Applying the Model for Collaborative Evaluations to a Multicultural Seminar in a Nonprofit Setting

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Background: The diversity within organizations and the stakeholders served require an awareness and appreciation of multiple value perspectives. The challenges with respect to the handling of these perspectives and inappropriate biases resulting from poorly chosen value premises reinforce the importance of seeking out and engaging diverse and relevant evaluation stakeholders.

Purpose: This article addresses stakeholder engagement in evaluations by presenting an application of the Model for Collaborative Evaluations (MCE) to the evaluation of a multiculturalism seminar.

Setting: A nonprofit organization that promotes an understanding of multicultural environments through various programs, including a multiculturalism seminar.

Intervention: The article examines the application of the MCE to an organization.

Research Design: Single-case study.

Data Collection and Analysis: The collaboration team consisted of five members plus an external evaluator. The steps outlined in the MEC were strictly adhered to for fidelity purposes. Data collection was completed using interviews and written questionnaires.

Findings: The MEC approach that was used in this formative evaluation actively engaged the key stakeholders during the evaluation process. With a collaborative approach to evaluation decision-making, the collaboration members were able to share their various points of view and, as a result, there was a lower likelihood that a particular idea would be overlooked. The MCE enhanced the quality of the evaluation by establishing an open and shared evaluation environment while attending to the intended and unintended effects of the collaborative relationships. In addition, the MEC provided increased shared ownership in the evaluation that also led to an increased quality of information for decision-making and receptivity of the findings.

Keywords: *collaborative evaluation, checklists, multiculturalism seminar, nonprofit*
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Societies in their very nature represent organized groupings of people whose activities are coordinated through institutional channels. In industrialized societies, formal organizations are ubiquitous and an indispensable artifact of modern human life. The diversity within organizations and the stakeholders they serve requires an awareness and appreciation of the multiple value perspectives that are found both inside and outside the organization. In addition, internal and external constituencies hold various points of view from which they interpret organizational activities and outcomes. The challenges with respect to the handling of multiple perspectives and inappropriate biases resulting from poorly chosen value premises reinforce the importance of seeking out and engaging diverse and relevant evaluation stakeholders. This article addresses this issue by presenting an application of the Model for Collaborative Evaluations (MCE) to the evaluation of a multiculturalism seminar. The true case study is included to illustrate the model's emphasis on systematic stakeholder engagement in the evaluation process. An overview of the Model for Collaborative Evaluation (MCE) is followed by the case study and lessons learned.

Overview of the Model for Collaborative Evaluations

Collaborative evaluation is an approach to evaluation that purposely incorporates a significant degree of collaboration between evaluators and stakeholders in the evaluation process (Cousins, Donohue, & Bloom, 1996; O'Sullivan & D'Agostino, 2002; Rodriguez-Campos, 2005). Accordingly, a collaborative evaluation includes opportunities for stakeholders to learn how to improve the program more effectively, to practice new techniques and approaches, to obtain regular feedback on their performance, and to receive coaching from colleagues (Menges, 1985).

The nonrandom and planned division of labor, power, and communication responsibilities to support the achievement of specific organizational goals combined with the presence of one or more power centers within an organization require a collaborative environment to maximize returns to the organization's constituencies (Martz, 2008). These organizational attributes provide evidence for the need for and value of using a collaborative approach for evaluation in organizational settings. Organizational members that recognize and emphasize the importance of collaboration among its constituencies increase the chances of producing a credible and actionable evaluation (Cousins & Earl, 1992; Patton, 2008).

The MCE is a comprehensive framework that revolves around six major components specific to conducting a collaborative evaluation. Its core components were developed based on a wide range of collaboration efforts that the first author conducted in the private sector, nonprofit organizations, and institutions of higher education. Figure 1 provides the conceptual framework for viewing the MCE's components interactively: (1) identify the situation; (2) clarify the expectations; (3) establish a shared commitment; (4) ensure open communication; (5) encourage best practices; and (6) follow specific guidelines. Additionally, each of the subcomponents or factors—subsumed in each MCE component—includes a set of 10 steps suggested to support and encourage the proper use of the MCE.
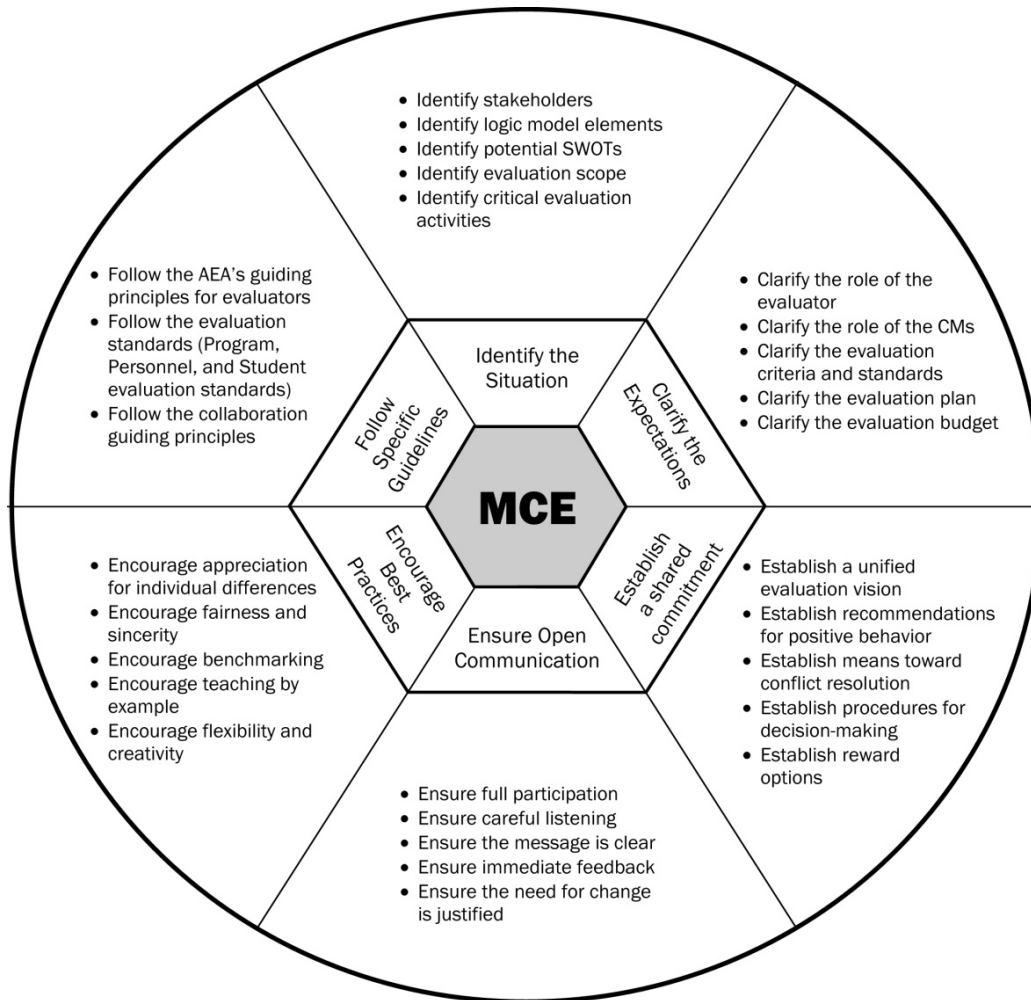
Figure 1. The Model for Collaborative Evaluation

The novelty of the MCE resides in the way in which each of its elements (i.e., components and subcomponents) influences the others and, as a consequence, the overall collaborative evaluation. That is, each of the elements is related and interdependent with the others; a change in one element will affect the others. Hence, the MCE is a system that incorporates continuous feedback for redefinition and improvement where "there is a clear understanding that changes in one subsystem affect changes in other parts of the total system" (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson 1996, p. 13). Users of the MCE may gain new insights by using each of the model elements individually. However, to accomplish a comprehensive collaborative evaluation, the interactive use of the elements on a rotating and remixing basis is recommended (Rodriguez-Campos, 2005).

The MCE also serves as a iterative evaluation checklist. As such, it provides guidance for the collection of relevant

evidence used to determine the merit, worth, or significance of an evaluand. The inherently systematic process found in the use of a checklist makes it highly relevant and useful for evaluative purposes. In addition to including important items to consider in carrying out a particular task, checklists have other functions and features. For example, when a checklist is used within an organization, the processes that it supports can be implemented consistently. Checklist use can also increase objectivity among a group of users by assuring consideration of all items within the checklist without being sidetracked by personal assumptions about the task. As summarized by Scriven (2005), checklists reduce the chance of forgetting to check something important, are easier for the layperson to understand and validate than most theories or statistical analyses, and reduce the influence of the halo effect by forcing the evaluator to consider each relevant dimension of merit. In addition, checklists incorporate a vast amount of specific knowledge about the particular evaluand in a parsimonious manner and facilitate the evaluation task. Consequently, checklists can contribute to the improvement of validity, reliability, and credibility of an evaluation (Scriven, 2007).

The Collaborative Evaluation

The evaluation client discussed in this case study, Aspire Unlimited,[1] is a nonprofit organization that intends to promote understanding of multicultural environments that recognize and appreciate individual differences for the benefit of all members. As an integral

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[1] Aspire Unlimited is a fictional name intended to disguise the identity of the actual client.

component of its service offerings, Aspire Unlimited developed a multiculturalism seminar that utilizes various approaches and techniques to address the cognitive, behavioral, and affective attitudes toward cultural differences held by individuals. More specifically, the seminar focuses on personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural values to effect positive and lasting multicultural change. Since 1990, Aspire Unlimited has conducted its multiculturalism seminar on a biannual basis and approximately 2,000 people have participated in this seminar since its inception.

For the purpose of this evaluation, the key stakeholder identified was the Aspire Unlimited executive director. In addition, other stakeholders identified were the Aspire Unlimited staff members, board members, and benefactors. Program participants were identified as direct consumers (i.e., those persons who are impacted or targeted by the specific program, c.f. Davidson, 2005; Scriven, 1991) and were included as primary sources of data collected during the evaluation.

Considering the broad application of collaborative evaluations, different aspects of the MCE have greater relevance in certain cases because of the contextual factors present in an evaluation. The MCE provided guidance for this evaluation with its transparent method of consultation including identifying the activities to be completed while minimizing unnecessary tensions when making decisions on conflictive or sensitive topics. Thus, the MCE contributed to a systematic, careful examination of where the evaluation stood in terms of the subcomponents or factors that influenced the success of the collaboration.

Determining if it was appropriate to use a collaborative evaluation depended

on the answers to a number of questions. For example, was the client willing to involve a number of stakeholders in the evaluation? What experience did the client and other stakeholders have with collaborative evaluations? How committed was the client and other stakeholders to learning from collaborative practices? Furthermore, other conditions under which evaluation studies are inappropriate, such as when the evaluation produces trivial information, the evaluation results are not used, the evaluation cannot yield useful or valid information, the evaluation is premature for the stage of the program, and the propriety of the evaluation is doubtful, were considered (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004).

Telfair, Leviton, and Merchant (1999) suggest that evaluation practice "requires an eclectic toolbox of knowledge and skills that will allow evaluators to engage community stakeholders in a flexible yet rigorous evaluation process" (p. 1). To ensure rigor and ethical practice, this evaluation was conducted in accordance with the "Guiding Principles for Evaluators" issued by the American Evaluation Association (2004), the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (1988, 1994), and the "Guiding Principles for Collaborative Evaluations" (Rodriguez-Campos, 2005). Additionally, a metaevaluation advisory panel regularly provided professional judgment to ensure use of best practices in the collaborative evaluation.

To a large extent, an evaluation's success depends on the identification of the evaluation situation through identification of the stakeholders, logic model elements, evaluation scope, and critical evaluation activities, among other contextual matters. Accordingly, after initial contact with the Aspire Unlimited

executive director to discuss the circumstances of the evaluation, the first author was introduced to the program staff and explained the purpose and key issues of the evaluation. This was followed by an invitation to the program staff to share their ideas and expectations of the evaluation, both publicly and privately, and to identify how they could contribute to it based on their skills, credibility, and availability. Being clear about expectations and possible outcomes is a critical element in the early stages of an evaluation (Gajda & Koliba, 2007). Following the exchange of ideas and expectations, the Aspire Unlimited team was eager to embark on the evaluation process as collaboration members.

Based on the collaborative discussions with key stakeholders and a review of the materials provided by the Aspire Unlimited staff, the collaboration team of five members identified the following evaluation questions that were used to design the evaluation plan and direct evaluation activities: (1) To what extent did the multiculturalism seminar have a major impact on the participants' lives? (2) What do seminar participants need (e.g., programs, products, services) to continue to work toward the promotion of multiculturalism? (3) What opportunities did participants experience that helped them to be effective in their efforts in promoting multiculturalism? and (4) What barriers did participants experience that prevented them from being more effective in their efforts in promoting multiculturalism?

To promote collaboration within the evaluation, it was necessary to define the extent of collaboration required and the various levels of involvement among those who participate in the effort. In addition, it is imperative to have a true collaborative atmosphere where there is a

balance of power and everyone feels represented in an appropriate and fair way. Therefore, who did what (i.e., collaboration member roles) and who decided what (i.e., collaboration member responsibilities) were closely linked to the evaluation scope definition and according to each collaboration member's strengths. This fostered a group dialogue of openness and exploration that continued among the collaboration members even outside of formal meetings. Although the number of collaboration members may vary, it is important that the group size be manageable to maximize the benefits of each collaboration member's contributions. In this particular evaluation, the collaboration team included five members. For large or complex evaluations, several groups of collaboration members can be created to represent a greater range of expertise and to minimize delays in completing the evaluation.

Meetings were held with the collaboration members on several occasions to review the evaluation plan. Together, everyone clarified the potential use and utility of each type of evaluation activity listed in the evaluation plan, and prioritized evaluation activities according to their importance, practicality, and cost. For example, the collaboration members helped identify the evaluation situation, the various sources of information, and other intended users of the evaluation findings. Their awareness of the culture and history of the program helped to select the most appropriate methods of data collection, plan their implementation, discuss strategies for handling difficult situations, and provide feedback for improvement. This type of involvement was considered essential for establishing ownership and building commitment in the evaluation process

and acting upon the evaluative conclusions.

The evaluation findings were used to reflect upon lessons learned and share findings with the stakeholders and external parties. In presenting the results of the evaluation to the various stakeholders, the dynamic role of collaboration was emphasized. For instance, areas were highlighted where such collaborative efforts proved to increase the effectiveness of the seminar. Finally, the methods by which an ongoing collaborative effort can be maintained were discussed. This evaluation showed that collaborative evaluations are most useful when stakeholders continue working together and results are used for ongoing improvement.

Having a clear understanding of the evaluation activities increased the collaboration members' involvement because they were confident about the expectations and, as a result, the quality of the collaborative evaluation was increased. Throughout the evaluation, the collaboration members reflected on what they learned together and affirmed their commitment to evaluation and its results. In addition, other positive characteristics of the collaborative evaluation included improved implementation and credibility of the evaluation because of shared decision-making, a broader knowledge base, creative problem solving to overcome evaluation barriers, strengthened use of evaluation findings because stakeholders believe their points of view are represented in the evaluation, and higher quality feedback from participants about the evaluation findings (O'Sullivan, 2004). What's more, the level of evaluation anxiety was appropriately managed because of the collaborative environment. An abnormal level of anxiety leads to a number of

consequences, such as a lack of cooperation among critical organizational members in evaluation activities, unconscious filtering or distortion of information reported to the evaluator, manipulation of performance data, attacks on the validity of the evaluation findings, poor utilization of evaluation results, and dissatisfaction with evaluation (Donaldson, Gooler, & Scriven, 2002). In essence, excessive evaluation anxiety can undermine the quality of the evaluation and act as a major obstacle for the evaluator. A number of techniques have been suggested to alleviate or prevent excessive evaluation anxiety (e.g., Arnold, 2006; Donaldson et al., 2002), One of the more frequently mentioned approaches is to have an open and frank discussion about the evaluation's purpose and its potential undesirable consequences and how those risks will be managed (Donaldson, 2001). The objective is not to eliminate evaluation anxiety, but to be sensitive to its manifestations and potential sources of excessive evaluation anxiety in an effort to minimize negative consequences and maximize potential use of the evaluation findings.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The collaborative approach that was used in this formative evaluation actively engaged the key stakeholders during the evaluation process. With this type of engagement, it was possible to capture the essence of the multiculturalism seminar from various perspectives. In addition, taking a collaborative approach to this evaluation enabled an emphasis on the needed transformation and improvement of the multiculturalism seminar. This approach was selected considering that key stakeholders embraced the evaluation as a learning process for program improvement. The evaluation findings were initially used to reflect upon lessons learned, and help the client and the stakeholders improve the multiculturalism seminar curriculum (e.g., logistics, content, activities).

According to the program staff and executive director, the questions that guided this evaluation and the evaluative conclusions resulted in valuable information for future program planning and improvement. Weiss (1998) stated, "Many decision-making communities use evaluation results to improve the effectiveness of what they do. They learn where failings occur and then seek ways to overcome them" (p. 318). Hence, the evaluation findings provided a useful basis for guiding the decision-making process, as people worked collaboratively, while respecting the evaluand and its interactions with its total system. A major contribution of the evaluation was a general increase in understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of this multicultural seminar as a result of working with the collaboration members. While there are areas for improvement, the stakeholders believe that this evaluation provided important information about underutilized strengths that may support a variety of refinements to the multiculturalism seminar.

This evaluation provided formative feedback and laid the foundation for a continuous process of improvement in multiculturalism seminar planning and development. With a collaborative approach to evaluation decision-making, the collaboration members were able to share their various points of view and, as a result, there was a lower likelihood that a particular idea would be overlooked.

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Because most decisions surrounding the evaluation were important and complex, the collaboration members provided creative solutions that an external evaluator most likely could not have produced in isolation. The clarity with which the collaboration members perceived the findings had great implications for the success of the collaborative evaluation. Everyone involved in the evaluation understood the reasons for the evaluation and how their roles affected the evaluation at every stage. Consequently, everyone felt positively committed to their work because they were aware of the meaningfulness of their contributions.

The MCE enhanced the quality of the evaluation by establishing an open and shared evaluation environment while attending to the intended and unintended effects of the collaborative relationships. This model helped users to understand and account for the nature of the work and the full range of stakeholders in the collaborative evaluation process. Hence, the evaluation findings provided a useful basis for guiding the decision-making process while respecting the evaluand and its interactions within its total system. This model provided an increased shared ownership that also led to an increased quality of information for decision-making and receptivity of the findings. Based on these findings and previous evaluation experiences, a well-developed collaborative evaluation can lead to better questions, solutions, and results.

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