Fitting Developmental Evaluation Concepts into Government Evaluations: Our Journey from Objective Outsider to "Critical Friend" TTORK



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The US Department of Labor awarded Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College Career Training (TAACCCT) grants to community colleges to implement innovative career pathways training programs.

Rather than relying on traditional government-funded implementation study methods, both Hezel Associates, LLC and Social Policy Research Associates incorporated aspects of Michael Quinn Patton's developmental evaluation (DE) approach to evaluations of these grants.

Here we explore the benefits of applying DE concepts—particularly related to shifting the evaluator's role to that of a "critical friend" and using "reflective practice" in evaluation products—in government-funded projects.

The "Critical Friend" Role and Needs "Critical Friend" Challenges & Potential Solutions **Key Factors and Benefits of the "Critical Friend"** Ability to incorporate Critical feedback may damage the Access to critical "reflective practice" Opportunity to Movement from objective, client relationship decision-making develop strong trust and to provide outside observer to "critical flexible, timely and credibility moments friend" embedded in the feedback program's management team Emphasize that critical feedback is for learning Attending all Being a consistent Budgeting time to purposes offer opinions on important meetings presence and • In reports, ensure findings are accurate, and use and trainings enables topics normally offering useful, diplomatic language timely feedback the observation of outside the Enough budget to builds trust with the evaluator's scope and key programmatic attend all key Maintenance of decisions in real-time offering insight gained client A more generous budget is needed trust by not airing from participation in meetings and • SUGGESTION: • **SUGGESTION**: Offer Willingness on to attend meetings and trainings program discussions "dirty laundry" trainings, review to advise on Explain to the both sides to use and to provide timely feedback leads to useful outside of implementation necessary management team this approach feedback that documenting matters where you documents, and management these moments will have expertise; this • **SUGGESTION:** Rather provide desired Rethink deliverables to be less time-consuming team develops credibility enable other than writing staid support Consider alternative formats, like PowerPoint before you have a innovative programs reports, provide presentations and "reflective practice" to learn from their full understanding of frequent, brief feedback program details approach Benefits and Challenges of Reflective Practice **Reflective Practice Key Factors of Reflective Practice** Formally facilitated feedback to debrief program activities, Supplementary Facilitated staff Continuous synthesis Benefits discuss findings, share experiences and perspectives, capture reports reflection of evaluation data lessons learned, and formulate ideas for future project Answers short-term questions; findings quickly activities and processes turned around for program development Additional reporting Regularly scheduled Implementation of Answers longer-term questions to be used for beyond the single cascading data in-person or formative and collection tools program improvement teleconference summative reports meetings to review Increases the utility of evaluation efforts Using a sequential Continuous cycle of data required by the Incorporating dialogue of evaluation data strategy for analysis collection, analysis, funding source findings with traditional collections as data are collected, feedback, discussion, and Challenges deliverables •Examples: building and Evaluators or "critical change annual/quarterly friends" provide realinforming new Maintaining regular participation of staff in the interim reports, analyses and time interpretations reflective process progress updates, recommendations of findings to guide Inflexibility for change within government data summaries, collaborative from previous grant structures short-term findings discussions of next Fidelity to the timeline for both program and recommendations steps in evaluation activities development

Given the current emphasis on collaboration and innovation in federal grant programs like TAACCCT, having the skills as an evaluator to navigate a "critical friend" relationship with embedded elements of reflective practice is beneficial to grantees while still satisfying grant evaluation requirements. This method provides real-time feedback, allowing grantees to make strategic adjustments so they can continually develop, as well as improve, their programs.