

Evaluating Practical Leadership in an Academic Setting

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Tales from the Field, a monthly column, consists of reports of evidence-based performance improvement practice and advice, presented by graduate students, alumni, and faculty of Boise State University's Instructional and Performance Technology department.

A Formative Evaluation of the Aboriginal Leadership Program Culminating Activity

Requested by the Canadian Defence Academy (CDA), a three-member team of Boise State IPT graduate students conducted an evaluation of the Aboriginal Leadership Opportunity Year (ALOY) Leadership Practicum between October and December of 2009. ALOY is a unique opportunity for Canadian Aboriginal youth who may not have had the prospects or ability to achieve the academic results required to qualify for post secondary studies. Along with academic advancement, ALOY provides the participants with an opportunity to develop leadership skills. The program was delivered for the first time in the 2008 academic year. The practicum serves as the culminating activity for the program.

Consumer Oriented Blended Approach

Discussions with the client (CDA) revealed a requirement to study elements of both management and consumer (practicum participant) oriented criteria, which resulted in the development of a goal-based formative evaluation of the practicum. This evaluation became the basis for determining how well the training prepared the participants to effectively apply leadership skills in both everyday situations and outside of the training environment. This blended approach subsequently allowed the evaluation team to provide recommendations to address any findings that impact the staff, the participants, or as appropriate both groups combined, to further improve the practicum.

Evaluation Question and Dimensions of Merit

The two-part evaluation question was: *Is the ALOY year end Leadership Practicum effective in preparing the participants to perform as leaders and what improvement needs to be made?*

Utilizing Scriven's Key Evaluation Checklist (KEC) (Davidson, 2005; Scriven, 2007) as an evaluation framework, four primary dimensions of merit and their value weighting were identified through planning sessions with the client. Each dimension of merit contained sub-dimensions that allowed for enhanced analysis of data and conclusions as shown in Table 1.

ALOY Evaluation Findings

The data from interviews, archival data, and surveys were triangulated to obtain the value ratings for each sub-dimension. These ratings were then averaged to determine an overall score for each dimension. Then, the overall quality of the practicum was determined by combining the scores from multiple dimensions and factoring different importance weighting into the calculation of a final score.

The evaluation revealed that the practicum was valued overall as a *good* culminating activity for preparing participants to perform as leaders, when measured on a 4-level scale (Poor – Marginal – Good – Excellent) as shown in Table 1.

The first two dimensions of Content and Implementation were rated as *Good*. The third dimension of Administration was rated as *Marginal*. The fourth dimension of Knowledge, Skills and Abilities received an *Excellent* rating, an assessment which was reinforced by staff observations of the participants

utilizing their leadership skills beyond the ALOY program. All eight participants who started the practicum successfully completed the training.

ALOY Program Leadership Practicum					
Overall Quality: <i>Good</i>					
Primary and Sub-Dimensions	Rating				Importance Weighting
Content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum alignment • Leadership Practicum 			✓		Very Important
Implementation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources • Performance review • Program assessment 			✓		Important
Administration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aboriginal considerations • Relationships • Quality control 		✓			Very Important
Knowledge, Skills, Abilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevance • Leadership • Transferability 				✓	Important
	<i>Poor</i>	<i>Marginal</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Excellent</i>	

Table 1. Performance by dimension

Recommendations

With the overall rating of Administration being *marginal*, it was recommended that this dimension be given the most attention as it has the greatest opportunity for improvement. Specific recommendations were offered in order of priority.

Administration - marginal:

1. Timely delivery of Lessons Learned reports
2. Common understanding of key program stakeholders
3. Capture Aboriginal best practices in control documentation

Content - good:

1. Conduct a Training Plan Writing Board (The Canadian Forces Instructional Design process)
2. Develop complete assessment rubrics

Implementation – good:

1. Formalize formative evaluations
2. Articulate special qualifications required by the ALOY staff

Knowledge, Skills and Abilities – excellent:

No recommendations

Additionally, the ALOY program could be strengthened by incorporating the following recommendations:

1. Create ALOY Community of Practice
2. Initiate planning to conduct a 2013 ALOY program evaluation utilizing past graduates

Exportability

This evaluation revealed that the practicum portion of ALOY demonstrated a strong potential for exportability within the Canadian military context. While the team did not evaluate the academic portion of ALOY, there is belief in the potential for this program to be replicated in other academic institutions in the Canadian Forces, such as the Collège militaire royale. Given the strong military flavour of the practicum, it was assessed that exportability to civilian universities and colleges would be less successful.

References:

Davidson, E. J. (2005). Evaluation methodology basics: The nuts and bolts of sound evaluation. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Scriven, M. (2007). Key evaluation checklist. http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists/kec_feb07.pdf

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