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THE VALUE OF USING THE UTILIZATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION MODEL

BACKGROUND:

The evaluation literature is replete with conflicting prescriptions with regard to evaluation practices (Alkin, 1990; Love, 1991; Shadish, Cook & Leviton, 1991). Evaluators have debated the relative merits of quantitative versus qualitative approaches, the extent to which evaluators should engage program stakeholders in evaluation planning and numerous other issues.

Suchman (1967) published a book that is now considered to be among the classic works in evaluation. In this volume, he emphasized the need to bring scientific rigor into evaluation practice and recommended that evaluators maintain an “objective, scientific approach” to research on social programs.

Suchman’s view formed the basis of many latter evaluation approaches including the widely known work of Rossi and Freeman (1993). Rossi and Freeman continued to champion the view that the major determinants of evaluation utilization are high levels of methodological rigor and the credibility of the evaluation. In their view, credibility is largely determined by the recognized expertise of the external, objective evaluator with strong academic credentials.

In sharp contrast, Patton (1997), in an evaluation approach that was based on research findings with regard to the determinants of evaluation utilization (Patton, Grimes, Guthrie, Brennan, French & Blyth, 1978) has argued that the primary determinant of the extent of evaluation utilization is not the level of methodological rigor employed in the evaluation. Rather, evaluation utilization is largely determined by the extent to which program stakeholders take ownership of the evaluation process and actively work to ensure that evaluation findings are utilized as intended. Patton’s views have found support in research on evaluation utilization conducted in Canada by the author of this present document (Shea, 1991). Therefore, Patton’s (1997) model of evaluation is a preferred approach. This approach now will be described briefly.

KEY ISSUES & STRATEGIES:

Patton (2002, pg. 1) states that, “... evaluators should facilitate the evaluation process and design any evaluation with careful consideration of how everything that is done, from beginning to end, will affect use”. Furthermore, Patton argues that the major focus of all evaluations should be on intended use by intended users (underlining by the author). Intended users are the program stakeholders who have the responsibility to apply evaluation findings and implement recommendations.

Patton (1997, 2002) suggests that there are twelve (12) steps in the evaluation process at which the evaluator can employ influences on the potential usefulness or utility of evaluation findings. Patton contends that, by actively involving the primary program stakeholders in the planning, design and implementation of the evaluation, their feelings of ownership of the evaluation findings will be significantly increased. More specifically, by developing plans for evaluation utilization with primary stakeholders prior to the collection of any evaluation data, the primary stakeholders will be primed to utilize evaluation findings when they become available.

Patton's (2002) Utilization-Focused Evaluation (U-FE) model has been rendered into a twelve-step checklist. According to Patton (2002), the twelve critical steps in the evaluation process are as follows:

- 1) Program/organizational readiness assessment;
- 2) Evaluator readiness and capacity assessment;
- 3) Identification of primary intended users;
- 4) Situational analysis;
- 5) Identification of primary intended uses;
- 6) Focusing the evaluation;
- 7) Evaluation design;
- 8) Simulation of use;
- 9) Data collection;
- 10) Data Analysis;
- 11) Facilitation of use;
- 12) Meta-evaluation.

In contrast, Rossi and Freeman (1993), emphasize that the evaluator must make the final decisions with regard to evaluation focus and methodology and warn that the competing and often conflicting views of various stakeholders must be managed by the evaluator. They see the evaluator's primary role as ensuring that social scientific rigor is maintained throughout what can be a difficult political process. It is telling that Rossi and Freeman (1993) do not specifically address evaluation utilization as a major chapter heading. However, it should be noted that they provide a brief discussion of this issue near the end of their text, and conclude that evaluation utilization is determined by factors that include research quality, evaluator credibility, dissemination strategies and conformance of results with stakeholders' expectations.

The Utilization-Focused Evaluation model has been practiced successfully within the SMARTRISK organization by the present author from the perspectives of both an external evaluation consultant and later, as an internal evaluator within the SMARTRISK organization. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that Patton's (1997, 2002) approach be utilized by others who wish to improve the quality of programs in the area of injury prevention as well as in other program content areas.

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