Some specifics about evaluation-specific methodology: Importance determination

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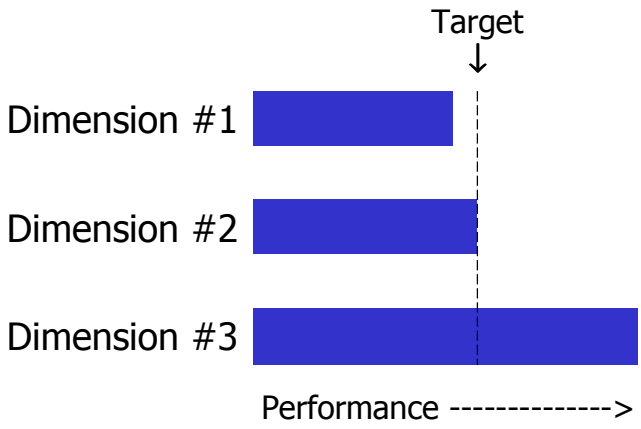
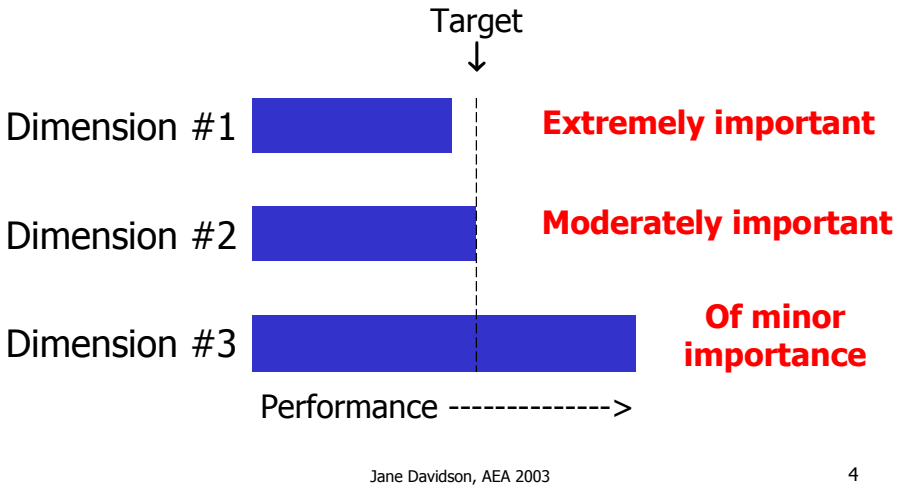
Overview

- The importance of importance
- What is importance determination?
- Six importance determination methodologies
  - How they work
  - Key assumptions (conditions for use)
- Points to remember

Hypothetical performance profile



The importance of importance



What is importance determination?

- Importance determination = the process of assigning labels to dimensions (aspects of an evaluand) or components (parts of an evaluand) to indicate their importance
- The labels assigned may be:
  - Quantitative "weights" (1, 2, 3, 4, etc)
  - Qualitative labels (extremely important, important, desirable, etc.)

But is this evaluation?

- Evaluation = the determination of merit (quality), worth (value), or significance (importance)
- Not just the significance/importance of the evaluand as a whole, but also the importance of components or dimensions
- Therefore, importance determination is relevant even in evaluations where there is no "final synthesis" step

6 importance determination strategies

1. Having stakeholders "vote" on importance
2. Drawing on the knowledge of selected stakeholders + evaluation team judgment
3. Using evidence from the literature
4. Using content specialist judgment
5. Using evidence from the needs assessment
6. Using program theory and evidence of causal linkages

1. Using the stakeholder vote method

- How it works
  - Single step (e.g., survey)
  - Deliberative (vote – discuss – agree)
- Assumptions/requirements
  - Perceived importance = actual importance
  - All right-to-vote parties are included
  - All voters are sufficiently well informed to judge importance
  - No stakeholder subgroup's views of importance should have primacy

2. Using key stakeholder knowledge

- How it works
  - Identify stakeholders who are particularly well positioned to see evidence of importance
  - Use a structured interview (or other method) to carefully probe their knowledge, e.g., ask:
    - How beneficial would it be overall if the evaluand did very well on this dimension or component?
    - How detrimental would it be overall if the evaluand did very poorly on this dimension or component?
  - Similar to the Critical Incident Technique

Matrix for using stakeholder knowledge

		How <u>detrimental</u> overall if the evaluand did *very poorly* on this dimension/component?		
		Not noticeably detrimental	*Noticeably detrimental*	*Unacceptably detrimental*
How <u>beneficial</u> overall if evaluand did *very well* on this?	*Somewhat beneficial*	Somewhat Important	Important	Important (and set a bar)
	Very beneficial	Important	Very Important	V. Important (and set a bar)
	Extremely beneficial	Very Important	Extremely Important	Ex. Important (and set a bar)

When to use key stakeholder knowledge

- Assumptions/requirements
  - Each "key" stakeholder is sufficiently well informed to help provide valuable, relevant information
  - The combination of stakeholder input will, as a package, provide a gauge of importance of sufficient certainty for the decision-making context
  - The "key" stakeholders are seen by others as credible and well-informed judges of importance

3. Using evidence from the literature

- How it works
  - Identify previous studies of evaluands of this type in a comparable context
  - Evaluate the evidence; ask:
    - What evidence exists that it would be beneficial overall if the evaluand did *very well* on this component or dimension?
    - What evidence exists that it would be detrimental overall if it did *very poorly* on this component or criterion?

Matrix for evidence from literature

		What evidence exists of detrimental impact if the evaluand did *very poorly* on this?		
		Little evidence of potential detrimental impact	*Evidence some detrimental impact possible*	*Unacceptably detrimental impact possible*
What evidence exists that it would be beneficial overall if evaluand did *very well* on this?	*Clear evidence some beneficial impact possible*	Somewhat Important	Important	Important (and set a bar)
	Substantial beneficial impact evident	Important	Very Important	Very Important (and set a bar)
	Consistently a major determinant of quality	Very Important	Extremely Important	Extremely Important (and set a bar)

When to use evidence from the literature

- Assumptions/requirements
  - Volume & quality of available research is sufficient to allow inferences to be drawn about importance
  - Context of other research is sufficiently similar => findings can reasonably be assumed to apply

4. Using content specialist judgment

- How it works
  - Identify 1-2 specialists who have spent many years evaluating or studying this type of evaluand
  - Ask each of them:
    - In your experience, what are the things that make or break a [program] of this type?
    - How potentially beneficial (or detrimental) is it if the evaluand is particularly good/weak on each of these components/dimensions?
    - How do factors like context, culture, recipient characteristics play in?

When to use specialist judgment

- Assumptions/requirements
  - The specialists have had sufficient experience with evaluands in a similar context
  - The information is based on actual, documented successes and failures, not just "style variables"
  - The specialists have credibility in the eyes of the main audiences for the evaluation

5. Using needs assessment evidence

- How it works
  - The needs assessment, at a minimum, identifies potential outcomes to be tracked:
    - Unmet or partially met needs that should be addressed by the evaluand
    - Met needs that should be maintained or enhanced
  - The most important outcomes are:
    - The "make or break" ones
    - The "hardest to find" ones

When to use NA evidence

- Assumptions/requirements
  - The needs assessment must go beyond asking people "What do you need?" (this taps only conscious, unmet needs)
  - The needs assessment must specifically probe needs that demonstrably impact *functioning* (most frequently mentioned ≠ most important)

6. Using program theory + link strength

- How it works
  - Draw a simple logic model that shows the links between proximal and distal outcomes
  - Use another importance determination strategy to determine the importance of the distal outcomes
  - Ascertain the strengths of the causal links
  - Determine importance of the proximal outcomes:
    - Most important proximal outcomes = those that are most *strongly linked* to the most important distal outcomes

(a) Importance of distal outcomes

PROXIMAL OUTCOMES

High-Performance Culture
Challenging Assumptions
Shared Vision & Intuition
Team Learning & Communication
Systems & Nonlinear Thinking
External & Future Scanning
Innovation & Experimentation
Systematic Evaluation

DISTAL OUTCOMES

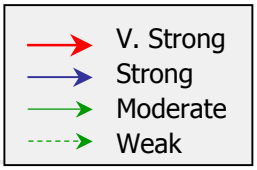
- Feeling able to perform at peak

extremely important

- Desire to stay in org

v. important

(b) Strengths of links



PROXIMAL OUTCOMES

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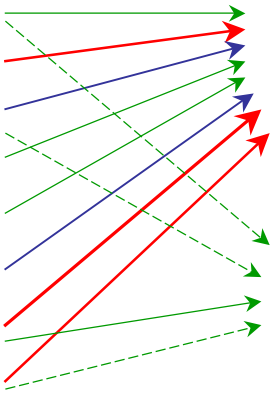
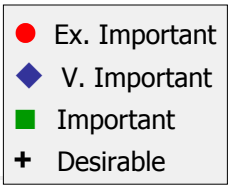


DISTAL OUTCOMES

● Feeling able to perform at peak
ex. important

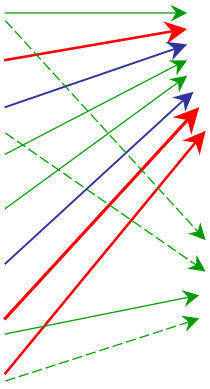
◆ Desire to stay in org
v. important

(c) Combining the info



PROXIMAL OUTCOMES

High-Perf'ce Culture ■
Challenging Assmptns ◆
Shared Vision/Intuition ◆
Team Learning/Comm +
Systems Thinking +
Ext/Future Scanning ◆
Experimentation ●
Systematic Evaluation ●



DISTAL OUTCOMES

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ex. important

◆ Desire to stay in org
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When to use program theory & links

- Assumptions/requirements
  - There must be independent evidence of the importance of downstream outcomes
  - The program theory should be plausible and consistent with other empirical research
  - The strengths of the causal links should be determined with more than just correlational data
  - Evidence about causal links should be provide sufficient certainty for the decision-making context (not necessarily just "beyond reasonable doubt")

Points to remember

- Need to fit the importance determination strategy to the situation—one size does not fit all
- *Usually* a combination of two or more methods works best
- It is often necessary to use different methods for different dimensions and/or components within the same evaluation
- For more info: *The Multipurpose Evaluation Guidebook: The nuts and bolts of putting together a solid evaluation* (due out from Sage, 2004)