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**Promoting Evaluator and Staff Collaboration: The Case Study Approach**

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Today, many social service providers are expected to evaluate their programs and give information on implementation, effectiveness, impact, and cost benefit to funders. However, there are many obstacles that can hinder the program evaluation process. One obstacle that is often not discussed in the literature involves the relationship between agency staff and program evaluators (Piening, S. & Warsh, R., 2001). Without the involvement of staff, the information gathered may not be as useful for making changes to improve the program. One approach that can be used for addressing this obstacle in both process evaluations and outcome evaluations is the case study. Using the evaluation of redesigned family reunification program in two sites as an example, this discussion briefly explains the case study approach, and addresses the benefits for both evaluators and staff in using this method to promote collaboration.

The case study is a unique and effective approach for conducting process evaluations and designing and planning outcome evaluations. Process evaluations explore the social structure of the program and document the achievement of developmental milestones, the formation of inter-agency linkages, the resulting program structure and service delivery model, and outcome objectives. In comparison, outcome evaluations examine the extent to which a program achieved its intended purposes (e.g. effective in reducing risk factors, reunifying families, and creating safe and stable families that remain together). The case study method involves systematically collecting information regarding a social setting or group to assist the researcher to “effectively understand how it operates or functions” (Berg, 2001). Researchers using this approach may gather data from program documentation, archival records, open-ended and/or structure interviews, direct observation, and participant observation (Yin, 1994). The data collection strategies used with the case study method encourages the development of collaborative relationships among researchers and program staff in both process and outcome evaluations.

During data collection for the process evaluation of the reunification program, the case study approach provided the opportunity for greater communication and collaboration among the researchers and program staff. Staff acted as key informants in the data gathering process and provided insight into the client population served, their work with families, and collaboration with the state child protective service agency. Staff were also able to express their concerns, and researchers had the opportunity to address these issues. At first, staff expressed ambivalence regarding program evaluation based on past negative experiences, as well as their anxiety about the impact it would have on their work and the families involved with the program. Overall, there was initially a “communal angst” among staff regarding research and program evaluation.

The case study approach provided the staff the opportunity to express their fears and concerns to evaluators and administrators, develop a greater understanding of the evaluation process, establish relationships with the evaluators, and contribute to the decision making process. Questions asked by evaluators validated the work of staff, and helped the administration to better understand and appreciate the complexity of their work. Staff also were provided the opportunity to ask questions, and the research team was given the opportunity to address these questions and allay fears that staff had regarding the evaluation. This process helped to develop a greater level of acceptance and participation in the evaluation process, as well as an increased level of collaboration among the staff and researchers.

In addition, the case study approach assisted in the development and implementation of the outcome evaluation. Staff and evaluators discussed the nature and complexity of family problems and extent of services needed, information about program process and outcome objectives and suggested strategies for measuring. Through this process, the staff identified the need for a comprehensive assessment tool with strong clinical utility that would not be burdensome to them or program families. In their discussions with staff, evaluators expressed the importance of selecting assessment instruments that were normed and that measured objectives linked directly to program's interventions. Through these discussions, the staff and evaluators also were able to clarify the key components of the program model, and identify the major domains for the outcome study. Based on these discussions, staff worked closely with the evaluators and played an active role in reviewing potential instruments, as well as making decisions regarding data collection strategies and timelines. Staff played an active and supportive role, and there was a greater acceptance of the research process. This on-going communication during the development and implementation of the outcome evaluation lead to a higher level of collaboration among research and program staff.

As the evaluation of the re-designed family reunification program illustrates, the case study approach assisted in developing the collaborative relationships among staff and evaluators. Through this process, staff began to see the evaluators as team members, rather than outsiders. The staff developed a higher level of comfort and acceptance with both the evaluators and the evaluation process, and the case study approach enabled them to play active roles in the decision-making processes. Finally, the collaborative process also helps to ensure that the outcome evaluation accurately reflects the work that the staff are doing with families.

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