Session ID: 2272

Title: *Eval Lab - Increasing Strategic Learning in the Social Sector*

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Abstract
Non-profit organizations are under pressure to increase their relevancy and impact in a complex operating environment. Despite the push for evidence-based decision-making, many non-profits find it challenging to make evaluation part of the life-blood of their organizations. Barriers include resourcing, expertise, mindsets, and organizational readiness. Evaluation is often perceived as judgement rather than as an aid to innovation and adaptation.

In response to this, concepts such as "strategic learning" have emerged to integrate evaluative thinking into strategic action. To explore the possibilities of strengthening strategic learning in the social sector, Eval Lab was launched in 2018 by the Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations, the Community Development Unit (Government of Alberta), and the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Families (University of Alberta). This presentation will encourage participants to reflect on the lessons we have gained from this collaboration and to share their attempts to build capacity in non-profits.

Relevance statement (500 words)
There is a growing awareness in the social sector of the importance of de-mystifying evaluation and systems thinking so that non-profits can make informed decisions to drive change and adaptation (Parsons, 2017). The necessity of adopting methods, approaches, and mindsets that are appropriate to complex and dynamic environments has also been widely recognized (Mignone et al., 2018; Patton, 2011).

But how can the capacities for evaluative thinking and strategic learning be bolstered in non-profits that often face challenges related to resourcing, expertise, and organizational readiness? How can key concepts from the world of evaluation be made more accessible, practical, and desirable to non-profits and the broader social sector?

In order to answer these questions and to explore the possibilities of evaluation in the social sector, Eval Lab was launched in 2018 as a unique collaboration between the Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations (non-profit capacity-builder), the Community Development Unit (Government of Alberta), and the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Families (University of Alberta).

The goal of the Eval Lab is to support evaluative thinking and critical reflection in the sector to improve practices, policies, and research to address complex social issues. The Lab was set-up as a six-month

experiential process where participants from up to 10 different non-profit organizations learned and applied key concepts and methods from the domains of evaluation, social innovation, systems thinking, and strategy. The Lab worked from the assumption that innovation and effective adaptation is driven by the ability of individuals and institutions to turn evidence into insights to shape decisions and actions. This is a complex social endeavour that requires individual and organizational capacities to support sensemaking and strategic learning (Coffman & Beer, 2011)

References

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