

## TRADEOFFS

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In order to provide The Center with critical and constructive recommendations, it is important to look closely at the benefits and costs and tradeoffs of different types of data collection (what sort of collection instrument: surveys, focus groups, etc), how data collection is implemented, and the types of questions respondents are asked to report on.

### *Evaluation Instrument Type*

- Surveys / Questionnaires

Surveys or questionnaires can be done by participants with anonymity and can be implemented to allow respondents to fill them out at their own leisure. The greatest attraction to surveys is that they can be managed at relatively low cost to The Center, implemented easily, and can be constructed to allow easy analysis. However, surveys present a selection bias in that respondents may only provide feedback which is asked for and frequently have varied rates of response. Because of the fluctuation in response rates, The Center may not gather all the information it seeks. Participants may feel more or less comfortable responding on a 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' project. The Center would have to be diligent in collecting survey responses and potentially request feedback more than once which could disaffect project participants.

Surveys can be implemented at different points: Post project; pre and post project; and during some mid-point through a project in addition to post and/or pre/post. Frequently the types of questions asked in project evaluation ask for participant reflections or perceptions on topical areas. Questions of these sorts, while probably necessary, are hindered by the fact that each respondent has unique experiences which inserts a relative nature into the survey responses. A pre/post survey structure can allow The Center to legitimize some of the post survey responses. A pre survey constructed to mirror some of the material gathered in the post survey would allow a one to one before and after comparison with each participant, thus allowing a more detailed look at the effects of the project on each individual participant. Drawbacks of a pre/post format are that they are more costly and resource intensive than a post survey only format and they may introduce a sort of Hawthorne effect into the process. However, it can be argued that this Hawthorne can actually benefit both the process and the participants in that it essentially coaches participants. This is important because participant training has been identified as an important part of ADR processes.

A mid-project survey evaluation can potentially allow the facilitator or mediator to gain important insights into how participants are feeling or thinking and thus allow important issues to come to light or allow for process course corrections. However, pausing what is essentially an intervention in order to perform a higher level intervention can seem confusing and introduce kinks into what is a dynamic and fluid process (ADR). Further, a formal pause in an ADR process for an evaluation to take place can be avoided through backchannel communications between the facilitator and process participants.

Surveys can be implemented in a number of formats. Participants can receive surveys via handouts in person, via email, use a service such as Survey Monkey, or respond to them through semi-structured interviews. Emailed documents, Survey Monkey formats, and to a lesser extent handouts, allow respondents to complete in their own timeframe, as indicated above, provide some degree of anonymity of chosen (which for many people may generate a greater willingness to be forthcoming), and require relatively low cost to The Center. A benefit of a Survey Monkey style service is that analytical tools are part of the service's features. Again, the data collected in these manners can be limited to what is on the screen or piece of paper. Semi-structured interviews are high cost to The Center and provide no anonymity to participants. However, the ability for deeper dialogue, and thus data gathered, is pronounced. Further, one on one feedback and attention lets participants know that their thoughts and feelings are truly valued which invests them in the process and thus creates, perhaps, more reliable information. Semi-structured interviews can create strong relationships and help create goodwill toward ADR as a practice.

Many participants may not wish to participate in one or the other which creates a sampling issue. Because of this it may be useful to use a hybrid model where, for example, a Survey Monkey survey would be distributed to project participants wherein they would be asked if they were willing to meet in person or via the phone for a more detailed conversation. This hybrid model mitigates cost to The Center (in terms of interview hours) and allows participants to choose their feedback method. While respondents would self-select to each feedback method, this will still allow The Center to gather more data. However, it presents a problem for aggregate data analysis in that there would be two different evaluative instruments. This may not present a huge issue for The Center because the purpose of this evaluation instrument is to capture lessons learned and foster process improvements. If The Center were to embark on larger scale empirical research, there would need to be some compensation for the difference in evaluation instruments. At the very least the data collected from each would need to be presented as such.

- Open ended participant interviews

These are similar to semi-structured interviews based on survey formats mentioned above. Their difference is that they are intentionally opened-ended to allow participants to engage in a conversation about the process they participated in rather than asking them to answer a specific set of questions. This presents analytical problems when looking at aggregate data, transforms feedback into anecdotal information rather than standardized, and comes at high cost to The Center. Because of the time cost and intimate nature of this method, participants may have mixed feelings which could result in feedback from only those who self-select. Open-ended interviews may provide a great deal of sensitivity, though the broad reliability of them is questionable. (However, demonstrating reliability could potentially be achieved through detailed interview coding.) The transactional cost and selection bias of interviews and their coding can be higher than with other methods.

- Focus Groups

Focus groups are an alternative to variations of standard project evaluation. Focus groups ask participants to reconvene at some point not too distant after a process conclusion to discuss various aspects of the process (just as surveys ask participants to give feedback on various aspects). The costs are somewhat high in terms of time and resources to both participants and The Center in that a focus group is another meeting which requires preparation, moderation or facilitation, and summarizing. There are selection issues as not all process participants will be available to reconvene for a focus group, and asking for that commitment up front (perhaps in ground rules) is itself a barrier to entry in the ADR process. Further, in some projects it would be impossible to ask all participants to reconvene, The Center faces the painful task of choosing who to invite. However, a focus group can provide a type of feedback which is otherwise unattainable because participants in the focus group build off each other's comments and feelings, and through discussion are able to discover details of the ADR process which they may not have been able to by filling out a survey individually. If an ADR process is about a group of people finding a solution to a problem which could not be discovered by individuals, then a focus group is the mirror of this within the bounds of evaluation. On the downside, focus groups may also face challenges in terms of reliability and validity.

- Observation based

A third party neutral observer, acting as a process evaluator, could silently participate in a Center project and report on their findings. This method could possibly provide extremely detailed feedback, but would come at very high financial cost to The Center. Further, it would limit feedback to The Center to a single point of view. A fuller account would require observer based evaluation in combination with a second method of feedback.

- Case Studies

Another method for creating process improvements and identifying lessons learned is through the use of written case studies. A series of detailed case studies of Center projects could provide useful feedback and information for the development of future Center efforts. Case studies are an arduous task and come at a high cost to The Center. Alternatively, The Center could employ graduate level interns to write case studies, a resource which is at The Center's disposal because of The Center's relationship with UW and WSU. Case studies are particularly useful for assessing impacts and processes of a program (or project) which is unique, or one in which impacts are impractical or difficult to measure. Because of that they can be well suited to the sorts of projects which The Center engages in. Further, traditional evaluation techniques presuppose that the evaluated process assumes some rational and predictable path. Because ADR processes often take unexpected turns, the case study can be a valid way of capturing what happened, why, and the outcome in a way which traditional evaluation struggles with.

- Regional Practitioner Forum

Another method for capturing lessons learned and fostering process improvements The Center could engage in is collaborating with other practitioners. To this end The Center could host a regional mediator/facilitator forum in which practitioners from the Pacific Northwest (and perhaps nationally) could meet for several days, have panels and discussion groups and learn from each other's experience. The downside to this, clearly, is that it ultimately has no direct bearing on the projects which The Center directly engages in, either in the present or the future. It is certainly a wonderful learning tool for both The Center and the field. However, it does not provide direct project or programmatic feedback to The Center, and thus needs to be seen as a separate order of learning.

#### *Evaluation Participants - Sampling*

While it is clear that a project evaluation of this sort typically relies on information collected from project participants, with either surveys or interviews or focus groups, there are other sources of feedback as well. Project dropouts can offer an important perspective on project processes and outcomes, though gathering information from dropouts can pose complexities and require large amounts of time and effort. Community members impacted by the project but not part of the decision making process can also offer an important point of view for The Center to learn from, but again it can come at increased costs in terms of time and effort. Further, projects which The Center assesses that contain parties who choose not to engage in ADR comprise potential sample. While this does not directly relate to The Center's goal of *process feedback*, it is nevertheless a potentially useful feedback source for The Center. Who participates in project evaluation will be a sensitive issue regardless of what type of evaluation The Center uses or how it is implemented.

#### *Instrument Facilitator*

The Center's evaluation instrument (whether survey, interview or focus group) will need to be implemented by someone. Candidates for instrument implementation are: the project's facilitator or mediator, a Center staff member related to the project (or perhaps graduate student intern), or a neutral third. Benefits of the evaluation being administered by the project's facilitator or mediator are that they would have a deep understanding of the project in question and potentially positive relationships with project participants. On the other hand, process participants who have less than stellar feelings about either the process or the practitioner may be less inclined to interact with the practitioner or provide feedback to them. It is perhaps easier to sing praises than it is to condemn. Another issue with practitioner administered evaluation is unintentional bias being introduced into the evaluative process. Further, if feedback is requested from participants regarding the practitioner, practitioner administered evaluations face an awkwardness which could result in compromised data collection.

A neutral third administering the evaluation would not present some of the challenges with practitioner administered, however a neutral third also would not be able to benefit from relationships built between practitioner and participant. Additionally, a neutral third would probably

not have expertise in the topic are. While this would not interfere with the administration of surveys, it would pose a hurdle for feedback collected through an interview process. The main attraction to a neutral third comes built into their designation: neutrality.

Another possible candidate for project evaluation administration is a project manager. Someone related to the project and familiar with the participants and the process history, yet someone distant from the project itself. This could present a compromise between the two previous options.

All of three of these options and their considerations bear more weight on evaluation strategies which use one on one communication. For a purely survey method of collection the issue of how administers becomes only an internal issue. That internal issue is mainly concerned with time and cost and the possibility of bias. In either case, it seems that having the practitioner administer the evaluative process presents a possible conflict of interest for The Center.

#### *Implementation Timeframe*

Another issue to consider is when the evaluation takes place, regardless of its format. An evaluation which takes place directly after the end of a process may have its results skewed by 'post process glow/unhappiness'. This runs the risk of capturing the feeling of a particular moment of a process rather than capturing feedback about all phases of a project. On the other hand, evaluation delayed for a long period of time after the completion of a Center project runs the risk of diminished participant recollection.

#### *Instrument Size*

Regardless of the method used for evaluation, it must be useable by those involved. For surveys, those which are very short (under 10 questions) are easier for participants to complete while sacrificing the amount of data collected. Surveys which are very long (30+ questions for example) or complex can provide more information as the cost of potentially inhibiting respondents from completing.

#### *Survey Question Types*

Along with balancing instrument size is the challenge of collecting enough of the *right* information so that the evaluation is able to meet its goals. An evaluation instrument which employs only hard measures may be easy for participants to engage in and be somewhat easy for analysis, however it would lack a certain depth necessary to gain reliable insight into a project's process. Hard measures on the surface can appear reliable and valid, but because of the differences in participants themselves, hard measures may be somewhat superficial. Reports on soft and transformative measures can provide information on the process and its impacts on participant experiences. For gaining insight into lessons learned from Center projects this can be useful, however again there is the problem of reporting being relative to different perspectives among project participants. This issue is of course present with evaluation reporting which relies on participants reporting their perceptions as well.

Close-ended questions are easy to analyze and enhance reliability but provide less depth and substance and may inadvertently force invalid responses. Open-ended questions are more difficult to analyze and may require coding. They also present the difficulty of understanding a respondent's *meaning* via their words. However, open-ended questions allow for more detailed responses and can provide insight which close-ended cannot.

Likert scale questions are easy to answer and analyze, however they lack the depth and nuance necessary to identify lessons learned and foster process improvements. Qualitative essay style feedback may present difficulty in analysis, require considerable coding, and strain respondents. Using them in combination mitigates some of the issue.

Reliable and useful surveys should present questions in a straight forward manner, free of complications such as double barrel questions, double negatives, etc. The questions themselves should be written in a manner which does not create uncertainty and propel answers in one direction or another, and they should seek to create exclusive and exhaustive categories.