

Evaluative inquiry: what is it and why do it?

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Supported by:

Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs Council (ATDC) of Tasmania

(www.atdc.org.au)

- Peak body representing ATOD funded services in Tasmania;
- advocates for adequate infrastructure support, and funding for the delivery of evidence-based alcohol, tobacco and other drug initiatives;

Quality Improvement Project

Aim:

- the development of ATOD sector quality policy in Tasmania;
- increasing ATOD sector cohesion; and,
- the adoption of evidence-based organisational and clinical governance, contributing to better quality services for consumers of ATOD NGOs.

Evaluation research activity

- Qualitative interviews with The Link, Mission Australia and Community Connections Inc. Burnie;
- Product: discussion paper that informed an evaluation workshop.

Evaluative activity provides data about what works for consumers

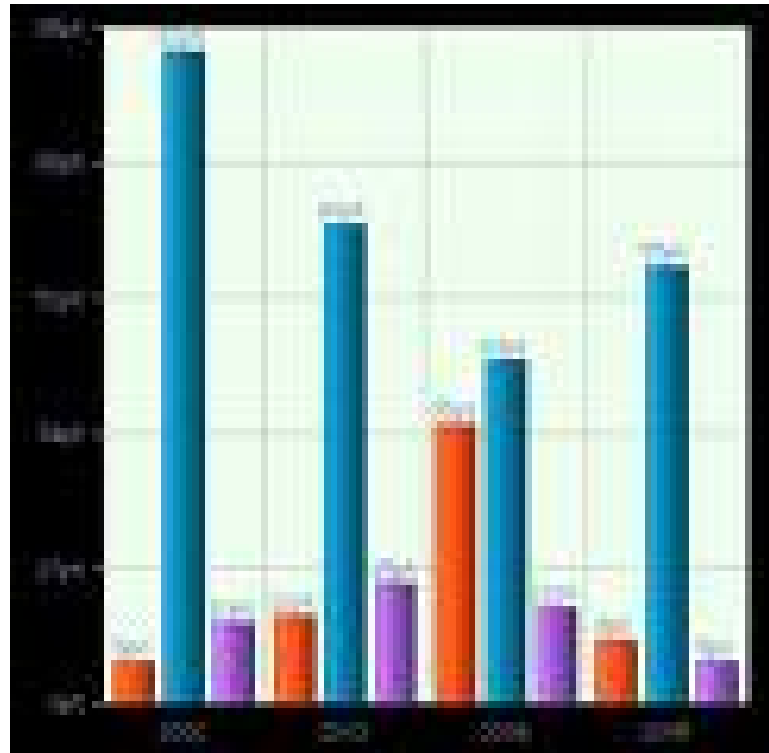


Quotes from interviews

“...We’re able to identify if our services are best delivered at a site [or as] ...outreach...” (Mission Australia)

“...[The benchmarking] process started because [staff] had a concern that we’d moved from an arts-based environment with drug and alcohol attached, into an office based, formalised structure. ... But moving from an arts-based environment into an office-based environment had meant that we lost our drop-ins. ... now that we have become more formalised, we needed to check out [whether] it worked. ... Is what we’re ... doing youth-sensitive, good-practice?” (CCInc ATODs)

Evaluative activity also strengthens the evidence base for advocacy



Quotes from the interviews

“...if the data you’re collecting makes sense ... you know the target you’re working at, you can actually lobby a lot better, and you can negotiate a lot better for money for specific issues, because you’ve got good and clear evidence that this is the area that may need a worker, funding or whatever...” (The Link)

But evaluative activity needs to be practical and meaningful



Quotes from the interviews

“...[unless] there’s a use for [the data] there is no point [collecting it]. You can over collect data.” (The Link)

“...To ensure data collection is done we communicate the importance of it. So it’s really a people motivation thing. I find that program managers and program staff are keen because they can see [the results] at the end of the year.” (Mission Australia)

Embedding evaluative activity requires leadership and resources



'...evaluative inquiry and organizational learning will not succeed if the executive leadership rung is indifferent or hostile to establishing learning processes and systems.' (Hallie Preskill, 1999: 53)

At the same time staff need to be engaged in, and committed to evaluation



Quotes from the interviews

“[The motivation for evaluative activity] ...is coming from program managers. It’s coming from staff. It’s coming from a genuine passion about delivering effective services and a genuine feeling that we need to make sure we’re doing the right thing ... “ (Mission Australia)

“...change is just effected as it needs to be ... change is no major issue because [we are] always changing...you’re either moving forwards or going backwards, and as a service we can’t go backwards. We need to be continually moving forwards and keeping up ... or getting ahead.” (CC Inc ATODS)

External requirements may stimulate
evaluative activity



There are challenges associated with collecting data from consumers



Quotes

“If [a consumer is] crying, I’m not going to sit them down and get them [to answer my questions].” (CC Inc ATODS)

“... one of the girls the other day rang and said she was about to turn 29. When she was 20, suicidal, could have died a hundred times. So you look back now. She’s alive and got a full-time job. ...we’re lucky, been here a long time... But we don’t always capture it ...” (CC Inc ATODS)

There can be tensions between external and internal data collection demands



Quotes

“[For example] ...historically we have been primarily an outreach service ... counselling would occur when people were being outreached. But ...the funding body [required that the intervention] had to be either an outreach or a counselling event. It couldn't be either or.”
(CCInc ATODS)

“The measure of [the services' work] ...is in the reports but if reports are not designed in a way that [allows you to measure] ... what you are trying to achieve it just becomes paperwork.” (The Link)

Conclusions

Evaluative activity is a cost effective strategy for assessing program effectiveness and relevance.

Strategies that facilitate evaluative activity:

- Nurture evaluation leaders at all levels;**
- Facilitate a reflective culture;**
- Make data collection meaningful; and**
- Balance accountability with learning.**

Internal and external stimulus is necessary to sustain evaluative activity.

Reading list

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