

Evaluation of an Initiative to Reform Government Contracting for Human Services: Part II Future Implications and Lessons Learned

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Purpose of Project

- Contracted by a major membership association to assess the degree to which reform in two large state human service agencies aligned with a comprehensive framework which was collaboratively developed to facilitate and guide this reform.
- External evaluators were brought into the project after this framework had been developed.
- Evaluators asked, using this framework, to assess the level of reform that these agencies had implemented through a multi-method approach that included government representatives and providers of these services.

Overview of Methodology

- Conduct and complete study within a 9-month period engaging stakeholders in data collection within a 6-month period.
- Government representatives were asked to complete an on-line survey.
- Conduct site visits at participating human service agencies that included individual interviews as well as focus groups, one with each agency.
- On-line survey to human service providers who contract with either one or both of these agencies.



Challenges

- Evaluators brought into the project midway – not engaged in the planning stage of this work.
- Government representatives not involved in the design and development of the framework.
- An aggressive (read short) time line used to get the work done.
- Contracting agency heavily involved in the design of the study.
- And, as we shall see, heavily involved at the end – when results were being generated and findings were being interpreted.



Considering the Political Context

Eleanor Chelimsky (2009) wrote in reflection about her experience as the Assistant Comptroller General of the U.S. General Accounting Office for Evaluation and Methodology for 14 years:

“Most discussions of evaluation policy focus on the substance and process of doing evaluations. However, doing evaluation in government requires careful consideration not only of evaluation but also of the larger political structure into which it is expected to fit.”

Political Context (con't.)

Chelimsky (2009) goes on to say:

“success for evaluation in government depends as much on the political context within which evaluation operates as it does on the merits of the evaluation process itself.”

Chelimsky (2009). Integrating evaluation units into the political environment of government: The role of evaluation policy. In W.M. Trochim, M.M. Mark & L. J. Cooksy (Eds.), *Evaluation Policy and Evaluation Practice New Directions for Evaluation.*, 123, 51-66.

Political Pressures

Three levels of political pressures, those stemming from:

- Democratic structure and process itself
- Bureaucratic climate
- Dominant professional culture within the agency

Political Pressures (con't.)

- Democratic structure and process itself
overall checks and balance -- vying for power,
engaging in political partisanship can create a tug-
of-war over the entire study process, drive policy
development and dominant the evaluative agenda

Political Pressures (con't.)

- Bureaucratic climate

the welfare of the agency is the primary political concern, optimizes agency defense, fostering self-protective, and territorial behavior



Political Pressures (con't.)

- Dominant professional culture within the agency (might be law, science, audit) political pressures on evaluation focus on differences between the methods, standards, and values of one profession versus those of another



Political Pressures (con't.)

- All three levels can exert pressure concurrently

Political pressure directed at the present evaluation was most evident from:

- Bureaucratic climate
- Dominant professional culture within the agency

Political Pressures (con't.)

Can (and in the present case did) affect the evaluation at two important stages:

- At the design stage (the use of a particular method, selecting the sample)
- At the final stage (when results were being generated and findings were interpreted)

At the Design Stage

Given the opportunity, what could we have done differently?

Preferably we should have been involved in the project much earlier:

- To provide more opportunity to understand the political context
- And perhaps use a different methodology or approach in this study



At the Design Stage: Different Methodology

- First, it would have been imperative to have included government representatives in the initial development of the framework.
- Given the chance, we may have elected to use work groups instead of the survey methodology that was used.
- Given a work-group methodology we may have actually had the opportunity to use a Delphi method to seek consensus around priority areas, develop strategies to use to bring about reform, and identify potential change agents.
- May have been able to systematically divide the framework into workable bits rather than treat the framework as a whole set (current framework does not address how change might happen).



At the Report Stage

The contrast between the dominant professional culture within the agency and evaluation culture was perhaps most evident at this stage:

- Agency culture supported results presented as bullet points or sound-bits, in contrast to
- A detailed, comprehensive evaluation report that was not compatible with the dominant culture of the agency



At the Report Stage (con't.)

Resolved these issues by:

- Preparing a summary report that was much shorter and more manageable
- Creating a summary table, which condensed a large amount of information (read dashboard or report card)

Context in which the Evaluation is Conducted

Chelimsky (2009) noted:

The context never stands still, that is ideas, policies, and political alliances are in constant flux, and, this has ramifications for both the evaluation process and the policy use of findings.



How We Might Have Contained this Movement:

- The development and use of a Policy Theory of Change Model (ala a Program Theory Model or Theory of Change Model) would have substantially grounded the work*
- Such a model may also have slowed down the morphing that occurred during the project or at least provided the structure to help identify that a change in conceptual thinking was occurring
- Such a model would have placed the necessary strategies and identified agents of change needed to support this reform front and center in these discussions (a necessary companion to a work-group methodology).

*[See for example: Donaldson, S. I. (2007). *Program theory-driven evaluation science: Strategies and applications*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum. Falcone, S. (2003). Modeling differences: The application of the logic model to public policy analysis. *The Innovative Journal* 8 (June – August).]

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