Creating an Evaluation Culture in International Development Cooperation Agencies

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Introduction

There is no doubt that the practice of evaluation is in a state of expansion worldwide. While evaluation had its origins in the United States of America, interest in evaluation practice and theory is now widespread, indicated by developments such as the creation of evaluation societies around the world. The fact that these evaluation societies have been concerned with codes of behaviour and evaluator competencies are indicators of an increased commitment to the development of principles and theories designed to encourage good practice.

Given this situation, we might expect that evaluators and evaluation findings are exerting notable influence on program and policy decision making. Yet, from our observations in Australia, and our monitoring of trends overseas, this is not always the case.

How can we set up conditions by which it is the norm for evaluations to be commissioned and for the findings to be used? One way is to encourage the use of evaluation to routinely inform decision making within organisations. To address this question, we turn to some recent literature on the use of new knowledge in organisations. (Davenport, 1997). The position we take is that evaluation is most likely to be used if a culture of evaluation can be developed within an organisation, which is supported by its leadership (Owen & Lambert, 1995). This is consistent with an organization adopting a 'learning' orientation, in which there is an increased commitment to openness and the use of new knowledge (Preskill & Torres, 1996). For the purposes of this paper, we describe a learning organisation as one which has developed skills associated with creating, acquiring and synthesising knowledge; and modifies its functions and behaviour on the basis of the knowledge acquired. Within such an environment, we contend that evaluation findings are likely to be relevant and utilized.

To illustrate that it is possible to set up an evaluation culture in the context of overseas aid and development, we present a case study of the application of these principles at the Australian Volunteers International (AVD, a non-government organisation based in Melbourne, Australia.

The 'Perspectives Gap' between Evaluators and Decision Makers

For the purposes of this paper let us assume that there is an internal evaluation unit or group with capacity in a development agency. The agency's area of work is in policy making and program delivery across a range of international development cooperation programs.

On the face of it, one would assume that the evaluators would be in a positron to influence decision makers. However, the evaluative and decision making environments may be separated by a 'perspectives' gap, for the following reasons:

1. There may be little openness and few opportunities for dialogue about the mission and core functions of the organisation. In such an environment, it is difficult for evaluators to be candid about what they have found and no incentive for them to undertake meaningful evaluation work. Eleanor Chelimsky provides us with a vision of the position highly principled evaluators need to take.
......telling the truth about what has been learned is arguably the most important purpose of evaluation. This is the case not only because of ethics, but because the courage to say what users may not want to hear is the characteristic of an evaluation function that keeps institutions honest......When evaluators lose their independence, evaluation itself loses much of its purpose, its deterrent value, its credibility, and its power (Chelimsky, 1995).

2. The evaluators may have insufficient understanding and regard for the reality of the political circumstances that affect use in the agency. Benefits for understanding these circumstances would assist evaluators to decide what can be evaluated and when to provide the findings of their studies. For example, the development agency may be so committed to a government policy that an independent evaluation has few chances of influencing practice or even being noted.

3. The evaluators may be too concerned with undertaking objectives based evaluation over other evaluation approaches which would meet the actual information needs of managers and other decision makers[1].

4. The evaluators may have a limited range of methodological expertise. In evaluation we need to start with the evaluation questions and use methods which can validly find answers to these questions. This almost always involves the use of a range of complementary methods so that the limitations of one method can be compensated for by the strengths of others

5. The evaluators may not have sufficient social interaction skills. These are skills needed to negotiate an evaluation plan, and to report the findings effectively. There is clearly a need for effective negotiation (Owen, 1998) for it is during this phase of evaluation that commitment to the remaining phases of the evaluation can be instilled in decision makers. Reporting is also an essential aspect of the dissemination of findings and we have known for a long time that evaluators must enable users to understand quickly what has been found, and in some instances how it can be applied to the policy problem.

6. The organisation may feel compelled to focus its evaluation effort solely on the collection of quantitative data, in response to the expectations of donor agencies for evidence which demonstrates accountability for the use of program funds. This can lead to emphasis being placed on the design of performance indicators to show output (e.g. how many teachers attended the training program? how many training programs were conducted?), ignoring the collection of information which would give the organisation an understanding of the quality of its work and some insights about how programs might be improved.

Together, problems associated with these and other points constitute a

'perspectives gap' between evaluators and decision makers. It may be worth keeping these points in mind as we now turn to our case study, which we would regard as an example of how the perspective gap has been largely overcome. In reading this case we encourage you to look for clues as to how this gap was narrowed in the case of Australian Volunteers International.

Role of Evaluation Within Australian Volunteers International

Australian Volunteers International aims to contribute to a peaceful and just world by fostering cross-cultural relationships and international understanding between people; and by participating in the social and economic development of communities (Mission Statement 1998).

The Australian Volunteers International - An Overview of the Organisation

Founded in 1961, Australian Volunteers International (AVI) is a community-based, not-for-profit organisation which conducts a range of people-centered technical cooperation programs and projects in almost 50 countries throughout Asia, Africa the Pacific and Central America. It is best known for its placement of more than 4,000 qualified and skilled Australians overseas in a wide variety of occupational fields[2]. Since the late 1980s AVI has also been engaged in the design and implementation of more than 50 development cooperation projects, which have been funded from bilateral and multilateral sources, in a variety of sectors including education health infrastructure support and agriculture. In the early 1990s, AVI also began to recruit skilled technical assistance personnel for positions in remote Aboriginal communities located in northern and central Australia. More recently the organisation has developed a corporate arm for the recruitment and cross-cultural preparation of personnel for businesses and other organisations which post Australians overseas. In seeking to fulfill its mission AVI believes that people in developing communities should be engaged in implementing and managing their own development initiatives. AVI responds to requests from in-country employers and project partners to help build local capacity and to support institutional strengthening initiatives. Concepts such as partnership, teamwork and consultation are highly valued. AVI programs give strong emphasis to experiential learning.

Today, AVI employs a staff of over 100 people, 80 of whom are located in the National Office which is based in Melbourne, Australia. The remainder of staff operate from State Offices situated in Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Darwin. One staff member a Cambodian national is based outside of Australia and is coordinating the AVI Office in Phnom Penh. A substantial proportion (over 90%) of the current funding for AVI programs comes from the Australian Government via the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID).

The Development of an Evaluation Focus at AVI

Since its commencement, AVI has regularly monitored and reviewed its volunteer program. During the first 25 years of its life, this comprised the systematic collection, analysis and reporting of personnel numbers by age, sector, occupation and country of placement, together with financial reporting related to volunteer and overhead

costs. The primary focus was on accountability for the expenditure of government funds e.g. the number of personnel assigned to a particular country, at what cost.

There was little expectation, either internally or from donor agencies, that the organisation should report on the achievement of its broader development objectives, let alone provide evidence of the developmental impact of its programs. From the latter part of the 1980s, AVI developed a much stronger orientation towards evaluation of its voluntary technical assistance program. This was later extended to include the review of development cooperation projects in which the organisation was involved. Due to lack of funds, early work in this area largely involved desk studies i.e. file reviews and internal discussions, together with some limited surveying of program participants. But from 1989, increased emphasis was placed on the need for more comprehensive evaluation work. Support for this approach came from the Assistant Director of the organisation, who had a strong belief in the potential of evaluation to enhance on-going program activities.

An internal document written in November 1989 stated:

In reflecting on the concerns current in evaluation theory and practice I would suggest that AVI take as a main focus the UTILISATION of any evaluation activity - 'HOW can evaluation help to improve the AVI program?' From such a base it would be possible to meet the needs for accessing the achievement of objectives and collecting information appropriate for accountability.

As a result, an initial evaluation framework was established and a schedule of evaluation studies proposed. An attempt was made to ensure that this included a range of evaluation activities which reviewed different aspects of the organisation's work: e.g. processes involved in the volunteer cycle; the impact of the experience for overseas stakeholders' the impact of the experience for Australian program participants; and the degree to which program goals were being achieved and AVI's mission fulfilled. In addition a set of procedures for the conduct and management of each evaluation study was proposed. This included the appointment of:

an evaluator or an evaluation team; and

a steering committee to establish the time-line for the study; the finances required; and the ethics for the process.

There was at this time, no expectation that the steering committee should become actively involved in the implementation of a study or in discussion of evaluation findings as they emerged. Nor was there any expectation that once the study was completed, the evaluator should assist program staff to implement the recommendations of the review. The importance of incorporating such activities did not emerge until the mid 1990s.

Evaluation Given a Higher Profile

In 1991, AVI undertook a major organisational review leading to the identification of nine key organisational objectives, one of which was to "evaluate existing programs to assess performance, and provide indicators for improvement and policy development" (Future Directions, p3).

Recognition of the important future role to be played by evaluation was timely and served to enhance its status within the organisation. Greater support was provided to develop internal evaluation expertise. A staff member who had been involved in the conduct of early evaluation work within AVI was supported to undertake postgraduate

studies at the Centre for Program Evaluation, The University of Melbourne. A new organizational role was created, giving this person responsibility for coordinating on-going evaluation activities.

By 1995 the Evaluation Coordinator was no longer being seen as the sole person responsible for conducting formal evaluation activities. Staffs throughout the organisation were being encouraged to realise that they too played an important role in terms of program monitoring and review. Increasingly, the Evaluation Coordinator was seen as someone who, as well as conducting specific evaluation studies and overseeing the work of external evaluation consultants, could provide support and advice to staff who were undertaking evaluation activities within their own program areas. A realisation that evaluation was a useful activity which aided program improvement and not merely "checked up" on what was being achieved, was beginning to emerge. The development of a culture of evaluation within the organisation had begun!

From the mid 1990s evaluation schedules were regularly updated in discussion with AVI management and program staff. In addition increased emphasis was placed on the need to involve (not just to collect data from) various stakeholder groups in evaluation processes. Greater attention was also being paid to using evaluation activities to assist program staff to identify the lessons learned from past experience and to use this knowledge to improve existing programs and to design new ones. In 1996, AVI substantially increased its financial commitment to evaluation by creating an Evaluation Unit within the Program Development Section; upgrading the Evaluation Coordinator's role to that of Manager; and appointing two additional evaluation personnel. One of these positions aimed to enhance AVI's capacity for quantitative data analysis, the other had a qualitative focus. This expansion heralded the start of a major shift in how evaluation was seen within AVI's structure; from a somewhat peripheral activity, to something which played a significant role in providing information to support program development and strategic planning.

A further commitment was made by AVI to enhance the capabilities of evaluation staff. Each team member undertook additional postgraduate studies, resulting in a greater breadth and depth of evaluation knowledge and skills. In addition, more regular use was made of external evaluation consultants to undertake specific evaluation activities, where possible in conjunction with Evaluation Unit staff, enabling the latter to develop expertise in new areas. Evaluation staffs were also supported to attend international evaluation conferences and to visit evaluators employed by partner organisations overseas. Greater use was made of the Internet to access information about "state of the art" evaluation methodologies and resources and to communicate with skilled evaluators working in similar fields. Efforts were also made to assess the potential usefulness of various types of computer software to assist in the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Recent Developments

By the beginning of 1998 it was clear that the Evaluation Unit was playing a more significant role in terms of aiding strategic planning; supporting organisational change; and assisting AVI to become a learning organisation. The following list documents some of the key strategies being undertaken by the evaluation staff to carry out their task:

encourage, within AVI, the development of a dynamic link between evaluation decision making, policy development and the implementation of review findings

encourage a process of continuous learning within the organisation, whereby the findings of evaluation activities are fed into the further development of existing programs and the design of new initiatives

assist program staff to develop simple tools for the regular collection and analysis of data which is useful to on-going program management

keep up to date with new developments, approaches and tools in the field of evaluation and circulate within the organisation (as appropriate) current literature and research materials relevant to AVI's work

Increased emphasis was given to developing a culture of evaluation in which evaluation staff supported their colleagues in other parts of the organisation to enhance their capacity to conduct their own evaluative activities. This support took a variety of forms including:

participating in advisory groups for particular evaluation studies
discussing an evaluation plan
recommending resource materials
making suggestions regarding appropriate data collection techniques
assisting with data analysis
providing advice on the preparation of an evaluation report
discussing the dissemination and utilisation of evaluation findings
providing advice on on-going monitoring and review

These strategies are seen as effective in enhancing the role of internal evaluation in organisations (Torres, Preskill & Piontek, 1996).

Regular discussions are held between Evaluation Unit staff and the Directors and Managers of other components of AVI's programs, in an effort to identify key areas for evaluation activity. In choosing which evaluations to undertake, consideration is given to how particular studies can be used to better inform strategic planning within the organisation. The urgency of the task and the resources required are assessed and a decision is made whether or not a given study should be implemented internally or externally. An effort is also made to conduct a diverse range of evaluation activities e.g. review of internal process; evaluation of program impact; studies of specific development cooperation projects.

Key Features of AVI 's Evaluation Approach

The underlying purpose of all evaluative activities undertaken by AVI is to enable the organisation to learn from its experiences. Evaluation is considered to be a process which should be incorporated throughout the life of a programmatic activity, not merely something which is conducted on its completion. Where possible evaluation staff encourage local stakeholders and/or program staff to undertake their own on-going monitoring and review activities, and assist them to enhance their evaluation skills as appropriate.

During the implementation of a review information is collected from a wide

range of stakeholder groups, using a variety of different data collection techniques. This approach aims to "give a voice" to people who represent different roles within a project or program e.g. manager, operational staff, in-country partners, the local project community etc. This strengthens the study by providing different perspectives on the same reality; a process called triangulation.

Emphasis is also given to providing and encouraging feedback throughout the evaluation process. This is done both formally and informally. Where appropriate, stakeholders are given access to data and information collected in other components of the study and are encouraged to share their views. This process can lead to new insights which can assist the evaluator in the development of the review findings. In designing the evaluation process, emphasis is given to the dissemination and utilisation of findings. In most cases the evaluator is supported by an advisory group, made up of different stakeholder representatives. This group acts, not only as a sounding board during the design and implementation of the study, but where appropriate becomes involved in data collection activities. This approach assists group members to take responsibility for owning the evaluation findings and following through on the review recommendations.

Where possible, program managers are encouraged to reflect on the findings as they emerge, and if appropriate, to begin to implement changes to program operations even before the study is concluded. Once the evaluation is "completed" and the final report prepared, the evaluator meets with those who commissioned the study and members of the advisory group. During these meetings there is discussion of the most appropriate format for the dissemination of the findings and to devise a procedure by which the report recommendations can be formally accepted or rejected. The resultant process generally involves the evaluator making presentations to a variety of different stakeholder groups.

Increasingly, the AVI Evaluation Unit provides on-going support to program staff to implement the recommendations of a review. This role can extend for some months (or even longer) beyond the "completion" of the evaluation report. However, it is considered that the time spent on such an activity is crucial, in order to avoid the possibility that the evaluation report will be left "to gather dust" because busy program staff do not have the time to incorporate what has been learnt into on-going activities.

AVI Evaluation of Overseas Development Projects: Current Challenges

The above provides a summary of the key stages in the development of evaluation activities at AVI. It outlines some of the main elements included in AVI's approach to evaluation, namely a focus on learning; the development of a culture of evaluation; an emphasis on stakeholder participation; and the utilisation of the review findings to help the organisation to improve it programs.

To date, AVI has had a reasonable degree of success in terms of integrating these principles into the evaluation of internal program operations. However, evaluation staffs are aware that it is more difficult to truly incorporate these features into the evaluation of overseas development projects which are implemented within a cross-cultural context. These concerns are reflected in the evaluation literature (McDonald 1999).

Writers such as Rebien, (1996), Snyder & Doan, (1995), Cracknell, (1991),

Bamberger (1989), Cuthbert, (1985), and Merryfield, (1985) highlight problems associated with the evaluation of overseas development projects, in particular, those undertaken in a cross-cultural context.

There is a significant body of literature about the evaluation of overseas development projects which shows that, despite a considerable increase in evaluation activity, aid and development agencies are failing to apply the lessons learned to enhance on-going programs Cassen(1986), Ginsburg (1988).

A recent report prepared for the Expert Group on Evaluation, within the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) states that evaluation of programs being implemented by non-government organisations (NGOs) fails to assess program impact. This report recommends that governments should support NGOS to develop innovative methods for the collection of data, which emphasise participation and the development of local evaluation skills (Riddell, et al., 1997).

The evaluation of program impact is not an easy task. A recent publication based on the proceedings of an international workshop conducted by OXFAM in November 1996, identifies some of the key problems facing evaluators who work in this area. They recognise the need for on-going program monitoring and the involvement of local people in identifying changes which are affecting their lives (Oakley, Pratt & Clayton, 1998) These are issues which the Evaluation Unit and the AVI are now addressing as part of their commitment to organisational review and improvement.

Bridging the Perspective Gap at AVI

Let us return to the perspective gap discussed earlier in this paper. From the case study of the AVI we can get an indication of how one development agency closed this gap to create an evaluation culture which made evaluation a central role m its operation.

Problem 1. There may be little openness and few opportunities for dialogue about the mission and core functions of the organisation. In such an environment, it is difficult for evaluators to be candid about what they have found and no incentive for them to undertake meaningful evaluation work.

AVI Solution. Since the commencement of evaluation activities at AVI, evaluation staffs were encouraged to participate in discussions with senior management about the organisational and program goals and objectives. This was helped by the fact that the person who initiated evaluation work within AVI was the Assistant Director and that the staff member who was later appointed to the role of Evaluation Manager had been in the organisation for many years. Both had a clear understanding of the fundamental principles on which the organisation was based and a detailed knowledge of how AVI programs operated. They had seen AVI grow and change; had gained the respect of those in decision making roles; and, overtime had gathered a wealth of information to support any views that they offered regarding strategic focus and any need for change.

Problem 2. The evaluators may have insufficient understanding and regard for the reality of the political circumstances that affect use in the agency. For example, the development agency may be so committed to a government policy that an independent evaluation has few chances of influencing practice or even being heard.

AVI Solution. Evaluation staffs at AVI are not currently included in the senior management team. However, there is close cooperation between the evaluators and

individual program directors. There is also an opportunity to discuss evaluation matters and policy direction with the Chief Executive Officer. Although they might not be fully aware of all political matters affecting the decision making process, the evaluation team are generally able to have open and frank discussions with program managers which alert them to the main issues at stake. This enables the evaluators to factor potential constraints and limitations into their studies, and to consider ways in which some of these political circumstances might be re-assessed (or even challenged) in terms of their on-going relevance for the future work of the organisation.

Problem 3. The evaluators may be too concerned with the evaluation of objectives, to the exclusion of other evaluation approaches which meet the actual information needs of managers and other decision makers.

AVI Solution. The focus of AVI evaluation is on reviewing existing or completed programs in order to identify lessons learned which will help to inform on-going work and the development of new program initiatives. Evaluation staffs regularly encourage their colleagues throughout the organisation to assess their work and to suggest changes which could be made to improve quality and efficiency. In addition, there is, within the organisation, a growing realisation of the potential benefits of building on-going, simple and useful evaluation activities into the implementation of overseas development projects. In recent years, country impact studies and project completion reviews have incorporated the need to learn from experience and to utilize any new knowledge gained to enhance program development.

Problem 4. The evaluators may have a limited range of methodological expertise. In evaluation we need to start with the evaluation questions and use methods which can validly find answers to these questions. This almost always involves the use of a range of complementary methods so that the limitations of one method can be compensated for by the strengths of others.

AVI Solution. At AVI there is an emphasis on the collection of data from a wide range of stakeholder groups, as well as from organisational records. This inevitably leads to the need to use a range of different data collection instruments to gather information e.g. database analysis; face-to-face interviews with staff members; focus groups with Australian technical assistance personnel; questionnaires sent to overseas employers and project partners; meetings with corporate clients or funding groups etc. Since the commencement of evaluation activities at AVI, the organisation has supported evaluation staff to extend their existing data collection skills e.g. through participation in external courses and conferences; the engagement of evaluation professionals to work alongside AVI evaluators to help train the latter m new techniques; and more recently by participating in cross-cultural evaluation teams.

Problem 5. The evaluators may not have sufficient social interaction skills. These are skills needed to negotiate an evaluation plan, and to report the findings effectively. There is clearly a need for effective negotiation for it is during this phase of evaluation that commitment to the remaining phases of the evaluation can be instilled in decision makers. Reporting is an essential aspect of the dissemination of findings and we have known for a long time that evaluators must enable users to understand quickly what has been found in the evaluation, and in some instances how it can be applied to the policy problem.

AVI Solution. Evaluation staff at AVI give priority to interacting with staff at various levels of the organisation in order to help identify key areas in need of review

and to gather data to incorporate into evaluation studies. Emphasis is given to both formal and informal discussions. Where appropriate, personnel throughout the organisation are provided with evaluation feedback as it emerges in an effort to stimulate further discussion about the possible way forward and in order to ensure that there are "no surprises" at the conclusion of the study. As well as encouraging those who have a decision making role to commit themselves to the implementation of the recommendations of an evaluation, the evaluation team endeavours to build support for the practical application of the review findings, amongst operational staff.

Problem 6. The organisation may feel compelled to focus its evaluation effort solely on the collection of quantitative data, in response to the expectations of donor agencies for evidence which demonstrates accountability for the use of program funds This can lead to emphasis being placed on the design of performance indicators which show output and ignoring the collection of information which would give the organisation a better understanding of the quality of its work and some insights about how this might be improved.

AVI Solution. It should be said that the AVI Board and staff are committed to providing a quality service and program. There is an eagerness throughout the organisation to discover ways in which the contribution being made by the organisation in the field of overseas development can be improved. Evaluation staff have worked to harness this enthusiasm and to convince those in authority of the benefits of collecting data from a range of stakeholder groups. They have participated in discussions with management about the limitations of performance indicators and the potential for such measures to be misinterpreted and even to skew program direction. They are becoming increasingly involved in working with program staff to develop simple tools for the collection of data which will reflect the quality of program outcomes. Allied to this, they are playing a role in assisting AVI management to convince donor agencies of the value of this approach.

Conclusion

We realise that this paper has been written around the experiences of just one international development agency and that extrapolating from just one case to make scientific generalizations is not possible. But our view is that case studies on the topic are needed. Our review of the literature shows a large increase in the number of conceptual and theoretical studies in the management, organisational behaviour and educational literature but very few which illustrate how an organisation develops a learning orientation and how evaluation can be an integral part of organisational processes.

So, we cannot claim that if an agency follows the solutions suggested by AVI that the perspectives gap will be reduced or closed completely, and that an evaluation culture will automatically emerge. Our aim is more modest. It is to provide readers with a vivid analytical description of how AVI has become successful in creating a culture of evaluation within an organisation. A rationale for this method of presentation relies on a premise known as naturalistic generalization, a notion invented by Bob Stake who says:
direct personal experience is an efficient comprehensive and satisfying way of creating understanding, but a way not usually available to our evaluation report audiences. The best substitute for direct experience probably is vicarious experience; increasingly better when the evaluator uses attending and conceptualising styles similar to those which the

audience uses. Such styles are not likely to be those of a specialist in measurement or theoretically minded social scientist. Vicarious experiences will be conceptualised in terms of persons, places and events (Stake, 1980).

It is up to a reader then to make the leap from this case to an organisation in which she or he has an interest and to glean from the case what might be useful in that organisational situation.

What this case does show is that problems associated with the perspectives gap can be overcome over a period of time. This in itself is an internal developmental process. It also shows the importance of leadership and the commitment of resources. But the most important message is that it IS possible to set up an evaluation culture which benefits the organisation. Evaluation can help make organisations more innovative, more responsive, more accountable and better managed.

Notes

1. For a detailed discussion of how evaluation can serve decision making at all stages of the development and delivery process, see (Owen & Rogers, 1999)
2. Until early in 1900, AVI was known as the Overseas Services Bureau

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