



*World-class
evaluation &
organisational
consulting*

Putting “values” back into evaluation

E. Jane Davidson, Ph.D.

Interactive seminar
Aotearoa New Zealand National Evaluation Conference
Taupo, NZ, August 1, 2006

1

Agenda

- Research methodology vs. evaluation-specific logic and methodology
- “Values” in evaluation and the “subjectivity” issue
- Merit determination basics
- Open forum for questions and discussion (questions & comments also encouraged throughout)

2

Research vs. evaluation methodology

- Evaluation logic (principles) and methodology (procedures) allow us to
 - Identify relevant values and
 - Blend those values with descriptive data to
 - Draw explicitly evaluative conclusions (conclusions that say how *good, valuable, or important* something is, rather than just describing what it is like or what happened as a result of its implementation)
- Research methodology is used to gather and analyze *descriptive* data (qualitative and quantitative)
- Most good evaluation combines evaluation logic and methodology with research methodology

3

Eval-specific logic & methodology

- *Identifying evaluative criteria* (e.g., using needs assessment, logic models, other sources of values)
- Answering the “how good is good?” question (*merit determination*)
- Working out the relative importance of performance on various criteria (*importance determination*)
- Combining performances on multiple criteria to draw overall evaluative conclusions (*synthesis methodology*)

4

Evaluation and “values”

- Evaluation questions (as opposed to research questions) always ask about **quality, value, or importance**, e.g.,
 - How effective is this community-based intervention at preventing family violence?
 - How valuable is this leadership development intervention for participants? For their organisations?
 - Is this special education initiative worth implementing nationwide?
- e-**VALU**-ation has two components
 - Descriptive Facts (what's so) + **Values** = Evaluative Conclusions (so what)
- Values are what get us from “What’s so?” to “So what?”

5

Aren't all values just subjective?

- Evaluation is an intensely political activity that is often under attack ...
 - “Well, that’s just *your* opinion about the programme”
 - “Yes, but *who defines* ‘acceptable performance’?”
 - “Who are you to impose *your values* on our programme?”
 - “Evaluation is just *so subjective!*”
- These comments and questions assume that evaluative conclusions are based mostly or exclusively on *personal values and preferences*
- Many people argue that our job is to present the [descriptive] data and allow stakeholders to draw their own conclusions about quality or value

6

The three kinds of ‘subjectivity’

1. Arbitrary, idiosyncratic, unreliable, and/or highly personal (i.e., based on personal preferences and/or cultural biases)
2. Assessment or interpretation by a person, rather than a machine or measurement device, of something external to that person (e.g., expert judgment of others’ skills or performance)
3. About a person’s inner life or experiences (e.g., headaches, fears, beliefs, emotions, stress levels, aspirations), all absolutely real but not usually independently verifiable

Plus the red herring: ‘Subjective’ vs. ‘objective’ measures

- Subjective measures = subjective 2 or 3 above, or qualitative
- Objective measures = quantitative, independently verifiable

7

Where the values shouldn’t come from

- “Values” used in an evaluation should NOT be the personal values, preferences and biases of the evaluator
 - Expert judgement is OK to use
 - Subjectively experienced outcomes are also OK to use
- Of course, we all have our ‘lenses’ and perspectives and ways of looking at the world, things that we are prone to notice, not notice, emphasise, etc., but ...
- The issue is whether any of our lenses/preferences have *interfered with the evaluation* to the extent that we:
 - Exclude or underweight important information or perspectives
 - Inappropriately include or give undue weight to something
 - Draw a conclusion that is not justified

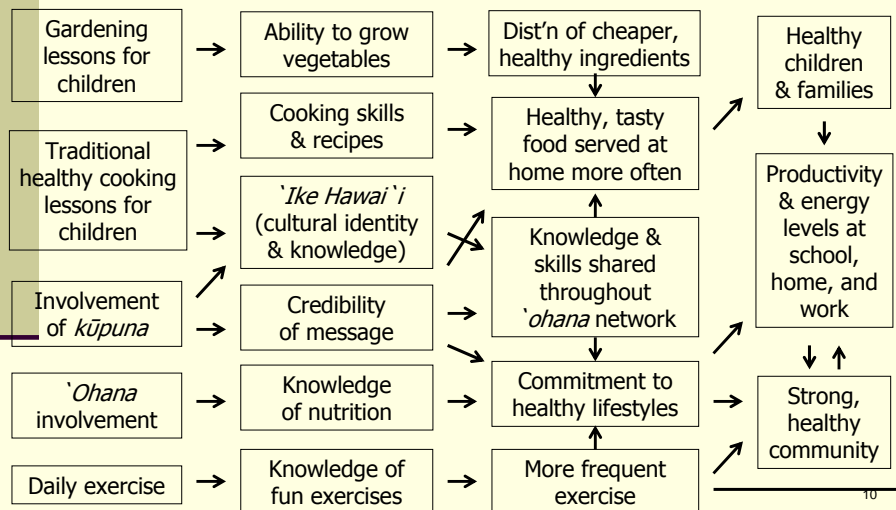
8

Ex: Community nutrition programme

- Vision/needs
 - Well nourished/healthy Native Hawaiian families & communities
- Causes of unmet need
 - Healthy ingredients unavailable or expensive
 - Perception that healthy = not tasty
 - Lack of knowledge about nutrition
- Important strengths
 - Extensive `ohana (extended family) networks
 - Respect for *kūpuna* (elders) and for tradition
 - Tradition of meeting and exchanging ideas in the context of a meal

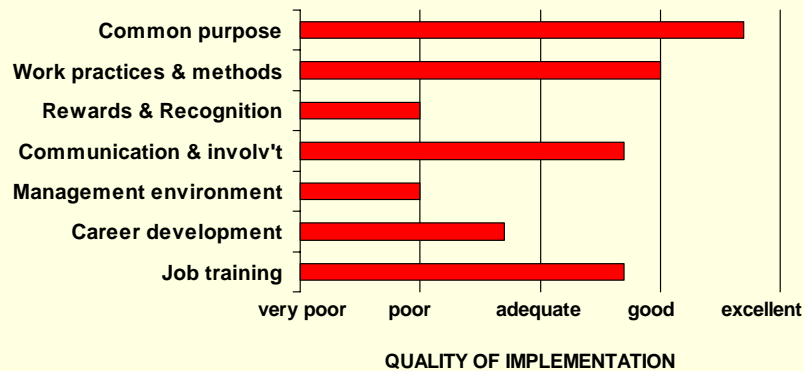
9

Logic model for `Ai Pono (“Eat Right”)



A Process Evaluation Profile

Example taken from a multifaceted organisational change initiative



13

Merit Determination Methodologies

- There are several strategies available for determining merit
- Each one comes with its own
 - Set of assumptions
 - Information requirements
 - Strengths and weaknesses
 - Price tag
- One size does not fit all — merit determination methods should be chosen carefully based on the specific task at hand

14

Merit Determination Strategies

1. Evaluate relative to **goals/targets** (usually a weak option)
2. Have stakeholders **“vote”** on standards
3. Evaluate individual indicators relative to some standards (e.g., fixed **quality standards**)
4. **“Benchmark”** against (compare with results achieved by) other efforts or alternatives
5. **Use your needs assessment:** Interview/probe the real impact on recipients' needs, e.g., for Outcome X, ask How *substantial* is its impact in people's lives?
6. Use **rubrics** that combine several of the above

15

A Basic Rubric for Determining Merit

Excellent	An outstanding outcome that represents having completely met the needs of programme participants and/or the organisation, possibly exceeding expectations in some areas
Very Good	A very valuable outcome that represents having very substantially met the needs of programme participants and/or the organisation; any gaps or areas for improvement in the outcome are minor
Good	A reasonably valuable outcome that represents having mostly met the needs of programme participants and/or the organisation; some gaps or areas for improvement evident, none very serious
Barely Adequate	A somewhat valuable outcome that represents having met at least some of the key (not just minor) needs of programme participants and/or the organisation; important gaps evident
Fair	A minimally valuable outcome that represents having met only minor needs of programme participants and/or the organisation; several very important gaps need to be addressed
Poor	Near-zero or negative outcome that represents a failure to meet the needs of programme participants and/or the organisation, possibly with detrimental effects

16

Determining Merit: `Ai Pono Example

Outcome Criterion: Knowledge of nutrition

Excellent	All participants are able to identify the main food groups, state which foods are the best sources of certain key vitamins and minerals (e.g., iron, Vitamin C), and design a balanced, nutritious meal using fresh ingredients
Very Good	Most participants can do all of the above; all participants can design a reasonably nutritious meal, although they may not be able to explain nutritional content in detail
Good	Most participants can design a reasonably nutritious meal, although they may not be able to explain which foods are high in key vitamins and minerals
Barely Adequate	Most participants can identify a healthy vs. an unhealthy diet (e.g., from a menu), but are not able to design a meal that meets minimum nutritional standards
Poor	Most participants are unable to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy foods, and so lack the knowledge required to make healthy food choices

17

Summary of key points

- Good evaluation requires more than just “measurement” or “research” (what’s so); you also need the ‘so what’ (evaluative conclusions)
- The issue is not just “who decides” ...
 - Which criteria should be used to determine quality/value
 - Which criteria should be weighted more heavily than others
 - How good is “good”
 - What all the findings add up to
- ... The issue is “how are these things decided” (i.e. how valid and justifiable are the definitions of ‘quality’ and ‘value’)

18

Some useful references

- Davidson, E. J. (2004). *Evaluation methodology basics: The nuts and bolts of sound evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Davidson, Howe, & Scriven (2004). Evaluative thinking for grantees. In Braverman, Slater, & Constantine (Eds.), *Foundations and evaluation: Contexts and practices for effective philanthropy*. Jossey-Bass. [Includes details on the logic model and evaluation design for the `Ai Pono programme.]

