



# **Haven't we been this way before? Learning and the politics of evaluation**

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# Overview

1. What do we mean by learning
2. Why is it important?
3. Reality . . . little learning
  - a. Indigenous Policy and Programs
  - b. Defence Procurement
4. What are the key factors?
  - a. Role and place of evaluation
  - b. Organisation culture
5. Blockers and barriers
  - a. Mindsets
  - b. Public service work organisation
  - c. Bureaucratic politics
6. What facilitates?
7. What does this mean for evaluators?

# What do we mean by learning?

- Changes in strategy, policy, programs
- Changes in outlook or mindset (individual, organisational)
- Changes in management priorities and behaviour

*as a result of*

- Evidence-informed evaluation or audit
- Lesson-learning through experience, reflection

# Why learning is important

- Makes possible a positive response to failure
- Improves adaptation
- Builds public trust in government
- Supports a creative organisational culture

# Reality – little learning ..

## Indigenous policy and programs

lots of individual learning, *but little systematic learning*

# Reality – little learning . .

## ◦ Indigenous programs and policy

Repetition of findings, year after year, for example

- DOFD Strategic Review 2010
- ANAO reports
- Productivity Commission - Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage.
- Evaluations of the COAG trials
- Jarvie and Stewart (upcoming AJPA)

Government action that flies in the face of evaluation findings

- NT intervention – coercive, no positive engagement
- One size fits all
- Myriad of programs, rather than place based joined up approaches that support local culture

# Reality – insufficient learning . .

## ◦ Example: Defence procurement

- Repeated negative ANAO findings
- Many reviews (Kinnaird, Mortimer) but insufficient (or wrong kinds of?) change
- New Senate inquiry into the Defence Materiel Organisation cites familiar failings

# Reality is ...

learnings blocked,  
limited or distorted

difficult to learn  
productive lessons from  
failure



# Reality is ...



Beware the pothole!

# Field of action matters


Health – more evidence based  
a lot of data linkage

Education – expert judgement  
less use of evaluations

Defence

culture of 'learning on the job'  
Evaluation not emphasised

# organisational culture matters



Cultures that are:  
authoritarian  
ideologically driven  
stress “can do” attitudes  
are risk averse ...

can compromise learning

# Vicious cycle



# Blocker: “the answer is obvious”

Occurs where

- complex policy problem
- high profile and/or
- Ministers/senior bureaucrats want simple solutions

So any finding that

- is counter-intuitive
- says take no action (eg just talk)
- says give up control

will struggle, even if experts are unanimous.

# Blocker: Mindsets

A particular issue with Indigenous programs.

Some public servants influenced by

- racism – low expectations
- Aboriginal culture a “barrier”
- need for “clarity” on objectives, timetables, and deliverables
- belief that Governments “do” things
- need to see things in terms of simple solutions eg “get them jobs” ; welfare is the problem.
- Community dysfunction is not government’s problem

# Blocker: Mindsets

## Prevailing beliefs in Defence

- More process will solve the problem
  - Business models are the answer
- More accountability results from more reporting, more controls
- Little place for trust, relationship-building
  - Risk can be eliminated

# Barrier: Public sector work organisation

• Learnings that suggest work organisation has to change will struggle, such as

- joined up approaches
- cutting across hierarchies
- devolution of authority
- quality administrative data



# Barrier: behaviour change

- Learnings that suggest public servants have to change behaviour will struggle, such as
  - give up some control
  - develop relationships
- give primacy to relationships over actions and outcomes

# Example: COAG Trials 2003-2007

- Difficult to extend lessons stressing
  - Governance within the public service, within Aboriginal communities
  - public service behaviour (“leave egos and money at the door”)
  - Community level facilitation
  - *Deliberative* processes with Aboriginal communities

# Example: purchasing reform

- Difficulty incorporating change when
  - mismatch between budgetary and accountability requirements and complex projects
  - difficulty in managing risk and uncertainty in this context
  - inadequate devolution of decision-making

# Barrier: Bureaucratic politics

Where personalities, power, ideologies intersect.

Example: the COAG trial in Murdi Paaki. ANAO found it to be the most successful.

But no learnings across agencies:  
Differences between FAHCSIA and DEST  
– meant evaluation results were  
downplayed/ignored/labelled

# Barrier: ministerial/bureaucratic politics

- Where interests, cultures and worldviews create a turbulent, risk averse environment

We see this in Defence

- Political priorities of Ministers and governments
- Views of what's needed change
- Media
- Civil/military relationships in Defence

# What facilitates?

- Quality evaluations. Competence is not enough.
- Organisational culture and structure – build in systematic approach to learning
- Respect for experience. A preparedness to challenge fashion
- Recommendations/learnings that fit to the current organisational structure – process ; hierarchical. Not relationships/focusing on the ground/joined up approaches.
- A process to maintain momentum – stakeholders/ public commitments within a stable policy framework based on evidence.
- Long conversations around counter-intuitive/difficult findings.

# So what does this mean for evaluators?

1. Awareness. Don't be naïve. Work in a policy area for a while.
2. Always do quality evaluations - then you can assert expert status.
3. Careful framing of findings
  - Call it – name the expected barrier to the evaluation findings
4. Policy and programs - build up evidence
  - evaluation resources and frameworks
  - administrative data sets
  - public release of findings
5. Set up long conversations to take forward confronting findings – within agency, publicly



# QUESTIONS?