

Evaluation culture: a definition and analysis of its development within organisations

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Discussions about decision-making and the kinds of knowledge that could and should be used for this purpose within the workplace have become prominent in current organisational literature. These issues are high on the agenda of the business community, and among not-for-profit agencies.

Research and observation suggests that a good deal of organisational decision-making has, in the past, been based on the judgements of authority figures. It was long assumed that senior managers had the sole right to make decisions, relying on a combination of experience, political know-how and the advice of trusted others in making choices about the present and future of the agencies for which they were responsible.

This situation is changing. Most organisations recognise that important executive-level decisions should involve others besides senior managers, and I have previously argued that evaluators should work cooperatively in providing 'just in time' information for leaders (Owen & Lambert 1998). This implies that evidence and empirically based knowledge has the capacity to enhance decision-making and the effectiveness of organisations, for example by making managers and other practitioners more aware of the context in which they operate, understanding the needs of their clients, determining the effects of major initiatives, and being accountable to funding sources.

In this paper, I argue that the creation of an evaluation culture leads to a change and improvement in the 'mix' of 'working knowledge' that is used by those responsible for applying information to solve organisational problems.

An evaluation culture can be regarded as a commitment to roles for evaluation in decision-making within an organisation (Owen & McDonald 1999). This is systematic enquiry which is initiated and controlled by members of the organisation, and is carried out with the explicit purpose of contributing to the stock of its working knowledge. Enquiry of this nature is not undertaken routinely, but in response to the need for empirically based knowledge to contribute to issues regarded as strategic.

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An argument for evaluation culture

In this section, I present an argument that an internal evaluation culture is central to the influence of enquiry in creating and applying useful knowledge. This argument has been assembled by synthesising findings from disparate sources in the knowledge utilisation research literature.

The argument can be summarised as follows:

- Organisational decision-making can be thought of as involving the continual application of 'working knowledge' to issues related to the policies and functions of the organisation. Working knowledge can be thought of as the knowledge practitioners seek out, accumulate, and use in their work, on a routine day-to-day basis (Kennedy 1983). Working knowledge may be applied at several levels. Individuals apply their working knowledge to issues in their jurisdiction. Through working parties, committees and the like, groups apply aggregated working knowledge to organisational policy and to program development and implementation.

- A major justification for the work of professional researchers is that systematic enquiry should contribute to working knowledge and organisational action. However, there is ample evidence that, in the past, traditional 'university research' has had little direct effect on organisational decision-making in business and non-profit sectors (Holbrook et al. 2000). This is consistent with the notion of two cultures in social systems: a research culture which produces knowledge, and a practitioner culture responsible for application, with poor linkage between producers and users (Wingens 1993).

The assumed influence of research is based on an 'objectivist modernist' perspective of knowledge utilisation, which puts a primacy on scientific knowledge as the source of truth. This contrasts with a 'post-modern' perspective which regards traditional 'academic' social science research as disembodied from reality, and the findings of such research as an abstraction. This makes these findings intrinsically meaningless to practitioners (Watkins 1994).

- A promising advance in breaking down the two-cultures problem has been the development of partnerships between practitioners and researchers. This has been described as 'sustained interactivity' (Huberman 1994), and observers of its implementation believe that practitioners will buy into systematic enquiry if they can contribute in meaningful ways (Campbell 1994).
- A perspective which balances the views of the objectivist modernists and the postmodernists, values the potential of systematic enquiry in the form of focused evaluation, and the need for practitioners to be involved in its application (Cousins & Earl 1992; Owen et al. 1994).

- For practitioners to be involved, organisations must sanction their contribution. Currently, the main barriers to practitioner involvement tend to be not at the level of individual resistance, but in organisational designs that do not foster learning and political agendas that are not consistent with the information. Changing these internal rigidities may be extremely difficult (Louis 1998),
- The adoption of an internal evaluation regime (Love 1994) which recognises these findings provides an avenue for meaningful use of the findings of systematic enquiry, internal learning (Preskill & Torres 1996), and improved organisational effectiveness (Kaplan & Norton 1996).
- An internal evaluation regime is consistent with an organisation becoming a centre of enquiry. In such a regime we no longer think of organisations simply as knowledge distribution centres. An organisation must be concerned with more than delivery; it must also be a producer as well as a transmitter of knowledge. One can think of an organisation with this perspective as engaged in a pervasive search for meaning in its work. If this position is accepted, then the organisation has developed a culture of evaluation.

Factors leading to the creation of an evaluation culture

A question which could now be asked is, 'How can we develop an evaluation culture in an organisation?' This is a question that senior managers might be asking if they foresee advantages in encouraging the use of research findings in the workplace.

This turns our attention to the identification of factors which lead to the institutionalisation of an evaluation culture.

Before turning to the journals to answer this question I would like to present a case example where, I believe, an organisational evaluation culture presently exists. I base this view on my knowledge of the organisation due to involvement as one of the external evaluators working internally to support the planning and use of evaluation across the organisation.

Presentation of an exemplary case can serve two purposes. One is to provide a grounded and detailed example of one instance of the phenomenon. For many readers the case might be enough to make the leap to their own situation or situations, and thus provide a valuable vicarious experience of the situation. (Stake 1980).

A second purpose is to provide a contribution to the conceptual body of knowledge about the class of the phenomena. This requires a move to more abstract notions than those presented in this case study.

CASE STUDY: DEVELOPMENT OF AN INTERNAL EVALUATION CULTURE AT EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AUSTRALIA (EMA)

EMA is a national agency responsible for professional education in risk management across the country. It provides education in various forms to employees from a range of occupations (police, firemen, town and city council officers, State Emergency Services). Most of these become participants in intensive residential programs offered at EMA facility in a secluded rural location 50 km outside Melbourne. EMA is funded by the Commonwealth Government, which also supports the cost of travel and accommodation of participants.

EMA has a professional staff of about 20. There is an executive manager, three middle-level or operational managers and about a dozen trainers. They have access to very good working and teaching facilities. No expense has been spared to support the programs offered.

EMA provides a suite of training programs, which have been developed over time. The usual pattern is for each program to be the responsibility of a duet from the training team. While most of the trainers are internal, some programs involve someone from outside who has special knowledge. There is a judicious mix of theory and practice, and most programs involve participants working in syndicates on an open-ended problem, requiring them to work for long hours over a week-long period, including sessions after dinner in the evening.

As indicated above, an internal evaluation culture has emerged within EMA. It is worth going back in time to determine how this has been achieved. This is presented as a series of key developments over a period of over some years, from mid-1999.

The following have been key factors in developing an evaluation culture at EMA.

KEY FACTORS

- 1 a joint and cohesive commitment from the operational managers to the introduction of internal evaluation to aid decision-making. The managers represented a 'cosmopolitan' externally focused managerial group, all had recent university training in the social sciences, and one had completed a master's degree in evaluation studies
- 2 the operational managers knowing where to look for expert outside assistance for evaluation work, and the employment of external evaluators who had an empathy towards a pragmatic participatory/interactive form of evaluation
- 3 a high level of support from the executive manager. While a key factor in his support was that evaluation would provide information for internal decision-making, he was also motivated by the need to supply information to external audiences. These included the corporate manager in the Senior Executive Service (located in Canberra), and Coordinators of Emergency Services in each Australian State
- 4 the creation of an evaluation team which included a member of the EMA staff and the external evaluators who worked cooperatively to develop protocols which responded to the information needs of middle management within the organisation
- 5 communication to all staff about how evaluation could be used and how it might affect individuals. This was particularly important for the training staff, some of whom were concerned that evaluation was to be used in the assessment of their work. Communication involved a series of meetings with the external evaluation team, and continuous reinforcement by operational managers
- 6 a decision taken by operational managers and the evaluation team to commence with an evaluation protocol which concentrated more on processes than outcomes. This decision was motivated by the need, in the first instance, to provide trainers with information that could be used to modify and refine the programs for which they were responsible
- 7 the creation of an internal committee to be responsible for receiving the findings of each evaluation. This was designed to emphasise that the organisation as a whole was responsible for receiving and making meaning of the findings, rather than individual trainers or managers;
- 8 requiring staff training teams to use the findings to modify and refine the programs for which they were responsible. This was an attempt to change delivery practices without directly apportioning blame to an individual trainer
- 9 identification of barriers to collection of systematic data. This involved convincing some staff members that the findings from a well-designed evaluation protocol would provide additional and relevant information over and above that which they were already collecting through more ad hoc methods. Over time, objections of these members were overcome through tactics, such as asking them to 'armchair' instruments being developed and generally seeking them out to be sounding boards in the development of the evaluation protocol
- 10 developing an internal capacity for the routine analysis of evidence collected from participants in each training program being evaluated. This involved assigning some members of the secretarial staff to undertake data entry. In addition, and most importantly, the internal member of the evaluation team was given the responsibility of analysing this evidence and reporting it to the internal committee. To achieve this, the individual was provided with some technical assistance (for example on the use of the program Access) to prepare these reports
- 11 the decision, from 2002, to prepare a second protocol which concentrated on training outcomes. This protocol involves following up on participants some months after the conclusion of the program they attended. In 2003, online data capture techniques are being used for this follow-up. The primary audience for this report was the executive manager. This was a recognition:
 - that the executive manager needed to report 'up and out' and that conclusions about outcomes were expected as part of the reports he assembled
 - that there could be information which related to an individual staff member, and would need sensitive handling.

internal evaluation culture

Fostering an evaluation culture

What do these findings suggest in terms of understanding how an evaluation culture can be encouraged? In general terms, development of an evaluation culture can be thought of as the introduction of a major process innovation, and a significant organisational change. The following discussion is based on the degree of consistency between the case presented above, and change theory research.

The literature suggests that organisational leaders can influence the introduction of new ideas if they are outward looking, and well connected to relevant external expertise (Rogers 1995; Havelock 1971). This was the case at EMA where operational managers had been involved with university staff, and also had other extensive professional networks. This meant they knew where to go for assistance to commence evaluation work. In addition, the fact that the executive director of EMA was outside from the outset is consistent with the important role that senior executives need to play in transforming organisations (Caldwell & Spinks 1992).

Operational managers spent considerable time disseminating information about what evaluation would mean to individual staff members before any evaluation work was done, consistent with the importance of internal communication and synergistic dissemination techniques in encouraging change (Kaplan & Norton 1996). Further, the inclusion of a staff member on the evaluation team served to embed the evaluation process in the ongoing fabric of the organisation. This provided a degree of ownership and reduced the chance of a two-cultures mentality towards evaluation (Owen & McDonald 1999).

The strategy to initially adopt evaluation on a small scale is consistent with the truism that change is a process, not an event (Hall and Loucks 1979). The use of a gradual approach, so that the involved staff had the time and opportunity to observe the processes, is consistent with the notion that observability of organisational innovation correlates strongly with successful implementation (Rogers 1995). Further, the fact that staff saw early benefits in terms of improving the programs they were offering meant that there were rewards for the staff and the organisation. The importance of rewards in the sustainability of innovations has been well documented (Guskey 1986). Commencing with an evaluation protocol was motivated by the need, in the first instance, to provide trainers with information that could be used to modify and refine the programs they were responsible for. This is consistent with the importance of selecting different zones of training for evaluation purposes (Brinkerhoff 1989).

Being clear about what evaluation entailed was also important. This was a key role for the external evaluators. Reducing the perceived complexity of an innovation has been shown to correlate with organisational adoption (Rogers 1995). In practice, this meant that staff had to be clear about what was

entailed in the evaluation process, and what benefits could be expected (Owen & Rogers 1999). A causal logic diagram which summarises these factors is presented as Figure 1.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed two related issues:

- the notion of an evaluation culture in an organisation
- factors which could contribute to an evaluation culture.

As a practising evaluator in Australasia, I have supported the development of evaluation cultures in organisations wherever this has been possible. There have been some successes and some failures, and in essence this paper is a distillation of what needs to be in place to encourage success.

Support for the development of evaluation cultures is also occurring in other parts of the world. For example, in the USA, those interested in organisational learning and capacity building reinforce the view that the wise internal use of evaluation can have very positive effects on decision-making, increasing the morale of staff and providing a sound basis for increasing outcomes of those for whom organisational policies and programs are intended (Compton, Baizerman & Heuftle Stockdill 2002).

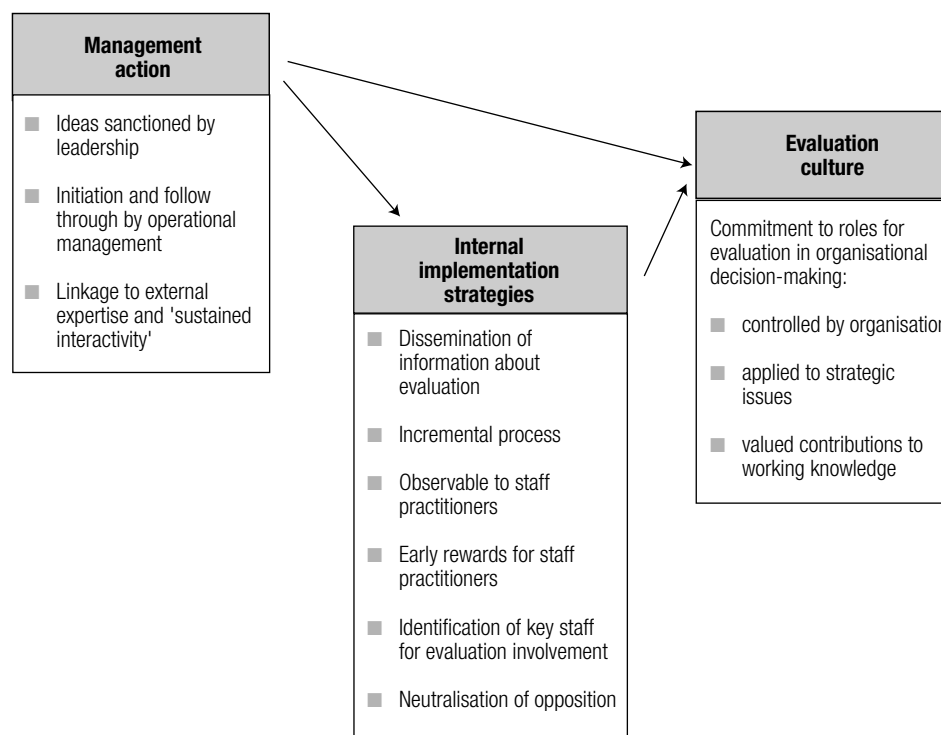
However, the case study suggests that installation of an evaluation culture requires a complex of conditions. There is a need for leaders to be provided with a perception of the benefits of a long-term commitment, and to see that resources and expertise are needed to realise these benefits. At EMA, these are now being realised, as organisational members now routinely decide at the beginning of each year what changes to previously evaluated programs need to be made, and which programs will be the focus for evaluation in the coming months.

As I have indicated, the basis for the causative factors has been a single case. It would be very interesting to put this beside other cases where internal evaluations have also been institutionalised. Such an analysis could lead to the modification and elaboration of what must be regarded as a tentative causative 'theory' of evaluation culture which has been presented here.

Note

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**FIGURE 1:
EVALUATION
CULTURE: CREATION
AND CAUSATION**



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