Creating a Culture of Meaningful Evaluation in Public Libraries:

Moving Beyond Quantitative Metrics

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Inculcating Evaluation within an Existing Organizational Culture

The following model was developed to demonstrate how an organization can progress through a series of steps, moving from output-based performance metrics, to an organizationally aligned outcome-based evaluation system that highlights the necessary operational and cultural transformations. It can also be used as an analytical tool to determine where an organization is situated in terms of its cultural readiness for change. Our model is in keeping with Lindblom’s (1959) theory of policy development favoring an incremental approach to institutional change, a “method of successive limited comparisons” (p. 81). It is designed to address concerns that contribute to a commonly held defeatist perception of outcome evaluation in public libraries as the practice of “measuring the unmeasurable” (Train & Elkin, 2001), or as our research participants stated “too hard.” Kramer (2009) calls the practice of small exposures towards assessment over time as “building assessment anti-venom.” Incremental change minimizes the perils of culture shock and catastrophic system failure that sudden, wholesale structural change can bring about.
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**Table 1: Framework for cultural change and evaluation**
We believe that our model can serve as a roadmap to assist organizations in moving successfully through a series of manageable steps by infusing a culture of outcome evaluation within the organization. Once an organization has achieved the final stage, evaluation then serves as an accepted and valued tool for: realizing organizational priorities; educating stakeholders and funders about the range of quantitative and qualitative program and service impacts; and, identifying operational issues and challenges. As an analytical tool to assist with organizational culture change, transforming the workplace from mere grudging acceptance of evaluation to enthusiastically embracing it, this model addresses two objectives:

1. Situating the current place of a library within the model’s five stages, leading to an awareness of the cultural context of the organization and subsequent amount of work needed ahead;

2. Plotting a course of action with embedded feedback loops leading to the emergence of a true culture of assessment.

Our model for moving organizations to full engagement in a culture of outcome evaluation and assessment is depicted in the above matrix (Table 1). There are five stages, each representing a level of institutional progression, awareness, acceptance and understanding, and these can be seen as steps towards evaluation enlightenment. Our experience and research suggest that the majority of public libraries are either at stage 0, or else at least some of their current practices are reflected in the dimensions of this stage. Kotter (2008) argues that getting buy-in is not enough because it only engages the head, not the heart. Moving through the stages is akin to Kotter’s step 6 for creating organizational change, creating short term wins, building staff confidence, and utilizing an incremental approach. The model is designed to address many of the obstacles that inhibit organizational change, the most notable being sub-cultures. Sub-
cultures can be seen as the greatest inculcator of organizational values (Schein, 1990) and as such are primary contributors to the staff perception of the purpose and value of evaluations, a postulation of negative influence, and having assessment viewed as “busy work.” Ours is an inclusionary model. It goes beyond the shallow engagement of staff typical of top-down approaches mandated by senior management, instead encouraging full staff participation through consultation and training, in order for them to take ownership of the process.

Detailed are the processes underlying each stage of the model, demonstrating how it specifically addresses Schein’s three components of organizational culture: artefacts; espoused values and beliefs; and underlying assumptions. As an inclusionary model there is a need for all institutional members to take a full participatory role in the process, as Farkas (2013) observed in her review of evaluation practices in academic libraries:

At many institutions, those tasked with building a culture of assessment are not administrators and do not have the ability to initiate such a system-wide change.
The library administrator(s) may be supportive of building a culture of assessment, but the task of creating it is frequently delegated. (p. 17)

The challenge to instilling an authentic climate of evaluation rests with institutional leadership and its ability to inspire, or better yet fully participate in this activity.

This model is designed to be extremely flexible and adaptable in its implementation, highly responsive to local needs and context. It is not a one-size-fits-all model. This is evident in the design and range of each of the model’s dimensions:
1. **Purpose:** Steps in the *Purpose* continuum capture the rationale driving the evaluation work. For example the Stage 1 rationale is listed as *justification*. At this stage participants are likely to be only reluctantly engaged in evaluation work, viewing this activity as part of the greater neo-liberal audit society. They see themselves as unwilling participants in a command and control culture from which they will quickly disengage if the opportunity arises.

2. **Motivation:** Steps in the *Motivation* continuum reflect both the institution and the institutional players’ impetus for engaging in new approaches to assessment. For example, the Stage 1 motivation is *fear and survival*. Organizations at this stage adopt new models of evaluation in a more or less cynical attempt to appease funders’ expectation (real or perceived), in order to ensure institutional survival, rather than out of a genuine desire to improve organizational functioning and success.

3. **Organizational Impact (tactical/strategic):** Steps in the *Organizational Impact (tactical/strategic)* continuum differentiate between short-term tactical acquiescence of evaluation, and long-term strategic acceptance, illustrating the practice as an authentic cultural artefact, rather than a temporary adjustment to a crisis situation.

4. **Organizational Impact (internal/external):** Steps in the *Organizational Impact (internal/external)* continuum chart organizational transition from a closed to an open system; becoming more attuned to ensuring that program outcomes reflect the expectations, needs and wants of the broadest possible constituency, and are not merely reflective of perceived needs of narrow, internally focused organizational imperatives.

5. **Inhibitors & Enablers:** Steps in the *Inhibitors & Enablers* continuum are designed to help understand where resistance to change (inhibitors) resides and what the real issues
underlying that resistance are. They also assist in identifying champions for change (enablers) within the organization who can help to institutionalize the new approaches (a.k.a. Kotter’s 8th step).

6. **Implications**: Steps in the *Implications* continuum help identify the potential consequences and impacts (organizational and psychological) that can be expected in libraries having attained a given stage of development. Both official cultures and subcultures are impacted.

**The stages revealed**

**Stage 0: Complacency**

The key challenge at this stage is to overcome organizational inertia. Staff pushback is seen as a key cultural phenomenon. Hiller, Kyrillidou, and Self (2008) describe the standard cultural environment for libraries at this stage:

In general we found a number of library staff skeptical of quantitative or qualitative data from customers, preferring instead to rely on their own assumptions and past practices to make decisions. The lack of staff competencies in research methodologies and data analysis contributed to this skepticism. (p. 228)

Staff skepticism represents a significant inhibitor to moving beyond the complacency stage. Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) composed the following list of typical answers to the question “what makes it hard to be evidence based?”
There’s too much evidence;
There’s not enough good evidence;
The evidence doesn’t quite apply;
People are trying to mislead you;
You are trying to mislead you;
The side-effects outweigh the cure;
Stories are more persuasive anyways.

Pfeffer and Sutton’s list is consistent with the rationales for not using outcome/impact measures stated by our survey and interview participants:

- Lack of staff capacity;
- Do not have anyone trained in outcome/impact measurement;
- Probably the best answer for why it hasn’t happened yet is “too time consuming”;
- Lack of time;
- Not currently considered a priority by our governing body;
- Assuring outcomes fall short on our priority list;
- No formal criteria which is implemented system-wide.

It is interesting to note that although our research was conducted with Ontario public libraries in 2014 whereas Pfeffer and Sutton’s 2006 findings come from a review of U.S. academic libraries, there is significant consonance between the two lists. Apparently not much progress has been made in the interim in addressing the lack of meaningful evaluation in the library profession.

In order to move beyond complacency, library staff requires a focused effort by management. Hodges and Hernandez (1999, p. 195) note that staff agreement with a program or agency’s stated vision and/or mission cannot be assumed. Willing consent is a critical element in order to successfully introduce a new system of outcome-based evaluation, as well as for establishing conditions amenable to cultural change (if necessary). Authentic participation
requires a motivational force that inspires staff. In this scenario the determinants and conditions of the status quo are evident, as identified by Nussbaumer and Merkley (2012), and need to be addressed as a pre-condition to progressing to Stage 1:

- “Due to the ‘everyone does the same thing’ culture and operational model it was impossible to make a change to workflow in one area without it directly impacting other areas – therefore systemic change was necessary.

- Organizational politics were so strong and polarized that they stalled or destroyed the development and implementation of new initiatives.

- The existing structures were so convoluted that the technical services review groups could not explain them and the focus needed to change from a ‘review’ to ‘building it today.’” (p. 680)

A final symptom of Stage 0 that must be addressed in order to advance the organization to Stage 1 deals with locus of control. In addition to the need for a shared vision/mission, shared control is also a prerequisite to successful execution of new institution-wide systems of assessment. The locus of control, also defined as power, is best shared by encouraging decision-making and effective action by those staff most affected by it- a top-down approach by management is unlikely to succeed. Distributed decision-making advances the introduction of outcome evaluation; but equally (if not more importantly) action to take place from the information obtained.

**Stage 1: Justification**

At this stage the need to conduct outcome-based assessment has become evident to key organizational decision and policy makers. It can be seen as an awakening, and at its most basic
level the primal organizational imperative, *survival*, is the catalyst behind its introduction. Organizations at this stage tend to embrace simplistic elements of the NPM approach when planning the form of their new assessment system. Evaluation tends to take on a ‘Return-On-Investment’ (ROI) posture: organizations are driven to demonstrate ‘worth,’ their competitive advantage and value propositions vis-a-vis competitors, who might be either private sector doppelgangers (e.g. bookstores) or other public services (e.g. police services). This being the case, there is generally no concerted effort taken to connect culture with evaluation in a meaningful or systematic fashion. As noted by Farkas (2013), “With limited time, faculty will look to using assessment tools that require the least investment of time rather than those that will provide the most meaningful data.” (p. 22)

An excellent illustration of a Stage 1 justification approach is evident in the *Best Value Initiative* launched in the United Kingdom in 2000. Developed using NPM tenets, it required all public service agencies, including libraries, to submit a *Best Value Performance Plan* (BVPP) annually, in order to “demonstrate that the service it provides is delivered in the most ‘economic, efficient and effective’ way possible” (Train & Elkin, 2001, p. 296). Evaluation includes the “4Cs” of best value:

- Challenging why/how a service was delivered;
- Comparing performance with other organizations in the private and volunteer sectors;
- Embracing ‘Fair Competition’ as a means of securing efficient and effective service;
- Consulting with local taxpayers, customers and the business community.

Train and Elkin review the implications of BVPPs in the evaluation of library literacy services. The very nature of this evaluation led to staff pushback, given that its design was
predicated on proving the value of institutional existence, rather than meeting goals, measuring outcomes, and measuring impacts; in short making the service better. The rather shallow focus of the Best Value Initiative eliminated any expectation for system-wide buy-in. The best value approach was ideologically driven by the politics of the day and hence was tactical rather than strategic in nature. As such it was viewed by library staff as a short-term scheme, easily abandoned when the political climate changed.

**Stage 2: Self Awareness**

This stage centres on the organization moving away from a position of fear and survival and toward a sense of self efficacy. This new sense of awareness is typified by a statement from one of our participants from a mid-sized library: “In terms of our staff perspective on a different type of evaluation; they are frustrated in evaluating programs based solely on the number of participants. Certain programs (we offer) are limited on the number of participants attending, given the current (evaluation’s) design and purpose.”

Further internal challenges, resource scarcity, and pressures can be impediments to better buy-in and more enthusiastic use of evaluation by staff. In their study of how ARL libraries use results of evaluations, Hiller et al. (2008) observed that only a few libraries understood and were able to analyze and present data effectively. As one of our interviewees from a large urban library noted, a perceived lack of practical application of assessment results provided to decision-making is troublesome and slows down acceptance of the new approach; “We have no results to give to staff to show that this (evaluation work) can help them in their work.” The same interviewee stated that this lack of applicability has resulted in a “misunderstanding” with “front line staff saying I’m very busy and this is extra work for me.” In this case, staff members were
ready and willing to participate and implement a new approach to assessment. Unfortunately, the library system lacked the ability (whether due to skills or politics) to utilize the data in a manner that would be seen as meaningful to staff, thereby needlessly squandering their goodwill. As previously noted, initial staff enthusiasm and acceptance of change is precious capital that once expended without any tangible results is quite challenging to re-accumulate it. Once lost, trust is difficult to regain.

In Stage 2 staff cautiously moves towards engagement. A lack of effective execution regarding assessment results can act as an inhibitor, stalling or even reversing forward movement of the model. Conversely, effective engagement (a constructive feedback loop involving results – involvement - use of data) can act as a catalyst, propelling the organization on to the next stage.

Stage 3: Alignment

At Stage 3, the evaluation enterprise shifts away from being viewed as a tactical tool used to justify financial expenditures, create one-time budget victories, or realize short-term project benefits. Evaluation becomes a strategic exercise, positioning the organization for long-term success and refocusing human and financial resources in relevant, effective and sustainable ways. In short, it leads toward a system-wide alignment between the organization’s vision/mission, and its ability to execute the mission and realize its goals. This is an important pivot point in the model. Once Stage 3 is achieved, backsliding into previous ineffective behavior becomes more difficult because the organizational culture has evolved. A self-perpetuating degree of forward momentum; a virtuous cycle is realized.
Hodges and Hernandez (1999), reviewing evaluation as a tool for demonstrating greater relevance in community-service organizations, stress the value of system-wide alignment:

By linking outcome accountability with systems change, the assumption is made that if child-serving organizations know more information about the outcomes or results of the work they are doing, they can use this information to improve upon their work and make systems more responsive to the needs of the children and families they serve. (p. 184)

A research interviewee from a small/medium-sized library described the challenges of having staff readily use outcome evaluation at a strategic level; “staff value conducting evaluation, and they grasp the importance of it. They are grasping what is offered and using data to fix it (programs requiring change).” In stark contrast, the same library’s board of directors is not interested in strategic uses of data: “We are not using evaluation results in making policy and financial decisions. It (evaluation) is separate from their (the library board’s) agenda. It doesn’t fit into their institutional perception.” The board’s traditional culture and simplistic perception of the evaluation effort has frustrated the staff, stymieing progress into Stage 3. When it is restricted to merely fulfilling the role of providing a set of tactical tools, meaningful evaluation can only go so far in helping libraries achieve greater relevance and sustainability. For authentic organizational alignment to be achieved, it must be seen and utilized as a strategic instrument affecting a greater degree of overall systemic alignment, including an intractable inculcation of shared vision and goals, amongst all institutional stakeholders.

**Stage 4: Actualization**
Stage 4 involves the complete integration of the assessment system into the organization’s culture. Evaluation has been inculcated within the organizational membership as a worthwhile and positive enterprise, becoming a naturalized element of workflows. Strategically, data from outcome evaluations assist in informing and forming priorities and activities, allocating and re-allocating resources, and ensuring that the organization remains responsive and relevant to all of its stakeholders, both internal and external: “In a culture of assessment, assessment becomes the norm and a valued part of planning and teaching. New services are planned for with consideration for how they will be assessed. The library does not just collect data; it acts on and learns from the data.” (Farkas, 2013, p. 15)

References


