

Working with non-government organisations: dropping the defences and building bridges

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the professional relationship between evaluators and their clients—in this case a number of non-government organisations (NGOs) that contribute to better NGO engagement in the evaluation process.

Evaluations are often imposed on NGOs by program funders for accountability, impact assessment, practice improvement or policy development purposes. Regardless of the purpose the imposition of evaluation is sometimes resented by program managers who may see evaluation as an unnecessary intrusion on their time, and something which the funder may require but will not benefit them or the people they are working with. For those without previous experience, the view of what evaluation is and does may be tainted by previous negative experiences of reports and assessments that are required for other purposes (such as financial acquittal or performance appraisal).

For the uninitiated program manager, the evaluator's first task may well be to allay those fears. The objections encountered range from: 'you can't measure what we do'; 'we haven't been funded to do evaluation'; 'what would you know about this program anyway—we are the experts'; to 'our business is looking after clients—where does evaluation fit into that?'. These objections—and more—have been encountered by two of the authors of this paper, (the 'evaluators') who for a number of years have evaluated programs designed to improve outcomes for communities, families and children.

In their first meetings with program managers the evaluators encountered varying levels of support for evaluation. While all agreed that evaluation was important some were more engaged in the process than others. The evaluators have noted that there were potentially a range of factors that appeared to influence the level of program manager engagement in the evaluation process, including the methodology and the approach taken by the evaluators. However, the utility of evaluation outputs, such as reports that include a critique of findings and recommendations, is greater when program managers embrace the evaluation process.

Given this observation, the evaluators asked themselves what the keys to successful engagement were. Rather than speculate further about this themselves the evaluators decided to put their beliefs to the test and ask five program managers what the turning point in their acceptance of evaluation was and why they became more supportive of evaluation. Their voices are included in this paper as co-authors with the evaluators. The five program managers represented here are all keen advocates of participatory approaches to evaluation. The paper offers perspectives from evaluators and program managers in order to suggest ways that evaluators can work more effectively with program managers—building bridges—so that evaluations can have greater effect in terms of policy and practice.

Introduction

The authors in this paper include a five program managers and two evaluators. The non-government organisations represented by the program managers are each engaged in an array of different activities with a common theme of programs designed to address family and community issues within the context of local communities. The evaluators worked collaboratively with the program managers on evaluation projects either as independent consultants or under the umbrella of a higher education institution. The evaluators were based in Ulverstone, Tasmania and Darwin, Northern Territory at the time of the evaluations discussed here.

The evaluators observed that in much of their work with non-government organisations generally, there was an initial degree of scepticism about the evaluation and some wariness of the evaluators. While in most cases these feelings subsided as the relationship developed between the evaluator and program manager, some program managers remained somewhat resistant to the end, making it difficult for the evaluators to give a thorough report of findings. Given this observation, the evaluators asked themselves what the keys to successful engagement were. Rather than speculate further about this themselves the evaluators decided to put their beliefs to the test and ask five program managers why they embraced evaluation and valued its importance.

The evaluations which brought the authors together included three Australian Government funded Communities for Children projects (Palmerston/Tiwi Islands, East Arnhem, Northern Territory and Burnie, Tasmania), an Aboriginal community safety initiative built on traditional law based in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, and an innovative project designed to address child safety concerns, based in Alice Springs, Northern Territory. The latter two projects were funded under the Australian Government's Family Violence Prevention Program (FVPP). Each evaluation was tasked to build the evidence base and to demonstrate outcomes consistent with the overarching goals of the Communities for Children and FVPP programs. These evaluations spanned the period from early 2006 to mid-2009.

Literature

There is no single way of doing evaluation. There is not a prescribed approach that must be followed. Rather, the process of evaluation can take many forms and can have many purposes depending on the context, the direction given by funders, the expertise offered by an evaluator and the input provided by staff who are responsible for what is to be evaluated. Some evaluations do not require a high degree of participation or cooperation between funders, evaluators and program managers. Others do—especially those that are formative in

nature. It is from this perspective (formative and collaborative approaches) that the findings presented in this paper are offered.

Evaluation as a formative process

Formative evaluations can be described as part of an improvement process: ‘prospective and proactive’ (Stufflebeam and Shinkfield 2007: 23). In contrast to summative evaluations, formative processes focus ‘on ways of improving and enhancing programs rather than rendering definitive judgement about effectiveness’ (Patton 2008: 114). The kinds of questions asked in a formative, improvement focused evaluation will generally be more qualitative than quantitative. Rather than looking at *the extent* to which a program is achieving outcomes, the evaluation will focus more (though not exclusively) on how and why questions about processes, activities and outcomes. ‘Often the purpose of formative evaluations is to get ready for summative evaluation’ (Patton 2008: 118).

Evaluation as a collaborative process

Michael Patton introduces the idea of ‘utilization-focused’ evaluation which incorporates a ‘process for helping primary intended users select the most appropriate content, model, methods, theory, and uses for their particular situation’ (Patton 2008:37). He explains program evaluations done this way as follows:

Utilization-focused evaluation begins with the premise that an evaluation should be judged by the utility and actual use; therefore, evaluators should facilitate the evaluation process and design any evaluation with careful consideration for how everything that is done, from beginning to end, will affect use. Use concerns how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings and experience the evaluation process. Therefore the focus in utilization-focused evaluation is on intended use by intended users. (p. 37)

Utilisation-focused evaluations will invariably require a degree of engagement between the evaluator, the program managers and staff, particularly at the front end of the evaluation. While this emphasis on the design and development process may seem onerous and unnecessarily time consuming to some, the benefits accrue later in the life of the evaluation when the report produced reflects the needs and anticipated requirements of the program stakeholders. Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007), summarising the benefits of this process suggest that:

Systematic involvement of the intended users in the entire evaluation process helps ensure that they will develop ownership of the evaluation process and findings, develop the necessary understanding of the information, and consequently act intelligently based on the evaluation findings. (p. 444)

While the front end of the evaluation is a useful (if not requisite) place to begin the engagement process, to effectively influence program outcomes, participatory processes must be built in to the entire evaluation process. The purpose of engagement then is for ‘enhancing ownership and thus usefulness of the evaluation results...’ (Greene 2000). Further, Abma (2006: 189-190) argues that ‘social relations in a program context at least partly constitutive of program quality and effectiveness’. Engagement can be achieved through a variety of mechanisms and approaches (see Rogers and Williams 2006). A few of these ways are discussed below.

Continuous Improvement Processes (CIPs) are a way of using action-reflection-planning cycles to engage stakeholders in an iterative approach to program development. CIPs are based on the notion of Action Research, introduced in the late 1940s by Kurt Lewin (1946) and popularized as Participative Action Research (PAR) in Australia by Stephen Kemmis and others (see for example Kemmis and McTaggart 2000) in the 1980s. PAR is established on a cycle (or spiral) of actions that enable a group to collaborate on evaluating and changing the way they work as issues arise. Carr and Kemmis (1986: 165) suggests that there 'are two essential aims of all action research: to improve and to involve'. Incorporated in this approach to research and evaluation is a conscious attempt to reflect critically on practice allowing change to occur both in the participant and in the practice (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000: 590).

An action learning or action research process requires a group to be actively engaged in and contributing to building the collective understanding of the team in what could be described as a 'community of practice' (Wenger 1998) where participation, reification, shared meaning, joint enterprise and identity formation come together within a professional learning community. Gill (2010) suggests that 'reflective inquiry is critical for learning in teams'. Clearly, this way of working is somewhat foreign to many in academic or institutional circles where expertise and knowledge is deemed to be held and controlled by the expert. In a community of practice, the expertise is held by the community itself. The evaluator takes the role of facilitator of community expertise. Some would argue that the objective role of the evaluator is compromised by this approach. However, we argue that it is indeed possible to achieve a balanced role as 'objective observers and engaged partners' (Guenther and Falk 2007a; b).

Participatory approaches to evaluation are not self-indulgent responses to the need for professional learning and engagement. They can form an integral role in evaluations that focus on outcomes and building (evaluation and practice) capacity of an organisation (Fawcett et al. 2003; Suarez-Balcazar and Harper 2003) and a community based initiatives (Miller and Lennie 2005). Further, they can be used as tools for 'empowerment' among other things for the purpose of improvement, community ownership, inclusion, social justice and accountability (Fetterman and Wandersman 2005: 2).

Evaluation with non-government organisations (NGOs)

There is increasing pressure on NGOs to conduct evaluations partly for accountability purpose under the guise of 'performance monitoring' (Poister 2004) and partly to attract funds in a competitive environment (Campbell and McClintock 2003). The pressure on NGOs is summed up neatly by Festen and Philbin (2007):

Seeing evaluation as a lot of added, new work, nonprofit managers often feel they have neither the time, the money, nor the staff trying to track, analyze, and produce evidence of organizational impact. Because nonprofits are overstretched in so many ways, the pressure to "do evaluation" can seem like just one more burden. After all, gathering data costs money. Tracking program participants or visitors costs money. Designing and administering surveys, holding focus groups, and maintaining records costs money. And it all takes time. (p. 3)

There are any number of reasons why many (particularly small) non-government organisations struggle with evaluation. It could be a capacity issue (not having enough or the right people to collect data). It could be about inadequate data management systems (not having the tools to be able to collate and manage data). It could also be about training and

skills. Beyond these reasons it may also be that 'tracking clients in difficult situations may be an extremely difficult task' (Kopczynski and Pritchard 2004: 651). These barriers should not be underestimated.

However, the anxiety resulting from being evaluated may act as a barrier in itself. In more severe cases, this has been described as Excessive Evaluation Anxiety (XEA) and produces symptoms of conflict (accusing evaluators of hidden agendas), withdrawal (refusing to work with evaluators), resistance (stalling and protesting), shame and anger (Donaldson et al. 2002: 263). The psychological reasons for this may be due to a) the need for control; b) need for a positive self-concept; c) the human tendency to maximize rewards while avoiding punishment; and d) prior learning experiences, which may be negative (Taut and Brauns 2003). These reasons are reflected in responses to power relationships, organisational leadership, uncertainty and communication issues, fear of change and the wider socio-political and cultural context of a program (Abma 2006: 190-191). Evaluators can mitigate the effects of these factors by taking them into account when working with program managers. 'It has been argued that continuous communication and involvement of program staff leads to higher acceptance of evaluation' (Abma 2006: 188). Abma goes on to argue that social relations in evaluation are not only useful to 'realize a particular goal (utilization, democracy, justice), but rather are intrinsically valuable' (p. 195).

Methodology

The basis of this paper stems from a desire by the authors to document the experiences of both evaluators and those being evaluated. The approach used mirrors the kind of participatory and reflective approaches used in the evaluations which were the basis of collaboration between the program managers (who represent NGOs) and evaluators. The approach used in the data gathering phase used for this paper was entirely qualitative and used a narrative approach designed to probe for issues that emerged from a set of guiding questions (Bernard and Ryan 2010). In this approach the narrative that emerges from interviews forms the basis of a discussion of implications (Silverman 2000).

The five program managers represented as co-authors in this paper were invited to participate in a focused semi-structured interview, where the questions asked were:

1. Reflect on the time when first confronted with an evaluation: What was your initial reaction?
2. Was there a point at which you saw the worth of evaluations?
3. What contributed to your view of the worth of evaluations?
4. What makes for a good working relationship with an evaluator?

The duration of interviews ranged from about 10 to 20 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were added to an NVivo (qualitative data analysis software) project for thematic analysis, according to established qualitative research principles (Weitzman 2000). Analysis of the data proceeded according to a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006), where theory 'derived from common sense, from observation and from literature' derives hypotheses, which in turn can be tested by further empirical observation (Bernard and Ryan 2010: 266).

Findings

Initial reactions

In each of the projects the evaluators observed that there was a sense of apprehension expressed by program managers involved. From the evaluators' perspectives there was a degree of fluidity and lack of clarity about what to expect from the programs. The evaluation approach prescribed by the funder (particularly in the case of the Communities for Children programs) was unclear and it became apparent that some negotiation was required to clarify roles and tasks. In each case it was apparent that funding did not allow for the evaluator to collect much of the data and that one of the major roles of the evaluator was to support the program managers by designing tools that could be used at the activity level. It would be fair to say, from the evaluator perspective, that there was a degree of obfuscation for all in the early days of the evaluation process. We now reflect on some of the program managers' initial reactions.

Commitment

Two comments from program managers succinctly summarise the feelings of the program managers.

I have always been committed to evaluation...

Right from the beginning I knew it would be worthwhile but I didn't know what the journey was going to be like.

It would be fair to say that there was never a question in the minds of program managers about the worth of evaluation. There was equally a sense of commitment to the process. However, as the second quote suggests, there was a level of uncertainty that was concomitant with the feeling of worth.

Mixed feelings and tension

At one level this uncertainty was expressed in terms of mixed feelings. One program manager commented that:

It was a bleak feeling to tell you the truth... in those early days, there was a question about whose side are they on.

At another level this feeling of uncertainty was expressed in terms of a tension between the recognition that evaluation was important and yet questions about what the results would be:

knowing that this is something that is really important that should be ingrained in the whole process but at the same time, what is going to come out of it?

The feelings of uncertainty were added to by questions about methodology, and the appropriateness of data collection tools:

I've never questioned the value of [evaluation], it's just how it's done to get the information that is helpful.

All of these feelings described by program managers point to the reality that embarking on a long term and often complex process evokes an uneasiness.

Anxiety and vulnerability

The reason for this uneasiness for some was expressed in terms of vulnerability and anxiety by one program manager:

I was keen to be able to participate in the exchange of knowledge and to be able to bounce ideas... but there was also a bit of anxiety because... I was feeling a bit vulnerable... the evaluators were in a position of relative power compared to where we were at...

Another described the feeling as ‘overwhelming’:

I thought ‘oh shit’... and for me it felt overwhelming. Also I felt like I was being directed to do something that I didn't really understand...

These feelings are perhaps what the evaluators interpreted as resistance. While they were well-experienced in research practices, the evaluators themselves, being fairly new to many of the concepts brought to the evaluation (such as program logic), felt to some extent like they too were embarking on a voyage into the unknown,

Cost

The evaluators, in those early days, were somewhat unsure of what was expected of them. It was evident to all of us that the number of consultancy days allowed for by the budgets would only allow for a limited amount of time on each activity. In the case of the Communities for Children programs, 20 days per year (available in the budget) was spread across up to eight activities. It is clear that some program managers felt that the evaluation resources should go a lot further than this. One program manager commented on her early feelings:

At the time I thought it was a ridiculous waste of money.

Others questioned the value for money coming from the evaluation. Regardless, the evaluations proceeded and increasingly, each program manager began to embrace the process.

The point of engagement

There were several triggers that led to this increasing engagement in the evaluation process. The evaluators were intent on providing value for money and while they felt that resources could not reasonably be spent on intensive data collection, they believed that resources should be applied to building evaluation capacity among the program managers and staff.

Collaborative process

For some program managers a factor that contributed to their engagement in the evaluation was the feeling of partnership that emerged as a relationship developed. One described it in terms of ‘working together’:

So when I started to understand that that's what we were doing together and we were really facilitating that reflective practice...

Another described it in terms of a partnership:

[It was when I felt] a sense of partnership and the time that we had a dialogue about what matters and is important... those things built our relationship, confidence.

Underpinning this feeling of partnership was a view that good communication between the evaluator and program manager.

Communication

Communication was discussed by program managers beyond the simple process of exchanging information. Communication was about described in the context of a developing relationship. According to one program manager it was about:

good interpersonal, good communication skills, good listening skills and openness. Being able to really listen to the context.

For another it incorporated sharing knowledge in professional development:

Being around, communicating, being involved with professional development with us, feeding us information...

Conversely, when reflecting on other experiences of evaluation, if communication was not what was expected, satisfaction of and engagement in the evaluation process was not viewed as positively. In that context one program manager commented that:

They didn't contact as much, I wasn't included as much... but the evaluators weren't proactive [communicating with us].

Part of this communication, as noted earlier was about listening to the local context.

Recognition of the local cultural and operational context

The evaluators were conscious of the fact that in several cases, they were external and remote from the evaluation context. How could someone based in Tasmania possibly hope to conduct a credible evaluation of programs being run in Alice Springs, Tiwi Islands, Groote Eylandt and the Gove Peninsula? Program managers indicated that they were less likely to engage in the evaluation process when evaluators did not take time to understand and appreciate the local context. Implied in their comments was a suspicion of evaluation processes that treated the context with apparent total objectivity:

Here in this context, which is so complex, very complex, and without having an understanding you can then misinterpret certain information that you see.

Another program manager commented on the time taken to 'yarn with her team' about local issues and take these on board as a critical factor that built the relationship.

so when I became aware that the [evaluation] team were prepared to take time and yarn with us on issues, understanding what the work was like and what the struggles we were dealing with were and some of our successes, and as we went through the journey and as the relationship built I was able to put aside any anxieties I had about whose side they were on.

Despite the acknowledged intent of the evaluators to communicate on a regular basis, there were still some concerns about the distance between program site and the evaluator. One program manager expressed the view that an ‘on site’ evaluator would have been better.

I wonder if a better way for us to have gone would have been to have a local evaluator who was on site, and this would have cost a lot more money, involved from the beginning.

The evaluators agree with this perspective to the extent that quality is affected by the depth of local involvement in data collection and understanding of the local context. The evaluators note though, that they drew on local knowledge and expertise where possible and at some stage one member of the evaluation team had lived in the region represented by the program. Further, the evaluators believe that there is a case for a combination of the use of local knowledge (with a deep understanding of the context) and ‘outsider’ input (where the evaluator has the capacity to look at the context with an unbiased set of eyes).

Where does the value of evaluation lie for NGOs?

Beyond the need for engagement, the evaluators believed that greater benefit from the evaluation would arise from approaches that added value to programs. With this end in mind, program managers were asked about where they saw value in evaluation. Their responses are described in the following sections.

Opportunity for mutually beneficial and shared professional learning

Early on in the process of the evaluations, the evaluators recognised that if capacity was to be built, opportunities for professional development and knowledge sharing must be made. This took the form of workshops, database development and more specific input for program managers about data and evidence. It would be reasonable to confess that in 2005, when contracts for evaluation services were signed, the evaluators were fairly ‘green’—they had as much to learn as the program managers. While the evaluators sometimes thought of themselves as offering an ‘evaluation service’ to clients the learning that results from engagement in projects was invaluable for their own professional development. The evaluators’ expertise is now far greater than it was, thanks to a large extent, to the exchange of knowledge offered by program managers.

There is a certain reciprocity acknowledged by program managers in this process. They too gained from the evaluators’ knowledge and skill. For example:

I was very much appreciative of the database [that was developed] and I suppose that was an exchange thing, it was a demonstration of a give-and-take process.

Another program manager described the exchange in terms of ‘translation’:

Hearing what the local evaluator said was important, and getting a translation... of whether it was what the government wanted and what they thought was important.

The element of capacity building provided through the evaluations is reflected in the following comment about the ability to attract more funding:

...when [the evaluator showed] us things that were put together that could show us success, how things worked I could start to see how you could prove how things worked and therefore seek more funding...

Further to this, one of the things that program managers found particularly valuable, was the opportunity for professional learning.

I guess when you see something tangible... we had a workshop at [the university campus] with service providers about how to do better evaluations, and seeing that and how that worked, taking that on board was part of my turning point. Not an evaluation report, but a physical something that you can see rather than a concept.

The above comments suggest that the evaluation process was mutually rewarding. Embedded in these realisations about factors that contribute to engagement is an implied value that ensues from engagement.

Critical feedback and legitimisation

The evaluators saw their role as critical friends. Given that the evaluations were all formative in nature, this role was vitally important. If changes needed to be made to programs then the constructive critique offered by the evaluator—whether formal or informal—would be important. Program managers, while acknowledging that this role caused them some initial anxiety, were quick to also comment on the value of critical feedback. For example:

It might highlight some of the things that you intuitively know you need to change in your work but because you are so busy in your day-to-day work you might not progress that in a way you think you should because you just don't have the time. But it actually points this out in a formal way. It is a funny thing—it gives you permission to do that.

The comment points to the reality of a busy day to day schedule where the focus is on service delivery and meeting the immediate needs of clients, the funding body and staff. The opportunity for critical reflection, then becomes an important point for review, as the following comment suggests:

Maybe we need someone to actually say, 'hang on you are putting in all this effort here. Are you getting the results for that, is that what people want?'

But this critical reflection process can also be used to legitimise processes and activities. Having someone with an objective pair of eyes confirm that a program is on the 'right track' can be just as important for program managers:

When I started to recognise that we were going to be working together on this; when you guys came in and we had already started the reflective practice process, you gave external legitimisation to the importance of doing that.

Opportunity for building the evidence base

The evaluators saw part of their tasks as supporting the process of building an evidence base, both for the NGO and for the broader community. Program managers too, saw value in this aspect of evaluation. One commented specifically on the importance of using data to support service delivery improvement:

It is when I could bring it down to getting data and information that related to the effectiveness of the operational stuff we were doing. Were we making a difference as a result of what we were doing was that occurring? That is the stuff that I value about evaluation.

Another saw evaluation as an opportunity to determine impact on service users.

I think that some of the information [the government] wanted us to collect was the sort of information that they could break down into how many people were being serviced at what cost. Now I tend not to come from that perspective... I would rather see how behaviour has changed or how ideas have changed around early childhood [compared to how it] was then.

Note that in the above perspective there is a view that the funder is more interested in evaluation for accountability purposes. The evaluators would agree with this perspective insofar as it reflects the key performance indicators that are often sought by funding bodies to justify a program's existence. The need for a broader focus on outcome measures as well as performance measures is implied by the statement above.

Potential for funding

Some program managers saw a direct link between the outcomes of evaluation and the potential for attracting future funding. While not necessarily reflected in comments here, each program manager has used evaluation reports for this purpose. One in particular attributes the evaluation report directly to achieving recurrent funding:

I'm sitting here now with a sense of achievement from multiple points of view, looking back and knowing that we are likely to get that recurrent funding and we wouldn't have been able to do it on our own.

Another program manager offered this advice for program managers:

Be proactive in seeking the evaluation, at the beginning and be involved. It assists you with report writing, with getting funding down the track...

The potential for attracting future funding, while not a driver for evaluation, is seen as one of the spin-offs that emerges from evaluation. In a cooperative approach to evaluation, the evaluators believe that it is possible to support the ultimate objectives of an NGO—including those that affect the sustainability of programs. The evaluators' experience suggests that it is more difficult to achieve these ends when relationships are less well developed.

Improving the relationship with the evaluator

By taking heed of the above findings as evaluators and program managers see real opportunity to enrich evaluation outcomes through improved relationships. We do not wish to suggest however, that there is no need for objectivity in evaluation. Clearly, impartiality is important. Unbiased findings and recommendations can sometimes be a point of tension—and at times that kind of objectivity has placed some pressure on us both as evaluators and program managers. However, what we do wish to suggest, is that for program managers and evaluators alike, a healthy, respectful and mutually beneficial relationship adds considerable value to the outcomes of an evaluation.

Availability of evaluators to program managers is another issue which affects the relationship. Program managers appreciated having the evaluators 'at hand' to discuss their concerns. While it was preferable that this availability was face to face, having ready access to the evaluator by phone and email was desirable. Program managers' comments about their experiences of feeling uninvolved and excluded from the evaluation process point further to the contrast between what they see as a good evaluation and one that is not.

Relationship building takes time. Program managers commented on the importance of allowing for the necessary time required to build a relationship during evaluation.

Implications

The argument that we present in this paper is premised on the assumption that participatory approaches to evaluations are important for quality in formative evaluations where the evaluation is designed to influence the outcomes of the program in question. This premise is consistent with the literature discussed previously (see Evaluation as a formative process, page 3). Engagement in evaluation is important for improved program outcomes. In this context, evidence therefore, is not required to demonstrate outcomes (though it may do so) as much as it is required to demonstrate the learnings that emerge from the ongoing development of the program in question. The value that arises from the opportunity for mutual learning and shared professional development is of paramount importance to both the NGO and the evaluator.

From an accountability perspective this understanding of the purpose of evaluation has significant implications for cost and effectiveness. If the evaluators and program staff, together with relevant stakeholders, can work collaboratively to identify factors that contribute to more effective and efficient delivery of services to clients this can be seen as a win for the funder and a win for the community into which the intervention is delivered.

Alongside this objective, the role of the evaluator is not only concerned with gathering evidence and reporting (objectively) on the findings. Instead, the evaluator adds value to the program by enabling the professional growth of stakeholders in the program. Evaluation then, is seen as a part of the working environment, not an add-on. In effect, the evaluator becomes a partner in the program. As a result, the quality of data obtained in this kind of process is improved because of the trusting relationship built between the program manager and the evaluator. Again, the experiences noted and comments made by program managers is confirmed in the literature discussed earlier (for example Donaldson et al. 2002; Abma 2006).

We acknowledge though, that the kind of formative and collaborative work suggested here requires a degree of flexibility (on the part of the evaluator in particular) and a considerable amount of time. In the case of the evaluations that brought the authors together, this in most cases amounted to at least two years. However, particularly for Indigenous contexts, this flexibility and time is essential, if stakeholders are to engage.

We also acknowledge that the time and collaborative work requirements of the kinds of formative approaches that were the basis of this paper may add costs to the evaluation itself. This cost (as shown in the responses) can be an initial sticking point for program managers until they are satisfied that they are not going to be 'ripped off' and could be a reason for non-engagement.

Conclusions

We return to the questions posed in the Introduction: Why it is that some non-government organisations embrace the process of evaluation, and others do not? The responses from program managers in this paper give us several clues as to the answers. First it should be noted that it is not a question of commitment to evaluation. All program managers represented in this paper acknowledged the importance of evaluation right from the start. However, when confronted with the external evaluations we were engaged with, the program

managers expressed some initial mixed feelings and feelings of anxiety and vulnerability. Some questioned the cost of the evaluation.

The point of engagement in the evaluations came at different times for different reasons. However, there were some common themes that emerged from program managers. First, a sense of ownership came when they realised that the evaluation was a collaborative process rather than something that was being done to them. Second, engagement in this collaborative process was built around strong and open communication between the evaluator and the program manager. Third, active participation was supported by a recognition and understanding of the local cultural and operational context by the evaluator. Finally, when program managers see that the evaluation has a mutual benefit, they more willingly engage. In particular, this was described in terms of the importance of professional learning that evaluators can bring to a program.

That benefit of evaluation for program managers was identified in a number of ways. Three important areas discussed were: 1) the value of critical feedback and the way evaluation legitimised program activity; 2) the opportunity arising from evaluation for building the evidence base in their field of interest; and 3) the potential for using evaluation reports as a vehicle for accessing additional funding.

While we cannot of course speak for those non-government organisations who do not engage, the lessons learned from this exercise suggest that evaluators need to be proactive in building their relationship with program managers. It is as if there is a kind of resistance hump that needs to be climbed before the benefits begin to run naturally downhill as it were. Those that do not engage seemingly do not overcome the resistance factors of cost, anxiety and tension. Those that do are driven by their commitment and go on to realise the mutual benefits of collaborating.

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