Clear Horizon submission to the Productivity Commission: Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

Clear Horizon is an independent consulting company that specialises in evaluation. The company was formally incorporated in 2005, and now has over 55 staff. Our staff work in the fields of environmental sustainability and climate change, international development, and social justice. In terms of our practice, our company is well known in the Australian community for participatory and collaborative approaches to the practice of design and evaluation.

We have over a decade's experience working with First Nations peoples to conduct evaluations. More recently, we have begun to strengthen our commitment to working alongside First Nations groups, recruiting First Nations peoples to design and implement evaluation.

This submission was drafted collaboratively by an Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff member. When drafting the submission, the authors considered what might be Clear Horizon's valued contribution to the strategy. We acknowledge that there is a wealth of cultural knowledge, of community knowledge, of academic knowledge, and of applied knowledge in the practice of evaluation with Indigenous communities. There is a growing body of knowledge regarding what constitutes best practice in evaluation which is generated by Indigenous peoples and Indigenous organisations. We were aware of Indigenous peoples and organisations who were submitting papers to the Productivity Commission. So, our goal with our submission was not to replicate the good work and knowledge of others but also to 'join the chorus' and contribute to a groundswell of voices that are calling for evaluations that best meet the needs of Indigenous peoples.

Having said that, there were some points we thought we could contribute to the Productivity Commission:

Section one: how evaluation has grappled with power in theory and practice. We would note that evaluation practice has historically been uniformly Western in its orientation. It's worth acknowledging that building Indigenous evaluation practices should ideally involve changes from multiple cultures, our fear is that the practice of evaluation in Indigenous contexts still relies on Indigenous peoples becoming 'bi-cultural', without a concomitant reciprocal change in orientation from their neighbouring cultures. Evaluators have been grappling with these issues both theoretically and practically for over 40 years, across a range of contexts. So, in section one, we discuss how evaluation has typically made sense of power and how it intertwines with the understanding and practice of evaluation.

Section two: our understanding of best principles. This is our 'joining the chorus section'. Here we acknowledge and affirm our understanding of and commitment to what is known about best practice in Indigenous evaluation contexts.

Section three: the liminal space between what gets written and what gets done. This is a more informal and reflective section where we reflect on our experiences of seeing organisations develop strategies and then struggle to reflect the spirit of the strategy. We included this section because our collective experience has shown us that organisations are typically better at articulating best practice in working with Indigenous peoples then they are at doing it. This is important to consider when developing a strategy, because the appropriate implementation of strategy is critical.

Section one: how evaluation grapples with power

Any theoretical, academic, or applied traditions and practices tend to be mediated by peoples who participate in overlapping and intersectional circles of power. People and groups hold power, and the powerholders of the day get to determine how theory is generated, how knowledge is constructed and the its implications for practice. The way that evaluation knowledge and practice is mediated is no exception.

- The practice of evaluation is shaped by who people think the evaluation should be accountable to, and people will have differing views about how the evaluation is accountable to. Usually 'people with power' get to determine who the evaluation is accountable to.
- The methods used to gather information about a program or project is informed by peoples or groups of people's personal views on what constitutes appropriate and adequate collection of information, and how reality is constructed. Again, people with power usually get to make these decisions.
- The judgement about the merit or worth of a program is usually mediated by people who hold power.

There is a rich theoretical and applied tradition in evaluation which seeks to understand the intersection between power and evaluation theory and practice.

- Evaluation theorists and practitioners have spent time debating the roles of values in evaluation. Whose values should be represented in evaluations? This is a particularly important debate when it comes to determining who the evaluation is accountable to, and who gets the judge the merit or worth of a program.
- Evaluation theorists and practitioners have historically engaged in (sometimes quite polarised!) debates about what constitutes the appropriate collection of information. More often than not, evaluation draws on social science traditions. Consequently, the debates about construction of reality follow fairly predictable patterns of positivist practitioners who think reality 'exists and is observable' at one end of the scale, and constructive practitioners who think 'reality is created by groups of people at the other end' of the scale.

When considering a strategy which seeks to engage Indigenous peoples in the practice of the discipline of evaluation, we would consider it advantageous for the peoples undertaking the development strategy to take some time to familiarise themselves with the history of evaluative theory and practice, especially as it pertains to the management of power in evaluation. It is also worthwhile to undertake a process of interrogating and criticising these evaluative traditions – because these evaluative traditions were written mostly by Westerners and their assumptions deserve to be scrutinised by groups of people who have not had opportunities to engage in theoretical traditions of evaluation.

It's time to get real here about how many communities and community practitioners view the practice of evaluation as it is usually implemented. The perception is not always great. (As evaluators we feel we are allowed to point this out!) These issues don't just affect the practice of evaluation in Indigenous communities but affect the broader practice of evaluation. The authors of this paper have collective decades experience in the conduct of evaluation. We see - more often than not - service workers, services users, and communities who are frustrated and alienated by the practice of evaluation. We surmise that many evaluation practitioners are feeling fairly certain about their epistemological and ontological orientations,

and they don't leave a lot of room for flexibility. Many evaluator practitioners get bound up in the formal practices of evaluation, to the point that they don't see that it is frequently the case the service workers, users, and communities are natural evaluators. In our experience, when a program is working well, we see service workers and communities who are naturally scanning the environment, identifying what works, and then making amendments. They do this intuitively and informally, and if an evaluation practitioner is not able to recognise non-traditional practices of evaluation, then service workers and communities continue to be under-appreciated as evaluators. It leads to the development of evaluation reports that don't always reflect the realities of what actually has happened, because the service workers, communities, and evaluators, have different understanding of the nature of how reality is constructed and the expressed.

Part two: how Indigenous communities have responded to evaluation

Along with a range of Western practices, Indigenous peoples have been required to participate and engage with the practice of evaluation, which is Western in orientation and which draws on a tradition of theory and practice, often conducted by Western practitioners. Historical exclusion from the practice of evaluation has resulted in a community of Indigenous evaluation practitioners and stakeholders who have grappled with how to engage in the practice of evaluation and how to 'make it their own'. A review of contemporary discussions about conducting evaluation with Indigenous communities has revealed a range of principles and practices that are best practice.

Identified principles of conducting evaluation with Indigenous communities

- **Recognising the diversity of Indigenous people.** We live on a continent that has over 500 Indigenous nations. It is not a homogenous group. This has implications for the design and delivery of collaborative processes. Consulting with one community does not represent in and of itself a consultation will all Indigenous peoples, and this needs to be recognised and articulated. Identification of which language groups need to be consulted at which times needs to be thought through. This also includes a responsibility to do deep consultation with Indigenous peoples, not just consulting with groups who are the easiest to engage with.
- **Recognising right to self-determination.** This means that Indigenous peoples have the right to have full participation in matters that impact on their lives. It means that evaluation should be owned by and accessible to Indigenous peoples. It means that ultimately, evaluations are accountable to Indigenous peoples.

Identified best practices

- **Being clear that evaluations need to reflect Indigenous values.** Good evaluation practice needs to ensure that Indigenous communities are able to define the values informing the evaluative criteria and evaluative judgements. This is not a straight-forward process, because as mentioned earlier, there are no one set of 'Indigenous values' and these values differ within and between language groups.
- **Collaborative and participatory process that are ongoing through the life of the evaluation.** Methods should be select that prioritise and amplify the voice of the community. Collaborative and participatory processes need to be interrogated for appropriateness and effectiveness. Interrogation of these processes needs to happen at every stage of the evaluation process. Collaborative and participatory process is not just about

- **Appropriate resourcing of evaluations.** Doing cross-cultural evaluation that is collaborative and which sits across differing epistemological and ontological contexts takes time. In our experience, evaluations are often not sufficiently resources so that best practice can be enacted. Development of resourcing models for evaluations with Indigenous people could contribute.
- **Reciprocity and the keepers of cultural knowledge.** Indigenous people usually carry the burden of cross-cultural practice, by this we mean that it is usually the responsibility of Indigenous people to sit across two cultures. Non-Indigenous practitioners normally work alongside Indigenous peoples who have cross-cultural knowledge. For true cross-cultural practice to occur, there needs to be reciprocity. This means that the non-Indigenous practitioners also need to be working across two-cultures.
- **Indigenous data sovereignty** is a global movement concerned with the right of Indigenous peoples to govern the creation, collection, ownership and application of their data. Indigenous peoples often don't get access to evaluation data that is collected about them. Communities who participate in evaluation have the right to view evaluation data and make their own evaluative judgements about the programs and projects that affect their lives. Indigenous data sovereignty recognises that evaluations are accountable to the Indigenous people they claim are benefiting from programs and projects. Data sharing agreements should be developed to store the evaluation data in some way with the participating communities.
- **Improving tender processes.** Documenting what culturally appropriate tendering processes looks like.
- **Accountability mechanisms.** Evaluators are usually accountable to the people paying for the evaluation. More often than not, this is a Government department or organisation who is also funding the program. The consequence of this is that the people implementing the evaluation see themselves accountable to the funder, the organisation is paying their wage or consulting fee. This often means that the expectations on the evaluator becomes intertwined with the political aspirations of the commissioner – and this may or may not align with the goals and priorities of the Indigenous communities who are affected.
- **More creative approaches to reporting which are accessible and even enjoyable to read.** Evaluation reporting subscribes to a range of culturally normative practices which favour people who are literate in academia and in Government. They are written in highly formalised language. Reports can be overly long. It is unfortunate that the concept of an evaluation report that is enjoyable to read seems almost a radical concept.

Section three: the liminal space between what gets written and what gets done

The Indigenous communities of Australia are not wanting for 'strategic direction'. Government departments abound with strategies for improving the ways in which they work with Indigenous peoples, and how we can collectively work to improve the lives of Indigenous peoples. How evaluations can be better designed to meet self-determination goals is already well documented. Indigenous people know what needs to be done.

We have worked in evaluation across a range of organisations, both Governmental and non-Governmental, and across a range of sectors. A common thread we have observed is the liminal space between what people write, what people say they want, and then what they do. Organisations who have well written and designed documents that articulate commitment to Indigenous people, to reconciliation, to self-determination, to respect for culture, still continue to fail Indigenous peoples. Why does this happen? Why do people say or write one thing and then do another?

We have worked in organisations who have very well written documents outlining their commitments to Indigenous peoples, and then we have observed the various ways in which the people in organisations have not been able to enact the very well written documents. We don't think it happens deliberately or consciously. It

happens for a variety of reasons. Firstly, people working across cultures need a lot of emotional and social intelligence. In fact, we would argue that capacity for emotional and social intelligence is one of the most important enabling factors for working across Indigenous and non-Indigenous space. It is also worth exploring how power gets expressed in workplaces through day-to-day practices, and how these can interfere with the implementation of strategy. Frequently, power is expressed financially, so decisions get made based on financial needs – either directly or because organisations need to orientate themselves towards those who control financial access. This has a profound effect on day to day life of organisations and peoples, and of course impacts on implementation of strategies.

When writing a strategy, it is worth reflecting on the reasons why strategies, which get written with the best intentions, sometimes fail to fully implement, and exploring what the impact for Indigenous peoples is when strategies fail. By exploring and acknowledging this, the strategy can make some headway into providing protective and empowering spaces for the practice of evaluation with Indigenous peoples.

Conclusion

- Evaluation is a historically Western practice and most evaluation strategies are asking Indigenous people to engage in Western practices rather than thinking about how the epistemological and ontological constructions of reality could be better oriented to Indigenous ways.
- Evaluation theory has a long academic tradition of grappling with power and how this impacts on the construction and implementation of evaluation. It is worthwhile for the people developing the strategy to spend time engaging with these traditions as part of the development of the Indigenous evaluation strategy.
- We feel the core components for an Indigenous Evaluation Framework are:
    - Inclusive decolonising of traditional evaluation theory – being prepared to throw it out completely or having knowledge of the rules in order to strategically break them down and capture the process of this for future knowledge
    - Valuing traditional ways of knowing to share and shift power
    - Authorisation by Government to do things different, valuing non-conforming approaches and knowing they are best even when they might feel uncertain. Shifting power again.
    - Government need to stop asking (explicitly or implicitly) Indigenous people to describe themselves in a way that makes sense to Government and the Minsiter
    - Providing a space to enable the bravery of organisations to do things outside of the status quo, providing a space for support from Government to make the change

    Finally, there is frequently a liminal space in Indigenous strategies between what people say the write, what the write they value, and then how they live in the world. This leads to strategies that never quite get implemented in the spirit they were intended. This can lead to stressful cross-cultural experiences. It is worthwhile considering this when developing the strategy.