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Building an Evaluative Culture for Effective Evaluation and Results Management

John Mayne

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Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative - c/o Bioversity International
Via dei Tre Denari 472°, 00057 Maccarese (Fiumicino), Rome, Italy
Tel: (39) 0661181, Fax: (39) 0661979661, email: **ilac@cgiar.org**, URL: **www.cgiar-ilac.org**

The ILAC initiative fosters learning from experience and use of the lessons learned to improve the design and implementation of agricultural research and development programs. The mission of the ILAC Initiative is to develop, field test and introduce methods and tools that promote organizational learning and institutional change in CGIAR centres and their partners, to expand the contributions of agricultural research to achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

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Abstract

A weak evaluative culture undermines many attempts at building an effective evaluation and results management regimes. This brief outlines practical actions that an organization can take to build and support an evaluative culture, where information on performance is deliberately sought in order to learn how to better manage and deliver programs and services. Such an organization values empirical evidence on the results it is seeking to achieve.

1. Introduction

Efforts at introducing results management and evaluation in organizations are widespread, although often seen as of only limited success. Developing and maintaining an evaluative culture in an organization is often seen as key to building more effective results management and evaluation approaches. On an ongoing basis, there needs to be a climate in the organization where evidence on performance is valued, sought out and seen as essential to good management. Without such a climate, adherence to systems and procedures can dominate attitudes towards results management and evaluation. This brief discusses what an evaluative culture entails and what can be done to build and maintain such a culture.

Table 1

Characteristics of an Evaluative Culture

An organization with a strong evaluative culture:

- engages in *self-reflection* and *self-examination*:
  - deliberately seeks evidence on what it is achieving, such as through monitoring and evaluation,
  - uses results information to challenge and support what it is doing, and
  - values candor, challenge and genuine dialogue;
- engages in *evidence-based learning*:
  - makes time to learn in a structured fashion,
  - learns from mistakes and weak performance, and
  - encourages knowledge sharing;
- encourages *experimentation* and *change*:
  - supports deliberate risk taking, and
  - seeks out new ways of doing business.

2. What characterizes an evaluative culture?

An *evaluative culture* denotes an organizational culture that (Table 1) deliberately seeks out information on its performance in order to use that information to learn how to better manage and deliver its programs and services, and thereby improve its performance. Such an organization values empirical evidence on the results—outputs and outcomes—it is seeking to achieve. Other terms used for such a culture include a results culture, a culture of results, a culture of performance, an evaluation culture and a culture of inquiry.

An absence of these characteristics will be recognized by many as all too common in organizations. Thus, a weaker evaluative culture might, for example,

- gather information on results, but limit its use mainly to external reporting,
- acknowledge the need to learn, but not provide the time or structured occasions to do so,
- claim it is evidence-seeking, but discourages challenge and questioning the status quo, and/or
- talk about the importance of achieving results, but value following the rules and frown on risk taking.

3. Building an Evaluative Culture

All organizations have an existing culture, which, as Kim (2002: 3) notes, "… conveys a sense of identity to employees, provides unwritten and, often, unspoken guidelines on how to get along in an organization. … An organizational culture is reflected by what is valued, the dominant leadership styles, symbols, the procedures, routines, and the definition of success that make an organization unique." This brief is addressing what structures, practices and actions can be put in place to build and support an evaluative culture as part of the overall organizational culture. Based on considerable literature and experience, I suggest that the several elements shown in Table 2 are needed to build such a 'culture of inquiry', i.e., the organizational culture outlined in Table 1.

Leadership

Leadership is probably the most important factor in organizational culture.

Table 2

Measures to Foster an Evaluative Culture

Leadership

- Demonstrated senior management leadership and commitment
- Regular informed demand for results information
- Building results measurement and results management capacity
- Establishing and communicating a clear role and responsibilities for results management

Organizational support structures

- Supportive organizational incentives
- Supportive organizational systems, practices and procedures
- An outcome-oriented and supportive accountability regime
- Learning focussed evaluation and monitoring

A learning focus

- Build in learning
- Tolerating and learning from mistakes

Demonstrated senior management leadership and commitment. Strong senior leadership in building an evaluative culture can be evident through such actions as:

- *supporting the results management regime*, including demonstrating the benefits of using evidence, and supporting results management with resources;
- *providing consistent leadership in results management*, including consistent and regular communication on results management, and acting consistently with an evaluative culture—walking the talk; and
- *managing expectations for results management*, through setting out reasonable yet challenging expectations for success, proceeding gradually and with modesty, and balancing accountability with learning.

In addition, senior managers need to *oversee the results management regime* through:

- *Agreeing* a results framework for the organization, and results frameworks for programs and policies;

- *Challenging* theories of change[1] behind programs, and the evidence gathered on performance;
- *Approving* feasible yet challenging performance expectations;
- *Using* results information in approving programming decisions and for holding managers to account*;*
- *Overseeing* key aspects of results management: evaluation and monitoring systems, results-informed learning, and results reporting by program managers; and
- *Reporting* on organizational performance.

Informed demand for evidence on performance. Results management and evaluation can be significantly encouraged and supported if there is informed and sensible demand in an organization for results information. Key ways that informed demand can occur is through:

- having managers and senior managers *routinely ask for results information*, and
- requiring that *planning, budgeting and reporting be results-based*.

Building results measurement and results management capacity. Building a culture of results in an organization requires a capacity to be able to articulate and measure results, a capacity to understand how results information can be used to help managers manage, and some level of in-house professional results management support. This capacity can be enhanced through:

providing *ongoing training* to managers and staff in the various aspects of results management,

- identifying and supporting *peer champions*,
- *integrating results management training* into the regular management training program;
- including *self-evaluation* as part of the results management training;
- providing *clear and effective guidance* to managers on results management; and
- using *results management networks* to share lessons and foster an evaluative culture.

Establish and communicate a clear role and responsibilities for results management. There is a need for a clearly articulated vision to build the organizational culture:

[1] Theories of change explain why it is believed that the objectives of the program will be met if the outputs are delivered. They lay out the logic and assumptions behind the program, the pathway of change expected.

- set out the *aims and underlying principles* for its results management regime, including developing and communicating a clear strategy for results management,
- agreeing on *key terminology*, and
- define the *roles and responsibilities* of senior managers, managers, program staff, and professional staff in the regime.

Organizational support structures

The second group of elements needed to foster a results culture (Table 2) are support structures. Specific structural aspects of organizational life give day-to-day meaning to the organization's culture.

Supportive organizational incentives. Having the right formal and informal incentives for individuals and units in place is essential to fostering a culture of results, probably more important than capacity issues. In results management, the aim is to have individuals and units deliberately plan for results and then monitor and evaluate what results are actually being achieved in order to adjust activities and outputs to perform better. The bottom line for results measurement is empirical-based learning. Evidence of this occurring is what should be rewarded. This contrasts with approaches that reward only meeting targets.

Supportive organizational systems, practices and procedures. To foster an evaluative culture, all the systems, practices and procedures in an organization need to align and be consistent with that culture. Thus, for example:

- *Managers need adequate autonomy to manage for results*: Managers seeking to achieve outcomes need to be able to adjust their operations as they learn what is working and what is not. Managing only for planned outputs does not foster a culture of inquiry about what are the impacts of delivering those outputs.
- *Evidence-friendly information systems*: The financial, human resource, planning and reporting systems in organizations need to be able to incorporate results information in a user-friendly manner. Otherwise, the gap between the rhetoric of an evaluative culture and the realities of everyday work will be quite evident.
- *Link results management with other reform initiatives*. Many organizations are instituting a variety of management reforms and results management needs to be seen as a key aspect of reform, not a one-off initiative to meet, for example, external requirements.

An outcome-oriented and supportive accountability regime. How accountability is exercised in an organization plays a key role in defining its culture, since accountability defines what aspects of performance are important. If managers are simply accountable for following procedures and delivering planned outputs, there is little incentive to actively seek evidence on the outcomes being achieved. Accountability for outcomes (Mayne, 2007) should consist of (a) providing information on the extent to which the expected outputs and outcomes were attained, and at what cost; (b) demonstrating the contribution made by the program to the outcomes; (c) demonstrating the learning and change that have resulted; and (d)

providing assurance that the means used were sound and proper. Thus, for example, if outcome targets and other expectations have not been met, a key accountability question should be what has been learned as a result and what will change in the future?

Learning-focussed evaluation and monitoring. Undertaking evaluation and monitoring can significantly help to foster an evaluative culture. If managers and staff are involved in the process of measuring and analysing results information, they are likely to see the value of such efforts and to make use of the information gathered. Seeing positive results of that use in terms of better design or delivery will further increase interest in learning from such information. But if the main purpose of evaluation and monitoring is seen as a means to check up on managers and staff, then learning—and hence an evaluative culture—is less likely to be supported. Carden and Earl (2007) discuss how improved process use was used to enhance evaluative thinking at the International Development Research Centre.

A learning focus

The third and last set of elements in Table 2 deal with the deliberate efforts needed to build a capacity for and acceptance of learning in an organization.

Build in learning. Building learning in an organization is widely discussed in the literature (see, for example, Cousins, Goh, Clark and Lee, 2004). Here I want to discuss several specific ideas:

- *Institutionalized learning events*— In my view, most useful is the idea of institutionalized learning events. A learning event could be structured around a current issue of concern where the available information and evidence is brought together in a digestible format for an informed discussion by the interested parties of the issue and what the available evidence implies for future actions. The International Development Research Centre holds annual learning events on a topic of current interest (IDRC, 2006).

- *Encouraging knowledge sharing*—An evaluative culture values sharing information and knowledge, such as providing group learning opportunities and developing supportive information sharing and communication structures.

- *Encouraging leaning through experience*—Learning also occurs through direct on-the-job experience. Organizations can enhance this type of leaning by encouraging efforts to identify and communicate good practices.

- *Making time for learning*—A key constraint for many managers is time. Keeping a program on track is a full time job, and it is hard to find time for reflection and learning. Briton (2005: 31-32) offers numerous suggestions on specific ways an organization can create ‘learning spaces’.

Tolerating and learning from mistakes. Mistakes occur in organizations and are not welcomed. But in a learning and evaluative culture, mistakes need to be tolerated and seen as an opportunity to learn what went wrong and how to do better the next time.

4. What not to do

All organizations have numerous formal and informal incentives in place to which managers and staff react. In some cases, while the original impetus for the incentive or procedure may have been valid, the incentive in a results management regime may now be in fact a disincentive. Across-the-board budget cuts is a good example. While simple to implement, they clearly send the message that when it comes to budgets—the kingpin of bureaucratic life— results don't matter. Table 3 provides examples of organizational actions that do not support an evaluative culture.

Table 3

Examples of Disincentives for Fostering an Evaluative Culture

- Penalizing programs/projects that provide results information (perhaps showing weak performance) over those that do not provide such information.
- Across-the-board budget cuts.
- A constant focus by management on outputs rather than outcomes.
- Penalizing individuals or units that make unpleasant truths visible.
- Setting unrealistic results targets and then sanctioning 'poor' performance, or setting targets too low.
- Poor quality results information that cannot be trusted.
- Results information overload, with inadequate synthesis done.
- Accountability that focuses only on following rules and procedures. Meeting indicators rather than achieving important results is what gets rewarded.
- No apparent organizational interest in learning and adapting.
- Inadequate regular review of the results being sought and the underlying theory of change, leading to perverse behaviour chasing the wrong results.

5. Systems of Results Activities or a Culture of Results?

Many organizations today engage in results management and most have put in place a number of results-related systems, for planning for results, for measuring results, for evaluating results, and for reporting on results. There likely is, as a consequence, a lot of activity and discussion going on related to 'results'. But is all that 'buzz' evidence that there is indeed a culture of results, an evaluative culture in place?

Maybe. If there were little results-based planning and little measuring of results, there would, indeed, be an insufficient foundation for even beginning to create and nurture an evaluative culture. However, as reviews of RBM regimes in many organizations have concluded, *systems do not a culture make*. An organization may have systems of results without the accompanying evaluative culture to adequately exploit their utility. Indeed, results systems in many organizations may be seen as a distraction from getting on with managing. Results management systems used mainly or only to feed external reporting are all too common. And as such, they may actual work against a culture of seeing results information as some valued and worth pursuing. A recent review of many years of experience in the UN system concluded that "results-based management will continue to be an administrative chore of no real utility" unless

significant changes are made in how the General Assembly operates (Office of Internal Oversight Services, 2008: 2).

Key to an evaluative culture is the routine use of results information to learn from past experience and to inform decision-making on the design and delivery of programs. In an organization with an evaluative culture, decision on design and delivery would rarely be made without credible empirical information on relevant past experience and on clear statements of what results will be accomplished if decisions are taken.

Table 4 suggests what would be expected in an organization with an evaluative culture, over and above systems of results.

Table 4

Systems of Results or a Culture of Results?

Many organizations have **systems of results:**

- a results-based planning system with results frameworks for programs
- results monitoring systems in place generating results data
- evaluations undertaken to assess the results achieved by an evaluation unit
- reporting systems in place providing data on the results achieved

But these should not be mistaken for an evaluative culture. Indeed, on their own, they can become a burdensome system not helping management at all.

An **evaluative culture** would show evidence of:

- structured learning events routinely held to discuss future directions, using available results data and information
- senior managers regularly stressing the importance of credible results information for good management, and asking for results information at programming meetings
- organizational units accountable for demonstrating that they are learning
- participation in measuring results occurring throughout the organization
- decisions on design and deliver routinely and visibly informed by results information
- good results management showcased
- results information widely shared around the organization
- honest mistakes tolerated and seen as opportunities to learn and improve rather than as opportunities to blame or penalize
- training on ‘results matters’ integrated into regular manager and staff training, supplemented with specific results management
- managers able to adjust their activities and outputs to reflect what is being learned

6. A strategy for moving forward

All or most of the elements identified in Table 2 and more concretely in Table 4 are needed to foster an evaluative culture, in the sense that their absence—and certainly their inverse—can undermine moving to a results culture. But an organization cannot advance on all these fronts at once. Changing organizational culture is a difficult task, and there has been much written about how to bring about culture change in organizations.

A first step might be to undertake a 'culture audit' (Pal and Teplova, 2003) to try and determine just what is the current attitude and experience with evaluative inquiry, and what are the current disincentives. Are any of the characteristics in Table 1 or in Table 3 in evidence? It is also clear from the literature that some level of senior management visibility and consistent support is essential to moving forward. This need not require 100% gung-ho support from senior management, but a level of support that is consistent with the actual beliefs of senior management, and with a realistic understanding of where the organization currently is. As the benefits from evaluative inquiry are realized, one can expect senior support to strengthen.

A strategy of specific actions can then be developed, based on the framework in Table 2 and the specific situation at hand. For an organization, a first level strategy might be:

1. Get senior management support.
2. Institute results-based planning and reporting.
3. Get managers asking the results questions.
4. Acquire a minimum level of internal expertise.
5. Hold and support learning events, at both the small unit and corporate levels.
6. Provide ongoing training to managers and staff.

Organizations often indeed implement some of these steps, especially the first two with some initial training. I would argue that is not enough, and the steps 3 through 6 are required to build a critical mass of support and interest in an evaluative culture.

A second level strategy could then be:

7. Identify and support results management champions.
8. Recognize and showcase good efforts at results management.
9. Encourage process learning—learning by participation in evaluation and results management activities.

Then, over time, additional elements of the framework outlined in Table 2 and Table 4 could be brought into play.

7. Concluding remarks

While organizations may tip their hats to the importance of an evaluative culture, little is usually done to deliberately build and maintain such a culture. Efforts are typically put into building systems of measurement and reporting, and, usually one-time,

enhancing the capacity of staff, all of which can be delegated to somewhere down in the organization. Yet, without a compatible evaluative culture, efforts at building capacity and systems are not enough for an effective evaluation or results management regime to thrive. Over and over again, assessments of evaluation and results management regimes find them wanting and burdensome, and point to the lack of a culture that supports and values the use of empirical evidence to routinely inform management as a major barrier.

Developing an evaluative culture in an organization will not happen through good intentions and osmosis. It requires deliberate efforts by the organization and especially its senior managers to encourage, implement and support such a culture. This brief has suggested numerous ways that such a culture can be developed and maintained in an organization.

8. Further Reading

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About the Author

John Mayne (john.mayne@rogers.com) is an independent advisor on public sector performance. Previously, he was with the Office of the Auditor General of Canada and the Treasury Board Secretariat.