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Developmental Evaluation from the Outside:
An External Consultant's Experience

Paper Summary

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Background

Developmental Evaluation (DE) requires the evaluator to assume a relatively new and unique role when compared to more traditional evaluation approaches. The DE role encompasses far more than the basics of data collection and analysis; the evaluator is integrally involved as a program team member, questioner, observer and facilitator throughout the program's lifespan. This role has also been described as that of a "critical friend" who can challenge assumptions while drawing upon best practices and research, as well as understanding the implications of an intervention from a social and political perspective. Drawing from our experience as external evaluators of a foundation-funded initiative, this summary paper sheds some light on some of the challenges that can accompany this novel evaluator role.

What challenges were faced in the DE?

Limited project team capacity

We learned that implementing the DE approach can be challenging when the skills and capacity of the project team are low. When such skills are lacking, increased demands are placed on the evaluation team. For instance, we found ourselves spending the large majority of our time coaching the Project Manager on how to plan and implement the intervention, rather than focusing on the evaluation itself.

Defining boundaries

We also found that the line between conducting the evaluation and helping with project planning tasks can easily become blurred when conducting DE, particularly when working with a project team that has low program management skills. While Developmental Evaluators are to assume a more collaborative role throughout the project's lifespan, time is money for external consultants.

Whistle blowing

Given the integrated role of the evaluator in the DE approach, we also found it difficult to determine if the evaluation team should act as the whistle blower in situations when the project veers off-track. For instance, the Project Manager planned the intervention before conducting the needs assessment. Despite coaching and advice from the evaluation team on the basic steps of project planning, the intervention was implemented without use of the needs assessment data to inform the project's path.

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Data overload

DE is designed to provide the client with timely data throughout the project's lifespan. In our experience, we found that this amount of evaluation data, alongside project-specific activities and tasks, caused a sense of information overload for the client. As a result, critical evaluation data was not used to inform the project's path, despite support and guidance from the evaluation team.

Budget

The evaluation team found it difficult to set an appropriate budget for the evaluation given that there are a number of ambiguities surrounding the DE approach, such as:

- ☑ the number and frequency of project team meetings
- ☑ unknown project intervention
- ☑ capacity of the project team

What are the implications for evaluation practice?

Through the conduct of this project, it has become clear to the evaluation team that Developmental Evaluators require special skills to effectively employ this evaluation approach, such as:

- ☑ basic program planning skills and experience
- ☑ process facilitation skills
- ☑ patience

We would also like to share the following recommendations with evaluators who are embarking on a DE.

- ☑ Before starting a DE, do as much research as you can on the project team you will be working with. Assessing their level of skill and capacity should provide the evaluator with a more informed understanding of their role in the project.
- ☑ Keep your eyes open and take on new experiences

Conclusion

In moving forward, we encourage evaluators to share the challenges and opportunities they encounter when conducting DE. Our practice of this valuable evaluation approach will become stronger as a field if we continue to share and learn from one another.