

# **Evolution of Learning: Positioning Evaluation within a Comprehensive Performance Management System**

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# Reference

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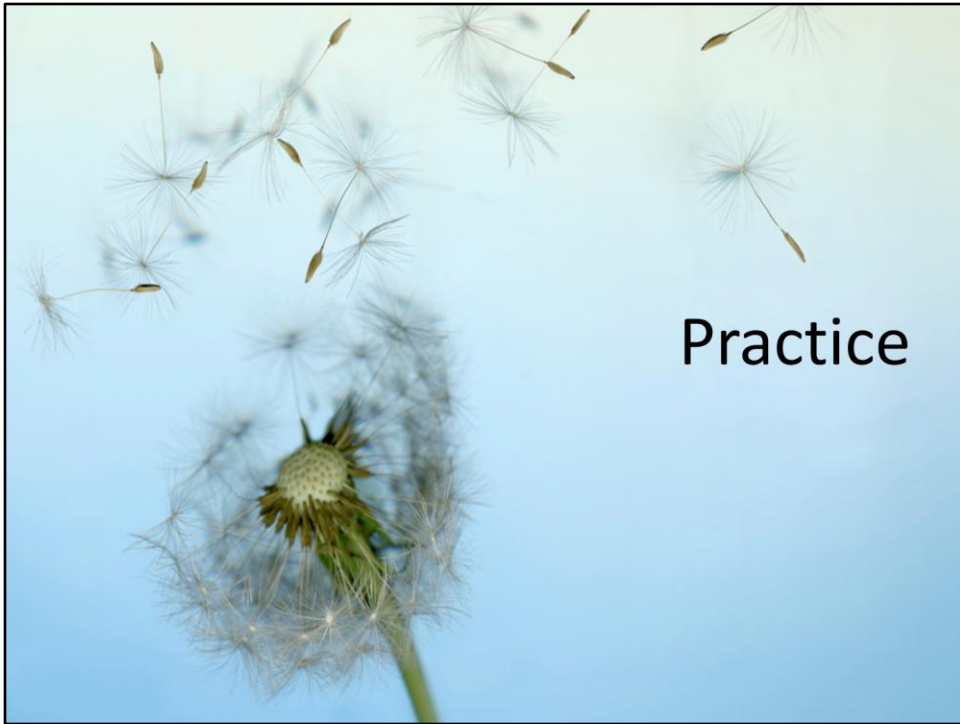


\*At its core, the concept of PM is one of *systematic learning*.

\*By systematically gathering and using data for decision-making, this will lead to improved decisions, better programs, and ultimately better outcomes for program participants.

\*Practice of PM has existed in different forms for at least 30 years, but recently there has been a renewed focus on PM among government agencies, nonprofits, and foundations.

\*Demands for PM are generally associated with calls for more informed decision making, evidence-based decision making, increased transparency, and accountability.



## Practice

\*So why has PM failed to generate a seachange of practice? Why are we not seeing better outcomes?

\*In practice, many PM systems are more focused on creating 'accountability' and 'transparency' and 'creating data' than they are with promoting learning.

\*One reason learning is lacking: PM frequently excludes rigorous program evaluation.

## PM systems often **exclude** program evaluation.

\*Current paradigm of PM tends to favor simplistic quantitative indicators – simple dashboards and scorecards and used to track, communicate, and assess program outcomes.

\*Such a system seems to offer simple answers to complex questions of program implementation and effectiveness.

\*Evaluation seems too complex, too academic, too time consuming, too squishy.

\*Research shows many managers use monitoring data as the sole way of evaluating their program.

\*Monitoring has supplanted the role of evaluation in many systems of PM.

\*Represents an impoverished concept of program evaluation, because monitoring data cannot address crucial questions about **why** certain outcomes occurred or **whether** the program caused those outcomes.

\*Without exploring these questions, decision makers lack the information they need to know what changes should be implemented, and whether a program is producing expected effects.

# Complementary knowledge:

## Monitoring and Evaluation

\*Pause for a moment to consider the roles of monitoring and evaluation data in a PM system.

\*They have different functions, answer different questions, but both are critical to creating a learning organization.

	Evaluation	Monitoring
<b>Tailoring of information</b>	Specific to the evaluation questions	Standardized across time and sites
<b>Scope</b>	Sample of units	Population (all units)
<b>Methods</b>	Mixed	Quantitative
<b>Availability of information</b>	Less frequent	Potentially real time
<b>Attribution of outcomes</b>	Test causality	Causality assumed

\*Consider the characteristics of monitoring and evaluation data.

\*There are not always hard lines, but some important distinctions.

\*Monitoring data – makes up the core of regularly collected data that informs day-to-day program operations. More operational in nature.

\*Evaluation data – less frequent, but deeper level of knowledge about what is happening in program, and whether outcomes can be attributed to the program.

	Evaluation	Monitoring
Program theory	Asks questions about strategic goals and program theory	
Planning	Questioning assumptions Considering how things fit	
Program implementation	Which areas need improvement? How can the program change? Effect of context?	What is the progress towards goals? What issues need further study?
Assessment of results	Why did these outcomes occur? What unanticipated results occurred?	What are the outcomes?
Attribution of impact	Did the program <u>cause</u> these outcomes?	

\*Differences mean monitoring and evaluation data are suited to answering different types of questions.

\*Monitoring data – particularly appropriate for addressing operational questions around program functioning, implementation, and movement towards expected results.

\*Plays a crucial role in program management by:

- identifying site-specific issues
- finding successes and challenges in implementation
- highlighting general trends or results across time

\*Evaluation data – not only what is happening, but also why.

\*“Why” is critical, but cannot be addressed through the simple indicators used for monitoring data.

\*Evaluation studies create deeper understanding of the program. Consider effects of context.

\*This knowledge is crucial for providing decision makers with relevant information about what specific changes are needed for program improvement. Equally important is evaluation’s ability to assess impact and causality, which cannot be addressed by monitoring data.

\*Evaluation studies tend to be most useful for understanding the overall functioning of the program, providing information on what specific changes could lead to program improvement, and for making decisions at the programmatic level.



Focus is on creating  
data...  
...not using data

\*PM systems tend to focus on creation of data.

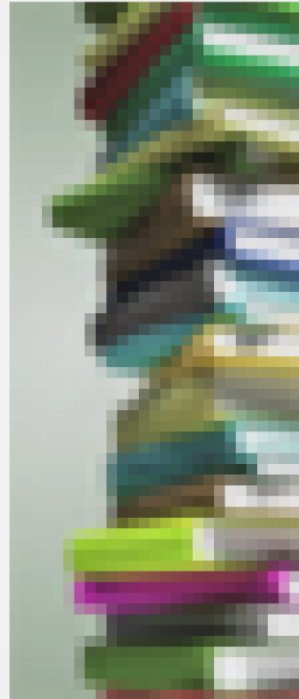
\*Grounded in the belief that increasing the availability of data will heighten accountability, and lead to improved performance and outcomes.

\*But....[next slide]

“...a lack of information does  
not appear to be the main  
problem.

Rather, the problem seems to  
be that available information  
is not organized and  
communicated effectively.”

– GAO, 1995



In the absence of processes and structures to support the use of data in decision making, the production of data is unlikely to improve practice.

# Role of Evaluation in PM

Evaluation's key contribution: Ways to promote learning

# Implementing structures to support learning

Evaluators are skilled at various methods of creating structures to support learning.

We have in the back of our minds that concept of utilization-focused evaluation – how do we help the client learn from the evaluation, and translate those learnings into action?

# Opportunity

PM systems often lack mechanisms to incorporate data into decision-making processes.

Evaluators:

- help institutionalize feedback loops so data are regularly discussed in a thoughtful way by both managers and program staff
- provide the chance for people to engage with the data: analyze data, synthesize results, and critically assess findings

Evaluators are uniquely skilled in guiding stakeholders through discussions of available data with reference to their key questions.

Organizational culture: risk-taking, failure is okay – an opportunity to learn and grow, asking questions

Avoid: ritualistic use of data that does not promote learning; a good litmus test of learning is whether stakeholders are able to explain what they learned from the data, and how their actions were informed (or not) by the findings.

# Capacity

\*Part of engaging staff in learning includes capacity building.

\*Amount of data available has increased exponentially, managers and program staff may not have the skills necessary to interpret data and apply it to their decision process.

\*Evaluators can play a key role in capacity building through both formal and informal interaction, including modeling evaluative thinking skills (e.g., asking meaningful questions), helping stakeholders consider alternative explanations for findings, and brainstorming with clients the ways in which the findings could inform practice.

\*Evaluative thinking: Evaluation has a key role in teaching stakeholders about the thoughtful use of data. Questioning habit of mind. Healthy skepticism. Appreciation of complexity.



Two very practical considerations are mentioned.

# Responsiveness

Acknowledge that managers need to make quick decisions that they didn't always know about last month – you might need to do a quick analysis/data collection to help them get the answer, even though it wasn't part of your scope

Easier when internal – good to have a balance of internal and external folks



# Meaningful reporting

References: Jane Davidson (Real Evaluation)

- \*Reports that actually address meaningful and important questions, and draw a conclusion – valuing part of evaluation

- \*Something other than the 50 pages + (different methods of communication – 2-page brief? postcards? Webpage?)

- \*Data visualization considerations – graphs, formatting – the visual is important – think marketing!

- \*Synthesis across data sources – please!!! Never organize reports according to datasource (e.g., all the survey info, all the observation info) – synthesize across sources to answer the question.



PM is not simply about collecting more data, crafting more measures, or creating more systems. Rather, it is about cultivating habits of mind. Stakeholders are often keenly disappointed when they find that even after reviewing all available data, questions remain and the path forward is not clear. As Mayne (2007) points out, data from PM have “been cast by some as a panacea for improving management and budgeting: users of performance information will have at their fingertips everything they need to know to manage, budget or hold to account. Such is not and will not be the case” (p. 93).

Evaluators can play a crucial role in helping stakeholders understand the promise and limitations of PM (including evaluation), and can help organizations learn to be more comfortable making decisions in the context of inadequate and incomplete information. The goal of PM, and of evaluation, should be to instill an “attitude of wisdom—the ability to act with knowledge while doubting what you know” (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006, p. 174).



**“an attitude of wisdom –**

**the ability to act  
with knowledge while  
doubting what you know”**

*- Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006*