

# Jointly Evaluating a Partnership Improves and Strengthens It

Paul Barnes, Deputy Commissioner, Social Security Administration  
Bill Lubking, Management Analyst, Social Security Administration  
Hinda Sterling, Ph.D., Senior Partner, Sterling & Selesnick, Inc.



# Jointly Evaluating a Partnership Improves and Strengthens It<sup>1</sup>

When, in October 1993, President Clinton signed into effect Executive Order 12871, he initiated a new era of labor relations in the federal government. In doing so, he challenged executive agency managers and federal employee unions to become working partners focused on improving the delivery of services to the American public and enhancing the quality of work life for federal employees. Section 2(e) of that Executive Order directs the parties in each agency to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of their partnership—a complex and challenging task.

The idea of evaluating any cooperative efforts program is a daunting one, especially one as wide ranging and intricate as a labor-management partnership. Added to the task's complexity (and, in the case of larger agencies, its magnitude) is a nagging fear for most of us—the fear of being evaluated and of having the results of that evaluation become public. When we conducted the Social Security Administration (SSA) partnership evaluation workshops in Atlanta and in Denver, we observed the following common concerns among the workshop participants:

- How do we begin the evaluation?
- What methodology should we use?
- Should we conduct the evaluation ourselves or hire “outside experts” to conduct it?
- If the evaluation findings show that our partnership is not working, does that make the partnership (or us) a failure?
- What if we fail at gathering the information, or worse, what if the evaluation process has a negative impact on our partnership and on our working relationship?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Our SSA experience indicates that when partners begin the evaluation process with an open and honest attempt to learn how to improve their relationship, the evaluation is a positive experience no matter what the findings reveal.

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on remarks delivered by the authors at the May 1999 Skills-Building Conference sponsored by the National Partnership Council to encourage and support labor-management partnership efforts in federal executive agencies. The Social Security Administration was the first federal agency to undertake the task of evaluating their partnership which was successfully completed on March 24, 1998. This undertaking was lead by Bill Lubking under the auspices of the SSA National Partnership Council. Paul Barnes served as co-sponsor of the activity along with AFGE's Jeff Sumberg. Messrs. Barnes and Lubking were assisted in preparing and presenting these remarks by Dr. Hinda Sterling of Sterling & Selesnick, Inc., an organization consulting firm with over 25 years' experience helping federal agencies and employee unions to improve and evaluate their working relationships.

## ■ HOW DO WE BEGIN THE EVALUATION?

First, the parties should discuss and agree upon operational and behavioral ground rules regarding how the process will proceed. Questions to ask and answer include: Who should do the evaluation? (Us? A joint committee? An outside organization?) Who will pay for it, and out of what funds? How much time will be allocated to the evaluation and what will its time frame be from start to finish? What should be the composition of the study team? How will they prepare and present the information? By discussing these issues openly and honestly up front, the partners will gain an understanding of each others' respective interests and concerns about the evaluation process and the use of its results. When the SSA decided to undertake the task of evaluating its partnership with the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), the SSA National Partnership Council (NPC) chartered an internal team to: evaluate the progress of the Agency's labor-management partnership, make recommendations for the future, and issue a formal report summarizing its findings. An eight-member union-management team worked together applying partnership principles and techniques to identify: progress and problems, success stories for use as future models, areas where the partnership is not working, and ways to improve the partnering process.

## ■ SHOULD WE CONDUCT THE EVALUATION OR HIRE OUTSIDE EXPERTS?

To determine who should conduct the evaluation, the partners should identify the audience for the final evaluation report and how the report will ultimately be used. If the partners believe the audience is Congress or another high-level review body, then perhaps they may want to hire an outside technical consulting group. If, however, the partners believe they are the ultimate audience for the report, and that part of the evaluation process is learning more about the challenges and opportunities of partnership, then the partners themselves may want to be in charge of the evaluation. "Being in charge" can run the gamut from hiring a contractor to conduct the evaluation to conducting the evaluation with the help of outsiders who have expertise in evaluation methods and labor-management partnerships to conducting the evaluation entirely on their own, as was done for the SSA-AFGE partnership evaluation.

Before selecting the evaluators, the partners should consider the advantages and disadvantages of the alternative approaches. Hiring outside, scientific experts to conduct the evaluation maximizes objectivity. Sophisticated data analyses can be accomplished relatively easily and the partners do not have to commit to spending time away from their jobs. These advantages must be weighed against a possible lack of sensitivity to the subtleties and complexities of the human interactions involved and the possibility of unintentionally missing important partnership issues.

By choosing to conduct the evaluation themselves, the partners will be able to: pay attention to information that is meaningful to the partnership stakeholders, be sensitive to multiple points of view, and learn more from the process. Potential limitations to the partners undertaking the evaluation task themselves are lack of objectivity (the potential to be susceptible to certain types of information or interests) and lack of sufficient time or resources to do justice to the evaluation.

The SSA decided to conduct its partnership evaluation as an internal initiative because the Agency Commissioner and the SSA NPC comprised the primary audience for its findings. The Agency wished to conduct a high-impact, quick-turnaround self assessment to determine the level of progress under the partnership and to identify what needed to be the partnership's focus in the immediate future. Selected to serve on the

evaluation team were field office and central office SSA staff representing both management and the union and possessing analytical skills, partnership experience and knowledge of Agency roles and responsibilities.

■ **IF WE DO IT OURSELVES, WHAT METHODOLOGY SHOULD WE USE?**

There are a number of approaches to evaluating a labor-management partnership—ranging from strictly quantitative to strictly qualitative. A strictly quantitative approach tells “what” (how many, how costly, etc.) but not “how” or “why.” A strictly qualitative

approach is rich in anecdotal detail (the “how” and the “why”) but may suffer from lack of measures (the “what”). There is no right or wrong methodology; it depends on the ultimate audience for the findings and what the parties wish to do with the results. A balanced approach includes both quantitative and qualitative measures as illustrated by the SSA evaluation.

The SSA evaluation approach was designed to determine how well the SSA-AFGE partnership was working by using a structures approach to examine a broad range of partnership activities and issues. We conducted individual interviews with over 160 employees who were directly involved with Agency partnership initiatives (e.g., chairs or co-chairs of every council, other union and management council representatives, and partnership work group participants). In addition, SSA regional and central office personnel who had been participants in partnership activities at various organizational levels of the Agency completed a partnership evaluation questionnaire. We also reviewed and analyzed all the pertinent information and statistics available from the SSA Office of Labor Management and Employee Relations. Finally, to ensure that all partnership activities were properly accounted for, we conducted an inventory and created a database of over 1,500 Agency partnership initiatives.

■ **IF THE EVALUATION FINDINGS SHOW THAT OUR PARTNERSHIP IS NOT WORKING, DOES THAT MAKE THE PARTNERSHIP (OR US) A FAILURE?**

Failures occur when there is no learning from the evaluation experience. The evaluation results will likely illuminate the partnership’s strengths and highlight those areas where the partnership needs improvement. Finding *joint* ways to improve the partnership without blaming each other will strengthen the partnering relationship and its positive impact on both the agency and the union.

The SSA evaluation results revealed obstacles to partnership that the Agency, in conjunction with the SSA NPC, needed to address. Despite progress in many areas, there remained an unwillingness to let go of old attitudes, a need to improve partnership communications throughout SSA and between councils regarding, and a lack of clarity concerning the role of some councils. Currently, the SSA NPC is closely examining the shortfalls identified in the evaluation report and proposing corrective action strategies.

■ **WHAT IF WE FAIL AT GATHERING THE INFORMATION, OR WORSE, WHAT IF THE EVALUATION PROCESS HAS A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON OUR PARTNERSHIP AND ON OUR WORKING RELATIONSHIP?**

It is our experience that partners who work together candidly and honestly will not weaken their relationship by evaluating it. The ground rules and behavioral guidelines developed and accepted by the parties before the process begins will act as an important monitor and guide for the partners’ attitudes and behaviors during the evaluation. It is

important that the partners remember the ultimate use of the final evaluation report is *for their own learning and growth*. Any recognition they may receive for having conducted the evaluation is just a bonus.

The SSA partnership evaluation experience is a strong demonstration that labor-management partners are capable of deep, analytical and candid self-exploration, and that this critical self-assessment can be a transforming process and an energizing experience for labor-management partners. We wish all of you the best of luck in your respective partnership evaluation activities.