

Checking on the Interests of Program Stakeholders

An evaluation experience from John Owen

One issue that I have met during my evaluation work is a tension involved when reporting to program stakeholders who have not been a party to negotiations about the original design of the study. An example is when the evaluator and program manager(s) have settled on an evaluation plan that is designed to meet their information needs. Sometimes, managers then ask the evaluator to present a report to another group who have an interest in the program. This group are usually not aware of the negotiated decisions.

One example from my practice involved an evaluation of the innovatory use of computers in a school. We had agreed that the evaluation would be developmental, because the innovation had just begun so one of the key evaluation products was a program logic the school could follow to improve implementation. The Principal asked me to present the findings to the School Board. Some Board members became aggressive when we told them that we could not provide evidence that the program was working. They wanted to be assured that the funds spent on the computers were improving student learning. While I had readily agreed to meeting the Board, I was unprepared for the ferocity of the questioning during the meeting.

I was unprepared for the ferocity of the questioning...The moral of the story is...make sure you are briefed on the interests of stakeholders and prepare to defend the evaluation design you have planned.

Similarly, in a study of a rural community arts program, the evaluation team had used mainly qualitative data to show that the program was valued by rural communities. The management asked the evaluation team to present the findings to a group representing philanthropic agencies. There were one or two members of this group who only wanted to hear about outputs, and were derisive of our findings. The managers had already collected output information, but we were not in possession of it at the meeting.

The moral of these stories is that if your primary audience wants you to present to program stakeholders who have not been involved in the evaluation negotiation, make sure you are briefed on their interests and prepare yourself well to defend the evaluation design you have planned. And make sure your primary audience is prepared to support you in discussion.