Case study of an evaluation coaching model: Exploring the role of the evaluator

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of the external evaluator as a coach. More specifically, using an evaluative inquiry framework (Preskill & Torres, 1999a; Preskill & Torres, 1999b), it explored the types of coaching that an evaluator employed to promote individual, team and organizational learning. The study demonstrated that evaluation coaching provided a viable means for an organization with a limited budget to conduct evaluations through support of a coach. It also demonstrated how the coaching processes supported the development of evaluation capacity within the organization. By examining coaching models outside of the field of evaluation, this study identified two forms of coaching — results coaching and developmental coaching — that promoted evaluation capacity building and have not been previously discussed in the evaluation literature.

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1. Introduction

Many recent approaches to evaluation tend to define them-selves, not so much as previous theories did, by methodology and evaluation purpose…instead, many contemporary approaches, define themselves primarily in terms of the relationship of the evaluator (and evaluation) to others" (Mark, 2002, p. 22). This study explored the role of evaluator as coach. Adapting a definition of coaching from project management (Berg & Karlsen, 2007), we defined evaluation coaching as the process of challenging and supporting a person or a team to develop ways of thinking, ways of being and ways of learning about evaluation, to achieve personal and organizational goals regarding evaluation practice.

The evaluation coach is commonly mentioned in evaluation approaches that emphasize evaluation capacity building (ECB) (e.g., Fetterman, 2001; Preskill & Torres, 1999a). Integrating multiple definitions of ECB, Labin, Duffy, Meyers, Wandersman, and Lesesne (2012) defined ECB as "an intentional process to increase individual motivation, knowledge, and skills, and to enhance a group or organization's ability to conduct or use evaluation" (p. 308). Based on a meta-synthesis of research on ECB,

they described existing empirical literature as "emergent" (p. 324) and in need of "growth and refinement" (p. 329). Preskill (2014) also identified four challenges to supporting ECB efforts in practice, including the lack of evaluation of EBC efforts. In general, the field of evaluation has developed numerous prescriptive models (see Alkin, 2004), such as ECB, and limited empirical research has explored the ramifications and impact of these models. This study provides empirical evidence of ECB through in-depth interviewing, focusing on a model of evaluation coaching and its impact on a non-profit organization.

In her Presidential speech, Preskill (2008) described a "social epidemic of evaluation" (p. 129) meaning that evaluation is becoming widespread and commonplace. Non-profit organiza-tions receive operating funds from government funding and private foundations, which typically require the reporting of performance metrics in relation to programme implementation and outcomes. Non-profit organizations often perceive their funding as dependent on their achievement on performance measures. Non-profit directors must provide evidence of meeting programmatic outputs and outcomes. Small non-profits might fund a single year-long programme with several different grants, each with its own outcome and output requirements. In such instances, service programmes might not have any funds allocated to report on the several requirements of how well they achieved outputs and outcomes.

The external evaluator who independently conducts an evaluation might not be the appropriate role to fulfil these

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demands of evaluation, given the cost. This case study empirically explored how the role of an evaluation coach might support these changing demands of evaluation in society. This case study described the processes of an evaluation coaching model at the education department of the National Museum of Mexican Art, a Chicago-based arts-focused, cultural organization. The evaluation coach (Tania Rempert, third author) approached the remaining authors about studying this case as a means to reflect on her own practice as an evaluator, and to better understand the impact and processes of evaluation coaching because other organizations were approaching her to expand the model. The research questions included: (1) what is the nature of an evaluation coaching model within a non-profit organization and (2) what type of coaching did an evaluation coach provide?

2. Literature review

To inform our understanding of evaluation coaching, we reviewed three areas of prior research and theory. First, we considered evaluation theory literature on the role of the evaluator, which demonstrates ambiguity regarding the role of the evaluator as coach. Next, we considered empirical research on ECB and the use of coaching as a strategy for achieving ECB. Finally, we considered literature from other disciplines and fields on various models of coaching to provide clarity on the role of evaluator as coach, and to articulate further coaching as a strategy to support ECB.

2.1. Roles of an evaluator

Orth, Wilkinson, and Benfari (1987) made a clear distinction between an evaluator and a coach. An evaluator judges performances based on agreed outcomes and expectations while a coach helps employees to learn, develop and implement new knowledge to the best of their abilities. Similarly, Mark (2002) characterized the traditional role of the evaluator as a distant judge, and argued metaphors for the evaluators' role have been shifting to emphasizing close relationships, such as a coach. Despite the shift away from defining an evaluator as a judge, evaluator roles based on metaphors, such as coaching, have limited value due to their ambiguity.

Metaphors for the evaluators' role that imply a close relationship between the evaluator and the evaluands, such as a coach, have been more closely aligned with evaluation theorists that emphasize use and utilization. For example, in *Empowerment Evaluation*, Fetterman (2001) proclaimed his hope that evaluation would be an integral part of programme planning and management, that data would be used routinely to inform decisions, and that most evaluators would serve as "coaches" facilitating evaluation work. He envisioned that, in the future, evaluators would take on a whole host of issues at a much higher level serving to mentor and work with organizations through challenges instead of solving problems for them. In *Developmental Evaluation*, Patton (2010) suggested that evaluation practice must extend beyond summative and formative purposes, and become involved in developing programmes. He described the evaluator as a vested member of the development team who brings evaluation skills and knowledge to facilitate learning that will allow the team to reach its vision and goals.

Also, Preskill and Torres (1999a) viewed the role of the evaluator as a promoter of organizational learning. They described the roles for the evaluator as "collaborator, facilitator, interpreter, mediator, coach, and educator of learning and change processes" (p.186). Their approach identified two main responsibilities of the evaluator, assisting stakeholders in examining products, services, organization processes and systems to determine where the organization's strengths and weakness reside; and promoting a culture of inquiry to foster continuous improvement and learning. The evaluator accomplishes these responsibilities by engaging the stakeholders in learning processes, which are at the centre of their model in Fig. 1, (i.e. engaging in dialogue and asking questions to promote reflection that assists stakeholders in clarifying beliefs, values and knowledge), and role modelling evaluative practices. An "evaluation coach" ought to be willing to work intimately with individuals within an organization, modelling constant feedback to maximize personal growth and mastery. Further, they have the power to influence the mental models of stakeholders housed within the organizations (Owen & Lambert, 1995).

2.2. Research on evaluation capacity building

Stockdill, Baizerman, and Compton (2002) advocate for organizational ECB as an effective means for intentionally sustaining evaluation practices and routines in a context-dependent manner. Frequently, organizational evaluation activities are not done by external evaluators (Carman, 2007), demonstrating the need to understand ECB processes and practice so that organizations can effectively evaluate and report on their programming. Baizerman, Compton, and Stockdill (2002a) inspected four case studies of ECB work (Compton, Glover-Kudon, Smith, & Avery, 2002; King, 2002; Mackay, 2002; Milstein, Chapel, Wetterhall, & Cotton, 2002) across different settings to look at common themes and practices of successful ECB implementation. They concluded that all ECB practice is highly contextual and site dependent and called for a more detailed, thick description of ECB practices to better understand practitioner roles, everyday ECB activities and explicit descriptions of ECB complexities. Baizerman, Compton, and Stockdill (2002b) then advocated for ECB practice and study to begin the task of mapping out the field of ECB to look at outcomes and best practices.

Heeding this call, Labin et al. (2012) adapted Preskill and Boyle (2008) multidisciplinary model of ECB to frame their research synthesis on the needs for, activities of, and outcomes of ECB. They identified 61 empirical studies on ECB from 1998 to 2008. They coded them for a variety of characteristics in these three areas. Almost all of the studies (97%) identified at least one type of strategy utilized to promote ECB, which the researchers classified as training (77%); technical assistance, coaching and/or support (62%); and involvement in doing evaluation (67%). As an activity or strategy of ECB, this synthesis did not differentiate the role of coaching from other similar strategies. Almost all of the studies (92%) reported an individual-level outcome for ECB with the most frequent being changes in behaviour and skills (80%), knowledge (50%), and attitudes (36%). Examples of knowledge and behavioural outcomes involved understanding and doing logic models, evaluation plans, and steps of carrying out an evaluation. Although training was associated with the high level of knowledge outcomes, a combination of all three strategies was associated with high levels of knowledge and behavioural outcomes. Given the limited research on attitudinal outcomes, the authors could not draw conclusions on the relationships between the strategies and attitudinal outcomes, although negative attitudes toward evaluation were commonly identified as a barrier to ECB. Seventy-seven percent of the studies also reported organizational-level outcomes, such as processes, policies, and practices (72%), leadership (13%), organizational culture (28%), mainstreaming evaluation (54%), and resources (46%). This study demonstrated that the individual outcomes of attitudes and behaviours were more frequent when ECB strategies also addressed organizational outcomes. Overall, this study emphasized the importance of collaborative evaluation approaches for doing ECB.