DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 188 IR 012 314

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TITLE Service Delivery Assessment Techniques. Evaluation Guides. Guide Number 15.
INSTITUTION Northwest Regional Educational Lab., Portland, Oreg.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE [84]
CONTRACT 400-80-0105
NOTE 13p.; A product of the Research on Evaluation Program.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Delivery Systems; *Evaluation Methods; Evaluators; *Human Services; Informal Assessment; Interviews; *Models; Observation; *Program Evaluation; Site Analysis; Workshops
IDENTIFIERS *Department of Health and Human Services; *Service Delivery Assessment

ABSTRACT

The Service Delivery Assessment (SDA) model is a human services evaluation tool which offers a viable alternative to more traditional approaches and is appropriate for small local evaluations as well as large national studies. There are five phases to an SDA study: assignment, pre-assessment, design, analysis, and communication of the findings. Assignments are decided by the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Inspector General, and may request answers to highly specific questions or be quite open-ended. During the pre-assessment period, information is gathered about local conditions, and possible contacts, respondents, and site study settings are determined. Because the primary means of gathering information in an SDA study is the one-to-one personal discussion, the design phase focuses on identifying a wide array of people with whom to talk; in addition, SDA teams observe local conditions and activities during this period. The analysis phase is best described as one of consensus building by iterative steps; as information is gathered, trends and patterns emerge and new information is sought that will verify or repudiate investigators' hunches. The final report includes three different types of information--a description of local activities and conditions, a comparison of conditions with standardized or existing criteria, and the interpretations of the SDA team. Six characteristics of the SDA method are provided, as well as suggestions on when to use this approach. Finally, the evaluation of a teacher training summer institute is described to illustrate the application of the SDA model. Two references are appended. (JB)

ED272188

EVALUATION GUIDES

Guide Number 15

SERVICE DELIVERY ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES

Mark St. John

The use of service delivery assessment in evaluation is discussed, including:

- The Service Delivery Assessment Model
- Characteristics of the SDA Method
- When to Use the SDA Approach
- Service Delivery Assessment for the Evaluator
- An Example

IR012314

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The critical feature of human services is that they are highly operator-dependent and difficult to standardize. Hence it is always problematic whether a treatment is being delivered as designed, whether the mode of the delivery is adding some unintended treatment to the basic one, and finally, whether the treatment can be delivered in a reasonable way at all . . . "

Rossi

THE SERVICE DELIVERY ASSESSMENT MODEL

When top management has to depend totally on abstractions, such as formal reports, figures, and quantitative data, rather than be able to see, know, and understand the business--its reality, its people, its environment, its customers, its technology--then a business has become too complex to be manageable. A business is manageable only if top management is capable of testing against concrete reality the measurements and information it receives.

Peter Drucker

The idea of Service Delivery Assessment was born in 1967 when Joseph Califano was appointed by Lyndon Johnson to be head of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW)--the then largest cabinet department. Experienced in working with large government bureaucracies, Califano resolved not to be insulated from the actual conditions and daily activities of those in his department working at "the client's end of the service pipeline." Accordingly, within the office of the Inspector General, he established a team of investigators to carry out what he called service delivery assessments (SDAs).

The SDA team was located in ten regional offices around the country, with a central office in Washington. Throughout the year, the fifty or so investigators were given specific assignments to carry out short-term, but intense, studies of programs in the areas of health care, income maintenance, education, and social services. These teams were given considerable freedom in the way they conducted their studies, and were not asked to replace traditional program evaluators or program monitors. Rather, they were asked to provide another perspective by closely examining local conditions, activities, and perspectives.

There are five phases to an SDA study--assignment, pre-assessment, design, analysis, and the communication of the findings. Each of these phases is discussed below.

1. Assignment

Working together, the Secretary of HEW (later changed to Health and Human Services (HHS)) and the Inspector General meet at the beginning of the year to outline the areas and topics of potential studies. Restricted patient admittance to nursing homes, low income energy assistance, medicare physician assignment, child abuse, and developmental disabilities are typical of the issues examined in SDA studies. In addition to the topics outlined at the start of the year, the service delivery assessment teams respond to those topics identified during the year by the Secretary. For example, the Secretary may ask for information on a program that has sudden operational difficulties, or information on emergency situations (such as the arrival of the Indochinese refugees), which may necessitate a study on very short notice.

The assignment may request answers to highly specific questions (for example, What is the quality of the toll-free service for medicare beneficiaries?), or the assignment may be quite open-ended, requesting information about conditions in a large domain (for example, What is the present state of civil rights enforcement?).

2. Pre-Assessment

One regional office is designated to serve as the project leader, and three or four other regional offices are assigned to support the project. The first task for the lead office is to conduct a pre-assessment study aimed at gathering an understanding of local conditions, and at generating a list of issues to pursue during the investigation. The service delivery assessment office spends considerable time and resources on this phase of the study, determining possible contacts, respondents, and site study settings. Site visits are scheduled so that SDA staff can "get their feet wet," and local program officials are visited so that their perspectives on present program operations can be gathered. Finally, a brief review of relevant documents and literature is carried out.

In addition to checking out the scene, the SDA lead team spends some time with those officials in the cabinet close to the Secretary, attempting to discover the views and interests of the policymakers who will ultimately use the findings. In this way, the SDA team works from both ends, so that there is no mismatch between the needs of the policymakers and information generated by the study.

3. Designing the Study

Having studied the results of the pre-assessment, the lead team designs the full study. The primary means of gathering information in an SDA study is one-to-one personal discussions (these discussions are not always as formal as structured interviews). Gaining a wide and full variety of perspectives is a top priority, so that sometimes considerable imagination is used in selecting a wide array of people to talk with. In one study of domestic violence, the SDA teams talked with hospitals, shelters for battered women, private homes, police stations, jails, judges, community centers, city service agencies, schools, township government offices, and crisis intervention teams.

In addition to talking to a wide range of people, SDA teams observe local conditions and activities. In a study of migrant farm workers, for example, much was learned by observing the living conditions and the interactions between the workers and local health care officials. In observations of local school board meetings, one SDA team member discovered how allocations were and were not being made for handicapped children.

Examination of documents can also be illuminating, showing, for example, the complexity of forms and procedures local welfare recipients must endure. One examination of local program memos showed how the communications to the head office were systematically biased in their reports of services rendered.

In choosing which sites to visit, or which people to talk to, random sampling may not be used. Rather, sites and participants are selected on the basis of the overall study needs. For example, in the investigation of extreme program practices, atypical sites may be specifically sought out. Both judgment and selective sampling are used to ensure that a full range of program practices and participant perspectives are included.

Also, the SDA study has the freedom to follow whatever leads they encounter in the field. They operate very much in the mode of the investigative journalist (see Guide No. 6 on investigative journalism). To capitalize on their freedom to explore all leads, the SDA regional site teams convene about one-third of the way through the study to discuss what they have seen, and to share interesting leads. In this way, the teams have both new and shared issues to investigate when they begin the second round of site visits and interviews.

4. Analysis and Synthesis

Unlike the handling of statistical data in experimental studies, there are no set algorithms for handling the data gathered by the SDA teams. The process of qualitative analysis is best described as one of consensus building by iterative steps. As information is gathered, trends and patterns emerge. New information is sought that will verify or repudiate investigators' hunches. Again, the parallel with the methods of investigative journalism is most pronounced in this respect.

Consensus is arrived at through several means. First, each regional team works up its own report independent of the other teams. Second, the raw field data (in the form of transcribed interviews or coded responses) are forwarded to the lead team office. Third, and most important, all key regional personnel meet in a two- to three-day debriefing meeting where all the issues are discussed, the key findings summarized, and a report outlined.

In a service delivery assessment (SDA) study, then, analysis and synthesis is an ongoing process--it begins with the individual investigators, moves to the regional offices, and finally takes place on a national level. Throughout the study, this process is interactive, iterative, and accomplished largely through sharing and discussion of personal perceptions.

Communicating the Findings

The first means by which the findings are communicated to the Secretary is a short (10-20 pages) written report. A draft of the report is circulated among the Secretary's other cabinet managers, so that their recommendations can be incorporated before the report goes to the Secretary.

In general, there are three different kinds of information included in the final report. First, the report provides a description of local conditions and activities. Here the SDA simply serves as the eyes and ears of the Secretary. Second, the report attempts to put these findings in perspective by comparing conditions with some set of hypothesized standards, with the original aims or goals of the program, with other similar programs, or with past levels of service. Third, the SDA team tries to interpret what it sees. Its interpretations might include guesses about causes and effects, assessments of strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations for changes. These interpretations are kept quite separate from the other findings, and the Secretary is, of course, free to accept them or not.

The second means of communication is a one-hour briefing scheduled with the Secretary. With the aid of charts and handouts, the essence of the findings are communicated in a 20-minute presentation. Approximately 40 minutes are then left for questions and answers. There is usually a practice briefing with the other department managers prior to the briefing for the Secretary.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SDA METHOD

A service delivery assessment (SDA) study is characterized by the following features:

- is typically designed to produce answers to policymakers' questions in a short time (a month or two),
- serves as the eyes and ears of program sponsors and policymakers,
- relies primarily on a flexible mixture of interviews, observations, and document analyses to gain "snapshots" of daily realities,
- is open-ended and gently investigative in nature, following up on issues that emerge,
- relies on briefing and debriefing as the main means of analyzing and synthesizing information,
- is most often used to supplement other means of gathering evaluative information.

WHEN TO USE THE SDA APPROACH

Use the SDA approach when

- program decision-makers are at a distance from the daily operations of the program (for example, when the program is very large);
- policymakers need answers to specific questions about a program;
- a program is in a trial period or in its early stages and changes can be made;
- an evaluation study is to be primarily in-house and the aim is to improve one's own operations;

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- a program has unique qualities or is particularly successful (or unsuccessful) and a full understanding or analysis is desired;

- emotional or political issues emerge and a deeper, almost investigative, study of the program is desired;

- other, more formal methods distort or leave a gap in the understanding of the essential character of the program.

SERVICE DELIVERY ASSESSMENT FOR THE EVALUATOR

The SDA model is useful for the evaluator, offering a viable alternative to more traditional approaches. Its methods are flexible, adhering more to rules of common sense than research protocol. The model is appropriate for small local evaluations as well as large national studies. The essential ingredients of the model are outlined in Table 1.

In addition to its usefulness as a general approach, the SDA model suggests some specific techniques that can be adopted and adapted by the evaluator of educational programs. One of these, the oral briefing, is particularly valuable, and is discussed more fully in Table 2.

AN EXAMPLE

The following example is given to illustrate the utility and flexibility of the basic approach contained in the SDA model. As long as the key characteristics of the model (the investigative nature, the use of qualitative methods, the emphasis on oral briefings) are retained, then the SDA model can be freely and imaginatively adapted to fit any local situation. The model is an inherently sensible one and is very appealing to local personnel.

* * * * * *

It was decided to use SDA methods in the evaluation of a teacher training summer institute to be held in a large and prestigious science museum. Sponsored by the National Science Foundation (NSF), the goals of the training program were to show teachers how to use the museum as a resource for their high school classes, to teach the teachers some new physics concepts, and to reward them with an enriching and inspiring experience.

Table 1
The Service Delivery Assessment Model
Five Phases of a Study

1. Assignment

(a) Topics are determined by:

- policymaker's request
- emergency needs
- field discoveries

(b) Research team is assigned questions to study like:

- what are conditions and activities like?
- what are barriers to effective service?
- what are the best (worst) practices?
- what are the perspectives of these involved?

2. Pre-Assessment

(a) A quick field study aims to:

- understand functioning of the program
- understand local conditions
- conduct short literature/ document review
- initially frame issues and questions for study

(b) Policymakers' needs are assessed:

- assignment review
- discussion with close staff

3. Design

(a) A meeting is held to plan:

- choice of sites
- choice of participants
- summary techniques planned
- consensus meetings scheduled

(b) Site visits are made to carry out:

- discussions
- observations
- review of documents
- pursuing of leads

4. Analysis

(a) The research team seeks consensus by debriefing:

- at the individual level
- at the team level
- at the project level
- as an ongoing iterative process

(b) Independent reports are written at the team level

(c) All field data is aggregated and analyzed at project level

5. Communication of Findings

(a) A report is written that is:

- submitted within 90 days of assignment
- short with essentials summarized

(b) Policymakers receive an oral policy briefing, including:

- description of conditions and activities
- comparisons
- interpretations

Table 2
Notes on Oral Briefings

1. Selecting and Organizing Information

Information should be pertinent to the needs of the policymakers.

Only what is key to understanding the program should be presented.

Only information that is related to feasible courses of action should be presented.

2. Selecting the Presenter

The person should be an effective speaker, with indepth knowledge of the study.

The persons should have confidence, poise, and the ability to handle the unexpected and inevitable distractions.

3. Preparing the Presentation

If possible, the presenter should give practice briefings to the staff of the policymaker and incorporate the questions and concerns they have.

Charts illustrating the key findings should be prepared.

Handouts identical to the charts will aid the participants in following the briefing, as well as leave them with a written summary of the briefing.

Slides, videos, or other media can be very effective in communicating the reality of the program's main issues.

4. Setting the Stage

A short report with an executive summary should be sent to participants just before the briefing.

An agenda for the briefing will establish time periods for the different phases of the briefing.

5. Selecting Participants

Participants should include:

- the chief policymaker(s)
- other managers
- key program staff
- a figure who can naturally serve as a liaison between the evaluators and the policymakers
- other key figures representing special interests

6. Holding The Briefing

The briefing should proceed as follows:

- a short presentation summarizing highlights, findings, comparisons, interpretations
- a short time for program staff to respond
- a longer period for questions, answers, and discussion

7. Recording and Followup

The meeting should be recorded and notes taken.

Particular attention should be given to suggestions that call for followup actions.

The course was administered by the museum and taught by two university physics instructors. The program was funded for a three-year period and was to provide in-service assistance to the teachers during the year, as well as conduct the summer workshops. In the first summer, two different four-week workshop sessions were held.

NSF had asked that an evaluation be done, but the assignment to the evaluator was vague. As no one was quite sure what exactly would happen in the workshops, the director wanted the evaluator to "keep an eye on things" and eventually "help the teachers find their way." It was felt that it was too early for any kind of summative report to be made to NSF, so that it made more sense for the evaluator to serve as an in-house consultant and to carry out a service delivery assessment (SDA) study.

The charge to the evaluator was, at least for the first year, to provide feedback to the museum program officials, and to the teachers, so that the program would get off to a good start. It was also hoped that the evaluator would be able to make recommendations about ideas for followup and inservice activities.

In the pre-assessment phase, before the start of the program, the evaluator talked with the teachers and the program director in order to learn what they thought the program would or should be doing. Documents, including the initial program proposal, the applications of the participants, and a sample of the teaching materials, were all reviewed. In the first week of the workshop, the evaluator attended as many of the sessions as possible, acting as a participant. During this period, the following issues emerged from the evaluator's observations.

- The participants, supposedly experienced physics teachers, were in fact a widely diverse group--some having little or no experience in physics and math.

- The course, while ostensibly aiming to teach methods of exhibit-based discovery learning, consisted largely of almost standard physics lectures.

- Because of logistics and economics, many of the teachers would not be able to bring their students to the museum regularly during the school year.

The evaluator discussed these observations with other members of the museum staff who were sitting in on the workshop, and confirmed many of the observations. The conclusions were presented to the associate director of the museum, who encouraged the evaluator to begin giving feedback to the university instructors. A meeting was held with the instructors, and in a week or so the workshop had evolved into a more interactive and exhibit-oriented approach.

After the first week, the evaluator began to talk with the participants about the workshop, and how it was going for them. After several weeks, the evaluator met with the director, and discussed what had been seen and heard. It was the director's opinion that the evaluator should continue with the interviews, trying to talk with everyone in the institute. At the same time, the director was particularly eager to get ideas for in-service activities. In the meantime, the evaluator was to continue providing feedback to the instructors.

The interviews and observations continued, with feedback given to the instructors each week. Toward the end of the course, the instructors were given transcripts of all the interviews with the participants. This provided them with full access to the perceptions of the participants, and was for them an unusual and very rich source of feedback. The instructors were asked to read through the transcripts and to respond to them at the final briefing meeting, which was to be held shortly after the conclusion of the workshops.

Present at the briefing were the director, associate director (who served as liaison between the evaluator and program staff), participating staff, and instructors of the institute. For approximately one-half hour the evaluator presented a summary of the findings. The course was described from the evaluator's perspective; the workshop was compared with other similar NSF summer workshops; and interpretations were offered of what had been the strengths and weaknesses of the workshop. For example, the evaluator made the following points:

- While the course addressed participants of all levels well, the workshop was more successful for those more advanced in physics.

- There appeared to be a double-bind, in that some teachers wanted more specific teaching ideas for their classess, and less time spent on learning physics. However, they agreed that such ideas were not worth much without a thorough understanding of the physics behind them. Thus, it appeared to be difficult to do both in the short time of the institute.

The evaluator also made suggestions, ranging from the major to the trivial, for next summer's workshops. Finally, recommendations were made for in-service activities. The meeting was not without interruption or diversions, but the main points were covered and discussed.

* * * * * *

How effective was the SDA approach and the oral briefing? In a very small evaluation of this kind, it offered the advantages of letting the evaluator focus time and energy where it could be of most use to the program. Both the directors and the instructors felt well informed about the progress of the course, even to the extent of having issues raised which they would rather not have to face. In this way, the evaluator served as a kind of catalyst, making sure that problems or difficulties were not ignored. Moreover, both the directors and the instructors used the evaluator to get answers to specific questions they had about how the participants were doing and learning. The director asked the evaluator to write a short descriptive report documenting the flavor of the first summer's workshops. Both evaluator and staff felt that, contrary to their experience with other evaluations, this had been an honest and useful effort.

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Printed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, a private nonprofit corporation. The work upon which this publication is based was performed pursuant to Contract No. 400-80-0105 of the National Institute of Education. It does not, however, necessarily reflect the views of that agency.