Through a culturally competent lens: Why the program evaluation standards matter

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> The young women sit stone-faced and silent as I ask about their experiences in the program. I'm the expert at talking to teens—that's why I got this job—but they have me stumped. Every prompt I try is met with suspicious stares, or worse, a round of snickering when I toss out some of the age-appropriate language I've researched just for this group. Their eyes demand, "Who are you? What gives you the right to ask us these things?"

> Out loud, they say, "By the way, I'm pretty sure that thing you were talking about earlier doesn't mean what you think it means."

Does this sound familiar? All *too* familiar? Maybe not the specifics, but the general situation? The strongest evidence-based program, implemented with impeccable preparation and the best of intentions, won't be effective when the target population doesn't "buy" it. If you were a "target population", would you?

People, not "targets", are at the heart of what we do in public health. And people come embedded in cultures, wrapped in history, language, and communal habits, sorrows, and joys. When we fail to appreciate and account for the influence of culture and values in program planning, implementation, and evaluation, we risk being ineffective or even doing damage. Conversely, by increasing our cultural competence, whether we are planning or evaluating a program, we enhance its relevance and value.

Recognizing the importance of culture in our work, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Asthma Control Program and the Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention partnered to create *Practical Strategies for Culturally Competent Evaluation* (CDC, 2014). The guide, designed for both program implementers and evaluators, demonstrates a step-by-step approach to incorporating considerations of culture in evaluation. It includes specific strategies grounded in the professional standards program evaluators are expected to observe.

Why the Program Evaluation Standards Matter

Program evaluation is an important tool for all health professionals as it enables us to learn what works, what doesn't, and how we can make improvements. Although you may not have the primary responsibility for evaluation in your program, it is important to understand how your work intersects with and benefits from strong evaluation practice. In this way, you can ensure that the evaluations in which you participate (in whatever capacity) are high quality and ethical. To achieve this, a basic familiarity with the program evaluation standards, or simply "the standards," is essential.

First established in 1981 by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation and updated most recently in 2011, the standards are the benchmarks used to address the quality of evaluation efforts (Yarbrough, 2011). The standards are grouped into five categories, with the first four (utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy) providing guidance on the many decisions made in the course of an evaluation. The fifth, accountability, was added in 2011 and is unique in that it focuses on ensuring the evaluation is properly managed and documented. The CDC Framework for Program Evaluation in Public Health (CDC, 1999), shown in Figure 1, highlights the importance of the standards by placing them at the center of the model. (Accountability has not been added to the graphic, owing to its focus on managing, rather than designing and using, the evaluation and its findings.)

Stakeholder involvement is a cornerstone of the program evaluation standards. As we have come to understand the centrality of context and culture, our professional standards have evolved to include the recognition that cultural competence fosters stakeholder engagement *and* that stakeholder engagement can improve an evaluation's (and evaluator's) cultural competence.

The American Evaluation Association, in its Public Statement on Cultural Competence in Evaluation, refers to cultural competence as a "stance" (American Evaluation Association, 2011). If we think of cultural competence in this way, as an openness to continually learning from and about context and culture, we can represent the relationship as in Figure 2.

When both cultural competence and meaningful—not token—stakeholder engagement are present, we produce better evaluations that are more likely to yield useful findings that can lead to more effective programs. Attention to these aspects of an evaluation can yield valuable insights even before an evaluation is completed.

With their emphasis on stakeholder involvement, the standards provide a springboard to advance understanding of the cultural context of a program and its evaluation. The "Evaluation Standards and Strategies to Increase Cultural Competence" tool uses the 30 standards to organize strategies that can increase cultural competence. Our hope is that the tool will provide inspiration to program managers and staff, evaluators, clients, and advocates—all stakeholders— to develop their programs and evaluate them in a culturally informed manner. To get you started, we highlight a few of the standards and accompanying strategies. You can find the full list in Appendix A of *Practical Strategies for Culturally Competent Evaluation*.

Utility

The first group of the evaluation standards relates to utility. The utility standards are intended to increase the extent to which program stakeholders find evaluation processes and products valuable and responsive to their needs. These standards emphasize inclusiveness when thinking about stakeholders; implicit is an acknowledgement that respecting stakeholders' needs will lead to meaningful findings that add value to the program. For example, the second utility standard (U2) requires that we actively include various stakeholders in any evaluation. It also requires that we seek out all stakeholder groups, even, sometimes, critics of the program we're evaluating.

➤   **U2 Attention to Stakeholders:** Evaluations should devote attention to the full range of individuals and groups invested in the program and affected by its evaluation.

➤   Strategies to address:

○   Actively recruit and engage a range of stakeholders, including program participants or others affected by the program.

○   Ensure participation by affected groups that are typically overlooked or excluded.

Feasibility

The second group of standards relates to feasibility. The feasibility standards are intended to increase evaluation effectiveness and efficiency; they remind us that programs and evaluations use resources that could be directed elsewhere. To apply these standards, it is helpful to understand the cultural meaning and value of resources to the stakeholders. The following example is a strategy suggested for feasibility standard 3 (F3).

➤   **F3 Contextual Viability:** Evaluations should recognize, monitor, and balance the cultural and political interests and needs of individuals and groups.

➤   Strategies to address:

○   Understand the cultural, political, and economic context of the program; engage stakeholders to assure understanding among diverse perspectives.

○   Foster and monitor communications to ensure balance among stakeholders throughout the evaluation.

Propriety

The third group of standards addresses propriety. Propriety standards support what is ethical, fair, legal, and just in our work. This means being clear and respectful in our actions and responsible to all of the program's stakeholders. The inclusive nature of these standards is exemplified by propriety standard 1 (P1):

> ➤ **P1 Responsive and Inclusive Orientation:** Evaluations should be responsive to stakeholders and their communities.

> ➤ Strategies to address:

>> ○ Include a wide range of stakeholders, including program participants and others affected by the program, and engage them meaningfully throughout the evaluation.

>> ○ Consider power relations within the program when determining the breadth and depth of stakeholder involvement.

>> ○ Optimize the benefits of stakeholder involvement by focusing on the unique assets and strengths of individuals and their cultures rather than on their deficits.

>> ○ Acknowledge the contributions of all stakeholders to the evaluation.

Accuracy

The fourth set of standards addresses accuracy. Because the concept of accuracy relates to interpreting and making judgments about evaluation findings, we must recognize and respect the cultural lenses through which stakeholders make those judgments. The standards establish that accuracy in evaluation can only be achieved when we respect cultural values and understandings from the earliest stages of an evaluation. For example, accuracy standard 2 (A2) requires:

> ➤ **A2 Valid Information**: Evaluation information should serve the intended purposes and support valid interpretations.

> ➤ Strategies to address:

>> ○ Identify when key evaluation terms have different meanings for different stakeholder groups and build understanding among these perspectives.

>> ○ Learn and use key terms as they are understood by the communities involved with the program.

>> ○ Reconcile how stakeholders understand the meanings of key terms; guard against giving precedence to the ways they are understood by the most powerful stakeholder groups.

Evaluation Accountability

The evaluation accountability standards differ from the other evaluation standards in that they address the proper management and documentation of an evaluation, focusing on responsibilities for the evaluator who leads and manages it. The standards require evaluators to address cultural competence on every level, continually reflecting on the values we bring to an evaluation, the values held by the evaluation users, and the value of evaluations to improve programs and accountability overall.

Given this understanding of evaluation accountability, adherence to the standards would mean documenting the evaluation in a culturally appropriate way to ensure stakeholder understanding and acceptability. The standards also promote internal and external review of the evaluation itself. Meeting these standards means ensuring that all stakeholders are equal team members in assessing the program and being clear that cultural competence is a quality by which the evaluation will be judged. For example, the third standard (E3) is external meta-evaluation:

➤ **E3 External Meta-evaluation** Program evaluation sponsors, clients, evaluators, and other stakeholders should encourage the conduct of external meta-evaluations using these and other applicable standards.

➤ Strategies to address:

○ Clarify cultural competence as part of the purpose and standards for the meta-evaluation.

○ Seek out reviewers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion

Grounding our work in the program evaluation standards as we design and evaluate programs reminds us to listen openly without judgment and to maintain a willingness to learn: about others, about ourselves, and about how the programs we create and operate in the world.

References

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Key Points to Remember

- Program evaluation standards are tools that help both program planners and evaluators promote cultural competence.

- We can use the evaluation standards to verify that our programs and evaluations are meaningful, respectful, and practical for all stakeholders.

- We can and should develop our programs using strategies that promote culturally competent evaluation, especially given the increasingly diverse contexts in which programs operate.

- Effective programs are culturally competent programs.

The young women listen intently as I explain the pros and cons of the evaluation design. They ask what will happen if the focus group participants really "dis" the program. Will they be punished? Will anything really change?

When I first invited them to serve on the evaluation planning team, they seemed skeptical, and they were pretty tentative in their comments. But now, now they don't hold back. I can't tell you how many potential missteps they've spared us. It took some time to get here—probably an extra two meetings—but the investment has been worth its weight in gold. More than that, it was the right thing to do: valuing their voices in matters that matter to them.
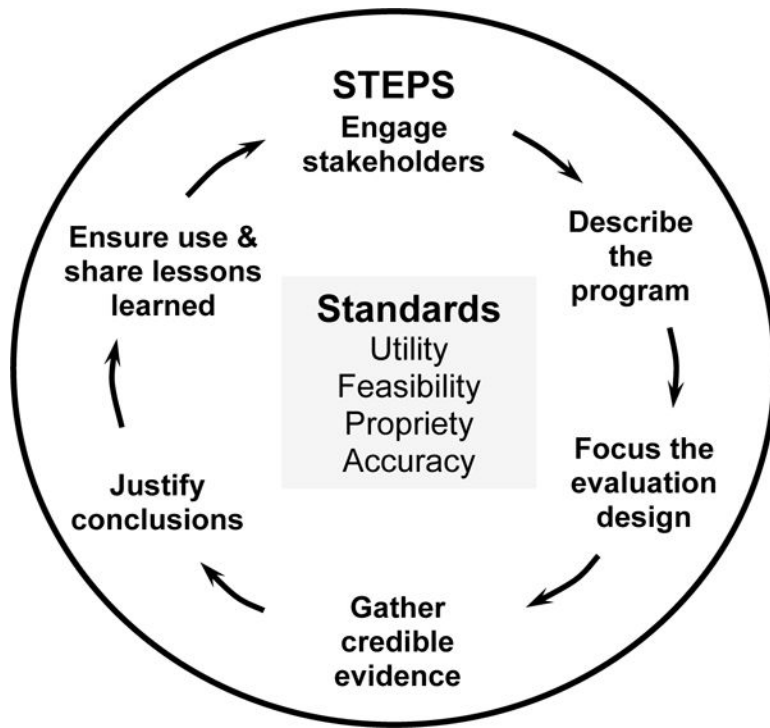
Figure 1.
CDC Framework for Program Evaluation in Public Health
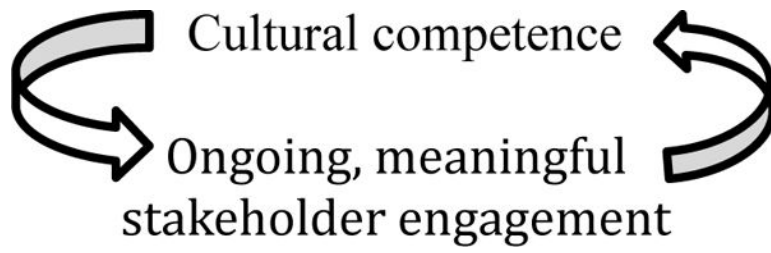
Figure 2.
Mutually Reinforcing Relationship Between Cultural Competence and Stakeholder
Engagement