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Organizational Resistance to Evaluative Reflection and Learning

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a meta-analysis of six multi-year evaluations of complex community initiatives conducted by the author. The focus is on understanding how the goal of creating learning communities was frustrated (to greater or lesser degrees) in each case. While some of the barriers and resistance encountered can be explained in terms of the existing literature on organizational resistance to inquiry, our meta-analysis suggests a deeper and more troubling dynamic at work. The initiatives we have evaluated were characteristically episodic and their sponsors and our key evaluation contacts more often than not had left their jobs by the time our evaluations were complete. The data suggests that the organizational underpinnings that support evaluative learning are being eroded by a changing culture in which short-term thinking and job churning have replaced experience-based craftsmanship and institutional loyalty as the dominant norms. We discuss the implications of these trends for evaluation practice.

Organizational Resistance to Evaluative Reflection and Learning

Evaluators take pride in seeing things as they really are and providing truthful feedback. Ideally, this feedback facilitates reflective learning and more enlightened choices about future directions. As evaluators who are also adult educators and community developers, we have a special interest in conducting evaluations in a manner that creates “learning communities” (North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, 1997; Mezirow, 2000) and “reflective practitioners” (Forester, 1999). The mark of these communities is the presence of citizens and organizational leaders who can test reality, suspend judgment, deliberate on experience, seek out relevant information, and develop strategies that are sensitive to the community context. Yet our experiences in conducting reflective evaluations in a variety of organizational and community settings have fallen far short of this ambition.

In this article we analyze the role of organizational dynamics in creating barriers and resistance to learning. Our data comes from a self-reflective examination of six multi-year evaluations of complex community initiatives led by the author over the past decade. The evaluated projects or initiatives vary considerably in their settings (rural/urban), scope (dollars and duration), focus (civic engagement, healthy communities, welfare reform school attendance, workforce development, youth development), and contractual sponsor (state agencies; community based organization; private foundations). What is consistent across the six cases is our oft-frustrated intention to relate to project stakeholders in a way that facilitated organizational learning and improvement.

Background

For the past decade the author, a political scientist, has teamed with a variety of colleagues to evaluate collaborative community development initiatives sponsored by public, nonprofit and private organizations. The evaluations were conducted under the auspices of the California Communities Program, a statewide program of the University of California Cooperative

Extension, an organization rooted in a desire to develop and deepen the practice of democratic citizenship through various methods of adult learning (Peters, 1996).

In seeking evaluation projects, the author looked for opportunities to better understand three recent trends in American political life that have heightened interest in the processes of community self-governance. The first is *policy devolution*—the idea that government programs are more effective and more engaging of citizen energy and allegiance if they are designed and managed at the local level. The second is the move to *reinvent government*—the attempt to turn isolated bureaucratic programs into results-oriented integrated service partnerships between government, business, nonprofit organizations, and other elements of local civil society. The third is a growing *regional awareness*—the realization that local governments must learn to plan and act cooperatively if they are to thrive in the new global economy and care for what is unique in their heritage and place.

A wave of innovation and experimentation in community settings has accompanied these trends. Government or foundation funding is driving much of the new experimentation, and funded projects frequently take the form of what are called complex community initiatives (Connell et.al., 1995). As a university-based program with interests in collaborative community processes and expertise in evaluation, our evaluation services have been solicited by a number of project leaders. Even if we had wanted to do so, it would have been very difficult to impose a single mold on the six evaluations described in this article. Nevertheless, we brought to each evaluation a few general ideas about what we wanted to achieve that were independent of the expectations of the funders or project participants.

The goal of creating learning communities integrates a range of purposes and activities drawn from various schools of evaluation thought and practice. With Patton (1997), we believe that the ultimate test of evaluation is its validity and usefulness to project leaders, and its ability to build their capacity to undertake new initiatives. At the same time, we try to be “truth tellers,” collecting and presenting information on assumptions and performance (operations, management, accomplishment, costs, ethics), even when those findings are not what stakeholders want to hear (Scriven, 1993; Stake, 2000).

Much of our work with local actors involves helping them develop a broader perspective on the meaning of their work, and an ability to see it in light of the bigger picture of political and social trends. We are especially concerned with encouraging stakeholders to view their activities from a community development perspective, as opposed to the more narrow legal or managerial mindsets that often predominate in bureaucratic organizations. For example, we stress the talents and intelligence of ordinary people, rather than exclusive reliance on experts; mixed strategies rather than single approaches; and long time horizons rather than a fixation on the immediate bottom-line. Our hope is that reflective evaluation will create public space in which these qualities are present, with resulting increases in the community's ability to draw on diverse individuals to accomplish public work that solves common problems or realizes joint aspirations (Boyte, 1996).

We share with the action research paradigm (Argyris, 1992, p. 432) the inclination to take our cues about the important questions, puzzles and problems from the perceptions of practitioners within the local practice context. We are less inclined, however, to promote specific system changes through our own interventions. Similarly, we share with the participatory action research paradigm a desire for equipping local players—particularly the “lesser heard voices”—with new critical skills and capacities, and a greater sense of voice. At the same time, both our contractual obligations and our sense of professionalism have led us to retain primary control over the design and implementation of the evaluations. We try our best to minimize jargon and other unnecessary professional trappings, modeling open inquiry about difficult issues and treating all participants, regardless of status or standing in the community, with equal dignity and respect.

Meta-Analysis Strategy

For this analysis, we have treated each of the six evaluations as a case of “failed learning” and looked across the six cases to see if there are any common themes and patterns that help explain this failure. Our focus is on central evaluation findings and the key learning opportunity they present, rather than on a more comprehensive review of a variety of learning opportunities that presented themselves over the course of each evaluation.

We should make it clear at the outset that in all of the cases we describe positive learning and reflection did occur. It would be unfair to either us or the evaluation stakeholders to characterize the cases only as missed opportunities. However, in each case we were frustrated just at the moment when our findings seemed to cohere in a way that could inform future action. We focus on failures in this analysis not because it is the only possibly focus in these six cases but because it is the best way to raise issues that might clarify evaluation practice.

In identifying the failures in each case, we rely solely on our own subjective judgments based on our deep involvement. We have no way of verifying whether those judgments would be shared by a disinterested observer or by the various stakeholders to each evaluation. On the other hand, a disinterested observer would not necessarily have access to the type of clarity that comes from first-hand experience of frustration. In a sense, our work in this paper amounts to an effort to self-evaluate our own practice, and thus brings with it all the respective strengths and weaknesses of a participatory approach to evaluation.

We begin in the next section by presenting brief summaries of the six cases, focusing on the failed learning opportunities. The following section examines the case vignettes to identify common themes or patterns across cases. The discussion and conclusion draw out the implications of these themes for evaluation practice.

Resistance to Learning in Six Evaluations

We have organized the six case vignettes in chronological order. For each case we describe, in a highly condensed fashion, 1) the nature of the project or program evaluated and the sponsor/funder of the evaluation; 2) the nature of the learning opportunity we perceived; and 3) our understanding of the most important barriers or sources of resistance to learning that we encountered. Table 1 summarizes the key data.

[insert table 1 near here]

The Merced County Attendance Project (MerCAP; 1997-2000)

In the summer of 1997 we entered into a 3-year, \$300,000 contract with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to evaluate the Merced County Attendance Project (MerCAP). A joint project of the Merced County Human Services Agency (HSA) and Merced County Schools, MerCAP sought to improve the attendance of students receiving welfare case assistance (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, TANF). The setting for the project was an agriculturally dependent Central Valley county known for high rates of poverty. The program used attendance monitoring, communication with parents, corrective action plans, and a financial sanction to encourage attendance in children ages 6-15. The theory was that early intervention would reduce absenteeism that contributes to lack of school success, poor preparation for work, and future welfare dependency. Under MerCAP, failure of TANF children to attend school full-time results in a fiscal sanction that reduces the family's cash assistance by the amount for that child for a minimum of one month.

In most respects, this was a standard summative program evaluation, and the big question was whether the sanction threat had the effect of improving attendance. From our very earliest data runs to our final report, it was clear that the program was having a minimal effect at best on improving TANF student attendance (Campbell and Wright, 2005). When we shared these findings and highlighted mistaken assumptions (e.g. the fundamental assumption that attendance of welfare students was lower than that of non-welfare students), we saw little evidence that local officials were interested in altering the program to be more effective in meeting its goals.

Our greatest frustration was our perception that we made little dent in the basic legalistic paradigm with which welfare and school officials often operate. Despite repeated efforts and concrete suggestions over three years, they never really experimented with approaches that a community development frame of reference would suggest. For example, no one took us up on our recommendation to employ a revised program approach that would treat attendance issues as an early warning signal that would trigger some form of social service intervention aimed at solving the problem. Nor did they follow up on our advice to hold a community forum to elicit the support of citizens and community based organizations for MerCAP goals. Program

developers acknowledged the limitations of their approaches, but seemed content to adapt MerCAP to existing routines rather than use it to experiment with new directions. This seemed particularly shortsighted to us in the context of welfare reform's emphasis on inter-agency and community partnerships.

At first we struggled to explain the local resistance to our evaluation findings and recommendations. The only immediate explanation we could postulate was the fact that the program was having a positive effect on a few of the kids in schools with the most egregious attendance problems, kids who were very visible to school personnel even though they constituted a small part of the target population. But this didn't explain why local welfare officials continued to embrace the program given evidence that—on aggregate—it was not making much difference and was quite costly to implement.

Our understanding deepened when we realized the role MerCAP played in the organizational identity of the Merced welfare department. Among their state colleagues, including Department of Social Service officials and peers who were members of the California Welfare Director's Association, Merced County had long been known more for its persistently low ratings on social indicators than for cutting edge programs. MerCAP provided welfare department officials with a chance to be identified with a cutting edge program. They were motivated to emphasize the positive findings of the evaluation and downplay failures—always a tendency, but accentuated in this case.

At the state level, MerCAP represented just one of over 20 demonstration projects being conducted in the post-welfare reform era, reducing the chance it would have a high profile. The state official with whom we negotiated our contract left the agency before the evaluation was complete and we subsequently experienced significant turnover in our key evaluation contacts.

The Lassen County Healthy Community Project (1997-1999)

In the fall of 1997, we contracted with the Community Planning and Advisory Council (ComPAC) of Lassen County for a two-year, \$43,000 evaluation of their project to develop a

"healthy community." Lassen County is a remote, rural region in northeastern California, with one of the smallest county populations in the state. At the time of the evaluation, about one-third of the population was employed or incarcerated in two large state prisons. The project, funded by the California Endowment, involved initiating a set of healthy community initiatives to promote strong families, quality education, holistic health, a sense of community, civic infrastructure, environmental protection, and economic opportunities. The California Endowment required the evaluation, but left it up to ComPAC to hire the evaluator and specify its design and purpose.

In Lassen, we had perhaps the best chance at practicing evaluation in the manner we hoped for, given the hands-off stance of the funders and our ability to negotiate a tailored evaluation plan up front. What stymied us in that case was the presence of local implementation staff for whom the project felt overwhelming, and who thus brought with them a high degree of anxiety that inhibited reflection and learning. In particular, it tended to cause them to focus in a quite literal way on meeting the goals set out in the original proposal, rather than adapting to what was learned along the way. Over the two-years of this evaluation, the new nonprofit entity went through three executive directors.

The most significant missed opportunity, from our perspective, was the chance to focus the organization's energies by framing and then choosing among three future directions for the organization. These directions emerged when our interviews revealed substantial differences in how stakeholders viewed the organization's mission. Some wanted ComPAC to focus on engaging ordinary citizens, others wanted it to be a community planning council, and still others wanted it to be a spark plug for community action projects. In one of our interim reports, we sought to bring these alternative visions to the surface, attempting to respect the different opinions while noting the strengths and limitations of each alternative. When the report did not spark action by project staff, we volunteered to lead a community forum to look at the three options, reminding stakeholders of the need to focus their limited energies by choosing among these options. While the forum succeeded in selecting the community planning option, we subsequently observed little evidence that the choice was actually guiding ComPAC's activities.

The Prop 10 Civic Engagement Project for Children and Families (1999-2002)

From October 1999 through June 2002, we contracted for \$99,800 with five private foundations to evaluate the Civic Engagement Project for Children and Families (CEP), a collaborative initiative between foundations, civic organizations, and the University of California (Campbell and Wright, 2004). In November 1998 California voters had approved Proposition 10, which placed a new 50 cents per pack tax on cigarettes. The funds generated by the tax are designated for programs and services that benefit children ages 0-5, including the areas of childcare, health, and parent education. Tax funds are distributed proportionally to each of the state's 58 counties based on their birth rate, and local Children and Families Commissions make decisions on how best to use the funding.

For counties, Prop 10 provided a rare opportunity to receive relatively large amounts of discretionary funding that can be used to support locally designed programs. For a group of private foundations interested in developing a project to link ordinary citizens with elite decision makers in developing public policy, it provided a setting in which to test the potential and limits of the concepts of public dialogue. CEP sought to enhance the involvement of the public in the work of eight local commissions, particularly lesser-heard voices.

The funders themselves embraced the idea of “inquiry” as a basic mode of operation within CEP. On the other hand, the Prop 10 work in the counties was both highly visible and politically charged, creating an environment in which the value of open-ended inquiry was challenged by the needs for individuals and organizations to protect their interests and advance their reputations. In general, the pressing workload and pressure-packed visibility of staff work at the county level was out of sync with our efforts to promote suspended judgment and critical reflection. The tendency was to want to celebrate the good work of reaching out to minorities and non-English speakers, without carefully scrutinizing the meaning or value of the resulting encounters, particularly the key question of whether their civic engagement activities were actually influencing the policy decisions of local commissions.

When we questioned the policy impact of the project in our initial report, we hoped it would provide an occasion to rethink basic strategies and promote discussion of viable alternatives. Instead, local staff reacted defensively, the original project coordinator resigned, and the sponsoring foundations appeared more interested in creating promotional materials related to the project than to discussing the implications of project shortcomings.

Under pressure from local staff wanting sponsoring foundations to provide more support for their own local evaluation needs, project staff sought to recast the nature of the evaluation. We disagreed with their new directions, but our original champions on the foundation boards were no longer directly engaged with the project, which was moving beyond its original two-year term to a third year of funding. Rather than force the issue, we decided to discontinue our involvement at the end of our originally contracted period, which enabled the project staff to hire a new evaluator that was equipped to meet the local evaluation capacity building needs.

California Community and Faith-based Initiative (2002-2005)

From 2002-2005 we evaluated the California Community and Faith-based Initiative under a \$304,362 contract with the state Employment Development Department. With the backing of governor Gray Davis and funding from the state legislature in FY 2000-01, the California Health and Human Services Agency directed the state Employment Development Department to establish a competitive grant process to solicit proposals from established 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations. The department's special projects division managed the Community and Faith-based Initiative as a demonstration program with two public goals: 1) to expand access to workforce development services among hard-to-employ populations, including the homeless, ex-offenders, recovering substance abusers, emancipated foster care youth, refugees and new immigrants, abused women, mental health clients, and autistic youth; and 2) to build the capacity of participating community and faith-related organizations to function effectively as government partners.

Our evaluation found many positive outcomes: program participants gained greater access to services; grantee organizations developed new capacity and community legitimacy; state

program managers rated all but a handful of the participating community and faith-related organizations as effective partners; and grantees credited state staff with a quick and effective response to their problems and capacity building needs (Campbell and Lemp, 2007). On the other hand, a survey conducted at the end of the initiative made it apparent that these benefits would be fleeting since few of the funded organizations sustained their workforce programs after the initiative ended. We used this data to call into question the dominant approach to funding faith-based initiatives, which parachutes funding into isolated organizations from federal or state governments, without much attention to the local context. We argued instead for an approach that emphasizes local network development and that works to integrate a broad range of community and faith-related organizations into the existing service delivery network.

Although our work may have some broader influence on the field, circumstances rendered it beside the point for state officials. During the project, state officials were most concerned with the potential for political embarrassment arising from church-state issues or other grantee misconduct. At public gatherings we were told to stress positive findings rather than tensions or difficulties being encountered, lest initiative funding be threatened. With the recall of Governor Davis in late 2004, CFBI's administrative Champions left power, and the Schwarzenegger administration chose not to renew CFBI. In addition, none of the top-level state officials with whom we negotiated our original evaluation contract remained in state employment by the time our final evaluation report was completed.

California Workforce Development System (2004-2007)

This three-year evaluation (\$408,000) was broader in scope than the others. The California Workforce Investment Board contracted with us to evaluate the implementation of the Workforce Investment Act (1998) in the state, an evaluation required by the federal Department of Labor. We designed an implementation study built around case studies of implementation in 10 of the state's 50 local workforce investment areas (Campbell, et. al., 2006).

Local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) are recipients of formula funds allocated under the terms of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. Although the federal legislation envisioned that

these boards would play a strong leadership role in directing and coordinating service delivery in local workforce networks, an evaluation of local area implementation in California (Campbell et.al., 2006, p. 7) found that they struggle against severe constraints, including:

- the steady decline in federal funding for workforce programs;
- the lingering perception of some that workforce development is “just another welfare program,” making it hard for many WIBs to attract and retain the required business majority;
- the fact that WIA dollars come with tight restrictions that limit the ability and authority of local managers (or elected officials) to exercise discretion;
- regulatory compliance and reporting requirements that force a preoccupation with routine program oversight functions at the expense of strategic policy development, system alignment, and coalition-building;
- competition from other local centers of leadership; and
- a policy mission that has not traditionally aroused civic or political passion and interest.

Reflecting on these findings, we wrote a final report recommending that the state alter its basic stance toward local areas. We suggested that state officials should move away from seeing themselves as the regulatory and oversight arm of the federal government—there to prevent misuse of federal funds—and instead consider itself as a support structure designed to facilitate and support the outcome-oriented plans and activities of local areas. We provided a number of specific suggestions of how the state might adopt up-to-date management strategies that deemphasize top-down controls and instead empower personnel at all levels of the system.

Key state officials disagreed with the direction of the recommended changes, fearing that greater local autonomy would lead to a repeat of the types of scandals that have plagued job training programs in the past. While these officials did not succeed in altering our report, they did all they could to give it a low profile, twice cancelling our scheduled presentations to the state workforce board. Since our original champions on the staff of the state board had left the agency during the evaluation, we had to rely on local workforce officials and their state representatives as the

primary supporters for our evaluation. Unfortunately, the needed changes required state level action, over which the local actors had limited control.

REACH Community Action Initiative (2007-2010)

Our most recent evaluation is under a three and one-half year, \$375,000 contract with the Sierra Health Foundation to assess the REACH community action initiative. The Foundation is providing almost \$8 million to support youth development in the greater Sacramento region with approximately \$4.6 million going to seven community coalitions. The goals are to build community capacity and conditions for change and to implement strategies that increase meaningful supports and opportunities for youth ages 10-15, leading to positive youth development. Youth engagement is a key principle guiding the initiative and the local coalitions are actively working to involve youth directly in their planning processes and community change strategies.

At this time, we have yet to issue our first interim evaluation report, so in one sense it is too early to reflect on the learning opportunities provided by this evaluation and ways in which they may be frustrated. However, a couple of observations can already be made. First, both the executive director and program officer positions at the foundation have turned over since the time we were hired. The new executive director has been eager to put his own stamp on the foundation activities, and while he is committed to the youth development field, the direction this commitment might take is unknown. Second, we have learned that the board will be making decisions about whether the REACH initiative will be continued, altered, or discontinued long before they have access to our final evaluation report. While we hope that our interim report will inform these decisions, the report will be based on just over a year's worth of data, thus limiting our ability to assess findings and make recommendations.

Evidence About Barriers Or Sources Of Resistance To Learning

Across these six cases we note four common themes that recur frequently: 1) the episodic nature of most initiatives or projects, such that ongoing learning is less salient; 2) high levels of

turnover in key personnel, such that few of those who help design and/or champion the evaluation are around when it is complete; 3) anxiety and fears rooted in the vulnerability of key personnel to potential embarrassment and related threats to their job status and security; and 4) key personnel swamped with everyday demands and stresses and thus less able to engage in constructive deliberation prompted by evaluation findings.

Episodic nature of many initiatives

Developmental evaluation that seeks to promote learning makes sense where there is a medium to long-term commitment to pursuing an initiative, program or course of action. In many of these six cases this condition did not hold, despite hopeful indications at the time the evaluation contract was being negotiated. Government demonstration programs are thought of as incubators for learning, but the two we evaluated were pet projects of particular politicians who were less interested in long-term learning than in short-term public relations. Foundations have the freedom to change course quickly. In both of our foundation funded initiatives there were significant changes made or contemplated well before evaluation data on current programs were available to inform decisions.

Turnover in key personnel

Even if initiatives are sustained, key personnel that are the audience for the evaluation often depart. In not a single one of the six evaluations was the person responsible for hiring us still employed by the sponsoring organization at the time our report was completed. Quite often there was significant turnover not just in our key organizational contact but in a number of evaluation stakeholders spread out across many different organizations. Often, by the close of the project or initiative, we found ourselves to have more history and background with the project than any of the personnel at the sponsoring agency. In some cases we found it difficult to find any current organizational representatives with an interest in learning from our findings, despite the significant investments that had been made in the evaluation.

Anxiety and fears

Not too surprisingly, we find that many stakeholders harbors fears and anxieties about our evaluations, despite our efforts to frame them as an opportunity to learn. The presence of significant evaluation-induced anxiety is constant across all six cases, but takes a variety of specific forms. In cases where initiatives are tied to particular politicians, the chance to learn from errors pales in significance against the potential for political embarrassment. In cases where key implementers are funded with grant funds, they have every reason to fear whether an evaluation will cost them their jobs. Less sophisticated grantees often fear that the evaluation may expose their lack of competence or at best present options for future activities that they feel unable to implement effectively. We found it relatively rare to encounter individuals who felt secure enough to treat their work experimentally, expecting some failure and hoping to learn from it for the future.

Implementers overwhelmed by project and/or by other demands

Getting key stakeholders to even attend to our evaluations was difficult. We found that regardless of the sponsoring agency—government, foundation, or community-based nonprofit—most project personnel exist in a near constant state of busyness. Juggling multiple demands and managing complex network relationships, they have little reflective space to deliberate about the meaning and implications of evaluation findings. In complex initiatives involving a wide range of network actors, it can be easy for reflective learning via formal evaluation to take a back seat to more immediate demands. This is particularly true in collaborative projects in which no particular actor may feel directly accountable for the overall results, as opposed to a more traditional program evaluation setting where lines of authority and accountability are more clear cut and the evaluation is more likely to address itself to what individual actors can or should do.

Discussion

We want to interpret the findings of our meta-analyses using three lenses. The first two draw heavily on the received wisdom in the fields of organizational development and management.

The third, somewhat more speculative, uses the recent work of Richard Sennett (2006) on changes in the culture of cutting edge organizations brought on by what he calls “the new capitalism.”

Organizational resistance to inquiry

There is a substantial literature (Argyris, 1992) arguing that the spirit of inquiry researchers idealize is inherently in tension with the characteristic ways in which organizations teach people to not be open, not take risks, and not trust, lest organizational or individual survival be threatened. This is one potent way of explaining why a continuous learning thrust fails, despite the best efforts of evaluators. It certainly explains some of the anxiety and defensiveness we encountered in our work and reminds us that organizational stakeholders are not always likely to be as interested in disinterested truth-telling as we are.

In our CEP evaluation, we came face to face with the folly of this notion as we have interacted with executive directors of the local Prop 10 commissions. These directors serve at the discretion of their commissions, and have good reason to be threatened when our reports on interviews with commissioners convey their displeasure with certain staff directions. To expect the directors to read these in a spirit of “here’s the raw data, now what do you make of this?” is asking a lot. This does not mean that the information is not potentially useful to them. Rather, in managing our relationship with them, we need to be aware of these sensitivities and take additional steps to create a safe space for reflection.

In a very basic way, our essential naiveté was in presuming that the people we were relating to in the various cases really wanted to learn. Instead, we came to understand that what they really wanted was to adapt and survive as an organization without major changes, or to build a new organization in a way that was comfortable rather than requiring a great deal of stretching. This reality would come as no surprise to students of organizational development, but we failed to give it a proper place within our working field of vision.

Managerial Leadership as Key to Organizational Learning

There is another sense in which our work on these three evaluations was not sufficiently informed by the literatures on organizational development and organizational learning (Argyris, 1992; Belasen, 2000; Senge, 1999; Starkey, 1996). In these six evaluations, two focused on brand new organizations (ComPAC, the county Prop 10 Commissions), one on a fundamentally new strategy for a foundation (REACH), three on an established organizations in the midst of a major paradigm shift (the Merced County welfare department, the California Workforce Investment Board, and California Employment Development Department). As evaluators we never really came to grips with the importance of the stresses inherent in the flux that characterized these situations. Where organizations were brand new, project managers were overwhelmed with start up issues (e.g. securing office space, setting up an infrastructure for distributing funds) that had little to do with the focal point of the projects we were evaluating, but everything to do with their own learning goals. We are not suggesting that we should have altered our basic evaluation questions or played the role of organizational development consultants. But we certainly could have been more intentional about finding ways to insure that our learning-related activities met participants “where they were” rather than where we wanted them to be.

For example, our ability to promote a less legalistic and more collaborative approach to implementing MerCAP would have benefited from the literature addressing the key role of managerial leaders in organizational change efforts (Belasen, 2000; Senge, 1999). Our key organizational contacts tended to be at subordinate organizational levels and they lacked the authority to innovate without the approval of higher-ranking managers. Yet we spent little of our time, especially early on, in taking stock of these organizational dynamics and strategizing about their learning implications. We needed to better understand the perspective of the director of the Human Services Agency, and his relationship to the local elected official who had originated the idea for MerCAP. We can only speculate as to whether such an approach would have cleared the way for deeper learning and change. It may have been the case, for example, that the department did not have managerial leaders at the top who were committed to going out of their way to find information that would help the organization meet new challenges. What is clear in retrospect is

that without the active support of manager-leaders the front-line implementers had little inclination to stray far from engrained ways of doing business. In such a setting, our more critical comments and suggestions for change only served to reinforce the natural defensiveness of the organization.

The changing culture of organizations

In some ways the most challenging finding of our meta-analysis concerns the degree to which change and “churning” characterizes organizational life. This is most evident in the high rates of turnover of key personnel, but also evident in the tendency for both government and foundations to embrace but then quickly shed new initiatives, projects, or programs. From this vantage point, the difficulty is not in getting entrenched stakeholders to adopt new ways of looking at their work, but to find any stable anchor points within organizations where dialogue about evaluation findings can be located, much less have any prospect of long term impact.

Richard Sennett (2006) has written extensively about the larger forces within capitalism that are reshaping organizational life, resulting in more flexible and less permanent organizational forms and less stable career patterns. While the trends he documents are most pronounced in private sector businesses, especially those in cutting edge sectors such as technology and finance, he argues that they are becoming more normative in all aspects of society. The casualties of this ongoing process—a loss of institutional memory, disruption of social capital networks within and between organizations, and a devaluing of long-term initiatives—pose deep challenges to the field of evaluation. Put crudely, the question is: How can evaluation promote learning if its sponsors don’t stick around and its subject matter changes according to the whims of the currently vogue trends rather than by learning from past experience? As Sennett puts it “The culture of the new capitalism is attuned to singular events, one-off transactions, intervention; to progress, a polity needs to draw on sustained relationships and accumulated experience” (2006, p. 178).

Historically, evaluation has been seen as an instrument of reform. But in the new organizational culture reform is often defined in terms of creating something new that transcends the past, rather

than incrementally improving on the projects, programs, and ideas that we already have. Within organizations, change that matters has often been the province of mid-level managers who can take advantage of institutional memory and accumulated experience (including evaluation results) and put them to practical use. This work, rooted more in everyday experience than in the grand and flashy gestures of more visible organizational leaders, is modest in tone and style but has more likelihood of leading to effective results over the long haul. Distressingly, it is just this type of work and these types of organizational leaders that Sennett argues are being most disenfranchised in the new culture, where flatter modes of organization give top leaders instant access to front-line employees, without the moderating and interpretative influence of middle-tier managers who take a more craftsman-like approach to their work.

Conclusion

We have argued for a greater focus on the organizational settings in which evaluations take place and on the cultural dynamics that govern those settings. Bringing organizational dynamics into our focal vision will not make our work easier, or take the place of attending to program details and evaluation procedures. However, it can enrich and advance our understanding of the forms of resistance that stand in the way of making evaluation an occasion for learning and change.

Our examination of failed learning opportunities in six major evaluations identifies major challenges—some rooted in organizational defensiveness and rigidity; others in the churning personnel and the episodic nature of initiatives that characterize new, more flexible forms of organization. As different as these challenges are, we find they must both be attended to in our practice. It is not clear that evaluators are well-prepared to meet all the challenges we have just described, particularly those stemming from a change in organizational life that runs counter to the very notion of learning from accumulated experience. The following three suggestions represent options that may begin to approximate a way forward.

First, keep the nature of the organizational setting foremost in mind at the outset of the evaluation. Evaluators should scope out potential sources of resistance to change, but also be particularly alert to the possibility that key actors will not remain in place during the course of

the evaluation. Working to broaden the range of stakeholders at the sponsoring organization that have buy-in to the evaluation may help, although it raises the difficulty of managing ongoing communication, which is typically channeled through one or perhaps two key contacts. In network settings where there is a key collaborative forum, it may make sense to locate the focus of evaluative learning in that circle, rather than in the sponsoring agency only. This may require more complex design negotiations on the front end but would perhaps yield payoffs on the back end.

Second, to the extent possible, design the evaluation in a manner that promotes reflective learning during the evaluation, regardless of what happens to a formal report at the end. Much of our evaluation work is interview-based, and the frustration we feel on having some evaluation findings ignored or resisted is at least partially offset by knowing that we created space for high quality reflection in individual or group interviews. In this important way, the evaluation process is itself creating the occasion for learning, one interviewee at a time. Like teachers we may not always be aware of the uses to which this reflection may be put by those we encounter, but we assume that to some degree a well crafted interview is its own reward.

Third, write for the broad field, not simply for the immediate sponsors. In our roles as university-based evaluators we publish articles based on evaluations that speak to broader concerns in the field. We have even had foundation representatives tell us that they are funding evaluation not because they necessarily think it will help them improve their own programs, but because it is their responsibility to promote broader learning in their area of concern. In this important way universities and related institutions can model a form of disciplined learning over time that the world of organizations will continue to need, whether it knows it or not.

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Table 1. Summary of meta-analysis findings.

Program or Initiative/ Evaluation Sponsor	Lost Learning Opportunity	Primary barriers or resistance to organizational learning
<p>California Community and Faith-based Initiative</p> <p>CA Employment Development Dept.</p>	<p>Chance to craft a better implementation strategy for a faith-based initiative using a local network development approach rather than top-down funding of isolated organizations (Campbell and Glunt, 2006)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiative’s status as a special project of relatively short duration reduced incentive to learn for the future; • Complete turnover in key state personnel by the time evaluation was complete; • Political sponsors primarily interested in public relations materials and avoiding potential embarrassment.
<p>California Workforce Development System</p> <p>CA Workforce Investment Board</p>	<p>Chance to re-envision state workforce programs and boards as a support structure for local areas rather than a top-down regulatory control body (Campbell and Lemp, 2007)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key state leaders disagreed with findings, fearing costly embarrassment if greater local autonomy resulted in scandals as in some past instances; • Turnover and organizational upheaval in agency that sponsored evaluation put evaluation on back burner.
<p>Lassen County Healthy Community Project</p> <p>ComPAC, a nonprofit created to manage grant</p>	<p>Chance to build community consensus around a preferred approach to community engagement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small, new nonprofit grantee overwhelmed by scope of grant and focused on surviving rather than learning; • Turnover in COMPAC executive director position; • Local project implementers most receptive to the evaluation leave community before project ends.
<p>Merced County Attendance Project</p> <p>CA Department of Social Services</p>	<p>Chance to revise program approach given clear evidence that the program was failing to achieve its objectives (Campbell and Wright, 2005)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local officials reluctant to admit failure of program that gave them newfound status as innovators among their peers; • Turnover in state evaluation sponsors; • Low priority for state officials given other welfare reform priorities.
<p>Prop 10 Civic Engagement Project</p> <p>Five private foundations</p>	<p>Chance to assess shortcomings in original strategy before devising an alternative (Campbell and Wright, 2004)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turnover in key personnel at sponsoring foundations; • Local implementers viewed any criticism as threat to their initiative funded jobs.
<p>REACH Community Action Initiative</p> <p>Sierra Health Foundation (private)</p>	<p>Chance to learn from experience before making decision on future of initiative</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turnover in key foundation personnel, including executive director and program officer; • Timeline for Board’s future funding decisions means decisions on continuing initiative made well in advance of final evaluation findings.