Making The Most of Evaluation:
Those who throw Stones shouldn't live in Glass Houses
by
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Have you ever met a coordinator who had only one CAPE (Citizen Advocacy Program Evaluation) experience but reported being so scandalised by the results and personally devastated by the process that they (and the program's Board) decided never to hold a CAPE again? In every case where I have directly seen this situation, the program has deteriorated to the point where its identity as a CA program is in serious doubt. What a pity that a single experience should elicit such a response! What is the cause and what might be done to prevent CAPE — and evaluation generally — being seen as a destructive process to be avoided at all costs?

The irony is of course is that by its nature advocacy exposes circumstances of lowly people and in so doing asserts irresponsible or even destructive conduct by other parties. Yet too many Citizen Advocacy programs *refuse* to impose the same level of scrutiny upon their own conduct that they insist be placed upon others. Could this be seen as a bit hypocritical? Accountability in many areas of civic, legal, community and commercial life has increased markedly in recent years. Quality Assurance is now an expected and even demanded feature of many areas, including OH&S, grievance procedures, safety in the workplace, and so on. Imagine an airline trying to get away with slack safety procedures! Sometimes there are even evaluation tools designed to ask the searching yet specific questions inherent in some specialised areas. Many areas of science, industry, and medicine have such tools. In human services we have had the benefit of P.A.S.S.I.N.G. And in Citizen Advocacy we have had the benefit of CAPE.

It has always been understood (though easily forgotten) that the benefit of evaluation comes from *acting on* the findings. What is difficult to predict is how well a program might receive its evaluation results. An enthusiastic response naturally generates energy and motivation helpful to the thorough implementation of recommendations. A response of dismay and devastation is more likely to give rise to denial, recrimination against the team and/or team leader, and possibly complete withdrawal from the business of regular and systematic evaluation. This will almost certainly result in a decline in the quality of the work being undertaken by an advocacy office or even a decline in its capacity to remain true to its purpose.

This article is an attempt to outline some of the possible variables that influence the success of an evaluation effort. Parties wishing to make the most of their evaluation experiences may find that attending to these variables produces more beneficial results. I will discuss these variables as they affect the two main parties,[1] the program itself, and the evaluation team.

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[1] There can sometimes be other parties of course; funders, government instrumentalities, family members of protégés, etc., who exert pressure on programs to be evaluated – sometimes against the express wishes of a program. However, this article will restrict its discussion to the issues between the evaluated and evaluator parties.

A.   Variables associated with the program seeking evaluation

Is the purpose of the evaluation clear to everyone associated with the program's operation? This question assumes that the more a program understands the role played by evaluation in bringing excellence, the more it will wholly embrace the results it receives. A program that has internalised this need for evaluation is much more likely to embrace the results of an evaluation than one which sees evaluation as an externally imposed requirement, unjustifiably intruding into the affairs of an 'independent entity.' "How dare you say that about us!" Such a perspective might over time lead to a program serving the needs of the staff and board and once again forgetting the protégés, the people for whose benefit the program claims to exist.

1. Does the program undergo evaluation voluntarily (for the right reasons of course), or under compulsion? Individuals and groups of people — like a Citizen Advocacy Board — will be motivated quite differently depending on whether they *feel* compelled to act under regulation or whether they seek an opportunity for improvement through an evaluation process. Thus, the manner in which a program enters an evaluation exercise will dramatically affect its response to the findings.

2. Does everyone in the program (both staff *and* board) understand the nature and meaning of the questions being asked in an evaluation? For example, if the questions are understood — and expected — then the results will come as less as a surprise. If a program has a poor understanding of where a team is coming from, then it is more likely to be scandalised by comments and recommendations from the team. For this reason, it is often a valuable and even essential practice to hold a workshop prior to an evaluation which thoroughly goes over basic understandings of program operation, the nature of the forthcoming evaluation, the major questions it will be asking and why they are being asked. This is beneficial even for very experienced programs.

3. Is the Board motivated by an awareness that it is 'merely the steward' of a program and is obliged to ensure effective Citizen Advocacy practice? Part of the obligation is to arrange and conduct regular evaluations. For example, a program may either not know of or has rejected the need to assure good practice within its program. If it doesn't realise this, a program may be 'insulted' and 'offended' by the critique of an evaluation team.

4. Is external evaluation just one of a standard feature of the program that ensures effective practice? Do staff and the Board engage in systematic practices that monitor their own work on a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly basis? If so, the timing and expectation of external evaluation lie within the standard practices of a program and are not regarded as an unwelcome intrusion into the cycle of work. There is much to be learnt by staff and Board together as they undertake regular reviews of their work including learning from and assimilating the results of external evaluation.

5. Are staff and Board open to being taught and learning from a process of critique? Often staff can subtly and unconsciously develop barriers against further learning. Some new staff can arrive into a coordinators position with such barriers having obtained strong though unhelpful worldviews, ideologies and assumptions from prior training and experiences. This could either predispose them to being

prepared to acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses, or to the exact opposite. Such predispositions may be important for Boards to ascertain when interviewing prospective coordinators or during their probationary period.

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6. Can parties handle the emotionality attached to 'ownership', sacrifice and investment in a program? Such emotionality, when not balanced by a well-developed capacity for rational examination of practices and beliefs, can become so distorted as to make it difficult to examine even obvious facts. This is especially true for Citizen Advocacy because it generates a strong emotional response in staff towards the plight of people and the staff's prolonged efforts to find and potentiate relationships. Such emotionality must be balanced by rational and searching examination of one's practices.

7. Relatedly, is the program essentially satisfied with the job it does, keeping in mind that for humans, excellence is rare and must be relentlessly strived for? Self-satisfaction seems to correlate strongly with programs which don't require evaluation — they know they are 'good already' — and will certainly be reluctant to hear anything to the contrary.

8. Has the program a structured way to implement its recommendations? This usually requires some additional strategies, such as an evaluation sub-committee that systematically works through all recommendations to completion. This in itself could take two to three years; just in time for its next evaluation!

Ultimately, to make the most of evaluation, a program as a whole has to *want* the evaluation to occur and *look forward* to what it might reveal. Certainly, it would be rare for someone not to be a bit anxious at the prospect of hearing feedback, but what must remain uppermost in the mind of a program is how it can use this feedback to become stronger and do its work better. Sparing anxiety for some people (or even just one person) is not worth compromising the future wellbeing of the program and ignoring the benefits evaluation can bring to so many lives. It is vital to accept as reality what external evaluation may show the program.

B. Variables involving the evaluating party

Teams and team leaders make an enormous difference to the receptivity of a program to evaluation findings. How many programs have received CAPE feedbacks *they could not understand*, where teams in effect dumped the results on the program's door and fled? No wonder the program was scarcely motivated to use the recommendations! For a movement based on the strength of voluntary and committed relationships, such behaviour is a deep and embarrassing shame. This is, after all, a form of *peer* review!

Below are some suggestions for what a team leader and team might do to increase the likelihood that a program welcomes and embraces a team's findings.

1. Is the team leader well chosen? Does he or she have sufficient experience with CAPE in particular and evaluation in general? Has the team leader been mentored by others who are known for their excellence (albeit with imperfections) in conducting rigorous and disciplined evaluations?

2. Is the team well chosen, so that it consists of a well-balanced group of individuals from various programs, from various roles and with varying levels of experience? Is the team task-oriented and focussed on the work at hand, capable of collaborative and disciplined service to the program?

3. Has the team leader developed a relationship, or at least had constructive discussions, with the program? If not, the team leader will operate against a background of unexpressed assumptions and method of critique.

4. Has the basis of the evaluation been made clear to the program? Has the program been made aware of the fact that the purpose of the evaluation is to assess the performance of the program and to provide some constructive feedback about that? In this respect, the program gains a clearer idea of the team's intentions and of how the team will operate within those expectations. That is, there should be no surprises!

5. Does the team regard the evaluation as a constructive exercise for *all* concerned? In other words, is the team clear in its intention to serve the interests of the program, and not just its own interests for learning or to 'get even,' or other such destructive intent? With this in mind, team members must be willing to greet and socialise with board and staff, and following an evaluation stay for questions, comments and feedback. In other words, they must be 'present' *for the program.*

6. Do the team members conduct themselves impeccably during the evaluation? Clearly, the team must be focussed on the task at hand, be on time for interviews, treat interviewees well (by listening well, focussing on them, and setting aside sufficient time for people to be heard) and relate to the staff with great respect and in a sincerely warm manner. Evaluation is not a witch-hunt, though it will reveal weaknesses — but "no amount of evidence is worth being rude". (Tom Doody)

7. Are the team and team leader able to provide feedback verbally and in writing in ways that the hearers are more likely to appreciate and understand? Sometimes a team may discover serious threats to the program's identity, efficiency and/or viability, causing many team members to become anxious over the team leader's capacity to relay sensitive information to a program. This is a most reasonable concern, because if feedback is given poorly, even if the content is accurate, then the program's willingness to undertake the teams' recommendations may be undermined.

8. Have the team leader and the team been able to identify the 'overriding issues' for a program and how these issues affect the many features of program practice? This is a crucial requirement, otherwise a team may provide 'low level' feedback that fails to accurately identify the *major* features, both

positive and negative, within a program that account for its performance. Nothing defeats the intention of an evaluation more than to receive heavy feedback on trivial matters. If a team wants a program to remain serious in its effort for growth, then it must pitch its results accurately and with the appropriate level of emphasis.

9. Will the program have the opportunity to engage with the team either during or after the verbal feedback? Major advantages accrue to a program if the team remains for discussion. For example, discussion might reveal major misunderstandings that can easily be addressed by further explanation or background material. Is further explanation or even teaching of certain points required? Does the program require support to implement some of the recommendations? How can it implement that which it can't understand? Program feedback is a valuable feature quite in keeping with the climate of peer review. We would certainly hope for the same consideration when they come to visit us!

10. Can the written report be understood by most of the people who will read it? Reports vary widely (and wildly) as does the writing experience of report writers. It is an acquired capacity but an excellent source of learning in its own right. Report writing requires effective editorial support as well — not only at the technical CA level, but also for spelling, punctuation and grammar. After having had my reports edited by Dr Wolfensberger himself, I really know the importance of effective editorial support. To release a poorly written, mistake-laden report can be devastating to the standing of the team's effort and to CAPE in general.

11. Does the team provide an opportunity to get precise (written) feedback on its conduct of the evaluation? Is feedback obtained from informants and the program to assess key aspects of the evaluation? Teams learn a great deal from feedback on their own conduct; it could carry some surprises!

12. Is there ongoing support *from the evaluators* to the program in its efforts to implement the recommendations of the report — or is it left high and dry? A program will need time to digest a report and systematically implement the recommendations (as mentioned in A.9 above). But it may need help. The team leader especially (and sometimes relevant experienced team members) may be a key point of contact for further explanation, conveying of nuances, and commenting upon various strategic approaches for program change.

Between both parties there is a very high level of trust. The need for Trust is not new to Citizen Advocacy. Protégés trust us to find them a good advocate; advocates trust coordinators that they are the right fit; we trust advocates that they will act well; Boards trust staff that they will be disciplined and focussed; staff trust Boards that they will steer the program in the right direction; programs entrust a team with confidential information and teams trust that their good efforts to serve the program will not be used against them. The trust of good intention *must* be a two-way street if peer review is to work.