Some pointers concerning evaluation utilization

Anne's and Brian's presentation showed how the 2009 federal Policy on Evaluation contributed to increased use and utility of evaluation in the Government of Canada. I will take a step back to recap some of what was learned around the long-standing preoccupation of evaluators with utilization and I will show how the 2009 federal Policy did everything wrong – but still worked. The seminal work on utilization by Michael Quinn Patton dates back to 1978, almost 40 years ago. "**Utilization-Focussed Evaluation**" was the title of his book [1] which has seen four editions plus a shorter version published in 2012 [2]. This topic is alive and well in evaluation. The expression "Utilization-Focussed Evaluation" returns about 400,000 results on Google, not to mention more than 6,000 scholarly references to Patton's work.

Four decades of research on evaluation focussed on **utilization** have led to a number of firm observations that I will attempt to summarize now.

First, for evaluation, or more generally for knowledge, to be used in decision-making, the organization must be ready to accept **the challenge of questioning itself**. There has to be permeability to new ideas and data. An organization founded on ideology and unwilling to put its bases to the test will simply not use performance information contradicting its foundations.

Second, **actionable knowledge** is a derivative product: it is produced by a process of **engagement** which co-opts staff and managers within the evaluation process. Evaluation conducted in a totally arms-length manner without input from the organization itself is much less likely to get used – unless the findings happen to correspond with the interests or expectations of a particularly influential group. Ideally, engagement is found at every step of the way: in defining the approach, in identifying methodologies and yardsticks, in designing the logic of the demonstration, in interpreting the observations, in drawing conclusions.

Third, the universe of possible evaluation issues or social outcomes is always much larger than what is allowed by the practical limitations imposed on any feedback process (money, time, expertise, etc.). Therefore, it is crucial to identify the **priority purposes** for the feedback – and those are the concerns that staff, management and other stakeholders rank highest. Here again, the priorities for knowledge development must be identified through education and engagement.

Fourth, scattered collections of facts and figures are unlikely to get much use. Knowledge must be organized into **stories** that make sense to stakeholders, and that respect the complexity of the world in which the organization evolves. It is so easy for those at whom the knowledge is aimed to disregard a counter-intuitive finding with a particular case that pretends to lead to the contrary conclusion. To organize their work and to tell their stories, evaluators have used logic models, program theories, systemic maps, and other such tools which all aim to simplify the world – but avoid the science of particular cases – while allowing for important real-life interactions to be portrayed in their conclusions.

Fifth, **communication** to and with decision-makers is clearly a preponderant factor in utilization of knowledge. There are several facets to communication. Timing is essential: communication of results must start early and be

staged over time. Method is pivotal: if the final report is still a preferred vehicle, other methods are gaining ground such as thematic summaries, newsletter articles, brochures, press releases, oral briefings, discussion groups, retreats, storyboarding sessions, creative presentations, debates, etc. Adapting the content is also key: some audiences couldn't care less about measurement methods and want to focus on lessons learned while others need to be convinced that the measurement is reliable before paying attention to the results.

Patton identified five principles of utilization-focussed reporting:

1. Be **intentional** about reporting, that is, determine what you want the audience to take away and stay true to that purpose.
2. Stay **user-focussed**: aim for the priorities of the intended user and answer their questions.
3. Use graphics and other **visuals** to communicate succinctly and powerfully (something I have clearly not mastered).
4. Prepare users for **counter-intuitive** findings.
5. **Distinguish dissemination from use**: dissemination is an output whereas use is an outcome.

Sixth, utilization must be facilitated with **after-sale service or support**: decision-makers may well use carefully crafted new knowledge produced via close engagement, but they may also need to be reminded of the implications of this knowledge in the conduct of their business. The evaluator does not own the knowledge but she/he has profoundly contributed to developing it; because of that, she/he is in a pivotal position to help apply the knowledge to various situations in the organization.

This last utilization factor posits a position of influence for the analyst. This stance can conflict with the typical level of independence we want adopt. So how does one reconcile independence, influence, and responsiveness to organizational needs? Rakesh Mohan and Kathleen Sullivan [3] have proposed that these concepts are not mutually exclusive and that strategies are available to maximize independence and responsiveness. These strategies include:

1. identification of key stakeholders and their interactions;
2. extensive consultation on needs and tailoring of analysis for a variety of stakeholders;
3. appreciation and response to timing constraints;
4. judicious use of authority;
5. use of methods that produce information considered **reliable** from a broad range of perspectives;
6. balanced reporting;
7. use of **professional standards** to guide the work.

The last of these strategies is quite important. Evaluators as well as social impact analysts are open to criticism if they don't adhere to a clear set of well established professional standards. It has taken evaluators decades to develop standards that are now officially accepted in North America, Europe, and Africa [4]. Essential elements of these standards relate to stakeholder engagement, independence, credibility of evidence, protection of the confidentiality of certain information, quality assurance, balance in analysis and reporting, and record keeping.

Such standards constitute one of the three pillars of the Canadian Evaluation Society Professional Credentialing program, along with ethics guidelines and professional competencies.

So, in summary, optimal utilization of evidence occurs when all the utilization drivers are aligned: openness, engagement, priorization, storytelling, communication, and influence.

It is important to realize that utilization comes in a number of forms. Kusters and her associates identified seven types of uses [5]. They are:

- Direct or **instrumental** use which has an immediate impact on decisions and actions. This may be the type of use that you had in mind when you entered this breakfast and it is the use mainly observed in the evaluation of the 2009 federal Policy.
- **Conceptual** use affects how one thinks about certain issues and approaches them.
- **Symbolic** use affects how one justifies their action.

    These three uses are those most often cited but four more types of uses were also identified.

- **Process** use stems from being involved in the knowledge creation process; it may mean adopting a new approach to decision-making.
- **Relational** use changes how roles and functions are shared within the organization.
- **Value** use means that fundamental goals, aspirations, or motivations are modified.
- **External** use affects how individuals outside the organization adapt and the position they adopt.

In situating how to best impact decision-making, it is important to remember that utilization comes in a multitude of forms. Also, management science tells us that decision makers are not looking for certainty; they strive for a reduction of uncertainty. Managers also need information that is credible and actionable.

So, back to the 2009 federal Policy. It did many things wrong based on utilization theory since:

1. It imposed considerable rigidity in the questions that are to be raised as part of an evaluation: the Policy guidelines list the "core questions" (relevance and performance) that have to be raised. While other questions may be included to suit management needs, typically, resources are too scarce to allow for this.
2. It imposed the requirement to perform evaluations on all direct spending programs and on a pre-determined schedule (five years), even if without a stated need or a clear client.
3. It identified the client (the Deputy Head) whether or not the Deputy Head wanted an evaluation and whether or not other clients (e.g. the program manager) would be a better client target.
4. It was silent about the level of rigour of methods, insisting instead on transparency in their regard.
5. The Standard insisted on reports as the mechanism for communication.

So, why did the 2009 federal Policy on Evaluation actually contribute to evaluation utilization? I think that at least two factors contributed to it:

1. Because the Policy created an obligation to evaluate and because this obligation was sustained over several years (at least form 2009 to 2015), Deputy Heads were exposed to evaluation results (willingly or not) and learned to appreciate the information they were offered in these studies.
2. The Management Accountability Framework[1] (MAF) produced an annual "report card" of management excellence which was seen by Deputy Heads as their annual assessment. Performance at implementing the 2009 Policy on Evaluation was one of the criteria included in the MAF. Because Deputy Heads were looking to maximize their MAF rating, they insisted that the Policy be implemented adequately. Now that evaluation is off MAF for a few years, it will be interesting to see if utilization of evaluation results is sustainable.

SOURCES

[1] Patton, Michael Quinn (1978) *Utilization-Focussed Evaluation*, first edition, Sage Publications

[2] Patton, Michael Quinn (2012) *Essentials of Utilization-Focussed Evaluation*, Sage Publications

[3] Mohan, Rakesh and Kathleen Sullivan (2006) "Managing the Politics of Evaluation to Achieve Impact" in *New Directions for Evaluation*, no. 112

[4] Yarbrough, D. B., Shulha, L. M., Hopson, R. K., & Caruthers, F. A. (2011). The program evaluation standards: A guide for evaluators and evaluation users (3rd ed.), Sage Publications

[5] Kusters, Cecile et al (2011), *Making Evaluations Matter: A Practical Guide for Evaluators*, Centre for Development Innovation, Wageningen University & Research Centre, Wageningen, The Netherlands

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[1] "The Management Accountability Framework (MAF) is a framework for management excellence, accompanied by an annual assessment of management practices and performance in most departments and agencies of the Government of Canada." http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/maf-crg/index-eng.asp