Failing Forward Quickly as a Developmental Evaluator: Lessons from Year One of the LiveWell Kershaw Journey

Holly Hayes
Arnold School of Public Health, University of South Carolina

Susan Witkowski
Community Medical Clinic of Kershaw County

Lillian Smith
Arnold School of Public Health, University of South Carolina

Background: Learning to be a developmental evaluator is challenging because it is relatively new and sparsely documented in the scholarly literature. Developmental evaluation is intended to support the ever-changing and adaptive nature of complex environments. In a developmental, systems-oriented evaluation framework, the evaluator is embedded in the process to support and generate learnings from ongoing findings.

Purpose: This article presents the lessons learned through one case study and how the concept of failing forward can guide the evaluator's reflective process through a developmental evaluation.

Setting: Free clinic and community setting in Kershaw County, South Carolina

Intervention: NA

Research Design: NA

Data Collection and Analysis: The Evaluator documented mistakes and lessons learned during the beginning, planning and implementation stages of a complex community health initiative.

Findings: The evaluation team shares five mistakes made along during the journey and lessons learned. It's important for teams to understand what differentiates developmental evaluation from other types of evaluation and the role of the evaluator. The "critical friend" boundary can be easily crossed and the evaluator needs to have a strong understanding of the needs of the initiative.

Keywords: developmental evaluation, critical friend, failing forward

Introduction

Developmental evaluation is an approach that is increasingly being implemented by groups tackling complex social issues (Patton, 2011; FSG, 2013; Dozois, Langlois and Blanchet-Cohen, 2010; Preskill and Beer, 2012; Cousin, Goh, et al. 2014; Gamble, 2008; Rey, Tremlay and Brousselle, 2014). Evaluating a program within an innovative and complex environment requires systems-level thinking sensitive to dynamic and multi-factorial changes and that explores unknown paths and possible developments (Parsons, 2012). Developmental evaluation is intended to support the ever-changing and adaptive nature of complex environments. In a developmental, systems-oriented evaluation framework, the evaluator is embedded in the process to support and generate learnings from ongoing findings that allows groups to make real time course corrections (Patton, 2011; Patton 2013; and Parsons 2012).

Just as the strategies to solve complex social issues requires a fluid framework, so does the accompanying evaluation. Successful developmental evaluators find keeping an open mind and being comfortable with ambiguity key. They also have to apply the same principles in which they are evaluating the programs to the evaluation itself. Learning to be a developmental evaluator is challenging because it is relatively new and sparsely documented in the scholarly literature. This article presents the lessons learned through one case study and how the concept of failing forward can guide the evaluator's reflective process through a developmental evaluation.

Background

LiveWell Kershaw project adopted a developmental evaluation approach during the beginning stages of county-wide initiative. LiveWell Kershaw formed with the goal of becoming the healthiest county in the state based on Robert Wood Johnson's county health rankings (RWJF, 2015). A cross-sector of community-based and governmental organizations joined the local not for profit hospital, free community clinic, and Federally Qualified Health Center to complete an extensive community needs assessment and determine priorities. The SC Department of Health and Human Services noted the organization's assessment and planning processes and provided three years of funding for LiveWell Kershaw to serve as a "community laboratory" to test novel approaches for improving health outcomes.

The group focused on the northeastern part of the county to test how Community Healthcare Workers with community- and school-based health centers, and public health could improve the health of a rural area. Based on broad goals to integrate healthcare and public health, minimize healthcare costs, and develop innovative and sustainable solutions, LiveWell Kershaw proposed a collaboration process to meet their goals. The funder encouraged the group to build a model based on the community's needs and assets and document the entire story as it unfolded, with the hopes of guiding other rural communities in the state in the future. Given the uncertainty of how and what integrating clinical and public health resources in an rural underserved area would look like, the team embraced a developmental evaluation approach to guide their efforts.

The Evaluator began the evaluation journey in June of 2014 relatively unfamiliar with the implementation of developmental evaluation. The main sources of guidance were readily available resources such as published books, websites, or information gleaned from conferences and trainings. The Project Director began her role as a partner in the effort, directing a local free clinic. After a retirement and re-location of the two co-leaders of LiveWell Kershaw, the newly appointed Project Director began spearheading the newly funded initiative. The Project Director had worked with numerous evaluators in the past, primarily summative evaluation, with mixed outcomes. She believes in the value of quality improvement and frequently uses methods and tools to guide "course corrections" at the clinic and systems level.

The concept of "failing forward" resonated with both the Evaluator and the Project Director (Maxwell, 2007). Both knew that multiple mistakes would be made during this "laboratory experiment" and wanted to ensure that the mistakes could be used to move toward successful outcomes. Failing forward is defined as realizing mistakes quickly and responding to these mistakes by using them as opportunities to make changes and correct course (Maxwell, 2007; Howard, 2015). Since the funder and others considered the LiveWell Kershaw team in pioneering territory, there was a high tolerance for risk. This cultivated an environment that embraced mistakes and evaluated progress on a continuous basis to develop new strategies and course corrections along the way. Table 1 describes some of the key differences between failing and failing forward (Howard, 2015).

Table 1
Differences Between Failing and Failing Forward

Characteristic	Failing	Failing Forward
Motto	Get it right the first time	Test hypothesis, fail (quickly) and improve
World view	Solving problems is like baking bread	Solving problems is like raising a child
Beginning premise	If we plan enough, we can get it right	We can figure it out over time if we have a way to test hypothesis and improve
Implementation protocol	Follow implementation plan	Test hypothesis, iterate as needed, chart new course if called for
Use of data	Data used to report on past activities	Data used to test assumptions, guide current activities and inform decisions
When things go wrong…	Hide mistakes and/or apportion blame	Share mistakes, analyze and refine hypothesis and/or form new ones
Follow-up from mistakes	Increase intensity, continue doing exact same thing or stop doing it	Next step is dependent on lessons learned

The Evaluator kept a journal detailing activities, successes, mistakes, and actions taken to fail forward quickly. In addition, the Project Director and Evaluator discussed regularly how well the evaluation was going and what enhancements needed to be made in the spirit of improvement. What follows are the top five mistakes made and lessons learned by the Evaluator during the first year of the LiveWell Kershaw journey. The mistakes discussed are not the only ones made during the first year, but are considered "game changers" in both the approach used by the Evaluator and the insights gained on the process. This manuscript is written from both the perspective of the Evaluator and the Project Director with a description of the mistakes made and what occurred as the Evaluator continued to fail forward in her work.

Top 5 Evaluator Mistakes and Failing Forward

Mistakes #1 and #2 – Beginning Phase

Mistake #1 made by the developmental Evaluator was assuming that the Project Director and team members understood what developmental evaluation is and the difference between this type of evaluation compared to more traditional methods. The implementation team did not understand why the Evaluator wanted to be at the table and be and present at the majority of meetings; to clarify her role, the Evaluator explained the importance in developmental evaluation for the evaluator to be "embedded." Despite this explanation, there was a concern among some that the Evaluator was being too intrusive and serving as the "eyes and ears" for the funder.

As a result of this mistake, the Evaluator failed forward by taking time with the Director and the implementation team to explain the role of developmental evaluation. The Evaluator emphasized the non-linear and emergent nature of the project and the importance of using a framework that supported the particular stage of the project, in which is being "birthed". The distinction of summative (did it work?), formative (how is it working?) and developmental (what is it?) evaluations were made while underscoring the importance of using the appropriate evaluation approach based on the project and its stage within the eco-cycle. Key points shared and reiterated and several stages in this process included: 1.) The focus is on learning, improving and sharing; 2.)the Evaluation design is emergent and responsive to the needs of the team; 3.) the Evaluator wants to be your "critical friend" and 4.) the evaluation is continuous and using a "system" lens throughout the process. Once the implementation team understood the role of the Evaluator more as a "coach" and not a "judge," a shift occurred with the acceptance of the Evaluator and also utilizing the Evaluator more in planning activities (asking questions, facilitating, providing information or

linkages, reminding, visualizing decisions and match making).

Once the implementation team accepted the Evaluator, mistake #2 was made. The Developmental Evaluator's overly excited attitude about the initiative resulted in her flooding the implementation team with questions. While the evaluator asked pertinent and valid questions, implementation team was not ready to consider a large number of questions in a short time span. This caused the Project Director ended up telling the Evaluator that they "needed some space" to process and address concerns and test possible approaches.

In light of this mistake, the Developmental Evaluator failed forward by distancing herself from the implementation team for a period of two weeks. After much self-reflection, the Evaluator realized that the questions were not being a help to the group, but actually overwhelming the group and slowing progress. As a result, the Evaluator realized that the pace of the questions needed to be matched to the implementation teams capacity for addressing them; At certain stages of the project, issues can be addressed in rapid succession, at other times, the implementation team may not be ready to address multiple issues (i.e. branding statement, defining model for the CHW, communications plan). The lesson was that it is crucial to understand what stage of readiness a group is in, when considering potential developmental evaluation "interventions." Taking time to pause and reflect on the discussions, differences of opinions, and various options is just as important, if not more important, than asking questions. The Evaluator and the implementation team now go through stages of heavy interaction and also low interaction depending on what stage certain initiatives are in and when the Evaluator could most be useful to the team.

Mistake #3 – Planning Phase

The Developmental Evaluator spent an enormous amount of time in this stage facilitating meetings for the LiveWell Kershaw Groups at the request of the Project Director and team members. The Evaluator is an internationally certified facilitator and is well versed in facilitating conversations, consensus workshops, six month action plans, and strategic plans. As a result, some of the implementation team members began to believe that the Evaluator was the leader and project manager for the project which was Mistake #3. The Evaluator opened all meetings, facilitated the session based on rationale aims, and then closed

the meetings with next steps. The Project Director even asked for the Evaluator to serve as the project manager, since she believed that she was doing this already.

The Evaluator failed forward by clearly distinguishing the role of the Evaluator and the project manager, and that these roles could not be merged. The Evaluator emphasized the facilitation is commonly used as groups are grappling with the "what is it?" but that the implementation steps and delegation and monitoring of tasks was not part of the Evaluator's role. Following this realization, the Evaluator and the new Project Director met before all events to design the meetings and to determine roles. The Project Director opened all meetings, and demonstrated strong leadership for the project and the newly hired Project Manager facilitated all next steps after key decisions were made and closed the meetings. The Evaluator also shared facilitation tools with the entire team and "tricks" to build their own capacity to foster an environment for full participation, and designing meetings mindfully for meaningful results.

Mistake #4 – Implementation Phase

Nine months into the initiative and evaluation, Mistake #4 occurred. At this point, the Project Director considered the Evaluator "to be family" as the initiative was moving forward and making progress. The Evaluator spent at least 2-3 days on the field with the implementation team and became very close to certain team members. Surprisingly or not surprisingly, the Evaluator got wrapped up in personnel dispute amongst other members of the team. The Evaluator took phone calls from team members after hours and became very personally involved in the matter. As a result, the Evaluator became "part of the problem' and was not dispassionate enough to encourage and support a solution.

The Evaluator quickly realized while failing forward that she had crossed the "critical friend" boundary, which can be a precarious tight rope to walk at times (Patton, 2011). A critical friend is there to give "nudges", ask difficult questions, and share "difficult truths" (Langlois, Blanchet-Cohen, and Beer, 2013). The Evaluator's close involvement with interactions between team members were not in line with the spirit of the evaluation. As a result, the Project Director and Evaluator met and discussed the matter in length. It was decided that all phone calls from the implementation team members were to be directed to the Project Director. In addition, the Project Director worked with the individual team

members so they would feel comfortable sharing concerns and problems directly to her so she could "course-correct quickly" and not go to the Evaluator. The Evaluator also began more frequently writing reflexivity memos, recognizing that the personal self cannot be removed from evaluation, no matter how hard one tries. Questions the Evaluator pondered related to the critical friend role included: What information should or should not be used? Only information in the formal setting and not informally? What does an honest and objective evaluation mean? What is the right relationship balance? By practicing reflexivity, the evaluation was able to conduct her own evaluation instrument calibration while being mindful of assumptions and beliefs about the project. After this mistake, the Project Director and Evaluator worked closely together and fostered a spirit of "course correction" and improvement with the team during meetings, informal interactions and in written documentation. The focus of the evaluation and

also the project as w whole is on learning, improving and sharing. For this to happen, everyone needs to share to each other, even if the conversations may be difficult.

Mistake #5 – Implementation Phase

The Evaluator created quarterly reports for the implementation team and the funder to share progress being made for the various components of the project. Mistake #5 was made when much effort went into documenting timelines of events, decisions being made and describing processes without taking the next step and making recommendations that could assist the implementation team. The Evaluator had lots of digital files, field notes, and notebooks filled with descriptive information that was not being used to the fullest by the implementation team.
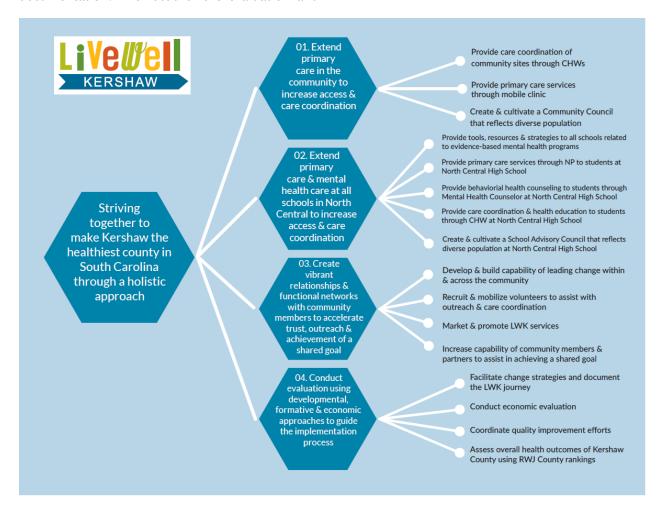

Figure 1. Driver Diagram for LiveWell

Reflecting on this, the Evaluator began spending time going through the observations and activities and creating detailed recommendations for each component in the quarterly reports. These specific recommendations were reviewed by the Project Director and adjusted if needed before being finalized in the quarterly report. In addition, based on the collective thinking of the group, the team created a driver diagram (Figure 1) for the overall project. A driver diagram shows the linkages between the aim of a project and the primary drivers that are needed to achieve the aim and the secondary drivers supporting the primary drivers (Quality Improvement Hub). The one page of "what is LiveWell Kershaw" with descriptions of the four primary drivers, has proven to be extremely helpful in understanding all of the pieces and how everything is connected back to "striving together to make Kershaw the healthiest county in South Carolina through a holistic approach."

Following each quarterly report, time is now spent with individual project team members on reviewing progress made, results of data collected (if any), and the specific recommendations for each of the four drivers. Monthly meetings are now held with each of the project teams on what priority actions are being taken, and reflecting on what's working and not working and how the action integrates with the project as a whole. The Evaluator consolidates the thinking of these team reflective meetings into visuals, and conceptual models that can serve as a reminder of what occurred at the meeting. Recommendations or insights are still shared with the team over the phone or in person as needed in addition the more formal write-up of recommendations in the quarterly report. A graphic designer works with the Evaluator to make the quarterly reports fun and colorful, and includes lots of photos, graphics, and quotes from implementation team members and participants in the program; this has increased the readability of the document and also served as a "reminder" of what has been accomplished. The quarterly reports are now celebratory and a time is given to reflect on what has been accomplished and what is planned for the next three months.

Lessons Learned

Through this evaluation journey, several lessons have been gleaned that we hope will help others on similar journeys. For our particular project and initiative, change is not incremental, but dynamic. The Evaluator went through "rapid" periods where lots of changes were occurring and decisions being made, and also went through "slow" periods where times was needed to process the implications of decisions and to take time to implement specific actions. The Evaluator thought that there would be a ramp up period, a settling in stage, and then a ramp down; this has never occurred. With developmental evaluation, there may never be a plateau stage, especially in community development work which typically involves a mix of paid staff and volunteers. It's important for Evaluators to be flexible and realize that there will be rapid times and slow times, and that this is perfectly fine and part of the process. Helpful practices during "slow" times can include: taking time to practice reflexivity, consider other tools and techniques to meet the group's current needs, go in depth on models the group is considering and document the story unfolding.

It cannot be understated, that it is so important for the Evaluator to practice cultural humility. The Client is the expert on their culture, their situation and their beliefs (Tervalon, M, and Murray-Garcia, J, 1998). It is important to stay grounded and centered with the needs of the client, and to not get distracted by perceptions from the funder or even other evaluators. Regardless of what others think (the Evaluator had some question whether she was really even doing evaluation), the Evaluator needs to accompany the client on the journey of its choosing and guide thoughtful discussion, and provide clarity to the group during their discovery process. The evaluation is not about you, but the client.

And lastly, it's important for the Evaluator to demonstrate openness through the journey and evoke new thinking into the group. The job of the Evaluator is to spur critical thinking, stimulate sense-making with groups, invite divergence, guide convergence, and ask questions that provoke thought and insight. It is critical to find ways to cultivate constant inquiry and curiosity on this journey, which is focused on learning, improving and sharing. Evaluation designs need to be emergent and responsive to the client's needs. The Evaluator sometimes views her role as a midwife that listens deeply and guides the group in awakening decisions and actions while also being an Evaluator at the same time ensuring the evaluation holds truth and rigor.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Evaluator and the Project Director hopes that this encourages others to be

comfortable sharing their mistakes, and more importantly reflect, make improvements and press on. The key with this type of emergent evaluation method is to fail *quickly*, fail often and of course fail forward (and not backward). The Evaluator and Project Director believe that the developmental approach was the appropriate evaluation method, and plan to continue refining the "what" over the next six months.

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