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Understanding Learning Agendas and Performance Management

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Understanding Learning Agendas and Performance Management

The recent report of the Evidence-based Policymaking Commission strongly recommends that agencies use learning agendas for evaluation plans to build the base of evidence that can be used to make program and government decisions. Learning agendas can serve as a useful approach to developing and implementing a strategic approach to rigorous empirical research about "what works" and what works "best." While their purpose is to systematically plan evaluation activities, learning agendas can also include research and analysis relevant to a range of other evidence activities, including statistical analysis of program performance measures and factors associated with performance.

Performance Management vs. Program Evaluation

Program evaluation and performance management are closely linked, but each serves a unique purpose. The unique roles thus typically require the two sets of activities to be organizationally separate. The overlapping roles, however, require that they coordinate to build evidence that can be used to improve program results.

Performance measurement is a management function performed by agency and program administrators and staff. A performance management system uses program reporting data to analyze activities, outputs, and outcomes on a regular basis. Well-designed performance management systems set realistic, but ideally ambitious, goals and targets that are tracked routinely and regularly, using information and data technology tools. The results are generally posted in the organization using dashboards and other visualization methods, and usually are discussed in strategic management meetings.

Program evaluations, in contrast, are formal empirical studies using academic methodologies. Evaluations are conducted periodically to address specific questions, particularly those related to outcomes and impacts. Evaluations use a variety of data, which sometimes includes program data, depending on the research question. Other data, such as statistical data from statistical agencies, surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and observations may also be collected for the evaluation. In keeping with professional standards and principles, evaluations are typically conducted by independent third-party researchers, outside the agency and usually outside the government. A variety of methodologies may be used, with the strongest studies designed to determine statistical causality. For example, the most precise design to estimate net impact, meaning what would have happened without the intervention being evaluation, involves comparing outcomes for a treatment group that receives the service or program being studied, to a group that does not receive the services (either a control group using random assignment or a matched comparison group). Another type of impact evaluation might compare outcomes for two different treatment groups that receive different types of services.

Thus, performance analysis and program evaluation provide different types of evidence about the results of programs and services. Evaluations are typically done by outside third-party researchers; use a variety of data sources, determined based on the study question; and often estimate net impacts—what would happen without the intervention--that is compared to a counterfactual. Performance management is done in-house, uses administrative program data,

and tracks progress towards management goals and objectives that managers and staff can use, ideally in real time, but without a counterfactual comparison.

Performance Management in Learning Agendas

Since performance management and program evaluation each produce information about the results of programs, it can be useful to include some performance-relevant analysis in an agency's learning agenda, complementing the regular and ongoing performance management analysis conducted by the performance management staff. The U.S. Department of Labor has a comprehensive learning agenda process which provides an example of the types of performance-related studies that can be incorporated into an agency's learning agenda.

The Department of Labor's Chief Evaluation Officer coordinates the learning agenda process. In collaboration with evaluation specialists in the Chief Evaluation Office (CEO), each operating agency in the department prepares an annual learning agency that reflects their priority research topics and questions, including studies that are related to performance measures and outcomes that could provide evidence about how to improve performance:

> "Agency Learning Agendas identify priorities for evaluations that can help agencies measure their effectiveness, their progress towards goals and outcomes, continuous improvement, and, in some cases, meet Congressional requirements for reports and evaluations. Evaluations focus on program performance and outcomes, measuring the impacts of core programs and services, evaluating new programs and initiatives, and testing the relative effectiveness of alternative program practices, using the most rigorous methodologies possible."[1]

In fact, evaluations contribute evidence that feeds into the performance management process. For example, among the studies initiated by the Chief Evaluation Officer are several that address performance measures and measurement, such as:

- *Collaborative logic model projects* with agency staff to develop or refine formal performance measures, particularly to support the development of outcome measures rather than focusing only on outputs.

- *Analysis of factors (e.g., activities or outputs) associated with outcome measures* to consider definitional refinements or new measures to more fully capture performance. In one study, management data from workers' compensation programs were analyzed to identify factors associated with the rate at which individuals return to work after receiving compensation payments because of a work-related injury. Another CEO study analyzed performance metrics capturing the extent to which local programs are providing statutorily required priority services to veterans and their spouses.

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[1] *Federal Register,* January 8, 2016. US Department of Labor, Chief Evaluation Officer, Evaluation Plan 2016 https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/01/08/2016-00170/request-for-information-comment-request-department-of-labor-research-and-evaluation-plan-for-2016

- *Statistical analysis of the employment results for particular subgroups* such as women, ethnic minorities, and veterans returning from active duty.

- *Statistical analysis and program assessments to inform the development of potential new measures*, such as an assessment of alternative metrics for employer services performance measures, as required under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

The Performance Management Center leads the Labor Department's performance management activities, but the CEO coordinates with the Center in several ways. Rigorous evaluations help policy makers and administrators understand why public programs may or may not be meeting their goals, the relative effectiveness of different strategies to achieve goals, and how informed evidence can help identify what needs to change to improve results. Through quarterly review meetings, with the deputy secretary, required by the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) the heads of sub-agencies discuss their agency's performance progress compared to previously established targets. The Chief Evaluation Officer participates in every quarterly performance meeting, providing input as needed on ongoing studies, summarizing results of analysis that has bearing on measures being discussed, or identifying potential future performance-related studies that might be initiated.

The culture of evidence that has grown at the Department in part reflects the active, empirically based, and comprehensive program of research and evaluation, consciously linked to management and operations through strategic planning and performance management. In addition to initiating formal impact evaluations using experimental and non-experimental designs and rigorous implementation evaluations, the learning agendas include (usually statistical) analysis conducted by outside independent researchers that informs the performance management process and contribute to continuous improvement.