

The politics of program logic

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This paper examines the use of program logic against the background of the politicised environment of evaluations. Its central argument is that the development of a program logic for the purpose of focusing an evaluation can be a highly politicised process, given that it requires sign-off by the 'authorising environment'. We commence with a brief discussion of how politics surface within organisations because evaluation planning is typically conducted within these settings. A model of change management is then introduced to highlight how political forces both hostile to and supportive of the evaluation process can surface when evaluations are being planned. We next consider two scenarios, drawn from the evaluation of a program to improve the competence and confidence of professionals working with people at risk of self-harm and suicide. These scenarios are used to highlight a number of important points about the politics of focusing an evaluation. The paper concludes by identifying some of the dilemmas that evaluation practitioners may need to work through in focusing an evaluation in a highly politicised environment, as well as how these might be addressed using program logic.

Organisational politics set the context for many evaluations

The politics that inevitably surround the evaluation of social programs are manifest in many ways. They can shape what questions are worth addressing, how success is defined and measured, who will be privy to the information and how the information will be used. Understanding how politics surface within organisational settings (both negatively and positively) is an important contextual consideration here. As defined by Mintzberg (1983, p. 611), politics operating in organisational settings:

... refers to individual or group behaviour that is informal, ostensibly parochial, typically divisive, and above all, in the technical sense illegitimate - sanctioned neither by formal authority, accepted ideology, nor certified expertise (though it may exploit any of these).

Extreme examples of politically motivated behaviour in organisations are outlined by Von Zugbach (1995). He identifies 13 'winner's commandments' for managerial success, including 'say one thing and do another', 'get your retaliation in first', and 'other people's idea of right and wrong do not apply to you'. In a similar vein, Kumar and Thibodeaux (1990) advocate the use of negative political strategies in planned organisational change, for example covert manipulation. A study by Parker and Dipboye (1995) demonstrates the effect that politics can have in the workplace. Their main finding was that organisations perceived by their employees as 'political' (i.e. in the negative sense of the term as espoused by Mintzberg) had lower overall levels of job satisfaction, were not seen as valuing high work standards, evaluated senior management as ineffective, and fostered beliefs that the organisation did not support innovation (see also, Witt 1999).

Politics in evaluation

How program staff may perceive evaluation

In a statement that captured the popular sentiment toward program evaluation within organisations more than 20 years ago, Brown (1979, p. 13) wrote, 'in this era of budget limitations and accountability, evaluation...has become almost as certain as death and taxes'. Staff anticipating an impending evaluation were seen to have good reason to be wary of 'the evaluator' as they would a tax auditor. In their capacity to uncover systemic problems, both tax auditors and evaluators were perceived to share the potential to undo or undermine an effective program, or at worst, to stop a program in its tracks. Hence, '... we are all a little afraid of evaluation, lest it be turned on us ...' (Sedlacek 1987, p. 2).

To illustrate, Patrick and Niles (1988) described four beliefs that US Student Affairs Office staff had about evaluation:

- The evaluation process was 'value-loaded' and 'in competition' with other academic units for scarce resources.
- Program staff who have limited control over budgetary matters were concerned that negative evaluation findings could be used as justification for reduced funding.
- Programs may be developed haphazardly, with ill-defined objectives, making evaluation less likely to reflect the true nature of their effectiveness.
- Many student affairs professionals do not believe their efforts are measurable, resulting in a reluctance to support an evaluation.

Clearly there is great potential for misunderstanding and defensive politics in this climate. Compounding this is the fact that evaluation practitioners find themselves in a

profession still in its adolescence, and still on its way to gaining the kind of formal authority confirmed by the legal system, or gaining status as an integrated part of governmental standard procedures (Kvitastein 2000). Unlike the tax auditor, evaluation practitioners work in the grey areas of socially based research, which is ultimately a value-laden process.

Factoring in the interests of evaluation practitioners

Politics in evaluation increases in complexity when one factors in what may be at stake for evaluation practitioners. This includes, for example, the need to generate an income, and a strong interest in maintaining a reputation of competence and integrity within professional networks. Scriven (1996, p. 8) discusses the contradictions that arise from being positioned as an independent reviewer, while at the same time, being 'on the payroll' of a particular agency. An evaluator consequently operates as both a 'quasi-external' and 'quasi-internal' actor. In his view, while an evaluator seeks the insights that dispassionate independence can bring, '... it would be naive to think that the external evaluator is always completely untainted by bias – even by economic don't-bite-the-hand-that-feeds-you bias'. Put differently, it is well recognised that the rewards to an evaluator for producing a favourable report often greatly outweigh the rewards for producing an unfavourable report.

Consequences of politics for evaluation

Politics within organisations will set the scene for how evaluations are planned, conducted and reported (e.g. Blomberg & Waldo 2002; Eastmond 1998; VanderPlaat, Samson & Raven 2001). Indeed, as Weiss (1993, p. 94) so eloquently put this, '... evaluators who fail to recognise that evaluations always take place within a politicised environment are in for a series of shocks and frustrations. This is because policies and programs are proposed, defined, debated, enacted and funded through political processes, and in implementation they remain subject to pressures both supportive and hostile.'

The impact of the politics of evaluation is illustrated in a study by Wolk, Hartmann and Sullivan (1995). Here the point is well made that outcome evaluations of alcohol and drug abuse treatment services are subject to relentless political struggles by elected officials and treatment personnel who have an investment in how success is defined. Outcomes of these struggles can have dramatic effects on the quality of the evaluation with the potential for:

- failure of the evaluator to report the distance from the original (and highly invested) program goals and the actual program outputs (Dadds 2001)
- temptation (and sometimes justification) for the evaluator to claim prematurely that programs work, especially when funding and wider

political support for the program is tenuous (Dadds 2001)

- the undermining of the cooperation and support on which the evaluator depends for quality information (Weiss 1972)
- practitioner resistance to using evaluation results and decisions, even if proposed changes would help improve program goals (Weiss 1972), and
- the occasional termination of an evaluation before completion because of the effective resistance of operating program personnel (Weiss 1972).

Understanding what Fredericks, Carman and Birkland (2002) refer to as the ‘authorising environment’ is central here. The authorising environment includes the agency or body that initiates, authorises or sponsors an evaluation as well as the agencies that operate the programs being evaluated. The authorising environment also includes implicit stakeholders such as program staff, service recipients and interest groups (Mohan, Bernstein & Whitsett 2002). The extent and intensity of the political behaviour are likely to depend upon what is at stake for those that constitute the authorising environment and how powerful stakeholders approach the evaluation process.

Dynamics underlying the politics of evaluation: insights from a change management model

Ideas and concepts from the literature about change management in organisations can assist in understanding the political forces in the authorising environment both hostile to and supportive of the evaluation process (cf. Chin & Benne 1976). Indeed, evaluation practitioners can find themselves challenging the status quo in a program (and/or in an organisation) and may need to act as change agents taking into account the interests represented within this environment.

A model of change management introduced by Stace and Dunphy (2001, p. 109) highlights the importance of appreciating the ‘scale of change’ and the ‘style of change management’ that powerful stakeholders within the authorising environment may *assume* is needed when an evaluation is being planned, conducted or reported. Based on their research and experience, four categories/types of change can be articulated in terms of these two dimensions:

- ‘developmental transitions’, that is, incremental adjustments which powerful stakeholders believe are best managed in a consultative style
- ‘task-focused transitions’, that is, incremental adjustments which powerful stakeholders believe are best managed in a directive style
- ‘charismatic transformations’, that is, wide-ranging changes which powerful stakeholders

believe are best managed in a consultative style, and

- ‘turnarounds’, that is, wide-ranging changes which powerful stakeholders believe are best managed in a directive and/or coercive style.

The ideas and concepts presented by Stace and Dunphy (2001) raise a number of important issues for evaluation practitioners. One of these, for example, is what style/model of evaluation should be adopted when one takes into account the interests and motivations represented in the authorising environment. Melrose (1996) identifies three models: ‘functional’, ‘transactional’ and ‘critical’. In the functional model, the evaluator acts as an external expert who makes judgements then reports to the decision-makers. The transactional model focuses on the context, the stakeholders, their beliefs and actions. Evaluators working from this perspective ask how the program appears to different stakeholders and whether the needs of stakeholders have been met. Critical evaluation aims to empower the group to set their own standards. Program stakeholders ideally initiate and direct the evaluation process, choose the criteria, collect data and use the evaluation to improve their program.

Advocating for the critical model (i.e. arguing that a consultative style is required), when powerful stakeholders have a strong (pre-existing) belief that the program should be ‘terminated forthwith’ (i.e. when they consider a directive style is appropriate and prefer the evaluator to act as an external expert), can be expected to be a highly contentious action on the part of an evaluation practitioner and one that can be expected to bring the politics of evaluation into sharp focus at the outset.

What tools are available to assist evaluation practitioners in these circumstances?

Current wisdom is that evaluation practitioners can use program logic not only for determining what is reasonable and useful to measure but also as a strategy for effecting genuine participation by key stakeholders in the evaluation process. Funnell (1997), for example, among others (e.g. Weiss 1997; Chen, Cato & Rainford 1998; Gardner 2000; Barbier 1999) advocate that program logic has multiple uses such as negotiating the criteria to guide the design of the program, determining the criteria by which program performance will be judged, negotiating levels of accountability (and limitations on accountability) for program performance, developing a shared understanding of the program, and communicating the intent and rationale to outsiders.

From a political perspective one is compelled to ask how easy or difficult this may be. This issue is explored in the next section by drawing on a recent evaluation conducted by the authors. Like many evaluations, the first challenge was to build a program logic that was acceptable to key stakeholders within the authorising environment. This could then be used as the basis for reaching agreement about the criteria by which performance could be judged.

Evaluation of the regional trainers sustainability project

Background

Improving the competence and confidence of professionals to identify suicide risk and intervene effectively has been an integral component of youth suicide prevention strategies implemented in Western Australia since 1989. The underlying premise of this initiative has been that psychosocial problems, particularly in young people, become evident through changes in emotions and/or behaviours. Early identification and referral are expected to assist in reducing suicide mortality and morbidity. To this end a two-day Gatekeeper Workshop was developed for professionals already competent in basic helping skills with young people. The workshop was modelled on the best practice principles for Gatekeeper training outlined by Frederico and Davis (1996) and was designed to increase participants':

- understanding and knowledge of suicidal behaviour in young people
- skills and confidence in identifying, assessing risk and intervening with suicidal young people
- understanding of the issues associated with responding to a completed suicide.

Subsequent development of a train-the-trainer model aimed to decentralise the delivery of the Gatekeeper workshops from metropolitan areas to regional settings, the idea being that local trainers would be better placed to understand the needs of their own communities in relation to suicide and suicide prevention, understand the local resources available for the care of young people at risk of suicide, thereby facilitating intra-agency and interagency networking and consultation within workshops, and be a conduit for referral and/or consultation for suicide intervention.

An evaluation of the initiative to decentralise the delivery of the Gatekeeper workshops from metropolitan areas to regional settings (Chadwick & Goldflam 1999) at the time concluded that the project had:

- strengthened interagency suicide prevention groups
- bridged professional, agency and sectorial differences
- demonstrated the enormous potential of a decentralised model.

The evaluation report also recommended that the network of regional trainers be fully utilised, supported and sustained, and for the model to be documented and made available nationally. By July 2002 there was a total of 58 fully accredited regional trainers in Western Australia and Tasmania. National Suicide Prevention Strategy (NSPS) funding was secured in 2000 for the development of a plan for sustaining the network of trainers. Implementation of this project, known as the

Regional Trainers Sustainability Project (RTSP) is currently overseen by a steering committee comprising a wide range of stakeholders, many of whom have the power to influence the success of the program. The organisations represented on this committee are regarded as critical to the success of sustaining training in the longer term, for example by giving their support for the release of regional trainers to provide workshops and/or releasing staff (practitioners who are not regional trainers) to be trained.

Political agendas in the evaluation of the RTSP

Evaluations can serve many purposes. These include being used to reinforce and validate the program 'as is', and in so doing make a case for ongoing funding pending a few minor adjustments and improvements. Evaluations can also be used to challenge the very basis of a program, which may result in a loss of ongoing funding (cf. Stufflebeam et al. 1971). In light of the range of possible outcomes, key stakeholders within the authorising environment who are involved in focusing an evaluation are not likely to put their own organisation's interests to one side in the development of a program logic. From a political perspective, it is more likely these stakeholders will explicitly or implicitly defend a view of the program that serves their interests.

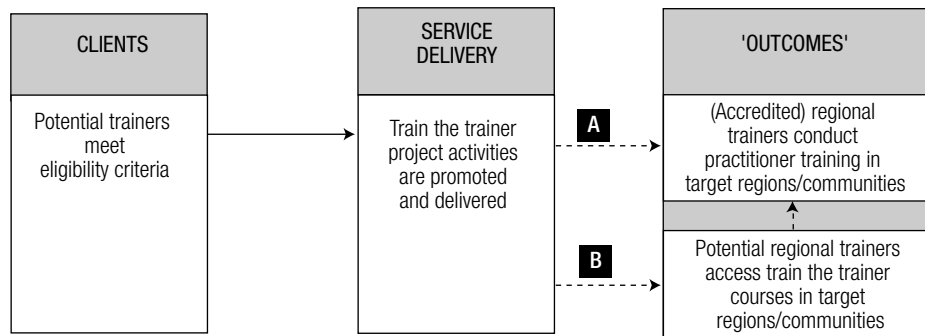
The process of developing a program logic with various stakeholders and reaching agreement about what to measure will surface some of those interests and possible biases. The issue for evaluation practitioners is how to proceed with the development of a program logic when powerful stakeholders within the authorising environment have to a large extent already made up their mind about the 'fate' of the program. Drawing on the change management model outlined previously, we now consider two hypothetical scenarios that were used to inform how to focus the evaluation of the RTSP.

Scenario 1

Scenario 1 is a hypothetical case which assumes the political interests of powerful stakeholders within the authorising environment will be met if the evaluation recommends incremental improvements to the RTSP which are best managed in a consultative style over the medium term (cf. 'developmental transitions', Stace & Dunphy 2001). What issues may surface in light of this?

First, key stakeholders may be adamant that it would be unfair to judge the success of the RTSP in terms of a reduction in self-harm or suicide despite this being the stated aim of the program. Self-harm and suicide, it may be argued is a multifaceted event with no clear, validated cause-effect relationship. Also, given its preventative nature, the self-harm or suicides prevented by the RTSP can never be known. Further, as they may point out, there is evidence in the literature to support this claim. Thus, measuring

FIGURE 1: SCENARIO 1



Notes **A** Project activities include a regional trainers incentive package for conducting local training.
B Project activities include a range of promotional activities.

RTSP success in terms of changes in self-harm or suicide rates in communities that hosted the program, should be deemed to be ‘out of scope’ for the evaluation.

Figure 1 shows what an ‘acceptable’ program logic might look like from this perspective, based on the way a program logic model can be depicted suggested by Unrau (2001).

As shown in Figure 1, the proposed logic incorporates information about the intended client group, the services to be delivered, and the intended outcomes. Acceptable evaluation questions would include what range and type of train-the-trainer activities have been conducted, the number of potential trainers accessing train the trainer activities, and how many of those trained have become active accredited trainers. The answers to these questions would be expected to be used to finetune the program over time with the intent of increasing the number of active regional trainers.

Scenario 2

Scenario 2 is a hypothetical case which assumes the political interests of powerful stakeholders within the authorising environment will be met if the evaluation reveals that the RTSP is fundamentally

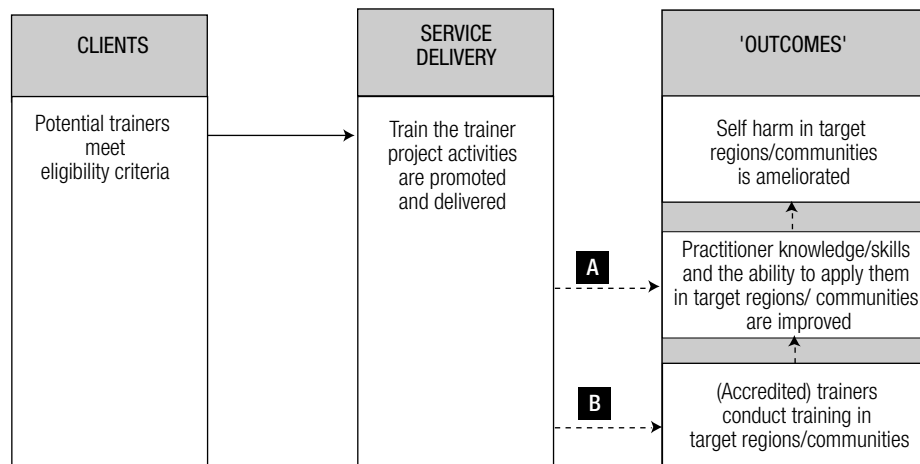
flawed, wide-ranging changes are needed as soon as possible, and these are best managed in a directive style (cf. ‘turnarounds’ Stace & Dunphy 2001).

What issues may surface here? First, key stakeholders may be adamant that it is more than reasonable to judge success in terms of a reduction in self-harm or suicide given this is the stated aim of the program. Thus, while acknowledging that self-harm and suicide may be a multifaceted event with no clear, validated cause-effect relationship, measuring RTSP success in terms of changes in self-harm or suicide rates in communities that hosted the program should be deemed to be ‘in scope’ for the evaluation. In this scenario the political agendas of key stakeholders within the authorising environment will be met if the evaluation recommends an immediate and radical departure from current program activities.

Figure 2 shows what an ‘acceptable’ program logic might look like from this point of view.

Here, Scenario 2 (like Scenario 1) incorporates information about the intended client group and the services to be delivered. However, what counts as an acceptable outcome, and by implication what should be investigated, has changed significantly. For example, evaluation questions would include

FIGURE 2: SCENARIO 2



Notes **A** Project activities include workplace mentoring of practitioners by regional trainers.
B Project activities include a regional trainers incentive package for conducting practitioner training.

not just how many of those trained become active accredited trainers, but whether those trained by accredited trainers actually apply their new skills in the workplace, and more importantly whether, over time, self-harm and suicide in the communities where those trained work, is ameliorated.

The politics of program logic

The central argument of the present paper is that the development of a program logic for the purposes of focusing an evaluation can be a highly politicised process. This is because stakeholders within the authorising environment (by definition) have a *stake* in how programs (and their sponsoring organisations) are perceived, and in some cases may build coalitions with other stakeholders to ensure this is a shared view (positive or negative).

We offer the following advice when focusing an evaluation is a highly politicised process.

First, evaluation practitioners may find it helpful to acknowledge that using program logic to focus an evaluation will be a highly politicised activity when stakeholders' interests are threatened. Some stakeholders, for example, are likely to strongly resist focusing an evaluation on certain outcomes. Returning to our hypothetical examination of the RTSP, investigating the extent to which service providers apply (in their day-to-day work) what they have learned from regional trainers may be strongly resisted if supporting regional trainers to mentor service providers in their workplace was not allowed for in the funding for the project. Similarly, evaluation practitioners might expect strong resistance among some RTSP stakeholders to any investigation of whether self-harm is ameliorated over time, as they may be driven to show the RTSP in the best possible light. Evaluation practitioners may therefore want to consider what may be lost or gained by ruling certain kinds of questions 'out of scope'. Other issues (not addressed in the present paper) that are intrinsic to the development of a program logic and therefore potentially 'political' include:

- the extent to which consensus can be reached among key stakeholders about the importance of including contextual/setting factors that may or may not facilitate the achievement of program aims in the logic model
- the extent to which consensus can be reached among key stakeholders about the importance of clarifying the assumed links between inputs, activities and their outcomes including the evidence base for these 'cause-effect' linkages.

Second, evaluation practitioners need to consider the decision-making *process* itself in dealing with political dilemmas that will

PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS BASED ON PFEIFFER AND FORSBERG (1993)

- 1 Describe the issues that have arisen, for example a particular stakeholder does not want the evaluation to focus on certain outcomes.
- 2 Identify who has a stake in how these issues are resolved, for example program clients, funders, service deliverers.
- 3 Develop alternative program logics and draw out their implications for the evaluation, for example under Scenario 1 (above) the focus will be on intermediate outcomes of train-the-trainer activities (such as where training is being conducted), whereas under Scenario 2 the focus shifts to what is achieved by building a regional training capability.
- 4 Describe the likely impact on stakeholders' interests of endorsing different logics, for example under Scenario 1 the agency funded to build a regional training capacity may be more likely to be refunded, because the focus is on how many trainers are active, as opposed to whether the practitioners being trained ever use the skills targeted in these workshops.
- 5 Evaluate the pros and cons for each logic in terms of the evaluation standards upheld and violated by it, for example under Scenario 1 a complete and fair assessment of the program may be compromised.
- 6 Decide which logic solution is best and justify why it is THE best (e.g. in terms of 4 and 5).
- 7 Defend the decision to proceed with this program logic against objections.

This process is currently being used to develop an agreed logic for focusing the evaluation of the RTSP.

invariably arise in the use of program logic to focus an evaluation.

The problem-solving process based on Pfeiffer and Forsberg (1993) illustrated in box to left may be helpful.

Conclusions

The present paper has examined the notion that evaluation planning takes place within a politicised environment. Planning issues that can be highly political include what questions are worth addressing, how success can be defined, who should be privy to the information, and how the information should be used. One response by evaluation practitioners to these complexities is to develop a program logic. Developing a program logic is useful as it can reveal underlying values and assist in determining which values will be most important for the purpose of the evaluation.

Based on our work to develop a program logic for the evaluation of the RTSP, we suggest the following. First, find a framework for understanding the political agendas that key stakeholders bring to the table. The literature on change management may be helpful here. Second, use an agreed and explicit process for developing an acceptable logic. Finally, keep in mind that evaluation practitioners bring their own set of interests and expectations to any evaluation, that is, their stake in how an evaluation should be conceptualised, conducted, reported and utilised.

Notes

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- 2 Lisette Kaleveld's background is in anthropology, where her leading interests were in medical anthropology and public health. Since graduating Lisette has gained experience in social science-based research (both qualitative and quantitative), and has been working in the field of evaluation. Lisette has a particular interest in the evaluation of public health programs and outcome measurement.

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Acknowledgments

The authors thank Ms Jenny Cugley and Ms Bronwyn Williams of the Institute for Child Health Research, Western Australia for providing information about the Regional Trainers Sustainability Project. We also thank the reviewers of this paper for their constructive comments on an earlier draft.

STYLE HINT 4:

Tops, tails and trimmings

Abstracts: An abstract is where you summarise, in a pithy, eye-catching way, what is actually in your article. It is *not* the place for background, or for airy generalities about how important the subject area is. That should go into your introduction, if you think it's necessary at all. Remember, the idea is to give the passing reader an idea of what you are writing about, and persuade them that it is interesting. A hundred and fifty words should be plenty – much more than that, and most casual readers will give up on the abstract, in which case it's a pretty good bet they won't bother with the article either.

Conclusions: the purpose of a conclusion is to sum up, succinctly and clearly, what you found or concluded as a result of the research or argument you are reporting – and perhaps to go beyond the confines of the specific case and talk about its broader implications. It is *not* the place to summarise the entire article – especially if you've already done so in the abstract. In future, conclusions that begin 'This article has examined...' will be rigorously pruned by the editors.

If you are writing for unrefereed publication in *EJA*, it's up to you whether you include either an abstract or a conclusion. Refereed submissions still require an abstract. As far as possible, let the subject matter decide the issue.

Pictures: *EJA* actively welcomes illustrations – graphs, diagrams, especially photos – so long as they add something to the reader's understanding of the issues you are discussing (i.e. clipart is unacceptable). But please don't fold them into the word-processing file. Not only do they make for enormous files that clog up our mailboxes (Word doesn't compress pictures), but they create problems for our publisher and designer when they want to convert the files into publishing software.

Photos should be submitted, each in a separate file, as high resolution (at least 266 dpi) JPEGs or TIFs, not bitmaps. Alternatively, you can send them in as hard copy. Graphics should be sent in the format in which they were originally created, with an identification of the software if it is not obvious from the file title. If you do a graphic in Word, please try to save it as a PowerPoint slide, as this will 'freeze' the fonts and the relative positioning of the various objects that make it up.