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THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING INTERNAL EVALUATION CAPACITY IN INJURY PREVENTION ORGANIZATIONS

BACKGROUND:

In 2007, the predominant manner in which program delivery personnel in the field of injury prevention bring evaluation into their programs and organizations is through contracting with external evaluation consultants to provide time-limited evaluations of specific programs or projects. At present, most injury prevention organizations in Ontario do not have significant internal capacity for the performance of program or project evaluation. This position contrasts with the situation in many other sectors, including the Canadian federal government (House, 1993; McQueen, 1992).

Love (1991) has described an alternative to this approach, in which organizations systematically develop their internal evaluation resources in a manner that allows for the continuous application of internal evaluation expertise to ongoing program, project and organization development.

In late 2001, an Ontario injury prevention (IP) organization began to implement the development of its own internal capacity for evaluation. This process and the benefits that have accrued to this IP organization as a result of this process will be briefly described.

KEY ISSUES & STRATEGIES:

Prior to the Fall of 2001, the IP organization in question had engaged in a number of evaluations of its programs and projects (e.g., Smaller World Communications, 1999). In each case in which an evaluation of an IP program or project had been performed, the evaluators who were external to the IP organization conducted the evaluation. This process was not fully satisfactory for this organization as their managers were not completely satisfied with the usefulness of the results produced by these external evaluations.

In late 2001, two important events occurred at this IP organization that signaled the beginning a new phase of evaluation activity within the organization. In November of 2001, the organization engaged an external evaluation consultant to assist with the development of a comprehensive set of evaluation processes for their flagship program. In addition, the external evaluation consultant was charged with working with program personnel in a manner that would lead to the development of evaluation expertise “within the organization” by involving them in the planning and performance of the evaluation. The external evaluation consultant who was selected for this assignment, chose to meet this organizational objective by practicing a model of evaluation practice known as

Utilization-Focused Evaluation (Patton, 1997). This evaluation practice style prescribes evaluator behaviours that include identifying the intended uses of the evaluation's findings (e.g. the specific decisions with regard to program development that the evaluation results are meant to inform) and the intended users (e.g. the specific managers in the organization who will make the decisions with regard to program managers) before making decisions with regard to the evaluation methods to be employed. This style of evaluation practice also involves program personnel (e.g. managers & delivery staff) in planning the evaluation, keeping other program stakeholders informed with regard to all of the important events in the evaluation and in reporting the evaluation's findings.

The second key event that followed short thereafter was the organization's decision to recognize formally that evaluation of the organization's programs and projects was a significant internal organizational priority. This was accomplished through the assignment of formal responsibility for evaluation within the organization to the recently created position of "Manager, Research Development & Evaluation", a position that was later upgraded to the level of Director, Research & Evaluation. Senior management communicated this important organizational development to all staff of the organization.

The importance of this type of "formal, organizational recognition" of the place of evaluation within a human service organization cannot be overemphasized. The formalization of internal evaluation activity within an organization signals to all members of the organization, that evaluation is part of the ongoing business of the organization.

Subsequent to these key events, acting as a Utilization-Focused evaluator, the external evaluation consultant actively and continuously engaged program managers and program delivery staff in the development of a formal evaluation plan for their program. During this process, program personnel provided critical inputs and participated in key decisions with regard to how "their program" was to be evaluated.

Following the completion of the evaluation plan for this program, the leaders within this IP organization decided, that following the recommendation of Love (1991) to expand their organization's internal capacity to perform the planned evaluation (as well as the evaluation of other programs and projects) through creating a new staff position. In February of 2003, this IP organization created the (part-time, 0.6 fte) position of "Evaluation Coordinator". This staff member is now actively engaged in the evaluation of numerous organizational activities (e.g.; ensuring that logic models are produced for all of the organization's programs and projects, working with program managers and staff to perform internal evaluations of all of this organization's new IP programs and projects, as well as the majority of their existing IP programs and activities).

This internal evaluation staff member reports directly to the Director, Research and Evaluation. In addition, this person works very closely with the organization's Research Associate and with other program managers and staff to ensure that evaluation is integrated into the planning, development and ongoing operations of their IP programs and projects.

As of the current date, this IP organization has developed a strong “evaluation culture” in which all program managers and staff members have become part-time evaluators. Program personnel now routinely draft program logic models when ever a new program or project is being planned or implemented. In addition, program personnel play active roles in the developed of evaluation plans, evaluation methods and tools, in the analysis and interpretation of evaluation data in ensuring that evaluation results are reported effectively and utilized as intended.

In summary, this IP organization has strategically chosen to develop its internal capacity to perform the internal evaluation of their programs and projects in an ongoing manner. This strategy is consistent with the organization’s orientation as a “learning organization”. This move does not mean that this IP organization will stop the use of external evaluation expertise, as this type of evaluation resource will continue to be brought into the organization on an as needed basis. Rather, this organization has strategically chosen to build its own internal capacity for evaluation, a strategic move that provide benefits to the organization over the long term. It is suggested that other organizations in the injury prevention field could also benefit from the development of their internal organizational capacity to perform evaluation.

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