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Shall We Dance?

Program Evaluation Meets OD in the Nonprofit Sector

By Marty Campbell and Charles McClintock

THE RODGERS AND Hammerstein classic *The King and I* is a clash of cultures, social strata and the sexes – a volatile mix that provides an engaging and enduring love story between a King and a governess. The professional fields of program evaluation and organization development (OD) have existed for about the same 50 years since *The King and I* was first produced on Broadway. Each profession has advanced in its separate spheres with relatively little contact. OD evolved mainly in the corporate sector as a means of humanizing and changing systems. Program evaluation emerged largely from the public sector with an emphasis on accountability and performance. In this article we explore the ways in which OD and program evaluation might initiate a duet of song and drama that will lead to greater collaboration for strengthening the nonprofit sector.

The nonprofit sector is critical to improving the human condition and strengthening social capital in areas such as education, the arts, health and human services, philanthropy, human rights and environmental integrity. Foundations have

long been interested in using evaluation to leverage their support for the nonprofit sector. Evaluation goals are usually a combination of accountability, knowledge generation, and program improvement. With rising interest in building grantee capacity and increasing nonprofit effectiveness, foundations are also looking to evaluation to support the broader purpose of organizational improvement. In order to have greater impact, many foundations are seeking longer-term relationships with fewer grantees—a strategy that usually implies a strong emphasis on performance measurement. In this circumstance, foundations are interested in the capacity of grantees to self-evaluate and continuously improve. Despite these lofty strategies and intentions, however, foundations struggle to improve themselves and their grantees through evaluation.

We as authors emphasize the need for using evaluation to improve more than to prove. In the foundation field, this contrast is referred to as using evaluation for purposes of learning as opposed to accountability. This distinction mirrors a long history in the field of program evaluation contrasting formative

inquiry (for program improvement) and summative inquiry (for final judgments of program effectiveness). (For an early description of formative evaluation that includes attention to organizational dynamics see McClintock, 1986). While both approaches are necessary, there are few evaluators who possess both the research and OD skills necessary to make evaluation useful for program improvement.

We speak from the front line of using evaluation to strengthen the nonprofit sector. The James Irvine Foundation has made a substantial commitment to evaluation as the first foundation on the West Coast to create an evaluation office. Irvine recently partnered with Fielding Graduate Institute, through their Center for Innovation in the Nonprofit Sector, to offer training for nonprofit program evaluators that will develop their OD skills. This initiative is a serious effort to move beyond the rhetoric of collaboration between the two professional fields to develop a new kind of professional – one who blends research and organizational change skills that are used to nurture self-assessment, reflection, dialogue and action among nonprofits and the foundations that support them.

A KINDER AND GENTLER EVALUATION

While both fields can learn from each other, our analysis focuses on ways that program evaluation can learn from OD. In this sense the field of program evaluation is more like the King

whose overly rational and unsentimental ways mirror the historic evolution of the field as a research enterprise. Similarly, the field of OD, which is more like the Governess and shares her emphasis on the heart, could benefit from the empirical emphasis in the field of program evaluation as a means of carefully documenting claims for interventions that would temper expectations about the latest consulting fads.

Evaluation is usually an afterthought. In the normal cycle of nonprofit program planning, it is often the last item on the agenda. There are many reasons why this is the case. Intuitively, we all know that evaluation has negative connotations. Experiences with evaluation include IRS audits, licensing, and renewing service contracts. Evaluation conjures up memories of the day we received our SAT results. It is usually associated with grades and scores. We know what these experiences can be like:

- They assume wrong-doing.
- They are only quantitative.
- They are mainly about control.
- They produce anxiety about how we measure up.

These characteristics certainly make us reluctant to pursue evaluation! When evaluation is used only for rating, classification and sorting, client agencies are motivated only to prove to others that they fit or qualify. This situation is especially problematic in the nonprofit sector where many small programs are tackling major social problems, such as poverty, access to health care, youth development and environmental protection, with meager resources. Evaluation done only as a fitness test will not lead to innovative and adaptive initiatives with respect to such important societal challenges.

At the same time, however, we all know and use other forms of evaluation. Athletes constantly evaluate their own performance and search for ways to improve it. They recognize their need for good coaches, teachers, evaluators – people who can help them understand their performance and target areas for improvement. Good athletes regularly seek this help. They ask for it. They pay for it! Artists – be they writers, filmmakers, dancers or musicians – also seek such evaluation. They seek to further their craft and skill in their creative activity. In these cases, evaluation is about appreciative inquiry, honest assessment, and helpful suggestion rather than rating and sorting into fit and unfit categories. Evaluators become our teachers, editors, instructors, and coaches rather than our judges.

THE PRESSURES FOR ACCOUNTABILITY AND OUTCOMES

The focus on evaluation for program improvement will, in the long run, redress the current and sometimes inappropriate emphasis on accountability. The impetus for evaluation as accountability and control is real and must always be kept in mind. It comes from three major sources.

1. Substantial growth in the number of nonprofit organizations over the past thirty years has increased the competition for philanthropic and government resources. In many cases,

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nonprofits are being asked to demonstrate their comparative advantage. Evaluation is seen as a guide to funding decisions for government agencies, foundations, and even individual donors.

2. The nonprofit workforce increasingly consists of highly educated professionals who want to bring new rigor to their efforts. Evaluation is a way to develop standards for measuring the performance of the programs and systems that they manage.
3. Since the 1980s, government leaders and the public have expressed skepticism that public and nonprofit sector interventions can have any discernible impact on societal problems. In the 1990s, a new government reform movement, the Government Performance and Results Act, emphasized not the usual outputs or activities accomplished – like numbers trained or dollars spent – but outcomes and impacts in relation to strategic goals.

These three developments have also influenced foundations. Similar to what we have witnessed in the government sector, foundations also have shifted emphasis from outputs to outcomes. Consequently, there has been a shift in foundation governance and board questions from number of grants given and types of programs funded, to whether philanthropy is making a real difference in relation to broad mission and human outcomes.

While these are legitimate and important concerns, they foster unintended consequences that ultimately work against organizational development and improvement. First, when evaluation has an excessive focus on grantee performance it is primarily for funders to render thumbs-up or thumbs-down judgments on the next cycle of support. As a result, grantees lose their power to define work, benchmarks, and success on their own terms. Not only does this kind of evaluation disempower, but it also leads to mutual self-deception in that grantees present only positive data that funders are reluctant to challenge.

This situation leads to another consequence: evaluation as public relations – fluff and butter that provide a smooth and pleasing spread for the surface – that overlooks real problems. It is always possible to put a good face on well-meaning but ineffective or inconsequential effort. Too many foundations use evaluations as “pats on the back,” which in turn communicates that evaluation is not informative.

EVALUATION THAT CONTRIBUTES TO ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

There is a critical need for solutions to the legitimate concerns for accountability and the unintended consequences of performance measurement and public relations evaluation that they often create. Evaluation research with rigorous designs and standardized measurement is typically not the appropriate

response for community-based nonprofits. It is too expensive, takes a long time to get results, is rarely conclusive or widely applicable at the program level, and can create distance between evaluators and those who are expected to use the results.

These criticisms do not deny the value of large-scale evaluation research. It can be very helpful for long-term policy questions by adding to general enlightenment about critical success factors in social programs. Evaluation research has made major contributions in areas such as early childhood education, health care, and anti-poverty policy. It does not address, however, the needs among community-based nonprofits and the philanthropies that support them for capacity building, implementation, and program improvement.

Nonprofits suffer and fail when they lose sight of their missions or the environments in which they operate by failing to adapt and change. Adaptation requires a willingness to admit to error while still valuing mission and purpose. Evaluation grounded in OD can be an important tool in this process by creating dynamic and self-renewing organizations. This is not a simple process as

years of OD work show. Evaluation, like good OD, should make the funder and grantee a little uncomfortable, introspective, and possibly a bit defensive, as well as appreciative and curious.

Peter Senge’s book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* provides a definition of a learning organization “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, and where collective aspiration is set free....” Although there are important differences among various proponents of organizational learning, a common requirement is that they engage in ongoing and frank inquiry and be open to diverse and critical views. Preskill and Torres (1999) advance this concept in greater detail that also provides a good foundation for linking evaluation and OD.

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The following ten lessons learned from evaluation in the nonprofit sector also draw upon some insights from the field of OD. They illustrate some important parts of the professional training landscape for program evaluators who want to strengthen their skills as organizational consultants and change facilitators.

1. **Be clear about what you are trying to accomplish.** The following excerpt from Michael Patton's book *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* illustrates the need for clarity of purpose for the program being evaluated. When Alice encounters the Cheshire Cat in Wonderland, she asks:

"Would you tell me please which way I ought to walk from here? That depends on a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat. "I don't much care where," said Alice. "Then it doesn't matter which way you walk," said the Cat. "So long as I get

OD professionals should share.

3. **Setting the stage properly.** A tripwire that foundations frequently encounter is that the stage is not set properly for evaluation work. Funders sometimes avoid the subject entirely or they simply are not candid about the purpose of the evaluation. It is important to clarify why the evaluation is being done at a particular point of time and how that information will be used. These issues need to be dealt with early on and revisited continually throughout an evaluation. The evaluator needs good brokering skills to work with nonprofits, their funders and other interested parties to regularly clarify expectations about the purposes of evaluation.
4. **Pay attention to stakeholders.** It is important that key stakeholders are involved in the process – to determine the important questions that need to be addressed and how suc-

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somewhere," Alice added as an explanation. "Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "If you only walk long enough."

- Evaluators need good diagnostic skills to work with nonprofits on this task prior to any discussion of assessment. Good evaluation will also look for goals from various stakeholders as well as unintended consequences, but formal goals are a necessity, especially when the program is externally supported. The process is likely to be a cyclical one since goals are refined through evaluation of progress.
2. **Link theory of the intervention to outcomes.** Evaluators need to help nonprofits define theories of change that underlie their operations – that is, the relationships among their assumptions, resources, program activities and expected results. For example, a youth development program seeking to strengthen leadership and civic engagement opportunities for teenagers might have assumed the need to collaborate with public schools and parents in order to achieve its goals. The evaluators can help the program staff determine how important these alliances are in producing the desired program outcomes, as well as monitor the resources and activities devoted to them. Explicating these theories of change, or logic models as they are sometimes called, is often a very useful formative evaluation task in itself since it helps identify gaps among resources, activities and outcomes. This is a first step toward building a shared understanding in the organization and provides a framework for dialogue about evaluation findings and continuous improvement of the project. This is a compelling need in nearly every organizational setting, and a skill that evaluation and

cess will be measured. Evaluators can start by asking grantees and their stakeholders what challenges or dilemmas they are facing in their work. In this way, evaluation has a higher likelihood that the stakeholders will cooperate with the evaluation and that the results will be used.

5. **Integrate evaluation into the program.** Funders and nonprofits need to build in at the outset the expectation that evaluation should be done and also the resources to do it well. Too often, the thought for evaluation comes once a program is finished with the result that useful baseline data and resources are missing to make evaluation meaningful and reliable.
6. **Integrate evaluation into daily work.** Evaluation activities can be integrated into routine work such as assessing needs at client intake, although the information processing demands on employees represent a significant challenge to keep in mind. The point here is to take advantage of relevant and accessible data rather than requiring additional work for information gathering. Evaluators who are sensitive to workload and workplace dynamics can be helpful in this process.
7. **Identify just a few things to evaluate.** Pick the fewest indicators that provide the most information about program assumptions, resources, activities and outcomes. Evaluators who are knowledgeable about information overload in organizations will obviously be helpful in this process, as will well developed theories of change to identify key information needs.
8. **Coordinate evaluation reports with internal decision-making.** Findings need to be presented on a timely basis to

inform learning and action and throughout a program's life – not just at the end. Evaluators need skills in understanding organizational power, budgeting, decision-making and culture that will attune them to how and when findings can be useful.

9. **Use evaluation as a process not simply as a report.** Grantees and program staff get more out of the evaluation process than its final report. Regular feedback and opportunities for varied interpretations of findings strengthen a program as well as any evaluation of it. Methods other than written reports, such as video, photos, and human-interest stories, can serve as effective communications tools within the program as well as with funders.

10. **Do evaluation only when an organization is ready.** Clear goals and theories of change are important for effective evaluation, but other conditions are also essential. As documented from the field of OD, evaluation is truly useful when there is a commitment to and resources for candid feedback. When these conditions are met, evaluators can serve as teachers as well as researchers in order to increase the capacity of nonprofits to continue evaluation on their own.

LET THE MUSIC BEGIN

The duet between the King (program evaluation) and the governess (OD) in "Shall We Dance," moves significantly from first to third person. This shift indicates a meeting of the minds and openness to exploring the mysteries of the other's ways of being. In this article we have pushed on the field of program evaluation to embrace the OD practitioner's skills as a means of creating more dynamic, learning organizations in the nonprofit sector. This shift in emphasis, while still requiring technical and methodological expertise, would be used to accomplish several critical goals including:

- Surfacing multiple points of view
- Helping to make hidden agendas visible
- Contributing to building a sense of community and connection

- Facilitating individual, team and organizational reflection and learning
- Creating the capacity for adaptation and change

The skills that are needed to accomplish these goals, such as group process, negotiation, team building, and interpersonal communications, are common to the OD field but new to the evaluation field. Our vision is to create a new professional – a scholar/practitioner – who combines program evaluation skills (e.g., research design, measurement and data analysis) with change-agent skills (e.g., establishing trusting and respectful relationships, effective communications, diagnostics and facility with motivation and change techniques). We face this challenge on various fronts, including the Irvine Foundation-Fielding Graduate Institute training project, but we must honestly acknowledge that this is the beginning of a long-term process of individual and professional field development.

We will measure progress toward this goal as we see more evaluation professionals add to their capacities as researchers by also becoming facilitators, coaches and teachers in the process of organization development. With OD and evaluation perspectives together, we believe evaluation can better support high-performing, adaptable and sustainable nonprofit organizations while also promoting attention to and accountability for results.

Shall we dance? ■

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