

## BUILDING EVALUATION CAPABILITY

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### Evaluation Capability

What is evaluation capability and is it useful to distinguish it from evaluation capacity ? Perhaps.

To use a metaphor. Think of a water tank whose purpose is to store water for irrigation purposes. The capacity for irrigating the land is stored in that tank. The fuller it is the more capacity it has for providing sustenance. However, the ability to irrigate successfully depends more on the storage of water. It depends on climatic conditions, historical rainfall, the presence of something to turn the tap on and off at the right moment, the quality of the tap and water distribution networks. That's what affects the capability of that amount of water to achieve its objectives.

So it is with evaluation. All the skills, knowledge, technical expertise and experience in the world won't help an evaluation if the capability of the program, community, organisation or environment cannot sustain and nurture those skills, and abilities.

What I generally see the moment, is capacity building (ie building large storage containers) without a great deal of capability building (ie the complex and strategic business of getting adequate water on the ground at the appropriate time). If this continues, I believe we are in danger of being all dressed up and nowhere to go.

Why do I say this ?

Several years ago, the US evaluators Hallie Preskill and Rosie Torres developed a set of questions that they believed promoted high quality evaluations that genuinely contribute to organisational and program development. There are well over 90 questions, but some really dig deep into the critical elements of evaluation design, and utilisation.

These are :-

- How does your organisation learn ?
- What brings about change in your organisation ?
- What kind of information and analysis is acceptable to your organisation ?
- Under these circumstances what kind of evaluation would your organisation be able to use ?
- Who might and might not benefit from that evaluation; how could that affect the data you collect and the acceptance of any conclusions ?
- Taking account of these factors what kind of evaluation is ethical, valid, feasible and desirable ?

On various occasions I've placed these questions before managers who have asked me to design and undertake an evaluation. What worries me is how few can answer all of those questions. I believe that this raises serious questions about the *capability* of organisations to design, undertake and use evaluations.

So what are the critical components of capability ? How do we recognise and promote them if they are there ? How do we develop them if they are not ?

Let's first understand what the evaluation process contributes towards. Potentially I think it helps us do four things. It helps us strategise more effectively - using the past to cope with future uncertainties. It helps us plan more effectively - using the past to cope with future certainties. It helps us to "change" more appropriately. It helps develop a process of meaning development and learning.

So what does the literature and research tell us about individuals, programs, organisations and communities that are capable of developing and using skills that help us strategise, change and developing meaning ? What does it tell us about the kinds of organisations that are able to *use* the capacities they have stored up in those tanks.

Here is a small sample of work that makes sense to me.

### ***Skills.***

Back in the early 90's, Roberta Hill, Phil Capper and others from WEB Research here in Wellington studied what properties were necessary for skill development and use in organisations. Here's their list :-

- Individuals understanding the occupational and professional orientations of others (cross-training)
- Unrestricted sharing of information
- Flexible and just in time learning systems
- Continuous and flexible learning approaches - and operationally systems which promote this
- Skills; whatever they are, wherever they are, acknowledged and respected
- Distributed authority, leadership and expertise
- Teams seen as units of learning
- Reward systems that reward the promotion of and activity in the above properties

### ***Strategy.***

Gary Hamel is one of the leading thinkers in the strategy development field. A while ago, he reflected over his experience in the area, and rather than ploughing the old furrow of what you do to develop strategy, he reflected on his experience of what kinds of organisation were naturally strategic.

Here are the features he identified :-

- New voices being able to be heard
- Dialogue that cuts across organisational boundaries
- Releasing the deep sense of discovery possessed by most people
- Ability to see things from many different perspectives
- Willingness to undertake small risk-avoiding experiments

### ***Ability to change***

The recent work of Professor Stewart Hase of Southern Cross University is relevant here. He investigated what factors helped organisations through change processes.

- CEO who carries the vision and protects the champions for change
- Leadership that is distributed throughout the organisation
- Effective teams
- Effective communication
- Capacity to harness learning
- Competence of employees
- Internal and external reward systems that are consistent with change
- Distributed non-hierarchical decision making
- Champions for change

### *Meaning and learning*

What are the features of organisations that promote the appropriate development of meaning and learning ? I'm no expert on learning theory, but I understand that many believe we learn through two main cognitive activities. One is patterning and the other is puzzling.

So if the evaluation is to be an effective vehicle of learning, then the organisation - at a quite open and deep level, needs to permit patterning and puzzling.

In other words the organisation needs to be able to acknowledge what has happened before and detect its relevance to the future.

Puzzling is trickier, since it requires people to acknowledge and gain meaning from "exceptions to the rule", "contradictions" and things that are just plain "missing".

In my own experience, organisations are quite resistant to some elements of patterning and puzzling, especially when those activities challenge dominant perspectives.

### **So what and now what ?**

The point I wish to make is that actually creating organisations that have the capability to evaluate effectively is more than just developing a few technical skills and raising awareness. It's quite a complex business. I'd argue that most evaluators don't have the necessary skills.

So there are two things we can do. One static and the other dynamic.

We can use the presence or absence of the properties proposed by WEB Research, Gary Hamel and Stewart Hase, or the kinds of questions posed by Hallie Preskill and Rosie Torres to judge the capability of the organisation we are dealing with. With that in mind we can begin to determine which evaluation methodologies, methods and techniques are most appropriate.

Alternatively, we can develop close relationships with those whose primary skills are in the organisational development field, and seek out opportunities for collaborating with each other.

## A CODA – SOME PRIOR THOUGHTS ON CAPACITY BUILDING

The above note was originally prepared for a short workshop at a conference attended primarily by non-evaluators. They were mostly middle managers and policy analysts. So before I read out the above speech on *capability*, I asked them to suggest ways of increasing evaluation *capability*, from their perspective as non-evaluators. Having got all their ideas up on a board (using hexagonal Post-Its) I then got them to cluster their ideas into the same groups that were used at the 2001 American Evaluation Association conference. The results are displayed below. Interesting.

Organisational Factors	Motivational Forces	Learning from experience	Interrelationships	Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal / external communication</li> <li>• An evaluation unit</li> <li>• Working definitions</li> <li>• Integral processes and disciplines</li> <li>• Evaluation in all policy / funding proposals</li> <li>• An evaluating culture</li> <li>• Clear accountability for evaluation</li> <li>• Review of processes</li> <li>• Clear cut evaluation framework</li> <li>• Goals identified</li> <li>• Measurement</li> <li>• Senior management commitment</li> <li>• Gap analyses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Values and vision articulated clearly</li> <li>• Carrot not stick</li> <li>• Demonstrate links between evaluation and improvement</li> <li>• Timeliness (ie evaluation when it can be of greatest benefit to clients and to a lesser extent other stakeholders)</li> <li>• Learning environment (not punishing)</li> <li>• Strategic leadership (believing evaluation will be useful)</li> <li>• Reduce defensiveness</li> <li>• Establish and communicate the need to undertake an evaluation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate / disseminate evaluation results</li> <li>• More desire to measure outcomes</li> <li>• Understanding cause and effect</li> <li>• Share information</li> <li>• Education in skills</li> <li>• Sharing expertise between organisations</li> <li>• Training</li> <li>• Defined outcomes and objectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusion of Treaty principles</li> <li>• Awareness</li> <li>• Communicate / disseminate evaluation results</li> <li>• Buy in from all stakeholders</li> <li>• Involved stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training and information</li> <li>• Variety of methods</li> <li>• Technology (ease of data collection)</li> <li>• Skills</li> <li>• Focus on what is most relevant</li> <li>• The 10% rule (the proportion of program costs that are allocated to evaluation)</li> <li>• Evaluation in the program planning</li> </ul>