

Aboriginal healing program evaluation: Success through negotiation

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The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) in partnership with Aboriginal communities and other agencies have made great strides toward addressing the need for culturally appropriate programming for Aboriginal offenders. There is now a need to create an evaluation process that is as pertinent in the Aboriginal context, as are the programs that are offered by Aboriginal communities. Evaluation of Aboriginal programs is important, as it provides a mechanism for ongoing improved service delivery and increases program effectiveness and accountability.

Formative evaluation has been described as to “look out for potential problems. This process identifies areas where the program needs improvement, describe and monitor program activities and periodically test for progress in achievement or attitude change.”² Evaluation needs to be an ongoing process before, during, and after program delivery to ensure the highest quality of client service is delivered.

Evaluation Based on Traditional Assumptions

Assumptions preclude the development of any program or research design; they are the beliefs that drive us and create our perspective. In the past, programs delivered by the Correctional Service of Canada were based on beliefs that originate from the dominant culture and were evaluated from the same perspective. Most recently, programs for Aboriginal offenders have been created using a different set of assumptions — those that originate in both traditional and contemporary Aboriginal culture.

Understanding how assumptions frame program delivery and evaluation is fundamental to the comprehension of the uniqueness and importance of Aboriginal programming for Aboriginal people; these underlying beliefs therefore constitute what makes a program successful for Aboriginal offenders. To create a process of continual monitoring and improvement of cultural-specific programs, the evaluation instrument must also be based upon those assumptions.

Assumptions and beliefs are not static for all Aboriginal people. Indeed, it is not our intention to advocate for the reductionistic perspective of Aboriginal people that assumes that all Aboriginal people have the same experiences and needs.

A more realistic and useful position is to acknowledge that there are as many interpretations and “ways” of Aboriginal culture in Canada as there are numbers of communities of Aboriginal people. However, there are similar values, customs and beliefs that loosely bind Aboriginal cultures together — assumptions that may be used by many different communities.

Holism is an example of a concept that is shared by many different Aboriginal groups and communities throughout Canada. It refers to a worldview that acknowledges the interdependence of all aspects of life: all things are connected (all things are related). Holism is also a paradigm that acknowledges the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual parts or components of every individual, and suggests that all parts are affected by each other.

The assumption of holism when applied in the context of healing asserts that healing cannot occur in one dimension only; in order to affect real and sustainable change in an individual, one must embark upon a process of “true learning”. As described in the Four Worlds Project, “It cannot be said that a person has totally learned in a whole and balanced manner unless all four dimensions of being have been involved in the process.”³ In the Aboriginal paradigm, the concept of a four-part person is often visualized as a wheel. Other names for it include the medicine wheel, which is a more traditional Aboriginal paradigm. There are Aboriginal people who do not follow this traditional path; but they may still see the holistic perspective as logical or appropriate.

In regard to service delivery, the program assumptions should match the worldview of the facilitators and evaluators of Aboriginal-specific programs. Aboriginal people employed in this manner are likely contributing to the program in ways that are in line with the philosophy of the program, and are more committed to changing behaviours through connectedness and commitment to their people (those who share the same world-view). Evaluations based upon the same beliefs as those that guide program development and facilitation are most likely to provide the richest, most accurate data; information that will result in improved service delivery.

Achieving Effective Evaluation Through Complimentary Partnerships

Negotiating Outcomes

One of the strengths of Aboriginal programming is the uniqueness and specificity of each individual program. Because the customs and beliefs of Aboriginal people vary nation-wide, each community will deliver programs in a manner that is appropriate for their people. Program managers may view this uniqueness as nationally problematic — for example, they may find it difficult to create uniformity of the reliability and validity of these programs.

When considering Aboriginal programming, however, it is best to view validity and reliability specific to the individual program being evaluated, as opposed to comparing it to other programs (Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal) as a means of evaluating. Reliability, for example, can only be measured within the context of that program, within that region and delivered for a specific population of people. Changing any of these variables will change the process of program delivery and therefore must be evaluated separate from any other program.

Evaluating the outcomes of the program, as opposed to the process is likely most effective. For this reason, it is imperative that during the time of program development, program objectives are created through a consensus process, between the Correctional Service of Canada, and the agency who will deliver the program. These objectives will dictate what will be evaluated, how on-going evaluation will be built into the program design and how the evaluation will be carried out. A negotiatory process is the basis for a complimentary partnership between contractor and agency and provides clear, achievable goals that will guide program implementation and delivery.

Effective Evaluation Teams

Creating the appropriate evaluation team and instrument is fundamental to the implementation of a meaningful, culturally appropriate evaluation. The make-up of this team should also be addressed at the time of program development and consist of people who have a variety of expertise and skills to offer. A balanced team would include those members who are knowledgeable in policy and

those with expertise in traditional and contemporary Aboriginal values and culture; team members who are quantitative researchers and those who are experienced in qualitative data collection and analysis; team members who are both program staff, as well as people outside of the program. Through this participatory process, Aboriginal agencies and communities build capacity for evaluation design and implementation, and facilitate a process for troubleshooting and preventative measures in program delivery.

The evaluation team should also be committed to upholding the values stated during program development and adhere to a process that is both *effective* and *respectful*. A key component in Aboriginal program evaluation is the respecting of traditional protocol when collecting data regarding the cultural and spiritual components of a program. These protocols are important guides in both program delivery and evaluation — they set the framework for respect and healthy relationships in the program and should be honoured throughout the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases.

Solution Focus

Many Aboriginal program providers have developed the opinion that a typical evaluation process is adversarial; they may see the evaluators as auditors whose primary function is find problems and identify who is to blame. Program audits, therefore, may be considered hostile processes, where policy is more important than the program or the people involved. This atmosphere is most likely to result in non co-operation of program staff, fear, or possibly feelings of being misrepresented and misunderstood.

In contrast, the evaluation process that works best for Aboriginal programming is one that is solution-focussed. From this perspective, both the contractor and agency own all issues that may arise and work together to find constructive, realistic solutions that result in better service for Aboriginal clients. In this environment of trust and camaraderie, evaluators and program staff are focussed on program resolution, and the creation of better programs, more effective staff and stronger partnerships. ■

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² C.T. Fitz-Gibbon and L.L. Morris, *How to design a Program Evaluation*, (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1978) p. 11.

³ Four Worlds Development Project, *The Sacred Tree*, (Lethbridge, Alberta, Lotus Lights Publications, 1985) p. 29.