



Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association

WHAT IS EVALUATION?

A brief introduction

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August 2014

Acknowledgements

The ANZEA Board has supported the development of this brief resource, which has been written by Kate McKegg and Syd King.

This resource is intended for anyone who has an interest or stake in evaluation and would like an accessible introduction to the field of evaluation.

Suggested citation: McKegg, K., & King, S. (2014). What is evaluation, a brief introduction, ANZEA, New Zealand.

The document can be found at www.anzea.org.nz

The ANZEA Board has made a commitment to review this version of the resource, at least every two years.

Table of Contents

section

1

What is evaluation?

section

2

Some important ideas – quality, value and importance.

section

3

What is evaluation for – why do it?

section

4

Good evaluation practice.

section

5

Evaluative thinking and reasoning: the evaluative attitude.

section

6

What skills, aptitudes and competencies do you need to do evaluation?

section

7

Meta-evaluation – who evaluates the evaluator?

section

8

Now what?

**What is
evaluation?**

What is evaluation?

Evaluation is the systematic determination of the quality, value and importance of something.

The 'something' could be a project, programme or policy; an initiative, organisation or artefact; it could relate to personnel or organisational performance; or something similar.

The process and product of reaching robust, defensible evaluative conclusions logically derived from evidence is what distinguishes evaluation from many other activities such as research, audit, decision-making methodology, monitoring, rich description, policy analysis, and the like. These activities may include evaluative components but often do not. On the other hand, evaluation *always* focuses particularly and intentionally on the quality, value and importance of things.

Humans have always evaluated, or thought evaluatively, informally or formally. All peoples and all cultures use evaluation methods, approaches and thinking – it is a deeply imbued dimension of human cognitive and affective behaviour and interaction.

We are all evaluators, whether we want to be or not, whether we are conscious of it or not – it is an intrinsic part of our nature. Evaluation has been evident throughout human history whenever the merits of a particular activity, entity or thing need to be weighed up in terms of how good, how effective, how useful, how important they are.

Quality, value and importance are considered here to be roughly equivalent terms to merit, worth and significance

What is evaluation?

It is only in recent decades that the conception and definition of evaluation as the systematic determination of quality, value and importance has become well-accepted. There is now a robust theoretical and academic base and the development of formalised evaluation theories, models, methodologies and tools.

What is unique about evaluation as a discipline is that it *requires* the systematic determination (reaching evaluative conclusions) of quality, value and importance.

At the end of an evaluation process, an evaluation needs to be able to say whether something is any good, or not, and why.

**Some
important
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Some important ideas – quality, value and importance.

Quality relates to the intrinsic merit or 'goodness' of something.

Many evaluators regard quality as dynamic and contextual, meaning that it can validly look different in different contexts and circumstances. This 'dynamic conception' of quality means that it will more likely be oriented towards meeting needs rather than meeting goals (unless the goals are well matched to the needs).

Value - what is important or valued in any given situation or context needs to be established and made explicit early on in the evaluation process.

These dimensions of value then become the criteria for how value is recognised. Evaluation criteria must be able to be defensibly demonstrated (explained) and be fact and evidence based – in a way that can be made available to another mind! In most circumstances value is derived from a determination of the extent to which validly identified important needs of stakeholders are

appropriately responded to and meaningfully met, at an acceptable cost. 'Value' includes but is not restricted to 'value for money' considerations. Defining what constitutes 'value' in a particular context is probably the most important part of any evaluation.

The concept of values is fundamental to evaluation practice, both in terms of:

- evaluation being about determining the merit, worth or value of something
- contexts, evaluands and all aspects of evaluation practice being fundamentally informed by value systems.

Importance relates to how significant something is.

Knowing the importance of key aspects or components of a programme, policy, project or initiative is essential to being able to weigh up a range of results and come to a conclusion about overall performance or effectiveness, as well

Some important ideas – quality, value and importance.

as being able to prioritise improvements and identify if any strengths or weaknesses identified are significant or relatively minor.

What and how quality, value and importance is established is *culture* and context dependent. It is now widely accepted that culture shapes and is present in all evaluation contexts. ANZEA has adopted the argument put forward by SenGupta, Hopson and Thompson-Robinson that:

"A common thread between culture and evaluation is the concept of values. Culture shapes values, beliefs, and worldviews. Evaluation is fundamentally an endeavour of determining values, merit and worth."

SenGupta, S., Hopson, R., Thompson-Robinson, M. (2004). Cultural Competence in Evaluation: An Overview. *New Directions for Evaluation. Number 102*, Summer.

**What is
evaluation for
– why do it?**

What is evaluation for – why do it?

Evaluation findings and results are typically used for one or more of the following main reasons:

- to design, establish, build or develop something on a rational basis in order to meet a demonstrated need – sometimes referred to as *developmental evaluation*
- to help bring about improvements – sometimes referred to as *formative evaluation*
- to find out how well something was implemented or delivered – sometimes referred to as *process evaluation*
- to find out or reach a judgement about the overall performance of something and/or to report for accountability purposes – sometimes referred to as *summative evaluation*
- to determine the value of something bearing in mind its performance, costs and alternative use of resources
- for knowledge generation purposes without the particular intent of using that knowledge for improvement or accountability – sometimes referred to as *ascriptive evaluation*.

**Good
evaluation
practice**

Good evaluation practice

Good evaluation practice requires evaluators to:

- ask, and answer, questions about the quality and value of things
- decide on what's important, in context (i.e., established needs, principles, sound knowledge and practice)
- get to the heart of what quality and value mean for people - from different worldviews and perspectives, about the outcomes that matter, and the processes that contribute to these outcomes
- reflect and incorporate these 'values' in the criteria that are used to judge how 'good' the services, and outcomes, are
- gather a range of valid and credible evidence (qualitative and quantitative) about the thing being evaluated (the evaluand)
- synthesise this evidence using evaluative reasoning to reach valid, defensible, unambiguous conclusions about the 'goodness' and 'value' of the evaluand
- present these conclusions explicitly so that the evaluative conclusion is transparent and open to challenge

- where relevant and useful, argue the case for the doing something useful with the results!
- be culturally responsive and competent. The American Evaluation Association's (AEA) statement on 'cultural competence in evaluation' notes in part that:

"To ensure recognition, accurate interpretation, and respect for diversity, evaluators should ensure that the members of the evaluation team collectively demonstrate cultural competence."

Cultural competence is a stance taken toward culture, not a discrete status or simple mastery of particular knowledge and skills. A culturally competent evaluator is prepared to engage with diverse segments of communities to include cultural and contextual dimensions important to the evaluation. Culturally competent evaluators respect the cultures represented in the evaluation.

**Evaluative
thinking and
reasoning: the
evaluative
attitude**

Evaluative thinking and reasoning: the evaluative attitude

The principle "discover not impose" recognises the need for evaluators to undertake as open an evaluation approach as possible, without imposing personal values and views on the evaluand.

Just because we may like, support or identify with a group or organisation's values and philosophy does not mean that they are doing a 'good job'. Our hearts perhaps dictate that we "think fast" (react intuitively), but evaluation requires us to "think slowly", that is, engage in careful and in-depth consideration of the evidence and its reasonable, and reasoned, interpretation.

Characteristics of evaluative thinking and reasoning include:

- thinking explicitly about the quality, value and importance of things
- thinking explicitly about *how* we arrive at our judgments about value and quality
- thinking about not just 'using

evidence' but 'using evidence to make an estimation of merit or value

- thinking explicitly about what is *not* evident or present
- thinking explicitly about unintended or side effects
- thinking explicitly about not just "what is" but "what is the value of?"

There is an emergent literature on 'evaluative thinking' and related topics but this is by no means a 'well-resolved' field of intellectual activity. On the other hand, there are widely available and highly relevant treatises on critical thinking, reasoning and the philosophy of knowledge, much of which is relevant to evaluation.

**What skills,
aptitudes and
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What skills, aptitudes and competencies do you need to do evaluation?

Evaluators require a suite of skills, aptitudes and competencies to do their job well, including effectively controlling the biases and prejudices that we all have.

In a nutshell, evaluation *teams* need to:

- demonstrate an understanding of the knowledge base informing the field and practice evaluation
- be credible within the context of the evaluation
- engage in respectful and mana-enhancing relationships
- be capable of sustained critical thinking and logical reasoning
- be open-minded, that is, prepared to suspend their own personal views and prejudices to evaluate the subject on its merits
- be well-informed about the subject matter of the evaluation, that is, have good knowledge of the subject or *access to that good knowledge*.

ANZEA has published an excellent set of evaluator competencies (2011):

http://anzea.org.nz/images/documents/110801_anzea_evaluator_competencies_final.pdf

**Meta-
evaluation:
who evaluates
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Meta-evaluation: who evaluates the evaluator?

Meta-evaluation is the process of evaluating evaluations - in order to determine the veracity of the original evaluation.

Historically meta-evaluations have often been done somewhat informally and intuitively but in recent years several well-developed checklists for the conduct of meta-evaluations have been published.

The checklists are usually referenced to, or use as a starting point, the American Evaluation Association 'Program Evaluation Standards'. These checklists whilst not developed for the Aotearoa / New Zealand context are a useful guide to meta-evaluation principles and practice.

ANZEA in partnership with the Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (SuPERU) of the Families Commission has developed a set of Evaluation Standards. These can be accessed at <http://www.anzea.org.nz>

Two strong examples of meta evaluation checklists can be sourced from Western Michigan University: <http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists> and Claremont Graduate University (via Michael Scriven michaelscriven.info/)

Now what?

Now what?

To find out more about evaluation and what is going on in the evaluation community, get involved. Contact ANZEA if you are unsure how to do that. You can find us at <http://www.anzea.org.nz/>

Other useful evaluation resources can be found at:

<http://betterevaluation.org>

<http://www.communityresearch.org.nz>

<http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/treaty-of-waitangi>