



BOOK REVIEW

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Evaluation in Organizations: A Systematic Approach to Enhancing Learning, Performance, and Change

Darlene Russ-Eft and Hallie Preskill
(Perseus Books, Cambridge, MA; 2001;
ISBN 0-7382-0268-1) \$50

REVIEWED BY GREG LATEMORE CMC

Evaluation, say authors Darlene Russ-Eft and Hallie Preskill, has probably been around since the beginning of the human race, but as a planned, formal, and professional practice it is a recent phenomenon. Evaluation means different things to different people, and it is related to but not the same as research. Research develops new knowledge and seeks new theories, and the topic is often determined by the researcher; while evaluation exists to provide information, seeks to describe particular phenomena, and is often undertaken at the behest of a client.

This book lives up to its subtitle by providing a systematic approach to evaluation and assessment in organizations. There are 16 chapters in three parts—Background and Context of Evaluation; Designing and Developing Evaluation; and Maximizing Evaluation Use. All this is summarized as a one-page diagram that is cleverly used to begin each chapter. The main topics are the history of evaluation and how the concept evolved, the politics and ethics of evaluation, methods of data collection, analysis and sampling, hints on testing a program's validity, and tips on integrating and using the findings. There is a comprehensive index, and 13 pages of references, most of

them quite current. The number of figures and summary tables is impressive and helps somewhat to make the text come alive.

It takes 36 pages to get to it, but *evaluation* is finally defined as “a systematic process; a planned and purposeful activity; a mechanism for collecting data on questions or issues; a process for enhancing knowledge and decision making; a means of judging the evaluand's merit, worth or value; [and] not the same as research.” About that word *evaluand*: This is the object of the evaluation, or what is actually being evaluated. The evaluand may be a program, an initiative, a process, a product, a service, or a person. For those used to evaluation only in training or consulting, this application and understanding widens the agenda considerably.

The purpose of evaluation is to gain information before a program's development, to improve a program, and/or to make a final judgment about a program. In other words, evaluation may be developmental (it begins with needs), formative (it is conducted during), or summative (it is conducted at the end)—or any combination of these. In any case, the intent should be to get results that can be used—an outcomes approach to ensure quality, to contribute to increased organizational knowledge, and/or to help prioritize resources.

Evaluation is usually neglected because no one asks for it, or previous experience with evaluation was a disaster or disappointment, or organizational leaders think they already know what does and does not work.

I found the introductory overview of what evaluation is and is not to be

impressive. The history of evaluation is well done and broadens our understanding of evaluation itself. The last part of the book recognizes the organizational realities of evaluation—for example, the focus on wisely selling an evaluation and the need for high-integrity work. That is, the *what* and the *why* of evaluation, and the importance of selling evaluation, are well presented.

It was also a pleasure to see some of the greats in training evaluation cited and cleverly critiqued—for example, Hamblin, Kirkpatrick, and Brinkerhoff. Surprisingly, however, Fitz-Enz is absent.

Another plus is that the authors do not merely provide a description of their instrument, “Readiness for Organizational Learning and Evaluation,” and some mean scores, they actually provide a copy of the instrument itself. That's unusual. More typically, authors just tease us with descriptions and intriguing claims, but don't let us see the tests they promote.

Overall, the main commendation for this text is the quality of the research behind the writing. The credibility and experience of the authors really show.

I do have one major concern. The book could and should have been made more accessible and easier to read. Simply put, the quality of the content is often obscured by too many words. Admittedly, the one-page overview repeated throughout, the end-of-chapter summaries, and the numerous tables, figures, and case studies help the reader understand this complex subject. However, this book needed more introductory objectives, more subheadings, and some summary do's and don'ts. After all,

not all interested readers are free to wade through pages and pages of text to glean the key points.

For project and program managers, strategic planners, and specialists in learning and development, compensation, occupational health and safety, human resources, and the like, this book provides a careful and scholarly analysis of the complex topic of evaluation in organizations. For the serious reader, what it lacks in accessibility is well compensated for by quality content and research-based evidence.

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