

# Actionable Evaluations: A Bootcamp for Commissioners, Managers and Evaluators

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anzea regional symposium workshop  
May 5, 2010  
Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand

## Overview

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- Disappointing evaluations
  - The commissioners' and managers' view
  - The meta-evaluators' view
  
- Real, genuine, actionable evaluation
  - Research  $\neq$  evaluation
  - What can you reasonably expect?
  - How to get it
  - A longer-term view



## Disappointing evaluations

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- The managers' and commissioners' view:
  - What characterises the evaluations you commission that disappoint you?
  - What characterises the ones that meet or exceed your expectations?



## The meta-evaluators' view

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- No incisive evaluation questions
- Wrong methodology for the questions
- Lost in the details
- No 'so what'
- Stated objectives as the only evaluative criteria
- Focus only on the average effect
- Fail to adequately triangulate & weave evidence
- Toss causation into the 'too hard basket'
- Fail to clearly communicate findings



## Research vs. evaluation questions

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- **RESEARCH** => **descriptive and/or causal** questions, even with an implicitly evaluative frame (**what's so?**)
  - What are the effects of 'boot camps' on youth recidivism?
  - How have student achievement rates and other key indicators changed since this literacy programme was implemented?
  
- **EVALUATION** => **evaluative** questions (**so what?**), i.e. questions about *quality, value or importance*
  - How substantial and valuable is the contribution of this diabetes prevention programme on key health outcomes?
  - Is this job skills programme worth implementing nationwide?
  - Is language immersion more effective than teaching language by translation? Or, more effective for some but not others? Who?
  - How well does this leadership development programme meet the needs of its participants and their organisation(s)?



## Real, genuine, actionable evaluation

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- What can you reasonably expect?
  - An evaluation guided by overarching questions based on what key intended users need to know
  - Culturally valid and relevant values analysis, methodologies, processes and reporting – *for 'general population' evaluations too!*
  - At least some evidence of causal links between the initiative and anything listed as an 'outcome' or 'impact'
  - Clearly reasoned and well-evidenced conclusions
  - Direct, actionable answers to important questions
  - Clear, concise reporting that gets to the point



## How to get a real evaluation

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1. Clearly define purpose, uses, users
2. Develop explicitly evaluative overarching questions to guide the evaluation
3. Consider the universe of possible evaluation approach & methodology options
4. Determine the necessary evaluation competencies for this piece of work
5. Design and implement a highly effective evaluation commissioning process
6. Actively manage the evaluation
7. Conduct a meta-evaluative reflection process



### 1a. Clearly define evaluation's purpose

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- ❑ This is a crucially important part of the process!
- ❑ Identify the key decisions and reporting requirements that spark the need for an evaluation
  - Ongoing improvement decisions
  - Decisions to roll out an initiative more widely
  - Report to Cabinet or the Minister
  - Review of provider contract
- ❑ Who needs to know what, to what level of certainty/ depth and within what timeframe?
- ❑ What are the priorities? Get clarity of focus



## 1b. Clearly define findings users & uses

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- Users of evaluation findings – who are priority audiences?
  - Agency or funding organisation
  - The Minister(s)
  - Provider or implementing organisation
  - Other 'right to know' audiences, e.g., participants, families/whānau, hapū, iwi, communities, employers, the public
  
- Uses of evaluation findings and/or process:
  - What do they need to know?
  - For what decisions or purposes?
  - When do they need the information?
  - What kinds of evidence will be convincing to them?
  - What level of certainty makes sense in this context?
  - Is there a need for evaluation capacity building?



## 2a. Develop explicitly evaluative questions

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- A list of 7 +/- 2 'big picture' questions to guide the evaluation
  
- All questions should be explicitly evaluative
  
- All questions should be roughly the same 'size'/level/scope



## 2b. What should the questions cover?

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- Most or all of the following:
  - Need for the initiative
  - Process evaluation (quality of content, design, and delivery/implementation)
  - Outcome evaluation (value of outcomes)
  - Learnings (barriers and enablers, and explanations if useful)
  - Overarching questions about value/worth
  - Forward/outward focused evaluation questions (e.g. exportability, sustainability, threats, opportunities)



## 2c. A generic set of evaluation questions

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1. What were the 'needs' or untapped potential that this was supposed to address? How have they changed? Is the initiative still needed, or the best 'solution'?
2. What is the quality of the initiative's content/design and how well has it been implemented?
3. How valuable are the outcomes to participants? To the community, to society, to the economy?
4. What are the barriers and enablers that have made the difference between successful and disappointing implementation and outcomes?
5. What else has been learned (about how or why the effects were caused/prevented, what went right/wrong, lessons for next time)?



## 2d. More generic evaluation questions

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6. Was the initiative worth implementing? Did the value of the outcomes outweigh the value of the resources used to obtain them?
7. To what extent did the program represent the best possible use of available resources to achieve outcomes of the greatest possible value to participants and the community?
8. To what extent is the program, or aspects of its content, design or delivery, likely to be valuable in other settings? How transferable is it?
9. How strong is the sustainability of the initiative and its outcomes? Do the changes 'stick' or 'slip back'? Why? Can the initiative survive/grow in the future with limited additional resources?



## 3. Consider the universe of options

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- a. Value-based vs. value-plural vs. 'value-free'?
- b. Subject matter expertise vs. cultural expertise vs. evaluation expertise?
- c. Independent evaluation vs. development of learning & evaluation capacity?
- d. In-depth/detailed vs. 'fairly quick/fairly clean'?

### 3a. Value-based, value-plural, value-free?

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- **Value-based**
  - careful definition of 'value', 'quality' and 'worth'
  - explicitly evaluative conclusions about quality/value/worth
- **Value-plural**
  - identifies what main stakeholder groups consider 'valuable' (e.g., government of the day, funding agency, programme providers, recipients, different community groups)
  - reports findings using each of these perspectives
- **'Value-free' (i.e. not actually an evaluation)**
  - presents descriptive data (summaries of themes from qualitative data; indicators measured; change statistics)
  - client expected to read and draw own conclusions about quality/value/worth (the 'Rorschach inkblot')



### 3b. Subject matter vs. cultural vs. evaluation expertise?

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- It's ideal to have all three, but there's often a trade-off
- Which stakeholders will view which experts as most credible?
  - Subject matter experts
  - Cultural and language experts
  - Evaluation experts
- If trade-offs are essential, which ones would be fatal to either credibility or validity?



### 3b cont. Expertise trade-offs

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- ❑ **Content experts with research skills but little evaluation or cultural expertise** tend to produce:
  - ‘Connoisseurial’ evaluations (‘expert reviews’) or
  - ‘Applied research’-type evaluations (‘value-free’)
  - ... all from within their own cultural frame
  
- ❑ **An evaluation expert with minimal content or cultural expertise** should be able to:
  - Partner with subject matter and cultural experts on the evaluation team
  - Run a participatory process that brings in subject matter expertise (e.g. from the agency) and cultural expertise (from the community)



### 3c. Expert analyses vs. learning capacity?

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- ❑ What’s the right balance between getting ‘independent evaluation’ and helping the organisation to learn?
  
- ❑ A few questions to ponder:
  - Is there an independent evaluation [Cabinet or other] requirement?
  - Do the required analyses require highly specialised (e.g. economic, financial, or statistical) knowledge?
  - Is buy-in to findings important (& likely to be difficult)?
  - Would the organisation gain substantial benefit from evaluative thinking and evaluative know-how?
  - Is it feasible and worthwhile to devote staff time to participation?

### 3d. In-depth vs. 'fairly quick/fairly clean'?

- This can be a real challenge when using 'researchers' to do evaluation
  - Different beliefs about how certain is enough ( $p < .05$ )
  - Orientation toward publishable article norms
- At the other end, decision makers may want answers now (or too soon) to something that cannot be determined within the timeframe
- Important to determine up front:
  - Audience, purpose and priorities
  - Timelines and decision points
  - Level of certainty required in decision making
  - Depth of understanding required for certain issues

## 4. Determine the necessary competencies

- What competencies are needed for a particular evaluation?

Evaluation includes ...	Competencies needed must include ...
How good, substantial, valuable ...? questions	Evaluation-specific know-how & methodologies; cultural competence & culturally relevant values analysis
Value-for-money questions	Either very specific econometric or ROI skills <u>or</u> alternative methodologies for getting approximate answers to VfM
Evaluation capacity building	Facilitation and coaching skills Evaluation capacity building track record
Practical, well-communicated evaluation for managers	Understanding of manager info needs Concision, clarity, to-the-point executive summaries and reports!



## 5. Implement effective commissioning

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- ❑ Clarity up front about purpose, needs – without being overly prescriptive
- ❑ State the budget range and make it realistic
- ❑ Beware of overly onerous RFP processes – who are you excluding?
- ❑ Consider a *brief* EoI followed by full RFP or face-to-face interview
- ❑ Look at (and ask about) work samples



## 6. Actively manage the evaluation

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- ❑ Don't send your evaluators off into orbit ... only to be disappointed with the product
- ❑ Maintain continuity of key contact people (use 2-3 people for long-term projects)
- ❑ Identify key decision points and obtain real-time updates to fit
- ❑ Ask for a 'skeleton report' *before* any data are collected
- ❑ Get an oral report prior to the big write-up; ask questions; clarify focus of the written report
- ❑ Have a contingency plan for 'pulling the plug'



## 7. Conduct meta-evaluative reflection

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- ❑ How well did the RFP process work? Did we get a strong list of contenders? Who didn't bid that we would have liked to bid? Why?
- ❑ In hindsight, did we choose the right evaluation team?
- ❑ How well did the evaluation meet our information and other needs (e.g. capacity building)?
- ❑ Did we get well-reasoned and well-evidenced answers to our most important questions?
- ❑ Were the evaluation and its findings actionable? Who has used them so far? Who hasn't, and why?
- ❑ What aspects of the evaluation were we disappointed with, and why?
- ❑ How well did we support the evaluator to understand the context, our needs and fill any knowledge gaps?
- ❑ To what extent was the evaluation value for money?



## Fatal mistakes to avoid

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- ❑ Be vague about what kind of evaluation you need – as though they are all similar
- ❑ Be vague about the budget
- ❑ Use an onerous RFP process
- ❑ Hire researchers to do an evaluator's job
- ❑ Opt for subject matter expertise over evaluation and cultural expertise
- ❑ Sign the contract, then hope for the best until the final report arrives
- ❑ Bury disappointing evaluations



## A longer-term view?

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- Does the evaluation profession in Aotearoa have the capacity to deliver?
- What's missing?
  - Sheer numbers of the right evaluators
  - Specific competencies
  - Specific combinations of competencies and capabilities



## Recap

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- Get clear about purpose, users, uses, focus
- Think through your big picture questions
- Decide what kind of evaluation you need – and what kind of team is needed to deliver
- Commission effectively
- Manage carefully throughout
- *Learn* from evaluation contracting experiences
- Think strategically! [Check out this afternoon's session on **Strategic Policy Evaluation.**]