

Paper presented at the American Evaluation Association, San Diego, 1997.

**Empowerment Programs & Empowerment Evaluation:  
Maximizing the Benefits of a Theory-Based Perspective**

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Theory-based evaluation has been advocated by many evaluators as a powerful framework for guiding evaluation decisions, for increasing our ability to trace causal pathways in program effectiveness, and for enhancing implementation evaluation (Chen & Rossi, 1987; Bickman, 1992). This paper will focus on describing how a theory-based evaluation framework has been used as a tool for providing information to the funders, directors, and staff of a multi-site family support program. We will describe several factors that we believe have contributed to the effectiveness of this approach in increasing utilization of evaluation information: (1) the degree of match between program and evaluation values; (2) ongoing iterative work using the program theory as a ‘touchstone’; (3) systematic integration of qualitative and quantitative data; and (4) commitment by the program to organizational learning.

This paper focuses on expanding our understanding of how information can be shared with stakeholders in ways that support utilization by programs for continuous improvement. Thus, the implications of this paper are primarily for understanding how evaluators can work with stakeholders to generate and convey useful information, and how evaluation practices can be developed that better support continuous program improvement. We will suggest that evaluation, in order to be useful, must be a well-integrated and coherent component of the program delivery process, and therefore reject models of evaluation that value “objective” external evaluation as fundamentally less useful than participatory evaluations.

Finally, we hope that evaluators who attend this presentation be able to use this model as an exemplar of how to approach both theory development and utilization with programs, will learn techniques that are helpful to them in developing feedback mechanisms for their own evaluations; and finally, will reach a better understanding of how to negotiate the “gray area” between external and internal evaluator roles which is a necessary by-product of truly collaborative evaluations.