Essays, opinions, and professional judgments are welcome in this section of EP. Forum articles speak to and about the philosophical and ethical dilemmas of our profession. Authors are invited to express their views to encourage constructive dialogue centered on issues. To keep the dialogue substantive, other articles motivated by previous Forum presentations should have independent titles and themes. Items labeled "Comments on . . ." and "Rejoinder to . . ." will not be published in Forum—such responses, and those not of article length or nature, are welcome and encouraged in the In Response section of EP. Standard citations and reference lists should acknowledge and identify earlier contributions and viewpoints. Manuscripts should not exceed 10 double-spaced typewritten pages in length.

The Evaluator as "Personal Coach"

MICHAEL HENDRICKS

Imagine yourself a world-class athlete, perhaps the figure-skating champion Scott Hamilton or Katarina Witt. In your pressure-packed world, you face two critical evaluators: First are the judges, those stoic officials who coolly scrutinize your every movement and impassively score you against other skaters. These impartial critics are the public evaluators of your abilities, and impressing them is essential to your success in figure-skating.

But you also face a second evaluator, one just as knowledgeable, just as conscientious, just as demanding, and certainly just as critical to your success. This evaluator, however, appraises your performance with an entirely different motive in mind. This evaluator assesses you so meticulously only because she cares so deeply that you achieve your fullest potential. This evaluator, of course, is your personal coach.

A good formative evaluator, an evaluator helping projects or programs to become as effective and efficient as possible, behaves remarkably like a good personal coach. Each has the same objective of wanting his client to perform as well as possible. Each operates by working closely with his client while still maintaining objectivity. Finally, each can contribute to his client's success in many, and strikingly similar, ways.
This last point, that evaluators and personal coaches often help their clients in very similar ways, is especially important, but it is not yet thoroughly appreciated either by practicing evaluators or by the evaluation profession in general. As a result, we and our profession have suffered in at least two ways. First, since we do not fully realize our own contributions, we inevitably underestimate the different ways we help our clients. The more we recognize the full range of our contributions, the more we can document our full worth to ourselves and to others.

Second, and much more importantly, by overlooking some of the ways we currently help our clients, we automatically overlook some possibilities for becoming even more useful in the future. Every profession continually explores ways to be more useful, but only in those arenas in which the profession believes it is offering a service. The more we evaluators understand the full variety of ways we contribute, the more we can develop strategies to contribute even more usefully in each of these ways.

**HOW IS A PERSONAL COACH USEFUL?**

In a moment we will explore how a good formative evaluator can contribute to the success of a program manager or policy maker. But first, think for a moment about how a personal coach contributes to figure-skating success. It seems reasonable that your personal coach would help you to:

*Take your skating seriously and appreciate the importance of performing as well as possible.* You are unlikely to invest the time and energy necessary to skate well unless you first believe that skating well is important.

*Understand how others will judge your performance.* Even if fully dedicated, you cannot succeed unless you understand how the judges will grade your performance. What traits in your skating will they mark highly? What aspects will lose you points?

*Develop confidence that you “have what it takes” to perform at high levels.* As a skater you must be absolutely convinced you can perform at world-class levels. If you do not believe in your heart you can compete with the best, you will not.

*Appreciate the need for coaching to reach your potential.* Self-confidence is important, but top-flight coaching is also necessary for top-flight success. Only if you believe your coach is essential to your success will you fully accept her guidance.

*Know exactly how well you perform now.* You cannot improve your skating without a full, realistic understanding of how well you now skate.

*Know what makes for a successful performance.* Your skating will vary, with some performances being better than others. If you understand what makes for a more successful performance, you can build upon your strengths and minimize your weaknesses.

*Willingly consider suggestions for improvement.* In improving your skating, no one expects you to accept each of your coach’s suggestions. It is expected, though, that she will offer her suggestions and that you will listen carefully.
Make the necessary changes in your training and/or performance routine. True, you are not expected to accept every suggestion, but if you accept none of your coach’s suggestions, why have a coach?

Continue to accept coaching even after your skating improves. As your performances improve, you may feel less need for coaching. But you will still need help, both from your current coach and perhaps even from new, specialized coaches.

HOW IS A FORMATIVE EVALUATOR USEFUL?

Having seen the many ways a personal coach is useful, let us now ask whether a good formative evaluator can help his clients in some remarkably similar ways. For example, a good formative evaluator can help a program manager or policy maker to:

Recognize that her program matters and that how well it performs is important. Many programs are important to the lives of their beneficiaries, and we evaluators can prove this point by objectively documenting the pressing needs which will go unmet unless the program performs well (McKillip, 1989). We can also develop historical time-lines to show that the program has been important for a number of years (Office of Evaluation and Inspections, 1990). And, we can analyze opinion polling and current budget information to show that the “public marketplace” supports the effort and that the program’s parent organization has committed valuable resources to the program. As a result, we can help a manager to take her program more seriously.

Clarify a program's criteria for successful performance. A manager must know what high performance means before he can adjust his efforts properly, and we evaluators are increasingly helping to establish success or performance indicators. Wholey (1983,1991) is especially active in this area and his discussions of performance monitoring and evaluability assessment are important. By using logic models and flow charts to specify the inputs, activities, outputs, and impacts of a program and to develop success measures at each step, we can help a manager to define more precisely what he is trying to achieve.

Believe that her program can significantly improve. A program manager needs confidence that her program can improve its performance enough to reach the criteria established above, and we evaluators can boost this confidence in two ways. First, we can cite examples of similar programs which have significantly improved their own performance, along with reasons to expect comparable improvements in this program. Second, we can help the manager to set realistic targets for program improvement and to have faith that these targets can be reached. As a result, we can help a manager to know that realistic, yet impressive, program improvement is within her grasp.

Acknowledge that outside help may be necessary to improve performance. A manager certainly needs the confidence discussed above, but he also needs to acknowledge that outside help may be an essential component toward improvement. In this delicate situation, we evaluators can typically contribute indirectly by arranging for personal testimonials from the manager’s peers. When a manager learns that respected
peers have significantly improved their program’s performance by accepting help from an outside evaluator, the manager becomes more amenable to accepting such help. As a result, we can help a manager to become more willing to seek needed help from expert sources.

Assess objectively her program’s current performance. A manager certainly must understand her current performance levels before she can improve, and it is this contribution, helping managers to “write a report card” of their operations and accomplishments, for which we evaluators are already best known (Rossi & Freeman, 1985). Our reputations are built upon our expertise in conducting descriptive evaluations (“What is happening?”) and normative evaluations (“Compared to what standards?”) which help a manager to understand her current situation much better than she did before.

Understand what makes his program effective. However, a manager also needs to understand what leads to more- vs. less-successful levels of performance, so he can isolate and correct the deficiencies. We evaluators can help in this area by conducting sophisticated cause-and-effect evaluations which study various components of the program and important intervening variables. While the distinction between these rigorous evaluations and basic research is sometimes blurred, both isolate the separate components of a program and help the manager to understand exactly what makes the difference. As a result, we can help a manager to know why his program works.

Consider suggestions for improving her program. It is not easy for a program manager to consider changing her program, even slightly, but one of an evaluator’s most important contributions is to help a manager consider other possible directions. While this dialogue occurs continually between evaluators and clients, it is most evident when we make our formal recommendations (Hendricks, 1984). Most evaluators recognize the importance of offering effective recommendations, although only recently has much formal work been done to develop these skills (Hendricks & Handley, 1990; Hendricks & Papagiannis, 1990). When we develop, present, and follow-up effective recommendations, we can help a manager to develop a broader array of options for the future.

Implement those recommendations which are accepted. A manager will rarely accept all of an evaluator’s recommendations, but he will hopefully accept some, and we evaluators can make an important contribution by helping implement the ones accepted (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973) and by tracking their impacts. Although formal implementation plans are too-rarely developed, our informed insights into the best ways to implement a recommendation are often invaluable. After implementation, we can help track the more obvious impacts of the changes via the various management information systems we help develop. As a result, we can help a manager to change his program in reality, not just in theory, and to track the improvements.

Continue to seek further performance improvements. Even after her program improves, more improvements are always possible, and we evaluators can help continue the improvements by convincing a manager that “excellence is a process, not an outcome” (Peters & Waterman, 1982), and that the proper advisors can help.
Sometimes the manager needs help we cannot provide ourselves, and then we can help by preparing the manager for this possibility, locating another person who can help, and smoothing the transition. If we do these two things, we can help a manager to integrate self-examination and self-improvement more closely into her program and to recognize the value of the proper advisors.

**PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THIS EXPANDED DEFINITION OF UTILIZATION**

We have just seen that a good formative evaluator can, and often does, help a program manager in at least nine different and important ways. A reading of the evaluation literature will verify that some of these ways are currently under-recognized and therefore under-appreciated. By definition, then, listing these nine contributions will expand the traditional definition of evaluation utilization.

But so what? Besides the intellectual exercise of listing the different ways we evaluators can help managers, are there any practical implications of this expanded definition? I believe there are at least two sets of very practical implications. One set for individual practicing evaluators and a second for the evaluation profession in general.

**Implications for practicing evaluators.** Listed below are several implications for practicing evaluators along with my personal suggestions for addressing each implication:

1. A broader array of contributions can only come with a broader vision of our role as formative evaluators. Visualizing ourselves as personal coaches to managers should be useful.
2. This broader role requires skills beyond the technical capacity to measure performance levels. It also requires some minimal facility in budgeting, administration, and management as well as not-inconsiderable interpersonal and negotiating skills. We should recognize the breadth needed in our work and develop ourselves in these additional areas.
3. Many of our potential ways of contributing require a level of trust between ourselves and managers (Patton, 1986). We should therefore, remember the vital importance of this personal aspect and make conscious efforts to develop and maintain a close working relationship with our clients.
4. Developing this personal relationship often takes time. We should therefore strive to develop continuing relationships with managers instead of one-time consultancies.
5. We evaluators can only help with designing programs and monitoring their early implementation if we are involved from the beginning. This
requires a willingness to get our hands dirty when the difficult early steps are being taken.

6. In order to convince indifferent managers that significant improvement is possible, we must be able to share a convincing number of success stories. This requires that we read the evaluation literature regularly and know the successes of our peers.

7. Improvements often flow from specific guidance for action. We evaluators need to overcome any fear that recommendations put pressure on a decision maker. Accept that offering useful recommendations is one of our major responsibilities to our clients. Make this a major focus of our work.

8. Before we can offer effective recommendations, we must first understand the processes of organizational change and be able to work within those opportunities and constraints. This requires a more-than-superficial understanding of the program’s purpose, history, operations, and expectations.

9. There will undoubtedly be times when a manager needs a skill we simply do not possess. To contribute at those times we should know the strengths of other evaluators and other consultants outside our profession. This requires actively developing a network of peers to whom we can make referrals when necessary.

Implications for the evaluation profession. In addition to these implications for practicing evaluators, there are several other implications for the evaluation profession. These implications and my personal suggestions are again listed below:

1. While the evaluation field recognizes that our work can have both instrumental and conceptual uses, we typically discuss utilization largely in terms of the percentage of recommendations accepted. Since this habit may mask some of the important contributions we make, the profession should greatly expand its definition of what it means for an evaluation, especially a formative evaluation, to be useful.

2. Some aspects of this expanded definition imply a definite orientation of evaluators as change agents for programs. The profession should explicitly discuss and accept this role as one important type of contribution we make.

3. In order to contribute in such different ways, we evaluators must develop practical skills in a number of areas currently receiving little attention. We should broaden our university curricula, training programs, and internships to include exposure to budgeting, management, administration, and social and organizational behavior.

4. As an adjunct to expanded educational and training programs, the evaluation profession should greatly intensify its efforts to develop links with
other disciplines. For example, the accounting profession’s management advisory services are very similar to formative evaluations, and we evaluators should develop more structured ways to learn from their experiences and those of others doing evaluative work.

5. Finally, the diverse contributions we evaluators make to administrators are extremely dependent on the unique situations in which we operate. The profession should think very carefully before adopting unnecessarily rigid standards for the practice of such a fluid process.

CONCLUSION

Evaluators, especially formative evaluators, are helping managers to improve their program performances in many different ways, and some of these contributions are being overlooked by both practicing evaluators and by the evaluation profession. By more fully recognizing these contributions, we can better document our worth and, much more importantly, develop additional ways to become even more useful in the future. If we consider seriously the practical implications suggested here, we will go far toward making these larger contributions.

REFERENCES


