Building an Evaluation Research System for Joint Business and Higher Education Use: Critical Questions

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Introduction

In June of 1984, Arthur Andersen & Co. together with Northwestern University sponsored a conference to discuss the state of the art of evaluation relative to human resource development in business. Twenty-five universities were represented along with twenty-five corporations. While there was interest in many collaborative training efforts, one conclusion drawn was that there were too few joint evaluation efforts between business and higher education (Arthur Andersen & Co., 1984), and therefore, an absence of a shared data base to be used both by industry and higher education. As a result, methodological improvements for evaluating human resource development are delayed in both sectors. The conference report concluded with a number of recommendations for accelerating the exchange of methodology, information, and personnel in human resource evaluation between higher education and business.

In September of 1985, IC Industries Employee Benefits staff contracted with the Office for Health Promotion, Northern Illinois University (NIU), for program development as well as evaluation research services to augment its health care benefit programs funded by a Welfare Trust (the "Trust"). In this paper we will first delineate the eight conclusions reached by the joint business and university conference. This provides the framework for the case study description of a cooperative enterprise in practice.

The Conference on Joint Ventures Between Business and Higher Education: Human Resource Evaluation ended with eight conclusions. These conclusions reflected comments by David Mintzer, Vice President for Research and Dean of Science, Northwestern University; Gearold Miles, Director of Educational Programs, Center for Professional Education, Arthur Andersen and Co. ; Alan Magazine, Executive Director, Business-Higher Education Forum; Ralph Tyler, Director Emeritus, Center for Advance Study in the Behavioral Sciences; and, William Wiggenhorn, Director of Training and Education, Motorola Corporation. The conclusions also reflected working group consensus from over fifty attendees. The conclusions are important because of the expertise of the participants. All are senior professionals committed to, and experienced in, the usefulness of industry/university cooperation. As you will see, they are reflective of real life project experience.

Conclusion 1: Business and higher education personnel are ready and willing to understand each other's needs in the area of human resource evaluation, and to enter into collaborative ventures when possible. Evaluation is a discipline that can directly affect training and other human resource development decisions. As such, it represents a sensible point at which to promote joint study efforts.

Conclusion 2: Effective evaluation is necessary to develop and implement sound human resource policy and programs. To meet human resource development needs, it is necessary to have a good understanding of the organization and its problems, opportunities, and business plans. Evaluation's purpose is to provide information to help ensure that the right people get the right kind of information and training at the right time, and in the right manner.

Conclusion 3: Evaluation is not being used to its fullest advantage in human resource development. In general, human resource managers need to expand their use of evaluation to improve program planning, development, delivery and maintenance. Evaluation also provides a means for generating data for policy decisions relating to the workforce and to long-term planning within industry and higher education.

Conclusion 4: The incentive structure for cooperation between business and higher education must be clarified, strengthened, and diversified. University fiscal policies do not provide incentives for unit-to-unit collaboration between business and higher education, and make it more efficient and cost effective for business to contract directly with individual faculty members. To make collaboration likely, it is critical that the benefits to each party be clarified, and that a structure for their negotiation be established.

Conclusion 5: Genuine collaborative efforts between business and higher education demand an understanding of alternative value systems. Business and higher education can learn from each other and learn together.

Conclusion 6: Many issues related to human resource development evaluation in private sector programs do not differ from those in public sector programs. The quality of evaluation in any setting is affected by the commitment to its use and the resources invested in its implementation.

Conclusion 7: Local conferences may be the most productive mechanism for establishing cooperative ventures between particular industries and universities. Meetings among institutions in close geographic location typically are more productive for generating sustained collaborative ventures.

Conclusion 8: Training and education in evaluation is important and can be

promoted in many ways. Use of faculty members in business and business people in universities is an option. Students also can serve internships in business settings as part of their academic training. Educational material highlighting sound evaluation practice would be helpful. These materials might take the form of collaborative case studies or evaluation materials for routine training.

The Cooperative Enterprise: A Case Study

Using a brief case study, we will describe efforts to build a joint evaluation capability and research base for shared use by a university and a major corporation. While it is not an unequivocal success story, it does demonstrate that, so far, project personnel have made incremental and deliberate gains in the art of collaboration. In part, steps forward have been stimulated and supported by lessons learned in that joint conference between business and higher education which was designed to explore human resource evaluation. The case itself is cyclical in nature, going from academic dialogue to field application to experiential data for client use and back to academic study.

The IC Industries Trust (mentioned in the introduction to this paper) was providing employees with new benefit packages, support resources for better use of medical resources, and on-site health promotion information and training. This three-part educational and resource support system, named LINK, was under development and partially in place at a number of company sites. LINK facilitators, though mostly untrained in the area of benefits or health promotion, were being selected to manage LINK programs within their companies. LINK was to be installed at the work sites of at least three of IC's six operating companies within the next calendar year. The initial request: Can you build a design to tell us whether LINK makes a difference in health claims, health habits, medical care behavior, and quality of worklife?

Posing the request in the form of questions implied that they did not know the answer. Correspondingly, it prompted university personnel to probe further, asking other and sometimes more difficult questions. Questions were aimed at clarifying the request and identifying the time and resources (personnel, money, and access) required to move forward in a reasonable manner. What seemed simple was extremely complex—developing and implementing a coherent research agenda and securing permission and access to data and employees.

Prioritizing Needs

Is what you want really what you need? In initial discussions, the first critical point was negotiating what an evaluation research capability should and could do for LINK. From our perspective, Trust staff were requesting summative outcome data from a program under development. There were a number of problems. The analysis of medical insurance claims data from each company site wouldn't be available for at least a year. LINK was in the formative stage and so staff were revising and often enlarging its mission and services on a monthly basis. There was little reason to anticipate outcomes of any kind if LINK programs were not installed and working at each site. At this point, there was no way to tell how operational they were. In short, summative data collection and outcomes assessment seemed premature.

From the Trust perspective, some key personnel thought we were rewriting their agenda. They wanted results (summative and high level) to report, and were not convinced installation and process evaluation was required. They thought the job they had outlined was clear and straightforward. We found the tasks neither as clear nor as straightforward as they did. Trust project staff wanted us to handle data collection but did not want to involve personnel at their sites in the process. Our dialogue ran into the occasional land mine. They did not speak our language, and we did not speak theirs. The formative/summative distinction, central to evaluation theory, was as involved to them as the corporation/company/site distinction was to us. The professionals in the business setting and the sensitive, profit-driven politics that connected them were the source of constant learning and innumerable design modifications on our part.

After six months, we had decided together to design a two-part evaluation research system. The first part, for immediate start-up, involved developing on-site evaluation support for each LINK program as it was installed. The strategy was to embed evaluation training and evaluation instruments into a one-day training session for new LINK Facilitators. The training would help facilitators understand LINK, learn how to set program goals, monitor success, and report outcomes to the Trust. To help facilitators accomplish these objectives, several instruments were to be developed and pilot tested: an employee interest inventory, training course evaluation instruments, and an annual lifestyle survey instrument. To help facilitators use instruments for goal setting, we jointly decided that university project staff would take care of scoring, analyzing, and reporting results to company sites.

> Businesses and higher education are ready to meet each other halfway in the area of human resource evaluation.

The second part of the evaluation system would be designed to address the corporate level and long-term policy research needs. The policy research system was to begin with a research agenda to address Trust questions about effectiveness and cost. The on-site program evaluation, specifically, the instruments built into facilitator training provided some information for the policy research effort. So, the items on the instrument as well as the audit trail to determine which employees were involved in interventions were constructed for use by facilitators and by researchers at NIU dealing with broader questions. The research system piggybacked on the program evaluation system. But the research system also would tap into many other information systems such as enhanced claims data, data provided by vendors like Care Counselor, second

opinion consultants, and limitless site-specific data related to job performance, absenteeism, accidents, employee assistance programs and so forth.

Developing Training Materials

Who says when it's quittin' time? Once we had negotiated the parameters of the evaluation research system, there was a premature sense of unanimity. We had written policy that covered details regarding the production and ownership of materials we produced, we had a work plan, and we had mutually acceptable rewards. But as development of training materials for program evaluation began, another critical point arose. While we were the specialists in evaluating an object, they were the specialists in, and the creators of the object. Since LINK was still evolving, a great deal of discussion revolved around what was to be evaluated, why, and how. Important side issues were: the variance in what LINK programs might look like from site to site, the uneven skills of LINK facilitators, and developmental changes in the scope of LINK activities. Back and forth to the drawing board we went. Since each of us depended on information from the other to deliver materials, development was halting, interrupted, and iterative.

Ultimately, of course, it is the client who must cry halt. According to professional evaluation standards (Joint Committee, 1981), it is clients who determine deadlines and evaluation scope. In our case, the evaluation specialists urged the content specialists to raise their expectations for the training materials and the LINK facilitators. We suggested that without basic planning and evaluation skills, untrained facilitators stood little chance of managing a sound LINK program. And without a sound program, there was very little purpose in doing research on results. The Trust project staff pushed us to simplify, to accept that some conceptual issues could not yet be resolved, and to make evaluation as straightforward as possible. As we expanded our expectations for evaluation information from the field, we expanded university services to support facilitators. Week by week we reviewed until we both could live with necessary compromises.

Client/Evaluator Relationship

Whose ball park and whose home team? A collaborative posture suggests that one culture is not better than the other, nor should it be dominant over the other. This posture is challenged regularly by the funding structure. The prominent role of the funding client is exacerbated in the case of evaluation research services. Professional evaluation standards (Joint Committee, 1981) clearly define an aggressive role for evaluation clients. For example, clients determine critical questions, approve designs, and set reporting agendas. Other professional standards, such as those dealing with technical accuracy, help evaluators tell clients when compromise is no longer possible. University personnel wanted to develop an internal program evaluation system that met the Trust's immediate needs to demonstrate that LINK was working at the corporate level, but also they were trying to design a system to deliver sound and useful information for company site facilitators. It was not always easy to dovetail both goals.

Slowly a new ball park was defined with Trust and university project staff. The Trust personnel learned pigeon evaluation as we learned to speak benefits. As both groups became bilingual, we began to become bicultural. The predominant values driving business and higher education are different. It continues to be important that we understand and respect each other's values. For example, unless faculty contract with business on an individual basis, they work within university fiscal guidelines. In this unit-to-unit arrangement, the rewards available to them generally are released time, graduate assistants, access to top quality hardware, and research and publication possibilities. In our case, research and publication potential are a prerequisite in order for faculty to make a long term commitment to a project. Why? Because they can make more money in direct consultation, because the kind of faculty we need to attract already have released time and graduate assistants, or could get them through a number of projects, and because typically, it is curiosity and scholarship, not consulting fees, that drive their decision to invest professional time.

If proprietary issues prevent access to researchable and publishable data, the incentive for higher education involvement decreases dramatically and is limited to financial gain. The construction of a data base that can serve business, but can also be used for research efforts in both sectors is the foundation for sustained joint ventures. Higher education has to remember, however, that business is concerned with meeting the goals of the organization in a timely and efficient fashion. The construction of a research agenda or research base is not likely to be a priority, but it *is* a point of negotiation.

Presently, evaluation materials for LINK Facilitators have been prepared and will shortly be field tested. We anticipate at least one dissertation study will result from the field test. Additionally, a three-year quasi-experimental study on the effectiveness of newsletters on employee health behaviors is underway. There is the beginning of a carefully designed data base that can address specific research questions related to LINK and non-LINK employees, longitudinal changes in attitudes and behaviors, and short and long term effects of educational interventions on employees. The partnership has just begun, but we are both already wiser. Some dissonance still exists, and we expect that other points of disagreement may occur. However, we are learning to accept tension as not only inevitable, but constructive. The result of the tugging is some stretching and flexibility that improves products and services.

Effective evaluation is necessary to develop and implement sound human resource policies and programs.

Future Prospects

What lies ahead? We began with the Joint Ventures Conference to demonstrate that even before the project

with IC Industries, we both had the benefit of past studies and dialogues on collaboration. Our project did not create new issues in collaboration; it reaffirmed those about which there is already some information. So, we are attentive to past lessons. In 1985 the National Science Foundation NSF concluded a ten-year study to investigate how innovations with implications for both business and university are diffused. The evaluation focused on twenty centers where universities and industries collaborated on research agendas. One factor that stood out was that participation by industry personnel was limited to one or two relatively senior people; industry saw research efforts as significant, but did not structure its interactions to take advantage of the products of the collaborative effort (Eveland, 1985). From the Trust and NIU perspectives, forewarned is forearmed. The next critical juncture may be collaboration of Trust and university project staff in promoting diffusion of jointly produced evaluation products in company sites. That effort, if it comes, will provide even more facets to collaboration.

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