, the model is particularly apt for new and emerging social programs that are eager to improve their services and willing to change. It is less useful for established and highly routinized programs. Such programs are typically more resistant to change and are less likely to accept the approach envisioned by participatory evaluation. In this case, a standard model may be more effective.

The participatory model provides an opportunity for critical self-assessment, which can be used to improve the program. It is the level of commitment to self-assessment and program improvement, therefore, that determines the success of the evaluation.

Early in the Challenge evaluation, case managers were observed and interviewed. As they began to reflect on their role and the issues they faced, they shared their thoughts with their supervisors. Together they began to identify skills and information they felt they lacked; deficits that made it hard for them to do their jobs as well as they felt they should. Using feedback from the evaluators and their own careful assessments, Challenge embarked on a series of staff development workshops to enhance the case managers' skills and knowledge.

In the participatory model, the evaluation is not seen as something totally external to the program, but rather as a complement to the program's on-going planning, design, and implementation. The evaluators become immersed in the program, acquiring in-depth understanding of how the program is administered, how its services are delivered, and how the participants experience the program. Their role is expanded to include a carefully prescribed change agent function. Throughout the evaluation, the evaluators provide feedback about issues that they believe affect the success of the program and thus warrant an organizational response.

Through the evaluation process, the evaluators provide program staff with the tools and experience they need to engage in an on-going learning process – one that hopefully will continue after the evaluation ends. These tools may include an improved information system for tracking participants and program activities, experience in analyzing data, expertise in conducting focus groups, and methods of engaging staff, at various levels, in regular self-assessment and program development discussions. By using the evaluation as a springboard for meaningful program innovation and change, and for establishing a self-learning culture, staff are much more likely to cooperate with the evaluators, sharing information and insights that improve the quality and usefulness of the evaluation.

At Challenge, the program managers used the evaluation process as a vehicle for self-study and program redesign. Feedback sessions with the evaluators led to extensive staff discussions about the implications of the information presented to them for improving the program. Meetings where the evaluators reported their findings routinely became occasions for the staff to review the purpose of these components, discuss ways of improving one or another of them, and think about strategies for enhancing their articulation. Initially, these discussions were rather freewheeling and diffuse. Over time, with some help from the evaluators, staff were more easily able to focus specifically on strategies for enhancing the overall effectiveness of the program.

Programs in the real world change rapidly and continually. In the course of the evaluation, the evaluators are likely to encounter important developments that impact its operation. These may include changes in the population being served, alterations in the service delivery process, elimination or addition of service components, and changes in policies that affect funding, participant eligibility, or outcome measures. The evaluators need to track these developments, taking them into account in their on-going data collection and analysis. They have to ensure that they will be able to measure, as best as they can, the effects of these developments and provide timely feedback on their effects.

At STEPS, there was a dramatic shift from serving recipients with disabilities to serving monolingual Spanish speakers. This shift resulted in important program angles, including assigning these recipients to worksites where mostly Spanish was spoken. These sites turned out to be ones where a very limited range of work skills could be acquired. The evaluators would have not been able to explain why monolingual Spanish speaking recipients were less likely to show improvement in earnings after graduating from the program if they had not recognized this change. Nor would they have been able to point out the importance of expanding the work experience options for these recipients, many of whom already had prior unskilled work experience.

Methodological Features of a Participatory Evaluation Model

The participatory evaluation model relies on the same tool kit of research strategies and data collection and analysis techniques as a standard model. However, it places special emphasis on selected techniques and strategies.

Multiple outcome measures

Recognizing that programs involve various stakeholders, evaluators need to identify multiple outcome measures that reflect the diversity of interests. Outcome measures identified by the sponsors of the program represent only one perspective, and evaluators should attempt to identify the expectations of other significant program stakeholders. These expectations can then be translated into outcome measures.

At STEPS, multiple outcome measures were used including the percentage of recipients employed, changes in earned income, increases in hourly wages, and improvements in job skills. Although in this evaluation there was considerable overlap among the stakeholders' interests, it was clear that the recipients were especially concerned about the work experiences they would be having while in the program. Consequently, in addition to asking them to rate the degree to which participation in various program components helped them get jobs and improve their wages (a key interest of the staff), they were also asked to rate the work experience they obtained in the program. As it turned out, these ratings were instrumental in pointing out that certain work sites were less effective than others in improving job skills.

Opening the “black box”

The participatory model always gives primacy to the program's actual service delivery system. A thorough understanding of the experiences of participants as they go through the program is therefore crucial. To conduct this type of analysis, the evaluators follow the participants from the moment they are contacted, selected, and enrolled in the program. They chart the trajectories of participants with different attributes as they go through the program. They identify key junctures in which decisions are made about the participants and the services they receive. The evaluators try to understand how and why such decisions are made. They record both the modal patterns of staff behavior as well as the responses of the participants to each service component and at each key juncture.

Multiple data-collection methods

The need to address multiple outcome measures and to open the “black box” of program services requires the use of multiple data-collection methods. Much of the data collection inside the black box involves participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews with line staff and participants, and retrieval of information from case records. Evaluators need to use multiple data sources to map out and validate the service delivery process and the resulting participant trajectories. These maps are always shared with the staff both for their own self-assessment and reflection, and to ensure that important service elements were not overlooked.

As in all research, it is important to work with a representative sample of the people involved in the program in order to get an accurate impression of how the program really works. When it is not feasible to develop a random sample of staff or participants, specially in small programs, evaluators should take care to include staff members and participants from all key components of the program.

At STEPS, the evaluators spent considerable time charting the service delivery process by following the participants from their point of entry into the program through their assignment to various service components. At each important decision juncture, the evaluators observed the interaction between staff and participants and interviewed the staff about how they made their service decisions. They also interviewed the participants and observed them in each program component, such as work experience or ESL class. When the evaluators felt they had a good understanding of the service delivery process, they charted it and presented it to the staff. The staff's feedback was especially valuable in correcting and clarifying several service decision junctions and the rules used to make these decisions – including why monolingual Spanish speakers were assigned to worksites requiring minimal job skills.

To reiterate, capturing the actual experiences of participants and staff is one of the major tasks of a participatory evaluation. It can be accomplished through several data gathering techniques.

Direct observation: Social programs are often justified by publicly acclaimed values and belief systems. Staff members embrace these values and beliefs, referring to them when asked to describe and explain their service decisions and actions. However, these descriptions and explanations may not provide a complete representation of their actions when they interact with their participants. Therefore, evaluators must observe every major service component and record the behavior and interactions of participants and staff. This data collection method produces rich and detailed information that other techniques cannot provide.

Focus groups: While informal dialogues with participants occur throughout the evaluation, focus groups are a valuable method for eliciting their experiences. Depending on the relations among program staff, focus groups with staff may prove less useful. Staff may be more reluctant to express their views and concerns in a group context. This is especially true when the program experiences high personnel turnover or other internal tensions. However, when similarly positioned staff members are able to participate comfortably in focus group, evaluators may gain valuable information and insight.

Longitudinal participant surveys: Participant surveys administered at point of entry and repeated after they have completed the program are invaluable for obtaining important measures of program outcomes. It is important to include in these surveys participants who failed to complete or dropped out of the program. These data also help identify participant attributes associated with different outcomes. Programs may be more or less effective with certain cohorts of participants, and this information is particularly important to the success of any program redesign efforts.

Staff interviews: Structured interviews with front-line staff remain a primary method of collecting data on their attitudes and beliefs about their participants, their understandings of the goals and content of their work, and perspectives on their own morale and job satisfaction. These interviews may be repeated over the course of the evaluation to gain additional insight into the program's evolution.

Assessing the Information System

Every social program is expected, and is often required by its sponsors, to develop an information system that keeps track of its participants and services. Nonetheless, our experience has shown that most social programs struggle to develop and maintain an adequate management information system (MIS)—a system that accurately records relevant attributes of the participants being served and the services they receive while providing for timely retrievals of the data for monitoring and analysis. Even when the program has an operating MIS, data collection is often geared toward meeting funding requirements rather than toward monitoring and evaluation of the program. Indeed, even under the best of circumstances, program managers and staff seldom use the data

for self-assessment, analysis, and self-learning. The multiple functions of participatory evaluation—assessing the effectiveness of the program, serving as a catalyst for organizational innovation and change, and promoting organizational self-learning—require that the evaluator ensure that the data collection is aligned with the evaluation goals.

In an early review of the MIS at Challenge, the evaluators noted that the case managers used a rather haphazard mixture of manual and computerized record keeping to track their initial and on-going work with participants. In effect, this meant that they could not easily access all the information they needed about individual participants or their caseloads as a whole. Furthermore, they entered information about employment and job retention into a separate database. Because the data entered into these databases were often also incomplete, partial, and sometimes redundant, it was not surprising that many of their statistics about their participants' attributes and their employment and retention rates were inaccurate. While staff recognized the inadequacies of their system, they were overwhelmed by the prospect of making a major change. The evaluators were able to work with them to develop a step-by-step plan for improving their data collection procedures; a plan that they felt they would be able begin implementing immediately.

One of the first phases in the evaluation is a detailed review of the program's MIS. The review identifies what and how data are collected, how reliable and valid the data are, and how are they stored and retrieved. The assessment also enables evaluators to ascertain how much of the data required by the evaluation can be provided by the existing MIS.

This review is done jointly with program managers and staff in order to understand their experiences with the MIS and to learn about their information needs. This process is an important learning opportunity. The evaluators can demonstrate what a well-designed MIS can do, bring examples from the field, and expose the staff to current information technologies. By involving them in the review process, the evaluators also help staff take an active role in specifying their own information needs, explaining how they can be met through the MIS. Such a review often precipitates a more detailed analysis of the entire service delivery system, pointing to redundancies as well as gaps.

At Challenge, the evaluators discovered early in the evaluation that much of the information needed to track the participants and measure outcomes were not being entered into a database. While the evaluators were able to extract the data they needed from paper files, they encouraged investment in a comprehensive MIS. The evaluators joined the staff in reviewing the program's information needs, training the managers to develop specifications or a computerized information system, and evaluate the merits of some these systems. The process of purchasing and implementing an MIS continued well after the evaluation ended.

The challenge for evaluators is to demonstrate that a comprehensive MIS will not only meet external reporting requirements, but will also enhance internal monitoring and coordination. Most importantly, it will provide data that can be used on an on-going basis to evaluate and improve the program. One of the most difficult hurdles for evaluators is to show program managers how they can aggregate participant-level data and use it to assess program-level practices. To do so, the evaluators share their own analytic skills, train program managers to use descriptive statistical tools to monitor and assess the flow of participants through the program, determine whether participants with certain needs are receiving the appropriate services, and learn what outcomes are attained for different participant cohorts. When program managers learn how they can use the MIS as a monitoring and planning tool, they become invested in maintaining and upgrading it. In this way, the MIS becomes a learning tool, transcending its simple contract monitoring and reporting uses.

At STEPS, the program managers were able to use the MIS to record and report the number of participants successfully placed in jobs at the end of the program, showing a high level of job placement overall. What they were not able to do was to link these outcomes to the characteristics of their participants. It was through the evaluation that the managers learned that while English speaking participants all got jobs; this was true for only half of the Spanish speaking participants. This insight led them to take a more careful look at what program elements needed to be enhanced to improve the employment prospects of Spanish speaking participants.

While the development of an MIS system that tracks participants and services is not technically difficult, and its basic elements often exist already, using it as an on-going evaluation and planning tool is a difficult leap for many program managers and staff. Here too, the evaluators can make a significant contribution. During an evaluation, the evaluators can develop various data collection instruments ranging from multiple outcome measures to participant surveys. These instruments can be incorporated into the program's routine data collection procedures, and the program managers can be trained to use and analyze them.

Key Ingredients of Participatory Evaluation

The successful implementation of a participatory model of evaluation depends on the ability of the evaluators to initiate and establish, in collaboration with the program managers and staff, organizational conditions that support the model. In this section we describe some of these key organizational conditions.

Establishing trust with multiple stakeholders

Multiple stakeholders are involved in the evaluation. Primary stakeholders are the evaluation sponsors, organization executives and program managers, front-line staff, and participants. The most important task for the evaluators is to establish a productive working relationship with each of these groups, even though their interests may, at times, diverge. By working to establish trust with each group of stakeholders, the evaluators are able to respond to their varied interests while upholding the integrity of the evaluation itself.

Trust is built on a clear understanding of the role and responsibilities of the evaluators, the transparency of their evaluation enterprise, the ability of the evaluators to demonstrate their respect for maintaining confidentiality, and the protection of the rights of all participants. Detailed explanations about how information will be gathered, used, and shared are stated in advance. It is made clear to all participants that no individual-level data (i.e., information that could identify a specific individual) will ever be shared, and that only program-level data will be disseminated. Moreover, the evaluators commit themselves to not divulging or using any information provided to them that is of a personal or interpersonal nature, even when it may have implications for the management of the program. The only exception to this rule is when the information is believed to pose an actual danger to individual participants or staff.

The following are more detailed descriptions of the characteristics of each type of stakeholder involved in an evaluation.

Stakeholder 1: The evaluation sponsors: As the funders and initiators of the project itself, the sponsors specify the products of the evaluation and set the ground rules for carrying out the work. Clearly, it is important that the evaluators come to an agreement with the sponsors about the acceptability of this model. Not infrequently, sponsors are more interested in program outcomes than in understanding its black box or the factors that affect the program's performance. However, because they typically also fund key program components, they gain important advantages from this form of evaluation. The evaluators encourage them to become an active partner in the evaluation enterprise by receiving and responding to regular feedback in the same way as the program managers. They are also enlisted to lend their expertise in rethinking and reformulating the program's objectives if this becomes necessary. In other words, a culture of mutual, on-going learning is also established between the evaluators and sponsors. A keystone to establishing trust among the evaluators, the sponsors, and the program managers is the transparency of the evaluation. Explicit information sharing rules are central to both developing and maintaining trust. Program managers must have confidence that program-level information generated by the evaluation will not be passed on to the sponsors without their knowledge. This norm must be accepted by the sponsors.

Early in the evaluation of Challenge, the evaluators identified several potentially sensitive administrative and structural issues they felt might impede the program's implementation process and possibly its effectiveness. They shared their observations with the program managers in a "for your eyes only" memo, to be followed by a group discussion. Nonetheless, the program managers chose to share the memo with the sponsors, even though this was not the intent of the evaluators. This way of passing information to the sponsors was possible only because the sponsors appreciated and respected the role of the evaluators and the rules they used for sharing information.

Stakeholder 2: Organization executives and program managers: Participatory evaluators make clear during their initial contacts with executives and program managers that one of the aims of the evaluation is to help make the program as efficient and effective as possible. The evaluators stress that the “client” of the evaluation is the program itself. Therefore, to the fullest extent possible, the evaluators strive to ensure that the activities and products of the evaluation contribute to program improvement. Such an emphasis gives the executives and program managers an incentive to endorse the evaluation.

As much as possible, program managers’ interests and concerns are incorporated into the design of the evaluation. They are encouraged to develop a collaborative relationship with the evaluators, and to be active participants in the enterprise itself. Only executives and/or managers can communicate to all staff the importance of the evaluation effort, while simultaneously assuring them that its findings will not put any individual staff member at risk. It is also critical for these leaders to follow the evaluation’s progress and keep the evaluators informed of program changes.

Instituting regularly scheduled feedback sessions, supplemented by spontaneous meetings when appropriate, is a cornerstone to building trust with the program managers. These feedback sessions provide opportunities to further educate them about the nature and conduct of the evaluation, and to demonstrate its utility and relevance. Drafts of each report should be shared with executives and managers (and often staff) and then discussed. Obviously, there is the danger that differences of opinion between the evaluators and the management cannot be bridged. However, an atmosphere of trust minimizes the potentially negative impact of such disagreements, making it possible for executives and managers to acknowledge the issues noted by the evaluation and use the insight gained from it to improve the program. When the leaders view the evaluators’ feedback and reports as constructive means to improve their program, they reinforce a culture of self-learning. Creating such an atmosphere requires that the evaluators carefully listen to and understand the concerns of management, and take into account their ways of thinking about the program they manage.

In the early stages of the evaluation of STEPS, the evaluators noted a very high turnover of staff, especially among case managers. Initially, they attributed the turnover to what seemed to be a chaotic way in which the program was implemented, and the lack of structure and clarity about the role of case management. during feedback sessions, however, program managers offered a different reason. As the program changed its target population from cognitively disabled participants to monolingual Spanish speaking welfare recipients, case managers who were hired to work with the former were ill equipped to serve the latter – hence the high turnover. This insight sensitized the evaluators to the ripple effects of the change in the target population on staffing, with its unsettling effects on other structural and substantive features of the program.

Stakeholder 3: Front-line staff: Without the support of front-line staff, the evaluators' ability to open the black box, to determine what constitutes the actual service delivery process and understand why it unfolds as it does, is significantly impaired. Staff must be willing to be observed in action, and to provide a candid account of their work. Therefore, it is essential that strict confidentiality be maintained, and that the participation of front-line staff is completely voluntary. They must be assured that evaluating the work of individual staff members is not one of the evaluators' tasks, and that managers cannot use the evaluators to gain any information about individual performance. At the same time, line staff are also informed that the evaluators have an obligation to report any behavior that is illegal, unethical, or abusive toward the participants.

Consistent with routine procedures to ensure the rights of human subjects, during the initial meeting between the evaluators and the line-staff at STEPS, the evaluators informed staff that they had the right not to participate in the study at any time at their own discretion. The managers, however, insisted that every staff member was required to participate fully. The evaluators were compelled to publicly correct the managers, and to ensure the staff that they retained the right not to participate, and that their decision to participate or not would not be communicated to management.

Maintaining the confidentiality of individual staff respondents can be quite a challenge, especially when some program components are assigned to a single worker. In such instances, it is difficult to ensure that certain facts, opinions, or insights will not be attributed to specific staff members. Further, the evaluators have to be sensitive to what information individual staff members might expect to be kept confidential. Opinions expressed openly by staff, and events that are on-going matters of discussion in staff meetings, are examples of the kind of information that may generally be shared—although even here the evaluators must use caution.

At STEPS, much of the data about the implementation and actual provision of services was collected through participant observation and informal interviews with the staff. The evaluators' draft reports included quotes from staff members as illustrative data used to explain certain service delivery patterns. As the managers began to review these drafts, they alerted the evaluators to the fact that many of these quotes could be attributed to specific staff members. As a result, all such quotes were purged from the report, even though doing so significantly weakened the presentation of evidence supporting the analysis.

Line staff are also encouraged to have a voice in the design and implementation of the evaluation. They are asked to identify issues and topics they would like the evaluation to address and, whenever possible, these are included in the evaluation enterprise. Ideally, line staff receive regularly scheduled feedback on different phases and aspects of the evaluation and are asked to comment, challenge or correct the findings presented to them. In other words, the evaluators make every effort to include the line staff as partners in the evaluation as well.

Stakeholder 4: The participants: It is not easy to identify and explicate the interests of participants. Nor do participants have a readily available forum for expressing their wishes and aspirations. Despite these difficulties, the evaluators need to create opportunities to explain the purpose of the evaluation and solicit participants' ideas and suggestions. In addition, participants have to be assured that their rights will be protected, that their

participation is completely voluntary, the information they provide will always remain confidential, and participation will in no way affect their treatment in the Group orientations to the program are an ideal venue. Alternatively, the evaluators may set up participant focus groups early in the evaluation process.

Challenge operates two paid work experience programs. Selected participants, generally those with limited or non-existent work histories, are referred to these programs as a way of enhancing their employability. During the focus groups and in subsequent conversations with participants, it was clear that many viewed these two programs as the “jewels” of Challenge and wished they could be expanded. At the same time, it became apparent that many participants were unclear about the purposes of these programs and the policies and guidelines governing participation in them. Although these programs were originally included in the evaluation, they were only a minor part of the project. In response to what the evaluators learned about these components from the participants, they were given greater prominence. Based on participants’ input, as a first step to thinking about expanding these components, the evaluators focused on determining how well they were integrated into the overall program, and how effective they were in strengthening the participants’ employment prospects.

During the course of the evaluation, participants may also provide information about their experiences that could lead to significant program improvements when shared with staff.

At STEPS, during focus group sessions, the monolingual Spanish-speaking participants told the evaluators that they were having difficulties completing their ESL and especially their GED classes during the six-month period of the program because the time of the classes often conflicted with their work experience schedule. Many participants were frustrated by not being able to get their diplomas while in the program. In presenting this information during feedback sessions, program managers and staff came to recognize that the competing demands of these two program components had a negative impact on the participants. As a result, they began to consider various alternative ways of reorganizing the participants' schedules.

The evaluators as catalysts for program change

By sharing data and results, and by leading discussions about the implications of the data and findings on the operation of the program, the evaluators help managers and staff members explore ways to improve the program. By presenting findings and providing analyses, the evaluators identify discrepancies between what the program aims to do and what it actually does. These kinds of "performance gaps" are often very difficult for program managers and staff to identify. Awareness, however, often initiates program change. With the evaluators' assistance, staff can use the evaluation data to understand the reasons for performance gaps, and then begin to consider alternative solutions for closing them.

The credibility of the evaluators in stimulating program changes arises, first and foremost, from their efforts to collect and synthesize data in an expert and objective way. From this advantage point, the evaluators are able to offer unique insights not available to the various stakeholders. The evaluators are also able to draw on knowledge and insights gained from other evaluation studies and research experience. And finally, they can be effective facilitators because they do not take sides or press for a particular solution. Rather, they clarify and present alternatives.

In their role as facilitators of program changes, the evaluators must avoid three potential pitfalls. First, they must maintain their critical evaluative stance in order to avoid over-identifying with the program and failing to recognize its limitations. There is a danger of embracing the program's rationale even when the evaluation points to its shortcomings.

At STEPS, the program rationale centered on the assumption that the work experiences provided by the in-house work sites would enhance the employment prospects and earnings of the welfare recipients. Interviews with the participants also indicated that they embraced the rationale. Nonetheless, the follow-up data on employment and earnings cast doubts on the efficacy of the approach, at least for monolingual Spanish speaking recipients. In addition, observations of the work sites also suggested that the recipients acquired very few job skills. Although the evaluators had developed close working relationships with the job site supervisors and staff, it was important that they maintain their critical stance in order to carefully assess the pros and cons of the work experiences.

Second, although participatory evaluators are expected to share the vision of the program they may, in the course of the evaluation, come to view or find that the program is not benevolent toward its participants or is in conflict with their own values. They must then determine whether they wish or can effectively assume such facilitative role.

Third, the evaluators must be careful not to become organizational consultants. For example, they cannot become involved in addressing issues related to personnel, internal allocation of resources, or strategic planning. Organizational consultants are agents of the program managers or sponsors. The program's top decision makers set their agenda. Consultants are then expected to identify and propose solutions. In contrast, the role of the evaluators is dictated by the objectives and nature of the evaluation. Their agenda is set, first and foremost, by these objectives and tasks. Their role is to assess what the program tries to accomplish, what actual services it provides, and what impact these services have on the participants. Therefore, their role as change agents is highly circumscribed. They assist program sponsors, managers, and staff to consider the implications of their findings for the

program, and to explore alternative ways of improving it. Once the evaluators cross the line and become organizational consultants, by aligning themselves with the program managers or addressing organizational issues not directly emanating from the evaluation enterprise, they lose their credibility.

Challenge experienced serious staff conflict in one of the program components. Simply by being present in the setting the evaluators were aware of the conflict, and many staff members also told them about it. While the evaluators took note of the conflict because it was adversely affecting the delivery of services, they also recognized that it was not precipitated by program-level issues (such as disagreement about service goals), but rather by personality clashes, a contentious management style on the part of one individual, and possibly some unacknowledged ethnic and cultural differences. The program managers urgently approached the evaluators for advice and help, but they declined. They explained that the issue was outside the purview of the evaluation, and that their involvement would compromise their role as evaluators.

Participatory feedback

A distinct characteristic of participatory evaluation is the use of frequently scheduled and unscheduled feedback sessions with the program managers and staff. These sessions reinforce a sense of partnership, encourage a climate of self-assessment, and nurture a culture of self-learning. They are also opportunities for the evaluators to demonstrate the utility of the various evaluation tools they use, teach staff to use them, and show how these tools can benefit the program long after the evaluators depart. In many respects, these feedback sessions demystify the evaluation enterprise, making it more accessible and understandable.

The evaluators noted that when case managers referred participants to Challenge's own temporary employment service, they seldom received feedback about how well their participants were doing at the work sites or about problems they experienced on the job. As a result, the case managers could not chart and respond to their participants' progress or recurring employment problems. While the staff of both components were aware of this disconnect, when these findings were presented and discussed, the staff decided to pursue a systematic internal examination of the function of the temporary employment service, how well it supported the goals of the program, and how they could increase coordination and communication between it and case management.

The role of the evaluators as facilitators of organizational learning unfolds during feedback sessions, the frequency of which is dictated by the various phases of the evaluation enterprise. These phases may include a study of the implementation of the program, an analysis of the attributes of the participants being served, a study of the actual service delivery process, a survey of staff about work satisfaction and morale, a survey of participants' satisfaction with program components, or a study of program outcomes. As reports are generated, they are presented for review. Formal feedback sessions are held to discuss the reports and the managers and staff (and when appropriate participants) are encouraged to respond to inaccuracies, offer alternative interpretations of data, and consider the implications of the findings for the program.

In addition to these formal sessions, there are frequent informal contacts between evaluators and staff at all levels. Indeed, the mutual sharing of information is built into the very data collection process. While observing or interviewing, evaluators are not passive data collectors but, rather, they are engaged in on-going dialogue with managers, line staff, and participants. These interactions help the evaluators gain the trust of their respondents and attain a better understanding of the meaning of the data they collect. These interactions with staff and participants also reinforce their sense of being important contributors to the evaluation.

Two very different perspectives on employment barriers were revealed during participant focus groups at STEPS. Monolingual Spanish speaking recipients attributed their difficulties to being exploited by employers because of their immigrant status. White and African American recipients tended to blame themselves and their personal failings for their situation. Once the evaluators became aware of these differences, they were able to follow-up more closely. In this way, they gained a deeper appreciation for the important ways in which different perceptions influenced how these two groups reacted to the various service components.

Attributes of participatory evaluators

Participatory evaluation requires evaluators to have competencies in four interrelated areas. First, they must be skillful researchers who know how to select and use the appropriate research methodologies for the particular evaluation project. Second, they must possess expertise in organizational analysis. They must be able to analyze and understand the organizational factors that shape the program, structure its service delivery system, affect the behavior of its staff, and influence its outcomes. Third, they must have expertise and experience in facilitating program changes. They must be able to integrate the evaluation data with the analysis of the organization in ways that will help staff consider possibilities for program change and innovation. Fourth, they must have the interpersonal skills necessary to establish and maintain trusting yet carefully prescribed relationships with all program stakeholders over an extended period of time and through numerous program and evaluation changes.

Most importantly, the model's success hinges on the ability of the evaluators to establish trusting relationships with the sponsors, managers, line staff, and participants. To maintain trust with stakeholders holding conflicting or competing interests requires a clear definition of the boundaries of the evaluation enterprise, sharing program-level data and their analysis only, and engaging in on-going dialogues with all groups about the implications of the findings at different phases of the evaluation process.

Conclusion

Because participatory evaluation incorporates multiple purposes, constituents, and program outcomes, this approach is labor intensive. It may require more resources than other models that, for example, focus strictly on measuring program outcomes. It also requires additional expertise not always needed in other approaches. Yet, it produces benefits that could readily outweigh the added marginal costs. First, it is very good at explaining why a program succeeds or fails to meet its intended objectives. Second, it identifies the organizational configurations, particularly the attributes of the service technology, necessary for effective implementation. Third, it provides important benefits to program managers and staff with its emphasis on learning and change. When implemented appropriately, the model can yield a valuable assessment of a program while dramatically improving that program in the process.

About the Author

Yehekel “Zeke” Hasenfeld, Ph.D. is Professor of Social Welfare at the UCLA School of Public Policy and Social Research. Dr. Hasenfeld’s research focuses on the relationship between social welfare policies, the organizations that implement these policies and the people who use their services. Dr. Hasenfeld has done research in conceptualizing human service organizations and applying organizational theory to understand their structural features and service delivery patterns. He is currently studying the impact of welfare reform, the role of nonprofit organizations in the provision of social services, and the relationship between social movements and third sector organizations in civil society.

The UCLA School of Public Policy and Social Research was created in 1994 to meet the need for a new approach to policy education, policy research, public service and advising policy makers. The school’s three departments—Policy Studies, Social Welfare and Urban Planning—offer professional programs that contribute to solving problems across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. For more information about the school, visit www.sppsr.ucla.edu.

Suggested Readings

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One Market, Steuart Tower, Suite 2500, San Francisco, California 94105, Telephone 415-777-2244

725 South Figueroa, Suite 3075, Los Angeles, California 90017, Telephone 213-236-0552

2300 Tulare Street, Suite 310, Fresno, California 93721, 559-442-1101