

# Participatory Data Analysis: Human Rights Issues Management in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade

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In an ongoing effort to increase accountability, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) is seeking ways to demonstrate its effectiveness and impact to Canadians. While its effectiveness is considered relatively straightforward to measure in terms of its international trade activities (e.g. joint ventures created, export levels increased, revenues generated for Canadian businesses), measuring the performance of its political and economic functions presents a greater challenge. How do we measure the results of twenty years of diplomacy in a region? How can we attach value to information generated on the economic context of a specific country? How can we assess Canada's performance in improving the human rights situation in a given country in isolation of a host of other external factors?

In January 1996, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) asked Universalia to conduct an evaluation of the management of its human rights function as part of its operational review of the political and economic function. The aim was to assess DFAIT's performance in managing human rights issues and thereby contribute to the development of indicators against which the Department could measure ongoing performance in its political and economic relations.

To assist DFAIT in determining its performance in human rights issues management, a mixed

qualitative and questionnaire survey research design was employed which addressed the following questions:

- What is the nature of human rights work being undertaken at DFAIT and how does it differ among functional and geographic branches?
- What constitutes performance for DFAIT in terms of its human rights work?
- What factors within the organizational structure and culture affect performance in DFAIT's management of the human rights function?
- How can performance be improved ?

## Methodology

Because of the nature of the evaluation and its potential for tapping sensitivities in the organization around organizational culture and structure, the participatory evaluation methodology was chosen in order to create ownership for the data collected and its analysis.

## Planning the Evaluation

From the outset, Universalia worked closely with the Evaluation Office at DFAIT in designing, planning and managing the evaluation. We jointly identified sources of information, developed data collection instruments and designed a methodology for involving DFAIT officers. This facilitated acceptance of the evaluation in DFAIT as the methodology and tools were contextually

sensitive and the evaluation team was perceived as being accepted internally from very early on.

The case study methodology was chosen as a means to examine specific performance issues in the Department as they relate to the management of both bilateral and multilateral human rights events. In order to encourage ownership for the evaluation findings and promote organizational learning around performance issues, focus groups were chosen as a vehicle for involving participants in both data collection and analysis.

## Data Collection

We gathered information from a full range of DFAIT stakeholders throughout the world including DFAIT officers at home and abroad, other government departments, and non-governmental organizations. We collected data through focus groups with political and economic officers at DFAIT headquarters, personal interviews with senior DFAIT and other government officials, an electronic survey of 500 political and economic officers overseas, and telephone interviews with selected ambassadors throughout the world.

To confirm the validity of the data analysis, a series of focus groups were held at various stages throughout the evaluation process. Focus group participants were selected so as to ensure a variety of levels and perspectives from among the political and economic function at DFAIT. An initial focus group was organized at the evaluation's outset to test and modify data collection instruments as well as to select the case study themes. A second series of focus groups was conducted to collect data around the four major evaluation questions outlined above. A third series of focus groups was organized to examine the validity of case study findings, and to complete data collection and analysis on each of the case studies. A final set of focus groups was undertaken to validate overall evaluation

findings and, based on these findings, to develop a set of recommendations for improving DFAIT performance in the human rights function.

Throughout the evaluation, it was interesting to note the evolution of stakeholder buy-in. Discussions in each series of focus groups became more animated and frank as participants witnessed their ideas and opinions influencing evaluation findings and recommendations. As a final step, evaluation findings and recommendations were presented to senior management at DFAIT.

## Results

Results included increased knowledge of the human rights management performance at DFAIT as well as increased communication between economic and political officers and senior DFAIT management. In effect the evaluation team facilitated the articulation of performance indicators and recommendations around improved performance by P/E officers and were able to package these for presentation to senior DFAIT decision-makers.

## Lessons Learned

By involving evaluation stakeholders in analysis of the data they have provided, one increases the likelihood of organizational learning.

The involvement of evaluation stakeholders in the analysis of the data they have provided, provides them with the time and a forum to articulate issues and ideas that the organization may not always afford. In DFAIT, there was no official mechanism for political and economic officers to reflect on and discuss issues of performance and organizational culture/structure. The evaluation allowed them an opportunity to collectively reflect on the nature of their work and to formulate recommendations that would be circulated to decision-makers.

For participatory data analysis to be effective, the evaluator must possess exceptional communication and facilitation skills in addition to the gamut of research skills required.

This participatory process changes the nature of the evaluator's role from researcher to group facilitator and articulator of participants' feelings and ideas. Because participatory data analysis ideally involves organizational learning, the evaluator needs to be able to guide people through the problem identification process to arrive at increased understanding of their organization and ways to improve their performance.

### Selected Bibliography

Anderson, G. (1997). *Advanced fundamentals of educational research*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Wholey, J. (1997). Trends in performance measurement: Challenges for evaluators. In E. Chelimsky and W.R. Shadish (Eds.), *Evaluation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

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