

Clustered Evaluations: Lessons learned from recent evaluations

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Purpose

- Review the background on approach adopted for program evaluations attempting clustered evaluation
- Challenges – scope, planning, methodology, and data collection
- Implications and lessons learned for clustered evaluations

Approach

- Review Treasury Board Evaluation Policy
- What are the “new” requirements
- Focus on the essentials to meet the requirements
- Application to PCH

Treasury Board Policy on Evaluation

Key changes introduced in April 2009

- Annual evaluation plan
- Requirement to evaluate 100% of program spending within a five-year cycle
- Focus on two themes – relevance and performance – to define “value for money”
- Introduction of the concepts of “economy” and “efficiency” to emphasize the importance of assessing how public resources are used to achieve “results”
- Reaffirming the role of the Deputy Head as the “client” for evaluations

Core issues to be addressed in evaluations

Relevance Issues

Issue 1 - Continued need for the program: Assessment of the extent to which the program meets a demonstrable need and is responsive to the needs of Canadians.

Issue 2 - Alignment with government priorities: Assessment of the linkages between program objectives and (i) federal government priorities and (ii) departmental strategic outcomes.

Issue 3 - Alignment with federal roles and responsibilities: Assessment of the roles and responsibilities of the federal government in delivering the program.

Performance Issues (Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Economy)

Issue 4 - Achievement of expected outcomes: Assessment of progress toward expected outcomes (including immediate, intermediate, and ultimate outcomes), with reference to performance targets and program research, and program design, including the linkage and contribution of outputs to outcomes.

Issue 5 - Demonstration of efficiency and economy: Assessment of resource utilization in relation to the production of outputs and progress toward expected outcomes.

Source: Directive on the Evaluation Function (Annex A)

Observations on Core Issues

- The core issues form the backbone of all evaluations and are the starting point of the evaluation matrix
- Evaluations may extend these themes to meet management needs – this is where the trouble starts for clustered evaluations
- The definition of performance, especially the isolation of economy and efficiency, means that resource use and financial data will figure more prominently in evaluations
- Core Issue 5 demands that programs map their results chains – logic models to locate where economy, efficiency and effectiveness are to be measured
- Clustered evaluations may generate complex results chains (logic models), especially when non-aligned programs are “tossed” into the mix
- The Performance Measurement Framework – PMF (formerly known as the RMAF) – is the central document, which guides the results reporting

Challenges Encountered “Framework sprawl”

Challenges

- Complexity of issues and questions multiply as additional players seek representation and influence
- Balancing reporting for each program and level consumers scarce resources

Mitigation

- The three programs support common PCH and Canadian Sport Policy goals
- Common stakeholders for the three programs
- Close and ongoing consultation with SC and ISD staff

The reality

- The evaluation matrix was too detailed and complex, as the evaluation attempted to include all of the interests of each program
- Questions that do not all align with TB requirements and represent “research” issues useful for strategic planning, but are not germane to an evaluation
- Insufficient definition of scope for each program, with the result that smaller programs either received superficial attention or consumed an inordinate proportion of the evaluation resources relative to their budgets

Recommendation

- Focus on matrix aligned to the five core TB issues
- Create an umbrella PMF approved by all programs
- Orient the evaluation to the clustered programs on the basis of materiality (size of program spending, strategic importance, and/or currently perceived problems)
- Decide what to exclude on the basis of current problems and hot buttons.

Challenges Encountered

Attribution and measurement of clustered impact:

Challenge

- Difficulty in measuring outcome/impact of programs compounded by other initiatives and processes
- Clustering can create a vast number of expected outcomes to assess
- Lack of performance targets and reporting by program meant that progress was hard to assess except through weak lines of evidence (interviews)

Mitigation

- Presentation of qualifications and context for the expected outcomes

The reality

- The role of the provinces/territories is very significant, especially in participation and in the earlier years of long-term athlete development – the evaluation could not measure/distinguish this impact from SC impact
- Expected outcomes that were difficult to assess, particularly in the absence of specific targets

Recommendation

- Develop and finalize the questions as part of the umbrella PMF
- Evaluation directors and managers need to ensure that evaluations remain focused on meeting TB requirements

Challenges Encountered in 2010 Sport Canada Evaluation (cont'd)

Long evaluation period (April 1, 2003 to March 31, 2010):

Challenges

- Ensure the evaluation takes into account the entire period and does not focus on recent events
- Records and documentation may not be available for earlier time periods or consistently enough to provide long-term data
- Interviewed participants may not be able to speak in the context of the entire evaluation period

Mitigation

- The evaluation to consider all seven years, if possible, but to focus on more recent events, particularly since OTP

Reality

- The evaluation considered the seven-year period as much as possible, but focuses on more recent years in which more data exists and is more reliable

Recommendation

- Define the evaluation period as the most recent three-year period

Challenges Encountered in 2010 Sport Canada Evaluation (cont'd)

Program documentation and performance information:

Challenge

- Information retained by many different units within and among the three programs, which in many cases was not processed or consolidated in summary reports.
- Recipient (NSO, MSO, CSC) performance reports varied widely in content and format, making it difficult to assess/combine information
- Very large volume of unstructured program documentation consumed evaluation resources to cost and classify information, much of which proved irrelevant for the evaluation
- Performance reporting was far from complete, requiring the evaluator to perform basic analysis, not supported by the budget

Mitigation

- No really successful strategies were developed to manage the high volumes of unstructured data that flows throughout the evaluation
- A single SC staff member who assumed the position of overall data coordinator and collector did assist in managing the program documentation

Reality

- The data processing overload contributed to the need to renegotiate the contract

Recommendation

- Prepare an evaluation assessment prior to launching any clustered evaluation to survey the state of the data and to refine the evaluation matrix and methodology
- Require the programs to summarize performance through annual reports that go beyond the high level annual DPR requirements

Challenges Encountered

Evidence goes viral

Challenge

- Each program element will present many lines of evidence 100 key informant interviews to cover many stakeholder groups – NSOs, MSOs, CSCs, Sport Canada management, experts and other stakeholders, and ISD management/recipients
- Interview guides appear to have 18 questions; in fact, the guides comprise over 90 discrete questions and many interviews lasted two hours or more; this was required to cover all issues in the matrix and interests of the three programs

Mitigation

- None, except to reduce scope of other tasks and increase budget

Reality

- Interviewer/interviewee burden was excessive
- This component consumed a large proportion of the budgeted resources – both for conducting and analyzing the results for the technical report

Recommendation

- Expand scope of data collection by using web-based, self-administered surveys targeted to each group/program to quantify opinions
- Select a limited number of strategically positioned key informants for actual interviews based on their position and responses to the survey
- Limit the interviews to 45 minutes and focus the questions on perception, analysis, and interpretation, not fact gathering

Challenges Encountered

Evaluation management and control

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Challenge

- Program management had significant control over the direction, scope, and budget for the evaluation
- This meant frequent negotiations among evaluation manager, contractor, and program representatives to accommodate program planning needs within the evaluation
- Additional questions that do not support the Policy are often inserted by the program as “add ons”

Reality

- Many departments require the program to finance the evaluations
- This passes *de facto* control from evaluation units to the program
- Evaluation directorates have the responsibility of ensuring evaluations meet TB requirements, yet are often not in control of the financial resources for evaluation and therefore lose control of the evaluation

Mitigation with current framework

- None, except to reduce scope of other tasks and increase budget

Recommendation

- Cluster evaluations will require evaluation directorates to do more with less
- Departments should reassigning resources for evaluation from programs to evaluation units to support the financial control needed to manage evaluations under the new policy
- “Add-ons” not in the scope of the evaluation should be financed by the program

Summary Recommendations for Cluster Evaluations

General recommendations on cluster evaluations:

- Only cluster programs that support the same PCH goals, have common stakeholders, and/or report to the same senior manager (ADM)
- Identify the emphasis in the cluster evaluation to ensure that the evaluation covers the most material elements – i.e., accept that some programs and components will receive less attention

Recommendations to create cost-effective evaluations:

- Undertake an evaluation assessment to review the state of performance data before finalizing the evaluation matrix, designing the methodology, and determining a budget
- Replace labour-intensive (costly) data collection methods (interviews) with more self-administered methods (web surveys) to conserve resources
- Use key informant interviews strategically to generate insight, expand interpretation and create context, and **not** as a primary fact gathering tool. Therefore do not ask whether the program is efficient; ask
 - what information does management collect to assess efficiency;
 - what changes have been implemented to increase efficiency or reduce resource (staff time use)....
- Insist that programs classify and streamline documentation prior to forwarding material
- Focus the evaluation on the recent period
- Require programs to process performance data and prepare annual reports, using a common format to support cross-program reporting and consistent reporting by Gs&Cs recipients

Concluding Thought

The TB Evaluation Policy envisions close cooperation among evaluators, program managers, and financial managers to support the review of 100% of program spending within a five-year cycle.

- **Evaluators** will need to ensure that methods are cost-effective and that evaluation questions support the core issues in the policy. Cluster evaluations need to make strategic choices in terms of emphasis.
- **Program managers** need to ensure consistent and regular performance reporting to replace formative evaluations, identify the program elements in most need of intensive review, and support the evaluation. There are insufficient evaluation resources to use evaluations to prepare adequate performance reports.
- **Financial managers** need to create systems that can align resource use with program activities and outputs. This is fundamental to the TB focus on economy and efficiency.