

WHAT IS APPROPRIATE EVALUATION? ETHICS AND STANDARDS IN EVALUATION

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Making decisions and shaping policies in a business, whether large or small, involve choosing among competing purposes and values. It could be a choice between the value of product quality and the value of a bigger profit margin... between more employee involvement and faster decisions, between budgetary controls and strategic considerations, between time spent on improving technical processes and time spent improving overall corporate culture... What becomes dramatically clear when the perspectives of actual policy-makers are examined, rather than the dogmas of economic theorists, is that a wide variety of values and purposes enter into the formulation of business policy. (McCoy 1985, emphasis in original, p 8)

Introduction

This paper is based on the work of the Committee on Ethics and Standards in Evaluation of the AES. We are concerned with developing a system for dealing with some of the difficult choices and the trade-off of values that all public sector managers have to make at some stage in their various roles (Bobbit & Ford 1980, Calabria 1982, Mintzberg 1973, Montanari 1978). In examining this issue in the public sector, it is customary to refer to the experiences of private sector managers. Although there are those who are rightly concerned that a comparison between private sector and public sector methods does not do justice to the circumstances and values of the public sector (for example, Wettenhall 1986, Yeatman 1987, 1990), some suggest there is much to be learned about management from any organisation (for example, Wilenski 1988). I believe that because of the economic pressure currently being felt by most organisations, it is not

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inappropriate to indulge here in a brief examination of the question of values in evaluation across the sectors.

Some Lessons From Recent Private Sector Experience

The 'bottom line' of the accounts balance sheet, that is, *annual profit*, has been the focus of so much of the evaluation of business performance for many years. But in the late 1980s and 1990s, business leaders have realised that annual profit is only one criterion, and not necessarily the most important, for judging performance. Indeed, several influential writers in the USA have been trying to persuade their business community to think beyond the dollars in the balance sheet (Callahan 1988, Frederick & Preston 1990, Gatewood & Carroll 1991, Perry 1984, Srivastara 1988). For example, the renowned business magazine *Fortune* has occasionally published articles on their evaluation of 'America's most admired companies'. They regularly survey over 7000 corporate executives, company boards of directors and financial analysts, of whom half usually respond (for example, Perry 1984). *Fortune* asked these business people to evaluate corporations on the following eight criteria:

- quality of management
 - quality of products or services
 - innovativeness
 - long-term investment value
 - financial soundness
 - ability to attract, develop, and keep talented people
 - community and environmental responsibility, and
 - use of corporate assets.
- Note that financial measurements are

only two or three of the eight. The reason they are not more prominently featured is explained in the conclusion of the article in which the criteria are listed. It reads:

The most admired US companies believe that their ultimate success depends on how they are perceived by the public. 'Consumers trust certain companies', says August Busch III, chairman of Anheuser-Busch. 'Consumers trust IBM. Consumers trust an Anheuser-Busch product. They trust a Boeing airplane.' Repeatedly, corporations with first-class reputations are seen to put quality, integrity and respect for the consumer alongside profits on the bottom line. (Perry 1984, p 56)

Management Values and the Management of Corporate Values

Organisational culture is a concept often emphasised as a tool for management to enhance the motivation of its staff (Rousseau 1988, Schein 1985, Sharp 1993b). Culture really refers to shared beliefs and values, which are actually *not* easily influenced by management dictate. As Parker and Lorenzini (1993, p 39) point out:

Explicit communications, such as written language, do not completely represent the organisational messages transmitted as part of a culture. It is also necessary to identify the 'words' behind the words.

People have to trust and believe their leaders in order to follow in aligning their beliefs and values. With the current economic and political pressures and conflict of change, and the suspicion about managers' abilities or 'hidden agendas', the last thing that workers are interested in doing is putting their faith in big-talking managers.

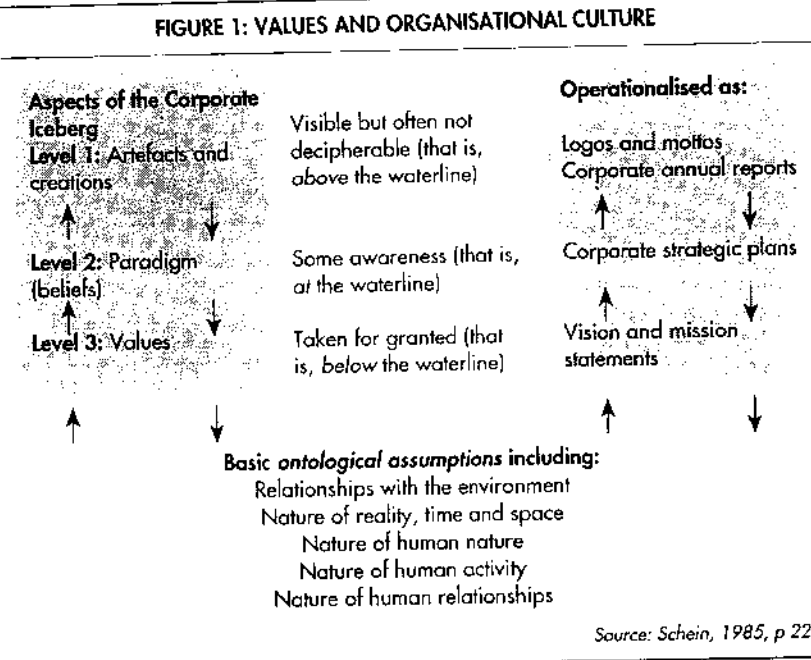
Figure 1 shows the relationship between values and the 'artefacts' of the organisational culture, such as the chief executive officer's introduction to the corporate annual report. This model is derived and adapted from the other figures provided by Schein (1985, p 22).

Evaluation as a Tool of Organisational learning

The premise often is that information from program evaluation can and should be used in improving an organisation's strategy. This implies that the organisation can learn, an hypothesis which has several supporters (for example, see Beer, Eisenstat & Spector 1990, Senge 1990a, 1990b, Stata 1989). One of the leading writers on organisational learning is Professor Peter Senge, Director of the Systems Thinking and Organisational Learning Program at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston, USA. Senge emphasises 'generative learning', as the most important aspect of organisational learning. Through generative learning, achievements are made by generating new ways of viewing the world. Its approach sees problems as facilitating a creative tension which leads to strategically important opportunities; whereas adaptive learning merely builds on existing information and experience in order to cope better with the world as it is. Both approaches are necessary, but generative learning has greater strategic significance.

For the manager, whose job is to improve the program for the organisation, the message from recent management literature is that you really must wish to improve yourself. In other words, you need to cultivate a climate of self-evaluation and self-awareness among your staff which transcends simply adapting to change and fixing problems. Through generative learning, continually challenging and seeking higher standards of program delivery, setting and upholding ethical conduct and continually seeking self-improvement, you can truly say that you are trying to improve the program for which you are responsible.

A recent review of the attempts to develop a culture of respecting ethics in business (Gatewood & Carroll 1991) have suggested a framework for assessment of the ethical behaviour of individuals and groups in organisations. Although not implemented yet in private sector



organisations, a similar approach has been taken for some time in public sector organisations in the USA (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation 1981) and is being developed here in some governments, and through the efforts of the AES (see Sharp 1991).

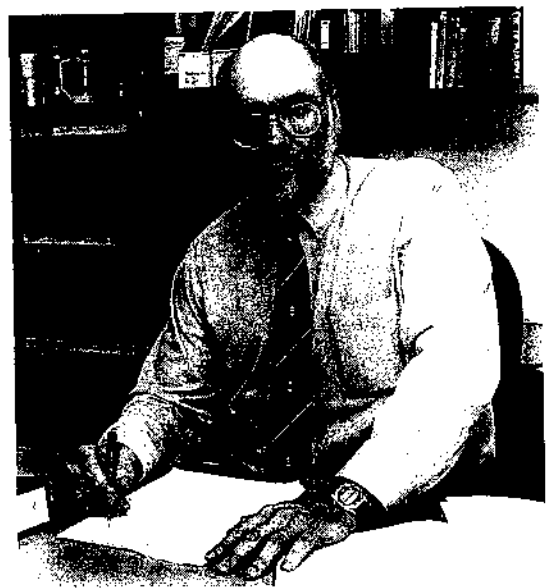
Values in the Public Sector

According to the Commonwealth's Management Advisory Board/Management Improvement Advisory Committee (MAB/MIAC 1993, p 5), the core public service values include a close focus on results, the highest standards of probity, integrity and conduct, accountability and continuous improvement, as shown in Figure 2.

It is not the place here to question how many of these espoused values actually coincide with the culture in action in various Commonwealth public sector organisations (see Sinclair 1989, 1991, Sharp 1993b). However, the fact that such a statement of values has

been promoted does assist in furthering ethics and standards in evaluation.

To introduce issues of ethics and standards in the public sector, it is useful to consider two themes which provide a formative background to understanding how program evaluation ethics and standards relate to practice. The first theme is 'appropriateness' and external



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accountability as evaluative criteria; and the second is the internal context of evaluation as a facilitator of organisational learning.

Appropriateness as an Evaluative Criterion

One of the earlier definitions of evaluation, from the influential Baume Report, warrants rediscovery, that is: 'social program evaluation is the process of thoroughly and critically reviewing the efficiency, effectiveness and appropriateness of any program or group of programs.' (Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare 1979a, p 5, emphasis added). According to the Baume Report, one of the criteria for evaluation of appropriateness was said to be: 'the extent to which the program is in accordance with the moral, ethical and social norms of the time . . . ' (Gross 1979, p 58, italics original). It is interesting that 'appropriateness' has been neglected, or undefined, as an evaluation criterion in most of the literature, except a paper being prepared by my colleagues at Flinders University (see Sharp, Roffey & Lewis 1993). Figure 3 is a model we developed to explain appropriateness in the context of effectiveness and efficiency as evaluation criteria.

More recently, the now Professor, Peter Baume (1991) in reflecting on the 10 years subsequent to his review, asserted that:

... of the many influential thrusts which can be traced back to my senate inquiry, perhaps none is more important than this: that public officials in positions of senior management have a direct responsibility to account publicly for the appropriateness of their program results. . . . Near the top of that list of elements of 'accountable management' is an evaluation of its appropriateness - judged in terms of the worth of the results of public programs (Baume 1991, p 37)

Following the lead of the two most influential parliamentary reviewers, Coombs (Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration, 1976) and Baume (Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare 1979a, 1979b, Baume 1991), the message of these reviews of evaluation practice in government was 'not about evaluation for evaluation's sake, but about evaluation as a means to a greater end of accountable management: the original aim was for more careful attention to program evaluation as a core component of enhanced public accountability'. (Baume 1991, p 36, emphasis added)

FIGURE 2: CORE PUBLIC SERVICE VALUES ACCORDING TO MAB/MIAC

A close focus on results:

- pursuing efficiency and effectiveness at all levels, and
- delivering services to clients conscientiously and courteously

The highest standards of probity, integrity and conduct:

- acting in accordance with the letter and spirit of the law
- dealing equitably, honestly and responsively with the public, and
- avoiding real or apparent conflicts of interest

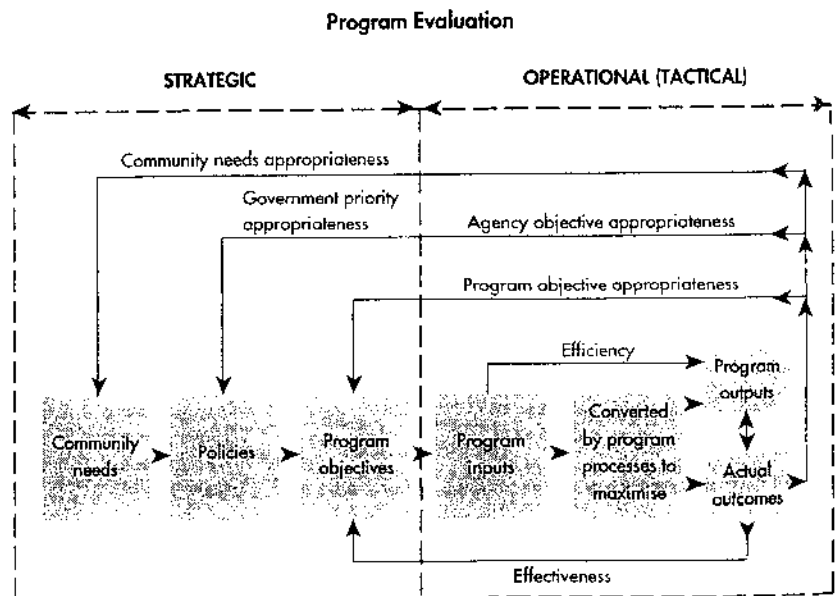
A strong commitment to accountability:

- contributing fully to the accountability of the agency to the Government, of the Government to the Parliament and of the Parliament to the people
- fully supporting the administrative and legal measures established to enhance accountability, and
- recognising that those delegating responsibility for performance do not lose responsibility and may be called to account

Continuous improvement through teams and individuals:

- striving for creativity and innovation, and
- making individual and team performance count

FIGURE 3: CONTEXT - CULTURAL, ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, LEGAL, SOCIAL AND ETHICAL NORMS



Source: Sharp, Roffey & Lewis (1993), developed from adaptation of Martin (1982), NSW Public Service Board 3/87, Treasury Queensland Model, source personal communication McLean (1993)

Also, as Baume (1991) states: 'Evaluation itself ought to be evaluated, with an eye to its social or community value, and not just its political or bureaucratic convenience' (p 35, emphasis added). This is implicitly one of the purposes of the AES's development of ethics and standards in evaluation (see Sharp 1991).

Standards for Evaluation

As an aid to introducing managers to an awareness of the technical requirements and the propriety of evaluation, the AES has recommended that those interested in ethics and standards seek out and consider the standards developed by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (1994) in the USA, chaired by James Sanders. The Committee on Ethics and Standards in Evaluation of the AES is considering adapting these guides for Australian circumstances. With regard to the 'propriety standards', the AES has developed its own draft *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*, and welcomes debate on this. (See Figure 4.)

Until appropriate standards are developed in Australia, in determining appropriate conduct of evaluations, practitioners and users of evaluation should be guided by the American standards on evaluation which have been produced in a handbook by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (1994). This useful handbook provides some explanatory text as an introduction to the standards, accompanied by discussions about application and relevant case studies. Thirty basic guides to evaluation are covered, which are summarised in the paper following this one.

Ethical Dilemmas

Professor Charles Hampden-Turner (1990) is one of a rising number of authors who recognise the unnecessary polarisation of values embedded in organisational cultures. His therapy is to 'chart the dilemmas' to expose the unnecessary tensions and vicious circles which cause disruptive influences on the organisation. It is said that only when the two horns of the dilemma are exposed that it is possible to resolve a path between them (see Figure 5.)

Unfortunately, many managers do not realise the ethical concerns involved with evaluation, nor do they understand how to resolve ethical dilemmas which can arise

FIGURE 4: OUR OWN ETHICS WATCHDOG: CEASE

The Committee on Ethics and Standards in Evaluation (CEASE) was established at the 1989 National Evaluation Conference forum on ethics and standards, convened by Jerome Winston (RMIT, Melbourne) and chaired by Colin Sharp. The impetus has been the occasional enquiry regarding the proper (or more likely improper) conduct of some evaluations (such as illustrated in the case studies presented in this paper). The main tasks of CEASE have been:

- to establish a code of ethics and standards of practice for evaluation (chaired by Ian Trotman, State Services, Wellington, New Zealand), and
- to develop suitable guidance on interpreting the American standards (see Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation) for Australian and New Zealand audiences.

in the practice of evaluation. An ethical dilemma is a situation involving a choice between conflicting, ethical prescriptions (see Rhodes 1986). As Hampden-Turner and Rhodes point out, these ethical dilemmas can also be disruptive because of the fundamental essence of the values and ethics which have conflicting prescriptions. This may take the form of various standards having conflicting implications in a particular situation. For example, a client's right to privacy may conflict with the community's concern for accountability. There is no easy solution to such dilemmas. It requires sharing the problem with peers, consultation with those affected, and advocacy on their behalf. Each of these approaches suggests a role for the AES. Indeed, as chair of the AES Committee on Ethics and Standards in Evaluation, I have received a number of complaints regarding problems in the conduct or use of evaluations. A few brief examples follow.

Case Study 1: What Can Happen When there is Inadequate Consultation in an Evaluation?

Let us say that a Minister of a new government wanted to revamp some of the main departmental functions and devolve other functions to the private sector for basically appropriate reasons. Even though the main rationale was ideologically based, the Minister's proposals for change to Cabinet emphasised potential savings from the sale of the now unwanted premises and the natural attrition of senior staff. The massive changes in the organisation imposed from above by the government wrought dislocation and depression in its professional staff and middle managers.

A few years later, the Treasury wanted an audit of the promised savings and the Department of Finance wanted an evaluation of the effectiveness of the new look department. However, the Department did not have its own evaluation function, nor an adequate database to support the evaluation. So in a hastily conceived reaction to these pressures they hired an academic (social sciences researcher) as an external evaluation advisor, setting a short deadline for the evaluation. The academic then subcontracted some of the study to a telephone survey research firm.

Later a member of the AES received a call from a regional officer (Ms X) of the department for advice about a problem with the evaluation. During the agitated conversation, the informant explained that she had stumbled upon the fact that the department's central office had hired external consultants to conduct a telephone survey of clients without systematically informing or consulting the regional officers of the department or the client group's representatives.

FIGURE 5: HORNS OF THE ETHICAL DILEMMA



This brings us up to date. Apparently the clients are to be contacted directly by telephone and asked questions which the regional staff believe are a violation of the rights to confidentiality of the clients. Mrs X is concerned about what appears to be an unethical process of obtaining information from the clients, that is, without their consent and without regard to the sensitivity of their circumstances. It seems that the clients are not to be given an opportunity for informed consent before being telephoned. (Although a quick motivating plea will be made by the interviewer, little attention will be given to explaining their *right not to participate*.) Mrs X feels powerless to address this issue with superiors in the department and does not know who the external consultants or other concerned professionals might be with whom issues could be raised. She asks the member of the AES whether it would be appropriate for the AES to intervene on behalf of those concerned.

The dilemma is that Mrs X has a duty to parliament, and her 'whistle-blowing' might damage or delay a necessary evaluation. But if she hadn't taken some action to delay and seek improvement in the methods used to obtain data from the clients, her professional standing as perceived by the clients (whose details she must treat with confidentiality) would be at risk. The clients might also turn to private sector providers instead.

Ethical Issues Raised in this Case: Client's Rights

Apart from not conforming to some of the American standards, this case highlights the fact that unlike the American Constitution, Australia's Constitution does not include a bill of rights but relies mainly on common law and specific Acts and regulations to deal with social justice issues.

However, Australia does have strict rules about the rights of human subjects to informed consent about the processes which will involve them. As was pointed out at the Forum on Ethics and Standards at the 1989 AES conference in Brisbane, informed consent of participants is now a mandatory requirement of research designs in university and government-funded programs. Also, the Commonwealth has strict provisions under the *Privacy Act* requiring agencies and institutional committees to scrutinise the use of client data for research purposes. This raises issues

regarding the management of evaluation projects as most managers and evaluation advisors are unlikely to be aware of these requirements or the training to deal with clients' rights.

For example, the manager of a service for people in nursing homes that involves programs for frail elderly people, intellectually disabled people, or disoriented or brain-impaired clients, will find the informed consent provision a problem when conducting evaluations (*Propriety Standard F2: Formal Agreements*).

Recent research relating to long-term care patients in medical centres in the USA suggests that these patients' understanding and recall of what they have given their consent to and what they have signed is very limited (Larson & McGuire 1990). Nevertheless, the ethical codes of the relevant professional bodies and responsible funding agencies demand that the procedures used to obtain the informed consent of target clients contributing to a study can be justified in the research or evaluation of programs involving such clients.

Obtaining consent is not negotiable (in either Australia, the USA or the UK), and an uninformed or brash manager seeking to avoid the requirement can risk the penalties specified in the *Privacy Act*, as well as the possible loss of funding for the research program or evaluation. A public relations blow-up may also ensue.

Other Standards Issues Raised in this Case: Need for Expert Advice

Another deficiency of the evaluation raised in the case study is that the study appeared to lack a steering committee or responsible liaison person for the evaluation consultants. Also, the study was unsatisfactory in terms of the American utility standards as the staff were not regarded as a salient audience and weren't to be involved in the follow-through. Also, it seems that the study did not follow Feasibility Standard F2 (*Political Viability*) as it did not seek the cooperation of the relevant interest groups, nor was there an attempt to anticipate how the evaluation may be curtailed.

Winston (1980) pointed out that such management issues can be appropriately addressed by the use of an evaluation steering committee with relevant external advisors, and a public officer responsible for dealing with enquiries about the study. This is really just good management

sense, but the lack of this communication channel can cause different types of confusion and inappropriate actions.

Case Study 2: No Access to Confidential Responses

An internal review using a staff survey (in preparation for an external evaluation) triggered a political squabble between the senior welfare staff and the newly appointed manager of an organisation. As a result of concerns over long-standing staffing issues, unrelated to the evaluation, the manager tried to seize the staff survey responses to identify the sources of complaints about staffing issues. The senior welfare officer (Ms Y) who conducted the staff survey withheld the survey responses and called for help.

Regardless of the circumstances, if information was given by respondents on the understanding that it would be treated confidentially, then normal standards of evaluation conduct (see propriety standards) would prescribe that no-one can expect to have access to the original responses, other than those for whom the responses were intended and for the purposes given.

Case Study 3: External Consultant Not Given Access to Evaluation Data

An external consultant (Ms Z) hired to design and conduct an innovative training program for a government agency, expected (from earlier suggestions from senior departmental officials) that departmental staff would contact the participants of the training program to ask if they could be interviewed and surveyed about the effectiveness of the program. The consultant was not informed about the survey, the interviews or the data obtained. One of the program's participants told the consultant about the evaluation. When she asked for access to the data and information she was refused and told that the evaluation did not concern her.

She called the AES for advice, which, unfortunately, was not easy to provide (as there is no current provision on 'full and frank disclosure'). The *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* could not provide assistance, as there was no provision for this matter in the initial contract (a formal agreement was not made). If access to the evaluation data and information was included in her contract, the departmental

staff conducting the evaluation could have summarised the data in a way that protected the respondents, allowing Ms Z to obtain the feedback that would help her improve the training program.

Where to Seek Guidance? The Australasian Evaluation Society

Where can advice be obtained on these issues? Some authors suggest that managers should study ethics (see Sharp 1991 for a review). A number of texts on business ethics (see Frederick & Preston 1990, Srivastara 1988) are available, as well as reviews of the codes of professional ethics (for example, Applebaum & Lawton 1990; Callahan 1988; Windt *et al* 1989). However, it would be more acceptable to managers to be able to seek assistance from appropriate advisors at the point of planning evaluations.

The AES is a learned society, consisting of professionals with varied backgrounds. While some regard themselves as *evaluators*, most have learned to practise evaluation methods in developing their own professional practice and commitment to quality assurance.

The Contribution from the Managers: Facilitate Self-Evaluation and Meta-Evaluation

In my review of papers on ethics of evaluation in the Australian literature and practices for a conference (see Sharp 1991), there appeared to be no systematic attempts at *evaluation research* as a form of descriptive ethics *per se*. Some of the issues relating to the roles of manager and evaluation advisor are worthy of consideration. The research is in both the field of business ethics (see Frederick & Preston 1990, and the field of program evaluation research (see Attkisson *et al* 1978).

Evaluation advisors, like other analysts, usually seem to be regarded as agents of the managers who hire or supervise them (Mintzberg 1973, Attkisson Brown & Hargreaves 1978). In this sense, evaluation advisors need to be aware of the effects of this position on their role (see Baker 1991). Although the importance of the roles of manager and evaluation advisor is well recognised, there is little systematic research on the ethical aspects.

However, there is much research in social psychology on compliance under the effects of authoritarian direction or as conformity in a group (for example, Janis & Mann 1977). All of which suggests that evaluation advisors and consultants and managers need to be aware of the 'Compliance Dragon' (Jerome Winston, personal communication, 1989) and cooperate to avoid its fearsome influence, by being strong enough to be open with constructive criticism while avoiding self-censorship (see Figure 6).

The bottom line is that if managers want to be able to call on competent evaluation advisors, then managers should give them the opportunity to sharpen their skills with program research and development, or meta-evaluation. This means encouraging critical self-disclosure among those who hire evaluation as well as those who serve.

Meta-Evaluation Studies

One version of the meta-evaluation, or evaluation of evaluation approach, has been presented by Illana McLean of the

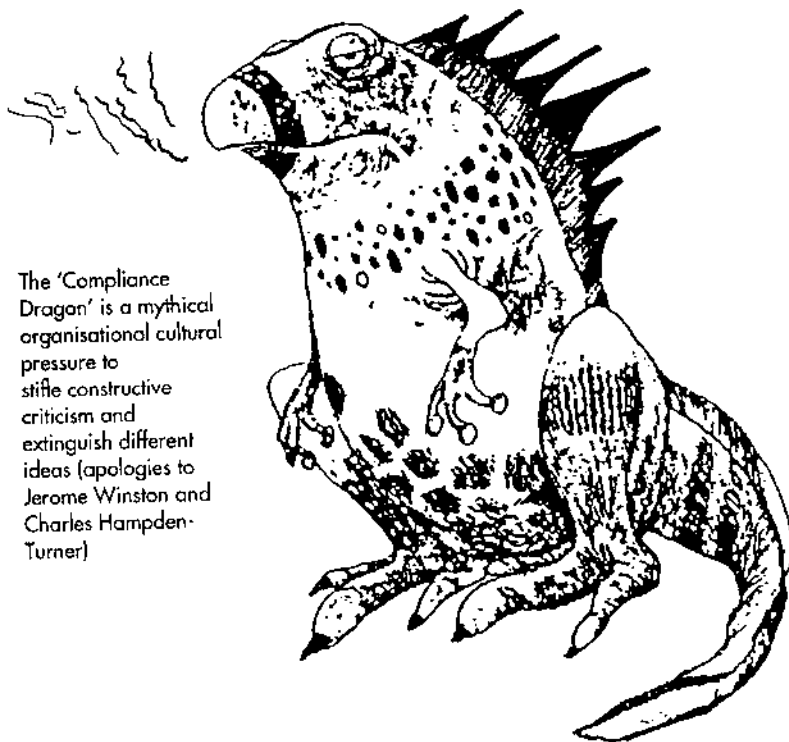
Queensland Treasury Department (1991) who advocated meta-evaluation as a means of determining what is an 'acceptable evaluation'. By 'meta-evaluation' she meant 'the systematic process of examining an evaluation and judging its quality and utility' (McLean 1991, p.329). A number of Australian authors have previously considered meta-evaluation for this purpose (see Bannister 1987, MacKenzie & Bannister 1988, Scriven 1989). Indeed I agree with McLean's view that:

Meta-evaluation can improve the potential for evaluations in the public sector achieving acceptable standards and allow decision-makers to have confidence in the performance information with which they are provided. (1991, p. 332; and see the last recommendation on p. 40)

But it requires the cooperation of the founders and patrons of the evaluations, to allow others to evaluate the evaluation.

I can speak for the AES in encouraging debate on this issue and inviting interested parties to contact me or Jerome Winston as representatives of the AES concerned with these ethical issues.

FIGURE 6: THE 'COMPLIANCE DRAGON'



The 'Compliance Dragon' is a mythical organisational cultural pressure to stifle constructive criticism and extinguish different ideas (apologies to Jerome Winston and Charles Hampden-Turner)

Conclusion

The AES intends to give a lead to the practitioners and users of evaluation about what are reasonable standards and codes of practice of evaluation in the Australian context. Most professional associations have developed codes of ethics or standards which encompass much the same issues. So there is little need to go to elaborate lengths to reinvent the wheel on general codes of conduct. Rather it seems appropriate to concentrate on those particular issues which concern evaluation advisors and users in this country, and to get on with a cooperative effort to increase our collective corporate health and capacity for organisational learning.

However, it is not all straightforward. One reason for the above caveats is that in Australia there is little in the way of fundamental evaluation research and meta-evaluation focused on the ethical issues. Too often the papers at evaluation conferences offer only anecdotal case studies, or simplistic applications of basic methodology, or platitudes about intended evaluation policies from inexperienced or naive practitioners in otherwise poorly prepared organisations. To address these concerns I offer the following recommendations.

Recommendations

In general the most important approach for the public sector manager is to address the risk of *inappropriate evaluations* and other corporate impediments to organisational learning, by fostering a spirit of self-evaluation in their organisation's use of program evaluation. Specifically, as Kemmis (1989) put it, top managers should be 'developing critical communities in program bureaucracies'. Only then can they build their immunity against the insidious effects of the 'Compliance Dragon'.

I also recommend that:

- public sector managers follow-up the self-evaluation approach by careful self-critical scrutiny in the light of references on ethical issues in evaluation and seek out guidelines such as those of Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (1994).
- the commissioners, practitioners and consumers of evaluation in the public sector should develop or adopt evaluation standards as the basis on which to guide their conduct regarding their involvement and also the use of external consultants in program evaluation
- contact should be maintained with the AES in its development (through the work of the Committee on Ethics and Standards in Evaluation) of a set of guidelines and case studies to illustrate excellence as well as pitfalls in evaluation practice
- the AES advises practitioners and users of evaluation that if in doubt about ethical or appropriate conduct, that in addition to the AES, that they should also seek advice from the relevant professional association as to the codes of ethics of the professional practitioners (for example, psychologists, social workers, nurses, general practitioners of medicine) involved so as to determine which actions will have the *least harm to the most at risk*. In order to do this effectively and efficiently it seems appropriate to invite such representatives to be part of a steering committee for the planning and conduct of the evaluation; indeed it would be appropriate to establish ethics committees in each ministerial portfolio and department in order to open communication between those concerned with ethical professional conduct and those planning and reviewing the evaluation in each portfolio
- the concerned public sector manager should contact the AES to seek advice regarding members who, within the guidelines and policies of the AES, could be available to represent and interpret the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* by participation in such steering committees;
- the public sector generally (perhaps through the management advisory board/management improvement advisory committee) joins with the AES to promote meta-evaluation research on ethical practices, and to verify the appropriateness of standards, and to demonstrate exemplars of quality evaluation practice.

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