

APPLYING SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVES AND LEAN TO STRENGTHEN UTILIZATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION

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Abstract

This paper elaborates on how Utilization-Focused Evaluation can increase use and impact on society by drawing upon Lean and systemic perspectives of organizational development. The paper is based on a pilot case requested by the Swedish Government offices. Lean provides established tools for analysing processes and making sustainable changes. Systemic process facilitation of workshops with users creates empowerment and commitment.

Keywords

Systemic, Lean, Utilization-Focused Evaluation, use, impact

Introduction

A central part of the definition of evaluation is that it is useful, the *raison d'être* for evaluations. Still, it has been a major challenge to make evaluations used to really contribute to changes. Michael Patton has elaborated upon this challenge and developed a guiding framework, the Utilization-Focused Evaluation (Patton, 2008). The framework has been widely recognised, but the evaluation society has still a long way to go to find concrete methods to further increase evaluations' impact on society.

The field of organizational development has developed theories, methods and tools for making impact. Organizational development on the other hand has often rested upon a shallow evaluation. This paper elaborates on how Utilization-Focused Evaluation can increase impact on society by drawing upon methods and tools from Lean and systemic perspectives of organizational development. The paper is based on a pilot conducted in Sweden 2014-2015 on request from the Swedish Government offices.

The pilot case in which Utilization-Focused Evaluation and organizational development were integrated was centred on the creating of improved means to handle domestic violence. Domestic violence is classified as a "mean" problem, meaning that it has severe consequences, the definitions and causes of the problem are unclear, the responsibilities are unclear and there is no undisputed method to solve it. Based on this, the Government offices appointed Ramboll Management

Consulting to develop a method that municipalities and organizations could use to improve their work against domestic violence. To develop the method Ramboll cooperated with the local organizations in a pilot case to conduct a thorough process mapping of existing practices and collaborations, identify challenges and design possible solutions. The pilot case was documented and a handbook with the method was spread nationally.

Ramboll developed the method by applying systemic perspectives and Lean methods from organizational theory within a framework of Utilization-Focused Evaluation. This paper describes the method and learnings regarding how to increase the use of evaluations to impact society by combining Utilization-Focused Evaluation with systemic perspectives and Lean.

The paper initially describes Utilization-Focused Evaluation, systemic perspectives and Lean. After that, the paper describes the result of combining these three in the pilot case. Finally, the conclusions for other evaluators are presented: strengths and weaknesses with the combination as well as recommendations on future studies.

Utilization-Focused Evaluation

Utilization-Focused Evaluation has the same premise as this paper:

"Utilization-Focused Evaluation begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use; therefore, evaluators should facilitate the evaluation process and design any evaluation with careful consideration of how everything that is done, from beginning to end, will affect use. Use concerns how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings and experience and learn from the evaluation process." (Patton, 2013)

Utilization-Focused Evaluation has been described in short as follows¹:

"The Utilization-Focused Evaluation approach is based on the principle that an evaluation should be judged on its usefulness to its intended users. Therefore evaluations should be planned and conducted in ways that enhance the likely utilization of both the findings and of the process itself to inform decisions and improve performance.

Utilization-Focused Evaluation has two essential elements. Firstly, the primary intended users of the evaluation must be clearly identified and personally engaged at the beginning of the evaluation process to ensure that their primary intended uses can be identified. Secondly, evaluators must ensure that these intended uses of the evaluation by the primary intended users guide all other decisions that are made about the evaluation process.

Rather than a focus on general and abstract users and uses, Utilization-Focused Evaluation is focused on real and specific users and uses. The evaluator's job is not to make decisions independently of the intended users, but rather to facilitate decision making amongst the people who will use the findings of the evaluation.

Patton argues that research on evaluation demonstrates that: 'Intended users are more likely to use evaluations if they understand and feel ownership of the evaluation process and findings [and that] [t]hey are more likely to understand and feel ownership if they've been actively involved. By actively involving primary intended users, the evaluator is preparing the groundwork for use.' (Patton, 2008)

¹ The citation is from a not named author in BetterEvaluation, as described in the bibliography. Minor changes of the citation have been made.

Utilization-Focused Evaluation can be used for different types of evaluation (formative, summative, process, impact) and it can use different research designs and types of data. Patton's original framework consisted of a five step process:

1. Identify primary intended users
2. Gain commitment to Utilization-Focused Evaluation and focus the evaluation
3. Decide on evaluation options
4. Analyze and interpret findings and reach conclusions
5. Disseminate evaluation findings

The Utilization-Focused Evaluation framework can be used in a variety of ways depending on the context and the needs of the situation.” Utilization-Focused Evaluation is a guiding framework, as opposed to a methodology, so it can include a wide variety of methods within an overall participatory paradigm:

“Utilization-Focused Evaluation does not prescribe any specific content, method, or theory. It is a guiding framework, as opposed to a methodology. Utilization-Focused Evaluation can include a wide variety of evaluation methods within an overall participatory paradigm.” (Patton, 2008)

The citation implies that Utilization-Focused Evaluation is suitable to be combined with several methods. This paper describes how the guiding framework of Utilization-Focused Evaluation can be combined with systemic perspectives and Lean.

Systemic perspectives

This paper states that the goal of evaluations is to be used, to contribute to positive changes. In order to reach this, Ramboll Management Consulting use systemic perspectives to engage workshop participants and intended users as well as to create a common understanding and visualize the participants’ different perspectives. The systemic thinking is, together with social constructionism, the basis for the concepts and methods used in Ramboll Management Consulting’s process management. Central methods and theoretical background for this are described by Annika Lindén and Pia Halkier Bjerring:²

”Systemic theory was developed within biology in the early 1900s. In the middle of the century, systemic theory was also beginning to get used within family therapy, as a theoretical basis for understanding human interaction. Today, systemic perspective is used in many forms of change management for individuals, groups and organizations. [...]

The starting point for the systemic perspective is that the relationship (and not the individual) is the smallest unit in the understanding of the world. When we based on this finding should understand the meaning of other people's actions, it is crucial for the understanding and cooperation to be aware of the context in which the other person belongs. If we want to change the state of things, we need to explore the system's communication and parts, which organizationally may include colleagues, management, customers, culture, values , family and friends.”

² The translation of the citation to English is made by the authors of this paper.

As stated above, a strength of the systemic perspectives is that they help to engage people, which is necessary for making change happen. One possible weakness of the systemic perspectives is that if the participants have different opinions, the process facilitator or evaluator is not considered to stand closer to the “truth” than anyone else.

Lean

Lean is a concept for organizations with the aim of creating high quality of goods and services in an efficient manner with customer expectations and requirements (customer value) in focus. It is about creating efficiency using customer value as the basis for prioritizing what activities to put the greatest emphasis on and what activities to do as little as possible of – the activities that do not create value for the customer (wastes). Efficiency is therefore created by continuous improvements, removing wastes as much as possible. Lean is also a management philosophy that involves a bottom-up perspective in which satisfied and engaged employees are essential for long-term and sustainable development. It has also a top-down perspective to ensure a leadership towards set goals. The Lean concept is based on a systems approach with a holistic view rather than individual functions' efficiency. Lean is also about development through sustainable solutions based on analysis of root causes of problems and waste.

The Lean concept is derived from the automotive industry and is based on Toyota's production philosophy "Toyota Production System" that during most of the 1900s has evolved into what it is today. The philosophy combines management philosophy and practices. The concept of Lean is a product of Western researchers' observations of Toyota's resource-efficient and high quality production system. Lean is today a concept used in both production sectors and service sectors, and has been adapted to other industries.

The term Lean was founded at the end of the 80s with the publication of the article "Triumph of the Lean Production System" (Kafcik, 1988). Based on Kafcik's further research Daniel T Jones, Daniel Roos and James P. Womack published "The Machine That Changed the World" (1990). Jones et al provide a comprehensive picture of what Lean production means and describe Lean based on the four principles teamwork, communication, efficient use of resources and waste elimination and continuous improvement. Jones and Womack have continued to develop the Lean concepts and developed five principles with focus on implementation, which they describe in the book "Lean Thinking" (1996). Jones and Womack's five principles are:

1. Specify what creates value from the customers perspective
2. Identify all steps across the whole value stream
3. Make those actions that create value flow
4. Only make what is pulled by the customer just-in-time
5. Strive for perfection by continually removing successive layers of waste

Both books have been sold in large editions worldwide and have very much helped to develop and spread the Lean concept. The concept has continued to develop and interest in the method has increased as Toyota's successes. In 2004 Jeffrey K. Liker published the book "The Toyota Way" and described his version of Toyota's philosophy in fourteen principles.

In order to create a useful evaluation that can contribute to change, we see several strengths of Lean that can be used:

- Lean has a strong focus on implementation and execution of solutions – not just analysis.

- Lean is a proven method with good results and established tools.
- The Lean concept ensures sustainable solutions through root cause analysis.
- The Lean concept stands for a healthy, long-term development by the principle of continuous improvement.
- Lean combines a bottom-up and top-down perspective for a high degree of involvement of employees in combination with leadership.
- Deeply understanding the customer and customer value as the basis of evaluation. The purpose of public organizations is to create a better society for the citizens. Hence, it is often useful to deeply understand the customer and customer value.
- Relating the situation analysis to customer value. Consider to what extent the organization(s) have a positive impact on the citizens'/customers'
- Lean has a cross-functional perspective, thanks to the focus on the customer's experience of the product or service. This can also help to gather several organizations around a common goal.

We also see weaknesses with Lean to be aware of and handle:

- Within Lean, it is not entirely clear how to process meetings and workshops with groups of people being creative together.
- Lean requires leadership and great participation of people with hopes of influencing their work.
- Lean can be negatively experienced as a method to search for errors in organizations.
- Lean has in some cases been applied in a manner that has lost the fundamental perspective of Lean. The method has a bad reputation in some organizations, which can cause resistance to the method. In this case, it can be useful to avoid using the terms associated with Lean and involve the participants in a discussion about the fundamental perspectives, purpose and plan for the evaluation.

The first three weaknesses correspond well to the strengths of systemic perspectives: methods for process facilitation, involvement of people, leadership and positive change management by appreciative inquiry³.

Combining systemic perspectives, Lean and Utilization-Focused Evaluation in the pilot case

The problem to solve in the pilot case was to design a method that should evaluate and improve the work of the organizations that work with victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. The method should ideally be possible to spread to more locations than the location of the pilot case.

The following chapter describes how we designed a method to meet this challenge by applying systemic perspectives and Lean to strengthen our Utilization-Focused Evaluation. This chapter first describes the principles our pilot case followed, then the main steps of the developed method and last a deeper description of the steps.

The case followed six principles:

³ For a deeper understanding of Appreciative Inquiry, see for example Cooperrider (2008).

1. Improve holistically.
2. Focus specifically on the relationship between the various parts (eg. between different entities or organizations).
3. Have a listening approach and involve the target group, employees and first-line managers.
4. Focus on what the target group values.
5. Find the root causes instead of symptoms.
6. Create the necessary conditions for improvements that last and develop over time.

A systemic approach is overlapping a Lean approach in several ways, but the first three principles are closely related to systemic perspectives and the last three are closely related to Lean. All principles could also be presented as principles from Lean and all principles could also be presented as principles from systemic perspectives. This close link between the two approaches simplifies the combination of them. All principles serve the purpose of increasing the utility and use of the Utilization-Focused Evaluation and increase the impact on society.

Result

The method developed in the pilot case consists of seven steps:

1. Gather employees for a start-up meeting to adjust the method to their local needs.
2. Meet focus groups with representatives for the target group to evaluate and identify relevant organizations to involve.
3. Formulate the purpose of the organizations' work to evaluate against.
4. Understand individuals' routes by mapping and evaluating real cases by Lean methods of process mapping and identifying challenges.
5. Deepen the evaluation of the current situation and identify alternative routes and challenges by Lean methods of process mapping.
6. Analyse root causes of the problems by the Lean method of asking „Why?“ five steps for each problem. First ask why the problem occurs, then ask why the reason for the problem occurs, then ask why the reason for the reason to the problem occurs and so on in five steps.
7. Identify solutions to the root causes and prioritize the solutions in a diagram with value and simplicity on the axes.

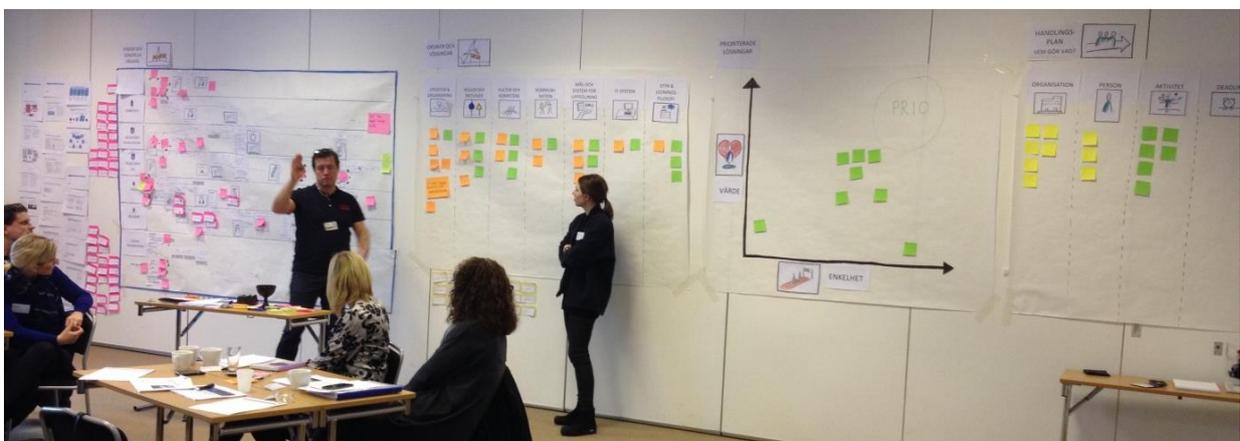


Figure 1: The workshops are based on communal analysis on the walls.

After the seven steps, the group can develop an action plan to implement the solutions and create a system to follow up and continually improve the organizations work towards the defined purpose using the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle from Lean. This is a way to follow the sixth principle, to create necessary conditions for improvements that last and develop over time.

The main data sources were focus groups with the target group, data from the involved organizations and workshops with intended users of the evaluation (employees and first-line managers). In order to increase the sensitivity to gender/diversity/intersectionality, it is important to choose focus group participants that reflect the intended target group and use techniques that make them equally represented in the conversation as well as in the analysis of sub-target groups. The view of the target group as diverse with sub-groups with different conditions and needs guides the whole evaluation.

Most of the steps consist of workshops with employees from the involved organizations. All exercises are drawn on big papers on the walls already in the first workshop in order to give the group a common understanding of the whole process. The evaluators' analysis is presented on papers on the walls and the group's analysis is added on the papers. Figure 1 illustrates this. By seeing all analysis on the walls, it is easier for the group to grasp complex issues and get a common understanding. Working together on papers on the walls with a common visual understanding and common tools for analysing follows both the third and sixth principle regarding involving employees and first line managers as well as creating conditions for improvements that last and develop over time.

The method Ramboll Management Consulting developed has been highly appreciated by the client, the target group, the users and new users of the method. The government offices' investigation chose the method as their first main proposition, the method was used on several other locations even before it was published and around one hundred practitioners have described how they can use different parts of the method. The users in the pilot case evaluated the method thoroughly and the average result was 4.2 of 5.

Conclusions about strengths and weaknesses from combining the perspectives

The target of combining systemic perspectives, Lean and Utilization-Focused Evaluation was to increase the use of evaluations in order to impact society. This chapter will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this combination in order to reach the target, as well as the need for future studies.

Strengths

Utilization-focused Evaluation, Lean and systemic perspectives can be combined to increase the use of evaluations to impact society. The method developed in the case worked well, so this section will just highlight a few aspects of the strengths. Utilization-focused Evaluation provides a well established framework for making an evaluation. Lean has a strong track record of making changes in organizations. Lean provides established tools for analysing organizations in workshops, crafting recommendations and methods for making the recommendations long term sustainable in the organizations. Examples of these mentioned strengths are process mapping, finding root causes by asking "Why?" five times, prioritizing based on a diagram of value and simplicity, creating a concrete action plan or a Gantt chart, forming implementation teams with team leaders and preparing for a cycle of continuous improvements. A strength from Lean is the power given to the target group and the users. The target group defines the purpose of the organizations, what to strive for and evaluate against. By letting representatives of the target group define the needs, all involved organizations

can strive towards a common goal and thereby increase their motivation to use the evaluation. The strength regarding users is that the users are trusted with description of the current situation, analysis and problem solving. How this improves the use and positive impact on society is described below.

Systemic perspectives provide approaches, methods and tools for how to conduct workshops to create group processes in workshops where you involve, engage and empower everyone, build a long term stable group and create a common understanding while gathering a large amount of evaluation data, draw shared conclusions and move the process rapidly forward. The systemic process facilitator has the role of listening and encouraging the workshop participants to listen to each other, understand each other and build trust. The participants are trusted to do a large part of the steering, analysis and problem solving. In this way, the users learn the analytical and change management tools, get the strategic picture, get empowered, engaged and craft solutions that are adjusted to what is possible to implement on their levels in their organizations and based on the needs of the clients they meet. One example of how one aspect of this is done as a systemic process facilitator, is to keep the workshop participants informed about the whole process for the workshops / evaluation and invite them to suggest changes to improve the process of the workshops / evaluation. This was done in several ways in the case. One way was to present the whole suggested process for the workshops and ask for feedback during the first workshop. Another way was to have all workshop exercises for the whole workshop series visible on the walls in the workshop room. Yet another way was to start all workshops with a check-in and finish with a check-out, in which the participants could say anything they like to the group and get an opportunity to suggest changes to the process. This was just a few examples of one single aspect, but the systemic process facilitation has remarkably many applications on how the workshops were conducted and this seems to be a core strength.

Many of the identified strengths have roots in more than just one of the traditions, e.g. the empowerment of the users is common for Utilization-Focused Evaluation, Lean and systemic perspectives.

Weaknesses

The weaknesses in this case are of different categories. Some weaknesses are specific for the pilot, but not as an example of weaknesses in combining systemic perspectives, Lean and Utilization-Focused Evaluation. One example is that the pilot was funded by the government offices, so the local organizations were less involved and engaged. The more interesting category of weaknesses are the difficulties that occur as a result of combining systemic perspectives, Lean and Utilization-Focused Evaluation, which will be described below.

One possible difficulty is the strong post-modernist tradition within systemic perspectives as opposed to the more positivist Lean and evaluation traditions. This creates differences on a more concrete level, e.g. regarding how to value the evaluator's perspective compared to the users' or target groups' perspectives or how to emphasize the separate parts or the system as a whole. We did not encounter this as a problem during the pilot, but we see the potential difficulties. The differences could possibly also be used as a strength in order to flexibly adjust the evaluation method to the

specific needs of the specific situation and needs of the evaluation object in order to make the evaluation useful and impact society.

Within the systemic tradition, Appreciative Enquiry is based on changing organizations and people by focusing on the positive: Vision, strengths and what already works well. The reason for this is that a negative focus risks decreasing the change energy among the users / change agents whereas a positive focus increases the energy to make changes happen. However, a central part of Lean is to find errors and waste in order to eliminate these. Lean still has the positive vision in mind, but there is a conflict between Lean and Appreciative Enquiry. In our case, we chose to still identify the negative and improve it. However, it would be possible to adjust the method of the pilot to instead identify the strengths and find ways for the organization to take greater advantage of the strengths. In this way, Lean and systemic perspectives can be combined, and they can even be adjusted to suit the specific needs of the situation at hand. If one organization needs a more positive approach, the combination can be tweaked towards this, and if another organization needs a stronger focus on how to identify and improve flaws, the combination can be tweaked towards this.

One possible weakness of the combination of systemic perspectives, lean and Utilization-Focused Evaluation is that it might be dependent on that the evaluation objects are organizations with several evaluation users and have the goal of serving a target group. The users and target groups were central for combining Lean, systemic perspectives and Utilization-Focused Evaluation. The users are central for participating in the workshops. The common goal of serving a target group is central because without a *common* goal, the systemic perspective and systemic process facilitation risk losing direction and hence not leading forward to an evaluation that is useful and create change.

Future studies

The combination of systemic perspectives, Lean and Utilization-Focused Evaluation seems to give good results in the pilot. This indicates a potential to increase evaluation use and impact on society on a greater scale. In order to reach this, several questions need to be answered and areas need to be investigated further.

This case was only one example of what seems to be a success. Have systemic perspectives, Lean and Utilization-Focused Evaluation been combined several times before? What are the key learnings? What are the results? Does the combination seem to work better than using other methods in those cases? How have systemic perspectives, Lean and Utilization-Focused Evaluation been combined? What combinations have functioned better? Under what circumstances is it beneficial to combine systemic perspectives, Lean and Utilization-Focused Evaluation?

How can evaluators combine systemic perspectives, Lean and Utilization-Focused Evaluation in other situations? It is not clarified in depth how the three traditions can and cannot be combined. Further, it is not clarified in a simple step by step process for others to *easily* combine in a more generic way. Our pilot developed one step by step method as a handbook, but this is just one example. Can Utilization-Focused Evaluation be further improved by inspiration from systemic perspectives or Lean?

Can the combination of the perspectives (the method developed in the pilot) get improved in a general way? How would it work to focus more on strengths as in Appreciative Inquiry, rather than focusing on the flaws?

The field of organizational development has a strong track record of making impact, but organizational development often rests upon a shallow evaluation. What can the field of evaluation learn about making impact from the field of organizational development? What can the field of organizational development learn from the field of evaluation?

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