



An evidence-based approach to organization evaluation and change in human service organizations evaluation and program planning



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ABSTRACT

The work described in this article focuses primarily on how human service organizations can use an evidence-based, self-assessment approach to organization evaluation to facilitate continuous quality improvement and organization change. Real-life examples are presented, strengths and challenges discussed, and future conceptual and measurement issues identified.

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1. Introduction

Nonprofit organizations, such as those providing services and supports to persons with intellectual and closely related developmental disabilities (IDD) are currently facing a number of challenges both nationally and internationally. Chief among these challenges are calls for increased effectiveness and efficiency based on outcomes evaluation, increased demands for services and supports commensurate with diminishing financial resources, and the need to focus on continuous quality improvement to increase an organization's effectiveness and efficiency.

These challenges need to be approached within the context of four significant trends in the fields of program evaluation and organization change (Claes, van Loon, Vandeveld, & Schalock, *in press*; Schalock & Verdugo, 2012, 2013; van Loon et al., 2013). The first is the increased focus on performance evaluation based on the assessment of objective, best practice indicators around which evidence can be garnered. The second is the emergence of indicators and practices related to multiple performance-based perspectives that involve the customer, and the organization's growth, financial analyses, and internal processes. The third is a collaborative approach to evaluation that involves organization personnel who are familiar with the cultural milieu of the organization and the organization's policies, practices, and data systems. The fourth trend is an integrative approach to continuous quality improvement, which begins with an organization-based self-assessment and continues through quality improvement activities. These four trends provide the framework for the conceptual and measurement model discussed next, and the backdrop for the work described later in the article on how nonprofit organizations can use an organization

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assessment tool based on best practice indicators to facilitate continuous quality improvement and organization change.

2. Evidence-based evaluation conceptual and measurement model

2.1. Best practice indicators

Best practice indicators are objective measures of organization processes and performance. Such indicators: (a) are based on current evidence that is obtained from credible sources that used reliable and valid methods; (b) are based on a clearly articulated, empirically supported theory or rationale; and (c) can be used for multiple purposes including the evidence in evidence-based practices, the items of an organization self-assessment tool, and the strategies employed in continuous quality improvement activities (Schalock & Verdugo, 2012, 2013; Schalock, Verdugo, & Gomez, 2011). As summarized in Table 1, and discussed more fully in reference to the organization self-assessment tool described in Section 3, these indicators can be aggregated into the four performance-based perspectives one commonly finds in the management and program evaluation literature. The indicators listed in Table 1 were identified based on a thorough literature review of the areas of performance evaluation, performance management, and program evaluation. This literature review drew heavily on the work of Bishop (2007), Bourgeois, Hart, Townsend, and Gagne (2011), Cooksy, Gill, and Kelly (2001), Cousins and Chouinard (2012), Donaldson (2007), Fuller (1997), Grol, Baker, and Moss (2004), Hunter (2006), Kong (2003), Lencioni (2012), Letts, Ryan, and Grossman (1999), Lick (2006), Pawson (2006), Pluye, Potvin, Denis, Pelletier, and Mannoni (2005), Scheirer (2005), Scheier, Hartling, and Hagerman (2008), Selden and Sowa (2011), Veerman and van Yperen (2007), and Wasserman (2010).

Table 1

The performance-based perspectives and best practice indicators used in this article.

<i>Customer perspective</i>	
1.	Aligns services/supports to identified support needs
2.	Reports the number of clients living or working in more independent, productive, and community-integrated environments
3.	Measures personal outcomes
4.	Reports and analyzes aggregated personal outcomes
5.	Uses technology to enhance personal outcomes
<i>Growth perspective</i>	
6.	Articulates the organization's mission and intended results
7.	Enters into partnerships
8.	Develops program options
9.	Utilizes and evaluates high performance teams
10.	Monitors job satisfaction and develops job enrichment programs
<i>Financial perspective</i>	
11.	Compares unit costs across different locations and service delivery platforms
12.	Reports percentage of budget allocated to client-referenced supports
13.	Monitors the relationship between social capital and agency-based fiscal capital
14.	Uses fixed and variable cost data to establish a baseline cost rate
15.	Analyzes overhead rate to increase efficiency
<i>Internal processes perspective</i>	
16.	Horizontally aligns input, throughput, and output components
17.	Vertically aligns an organization's input, throughput, and output components to the corresponding individual-level input, throughput, and output components
18.	Demonstrates relationship between units of service/support provided and the clientele's assessed support needs
19.	Uses data related to personal and organization outcomes for multiple purposes
20.	Uses evidence-based indicators for continuous quality improvement

2.2. Multiple performance-based perspectives

A multidimensional approach to organization evaluation and change is an emerging characteristic among IDD organizations (Schalock & Verdugo, 2012, 2013). This multidimensional approach is consistent with the balanced scorecard concept that was first introduced by Kaplan and Norton (1996) to replace the traditional performance system that typically focuses on assessing only financial performance. Incorporating multiple perspectives into performance evaluation allows for a more balanced perspective of an organization's performance, thus providing more useful information to leaders and managers (Niven, 2008; Tsai, Chou, & Hsu, 2009; Wu, Lin, & Chang, 2011). As reflected in Table 1:

- The *customer perspective* focuses on personal goals, assessed support needs, individualized supports, and personal outcomes.
- The *growth perspective* focuses on program options, high performance teams, direct support staff involvement, and networks, consortia, and partnerships.
- The *financial perspective* focuses on a standardized approach to calculating unit costs, cost accounting, cost allocation, social capital, fixed and variable costs, overhead rate, and resource allocation models.
- The *internal processes perspective* focuses on horizontal and vertical alignment of program components, mapping system(s), research and evaluation capacity, data sets, data collection systems, and quality improvement activities.

2.3. Collaborative approach to evaluation

A collaborative approach to evaluation is consistent with approaches such as participatory evaluation, utilization-focused evaluation, and empowerment evaluation (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2011; O'Sullivan, 2012; Patton, 2008). Collaborative evaluation involves organization participants, such as administrators, managers, and knowledgeable support personnel, who are involved jointly in assessing or evaluating organization processes and functions. The ultimate goals of collaborative evaluation are to increase: (a) the knowledge and understanding of the evaluation/assessment process; (b) the capacity for self-critique, self-determination, and systematic inquiry at the level of the individual and the organization; (c) organization learning that fosters shared values and understanding among organization members; and (d) the likelihood that the assessment's findings will be incorporated into subsequent quality improvement efforts (Cousins & Chouinard, 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2012; Luskin & Ho, 2013; Nichols, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2012; Rodriguez-Campos, 2012).

Collaborative evaluation has a number of benefits resulting from the use of the organization assessment tool described in Section 3. Among these benefits are increased knowledge and understanding of the evaluation/assessment process; enhanced capacity for systematic inquiry at the level of the individual and the organization; increased sensitivity to key concepts that include quality of life, personal outcomes, individualized supports, systems thinking, balanced scorecard, outcomes evaluation, alignment, continuous quality improvement, program logic models, and best practices; and an increased likelihood that the assessment's findings will be incorporated into subsequent decision making to improve organization performance.

2.4. Continuous quality improvement

There is wide consensus that continuous quality improvement needs to be approached from a holistic and collaborative perspective and one based on best practices and actionable

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