

# Overcoming Barriers to Using Evaluation to Inform Program Management & Public Policy

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# The 5<sup>th</sup> in a Series of Think Tanks on Barriers to Evaluation--Background

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2003 – 6 categories of barriers identified:

- Institutional/cultural
- Methodological
- Data/Measurement
- Resources
- Communications
- Conflicting stakeholder agendas

# These barriers were said to impede ...

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- Demand for evaluation
- Planning and conducting evaluation
- Understanding of evaluation studies
- Acceptance and interpretation of findings
- Use of results to inform
  - program management
  - budgetary decisions
  - public policy

# 2003 Think Tank found ...

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Striking commonality of evaluation barriers among programs and across countries

# Background

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## Six Categories of Barriers Identified - 2003

1. Institutional/cultural – 2004
2. Methodological – 2005
3. Data/Measurement – 2006
4. Resources – 2007
5. Communications – 2007
6. Conflicting stakeholder agendas – 2007

# Background, continued

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- 2003: Identified 6 Types of Barriers to Evaluation
- 2004-Present: Focus on Barriers to **Performing** Evaluation
- 2007 (Final Think-Tank in Series): Focus on Barriers to **Using** Evaluation to Inform Program Management and Public Policy

# Barriers to **Using** Evaluation to Inform Program Management and Public Policy

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- Resource Barriers
- Cultural/Institutional Barriers
- Communication Obstacles
- Conflicting Stakeholder Philosophies and Agendas
- Other Barriers

# Resource Barriers

- Omission of funding for evaluation from program budgets
- Little or no staff time for planning & managing evaluation
- Lack of connection of program managers to evaluation resources ... [think tank ideas next]
- Need to set % of budget dedicated to evaluation? # of FTEs/PTs/contractors etc.? (benchmarking purposes; vs. for planning purposes not resources; still, need reasonable % to pursue thorough evaluation even if plan for it)
- Lack of need for accountability in certain nations or programs (e.g., Nepal, SBIR)



# How to Overcome: Your Thoughts?

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- Advance planning for evaluation
- Change legislation that precludes budget going to activities like evaluation
- Advocate certain percentage range for evaluation (e.g., 1-5%) – AEA recommending a range so that agencies can point to it. Some agencies (DOD) feel a % is necessary or else you lose credibility
- In budget formulation process, use evaluation findings (performance-based budgeting – Tsy Dept – use performance/evaluation data to justify new initiatives, but difficult to institute b/c budget analysts don't see it as part of their job)
- Education to get buy-in from line to budget staff to show how evaluation affects them. Staff became data collectors and evaluators perform analysis. Non-performers would not be cut off, but would use data to improve or change strategy.

# Cultural/Institutional Barriers

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- Managers' lack of interest in evaluation
- Managers' protection of prerogatives/vested interest (e.g., peeling the onion, but Director still gets to do what it likes)
- Confidentiality of information
- Fear/distrust that evaluation will not fairly capture important program effects and/or will not be fairly used ... [think tank ideas next]
- Managers' lack of understanding of what evaluation is
- Managers not just lack interest, but distrust evaluation. Don't understand role of evaluation and don't want to. Need to build evaluation into the program and not bolt it on (e.g., evaluation written into ATP authorization). What OMB was trying to articulate in PART is to establish long range goals when programs are established at the outset

# Cultural/Institutional Barriers, cont'd

- Most important barrier and inter-linkage to resource barrier for Europeans. Not just managers, but policymakers' distrust of evaluation so it goes higher. Due to time constraints to explain evaluation. If have friends in the field it makes it easier.
- Without standard or model of (compelling methodologies) how innovation works, managers do not trust evaluation (e.g., when dealing with R&D and S&T, there's not a uniform understanding of how innovation works)
- Fear of evaluation results – defunding or pointing fingers
- Fear driven by not knowing “how” to use evaluation. Evaluation should be understood as useful to making improvements
- Even if get evaluation results and how to use them, don't have time or resources to implement improvement strategies
- In a political ethos that challenges science (policy driven by ideology), it makes arguing for evaluation dollars that much harder
- Fear is that external consultants do not understand science where interpretations may not be correct and program managers do not have influence on how the studies turn out

# Cultural/Institutional Barriers, cont'd

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- Need to embed need to high quality evaluation in a long-term, sustainable way for LT health of program
- R&D programs are set up to make investments, and do not see retrospective evaluation work as a cycle of planning, implementation, and feedback where evaluation informs program operations. Asking program managers to look evaluation results of programs from many years ago. They want to move forward and use the dollars to make new investments. Training should be provided (Shipman and Oros) to OMB staff who implement PART so that they see evaluation can set up to address the questions that OMB has upfront. And, build enough trust at OMB so that results will be viewed credibly. Political appointees with short terms don't want to use evaluation, but seat of the pants decisions. Challenge here. Need to show them that the tools are available and that evaluation can offer program managers assistance.

# Cultural/Institutional Barriers, cont'd

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- As evaluators we employ “swoop in and swoop out” and don't stop to ask what are the questions, to ask program staff what questions they are most interested in. Partly evaluators' fault. In performing retrospective studies we do the study and deliver it.
- To answer questions where answers are needed in 6-18 months vs. 2-3 years, the methods are less formal.

# How to Overcome: Your Thoughts?

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- Political leadership issue. What kinds of cultural modifications can be made so that political appointees understand that evaluation is an iterative process? Need to communicate effectively about programs from predecessor b/c the next round of evaluation will come that will assess their decisionmaking (if FEI or some institute provided Federal executives' training/conditioning, would that help? How about providing evaluation info into political appointees' briefing book? Works better when evaluation unit is line management or has a prominent role)
- As evaluation has gone up/down, staff has gone up/down, so when evaluation is up, try to grab people who aren't trained. Maybe AEA can try to reach out and explain to government that training is important and getting appropriate staff on board would raise trust in evaluation results. Staff who now don't have training go to FedEval, WREN, AEA to get up to speed. Unless you have someone higher than you who cares about the topic evaluation won't go anywhere. "Servicing the top" is key (Cheryl Oros)

# How to Overcome: Your Thoughts?

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- Need better mechanism to link back outcome via evaluation to the program. Not necessarily test of causality, but be prepared for the question if evaluators have gone to that level of rigor

# Communication Obstacles

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- Misalignment between requestor and evaluator about study goals and features
- One-size-fits-all communication approaches for diverse audiences
- Failure to reach key audiences
- Misunderstanding & misinterpretation of study findings
- Credibility issues
- Stakeholder resistance to findings (or to methodology used) ... [think tank ideas]



# How to Overcome: Your Thoughts?

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- Tailor reports to the audience and for what the need for the results is? Criteria for publishing results is different from business needs. Tension between academic contractor who wants to publish in academic journals vs. agency's audience is Congress or business audience.
- Communicate findings in other ways than reports (presentation, etc.)
- Need to develop systematic methodologies then can tie it to the funding that you might need to get it done (e.g., NAS itself is thinking it needs to systematize its evaluations, which it doesn't do b/c it doesn't have the funding)
- Real challenge. Need training to write for the Hill – to be succinct. Trying to answer evaluation questions and then go out to make recommendations is difficult to do, but as a start we need to be clear. (e.g., innovations being traced back to government funding via patent and publications)
- Need to reduce jargon.

# Conflicting Stakeholder Philosophies and Agenda

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- Differing perceived roles for government
- Different political goals
- Differing receptivity to evaluation results

# Other Barriers to Using Evaluation to Inform Program Management

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- Lack of management feedback loops
- Poor institutional arrangements for evaluation unit to secure buy-in
- Deficiencies in evaluation studies
- Insufficient evaluation findings

# Other Barriers to Using Evaluation to Inform Public Policy

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- Evaluation findings tend to be downstream of broad strategic policy decisions
- Typically focused on how past decisions performed rather than what future decisions should be

(AEA should pick this up and see how evaluation whether centralized or not makes an impact. Train agency SESers, administrators, to be a part of their responsibility)

# How to Overcome: Your Thoughts?

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- Generated by Think Tank discussion:

# Think-Tank Series Summary

- 2003: Six categories of barriers identified
- 2004-2006: Barriers to performing evaluation
- 2007: Barriers to using evaluation for program management & public policy

That's all folks...



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