

The Board's Role in Program Evaluation Capacity for Nonprofit Human Service Organizations

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Abstract

The increasing call for accountability combined with increasing competition for resources has given program evaluation more importance, prominence and attention within the United States nonprofit sector. As a result, some scholars indicate that the demand for program evaluation is growing (Carman, 2007; Fitzpatrick, Sanders & Worthen, 2004; Hudson, 2005; Newcomer, Hatry & Wholey; 2004). Nonprofit organizations face the challenge of responding to the *external pull* from funders, government agencies and accrediting bodies while developing an intrinsically motivated *internal push* to build long-term capacity to evaluate their programs. Evaluation's presence in the nonprofit management literature has grown in the last decade (Braverman, Constantine & Slater, eds., 2004; Gray, 1995; Hoefler, 2000; Mesch & McClelland, 2006; Paddock, 2001; Thomas, 2005; United Way of America, 1996); however the topic of evaluation capacity building (ECB) has only recently and sparsely been discussed. Evaluation capacity is defined as "...human capital (skills, knowledge, experience, etc.) and financial/material resources..." that are necessary for the practice of evaluation (Boyle & Lemaire, 1999, p. 5) while ECB is defined as "the intentional work to continuously create and sustain overall organizational processes that make quality evaluation and its uses routine" (Baizerman, Compton & Stockdill, 2002, p. 1).

A nonprofit's stakeholders that have an interest in program evaluation, regardless of motivation, require a comprehensive understanding of evaluation capacity in order to understand their role in ECB. One important group of stakeholders is the board of directors, a group of volunteers fiscally and legally responsible for the organization (Block, 2001; O'Connell, 2003). The board is accountable for ensuring the organization is effectively managed and working towards achieving its mission, and for fulfilling their *duty of obedience*, *duty of care* and *duty of loyalty* (Axelrod, 2005; Block, 2001; Burgess, 1993). This study seeks to understand how the capacity to evaluate nonprofit human service programs is impacted by the role of the board. Within their role, how do board members view program evaluation as part of their responsibilities and what motivates the board to engage in and/or support program evaluation?

How do their motivations impact evaluation capacity? What specific actions have boards taken to contribute to their organization's efforts in ECB?

One-on-one, qualitative interviews conducted with 20 board chairs from nonprofit human service organizations (NHSOs) and two case studies of NHSOs effectively engaging in ECB provide insight into the impact of the board's role on ECB. The results reveal a variance among the board chairs' understanding of program evaluation as a concept and process, and between them and other stakeholder groups such as their executive directors and program staff. Second, the board chairs emphasized and prioritized their roles around financial management and characterized program evaluation as a responsibility of the staff. Third, the organizations that effectively engaged in ECB had board participation in the process at some level. These exploratory results indicate that until board members become educated on program evaluation, recognize it as part of their responsibilities, and realize its importance as a policy and management tool, they are likely to not engage in ECB and instead leave it to their ED and staff.

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