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Facilitating Evaluation to Enhance Use

The interpersonal factor: This matters for actually conducting the evaluation, because creating, managing, and mastering interpersonal dynamics increases the likelihood of successfully interacting with and constructively involving others in doing the work of evaluation. Simply put, evaluators must interact with people, particularly primary intended users, to successfully conduct evaluations that will produce useful results and, therefore must be able to skillfully facilitate interactions that promote constructive interpersonal dynamics with and among those involved.

Laurie Stevahn and Jean King (2016, p. 68)

Facilitating Interactive Evaluation Practice:

Engaging Stakeholders Constructively

Evaluators need more than methodological knowledge and research skills. Core evaluator competencies include not only systematic inquiry skills but essential competencies in situation analysis, project management, professional practice, reflective practice, and interpersonal competence (Stevahn, King, Ghore, & Minnema, 2005). Interpersonal competence includes techniques and skills in communicating with stakeholders, conflict mitigation and management, and a variety of facilitation techniques and skills. This means knowing how

to work with a variety of stakeholders in a variety of situations. This book takes up that challenge.

● EVALUATION FACILITATION

Integrating Generic Facilitation Competencies with Essential Evaluation Competencies

In Chapter 1, I presented the niche of evaluation facilitation as special—and specialized—application of general facilitation skills. The International Association of Facilitators (IAF) has identified six core facilitator competencies. The American Evaluation Association (AEA) has identified essential evaluator competencies. Exhibit 2.1 presents these two sets of competencies side by side.

While the specific language used by the IAF and AEA differs, there are important similarities in emphasis. Both groups promote professionalism, having a solid knowledge foundation, demonstrating appropriate skills, engaging in situation analysis, being able to manage the work required for success, cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness, and interpersonal competence to establish meaningful and appropriate relationships as a basis for effectively working with others. This chapter focuses on the overlap where facilitation supports the work of evaluation and evaluators draw on, apply, and adapt facilitation knowledge, techniques, and skills. Let me begin with some evaluation facilitation scenarios.

● EVALUATION FACILITATION SCENARIOS

Evaluation facilitators must have skills in group process, negotiation, conflict resolution, group problem-solving, and decision-making dynamics. Below are seven examples of the situations evaluators can encounter that require skilled facilitation.

1. Teachers, school administrators, parents, and state education officials disagree about whether an evaluation should include data about school climate. They also disagree about what school climate is. What will be included in the evaluation must be negotiated.
2. Nurses, clinic administrators, physicians, insurance company representatives, and federal health officials have quite different views about how much emphasis should be placed on prevention and where in the health system accountability rests for prevention

Exhibit 2.1 Comparison of Competencies for Facilitation and Evaluation

Core Facilitator Competencies (IAF, 2017)	Categories of Essential Evaluator Competencies (AEA draft, 2017)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Create collaborative client relationships:</i> Develop working partnerships; design and customize applications to meet client needs; manage multisession events effectively. 2. <i>Plan appropriate group processes:</i> Select clear methods and processes; prepare time and space to support group process. 3. <i>Create and sustain a participatory environment:</i> Demonstrate effective participatory and interpersonal communication skills; honor and recognize diversity, ensuring inclusiveness; manage group conflict; evoke group creativity. 4. <i>Guide group to appropriate and useful outcomes:</i> Guide with clear methods and processes; facilitate group self-awareness about its task; guide the group to consensus and desired outcomes. 5. <i>Build and maintain professional knowledge:</i> Maintain a base of knowledge; know a range of facilitation methods; maintain professional standing. 6. <i>Model positive professional attitude:</i> Practice self-assessment and self-awareness; act with integrity; trust group potential and model neutrality. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Professional competence:</i> focuses on what makes evaluators distinct as practicing professionals. 2. <i>Methodological competence:</i> focuses on technical aspects of inquiry, such as framing questions, designing studies, sampling, collecting and analyzing data, interpreting results, and reporting findings. 3. <i>Contextual competence:</i> focuses on understanding the unique circumstances and settings of evaluations and their users/ stakeholders. 4. <i>Management competence:</i> focuses on logistics such as determining and monitoring work plans, time lines, resources, and other components needed to complete and deliver the study. 5. <i>Interpersonal competence:</i> focuses on human relations and social interactions that ground evaluator effectiveness. 6. <i>Cultural competence:</i> evaluator is prepared to engage with diverse segments of communities to include cultural and contextual dimensions important to the evaluation.

Source: International Association of Facilitators, <http://www.eval.org/p/cm/ld/fid=472/American> Evaluation Association, <https://www.iaf-world.org/site/professional/core-competencies>

outcomes. They also are in conflict about what prevention outcomes should be measured. Evaluation facilitation will require conflict resolution processes.

3. The program officer from the philanthropic foundation funding a developmental disabilities initiative is part of an evaluation task force that includes not-for-profit grantees, an advocacy organization that promotes the rights of people with disabilities, a university researcher with scholarly expertise in developmental disabilities, and the state administrator for disability services. The researcher proposes an evaluation using a randomized controlled trial. The advocates insist on consumer choice and are adamantly opposed to randomization. The grantees are concerned that the foundation's objectives overpromise what can reasonably be accomplished and want to scale back the outcome targets. The state administrator is worried that the state will be expected to pick up the initiative if it is successful and doesn't see the state having future funds to sustain such an initiative. Facilitating evaluation will involve finding common ground among these diverse perspectives to produce an evaluation design and agreed-upon measures.
4. A federal and state collaboration on reducing juvenile crime includes data management staff who use different systems with different codes. They are territorial about their own data system, and each wants the other to change forms and indicators to make the integrated system compatible with their own preferences. City, county, state, and federal data systems are incompatible. There are additional barriers to sharing data because of different data privacy procedures. And in designing a new survey aimed at high school students, some want even-numbered scales (no midpoint) while others insist on odd-numbered scales. It's hard to tell how much this is a technical debate, how much is power dynamics, and how much is just good old personality conflict. For an evaluation to get done, these issues must be resolved without undermining the evaluation's credibility and utility.
5. The evaluation task force for a sustainable agricultural development project in Asia includes three small farmers, an agricultural extension agent, an agronomist, a soil scientist, a crop breeder, a hydrologist, an integrated pest management specialist, and a gender issues expert. They have differing views and definitions of sustainability, different priorities, and divergent areas of

expertise. Facilitating the evaluation will involve finding a way to incorporate these divergent views within an overall systems change framework.

6. A multicountry HIV/AIDS initiative in Africa involves a collaboration among nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), two major philanthropic foundations, the World Health Organization (WHO), health officials from participating countries, and community representatives. Each comes with their own accountability mandates from the organizations and constituencies they represent. Those mandates differ in significant ways. The initiative cannot get underway until the collaborating parties agree on evaluation indicators and accountability targets.
7. A community-based environmental initiative includes an evaluation task force with environmental activists, private sector homebuilders, the city mayor's chief of staff, and the citizens' organization representing the community where the initiative will take place. All agree that the initiative is a good idea and badly needed, but they are suspicious of each other, have a long history of antagonism, and have very different priorities for the initiative. For the initiative to have any chance of succeeding, they need to agree on priority outcomes and what will constitute success or failure. These are ultimately evaluation issues, so the evaluator is asked to facilitate agreement to break the political and interpersonal logjam that has stopped the initiative from moving forward.



Experienced evaluators will recognize these kinds of scenarios, all of which are real, and could easily add their own. It is precisely because of the challenges of dealing with such situations that many evaluators prefer to design and conduct the evaluation without direct stakeholder involvement. Why bother? Why go to all the trouble of trying to get these diverse people to agree? Why bother, indeed? The answer? Increased credibility, user buy-in and understanding, and, ultimately, use.

● VARIATIONS IN THE NEED FOR FACILITATION

Some evaluation approaches do not involve high-level facilitation skills because engagement with stakeholders is minimized. For example, in *responsive evaluation*, the “responsive evaluator” interviews various constituency representatives and diverse stakeholders to surface different views and concerns, then the evaluator designs an evaluation that she or he thinks appropriately addresses and is responsive to stakeholder concerns. The stakeholders are primarily sources of data and an audience for the evaluation, not real partners in the evaluation process. That, at least, has been the classic approach to responsive evaluation.

In contrast, participatory and collaborative evaluation approaches involve a partnership between the evaluator and those who participate in the evaluation. Establishing a well-functioning evaluation partnership can be challenging in part because of underlying fears, bad past experiences with evaluation, resistance to reality testing, and cultural norms that undercut openness and questioning. Facilitating participatory processes adds layers of complexity to the already complex tasks of evaluation. Nor do all evaluators have the skills and temperament to successfully engage in and facilitate a participatory evaluation.

Traditionally, training of evaluators has focused foremost on methodological competence, assuming that methodological rigor is the primary determinant of evaluation credibility. But the evidence from studies of use (Patton, 2008) shows that contextual factors and evaluator characteristics interact with methodological criteria in determining an evaluation’s credibility. How an evaluation is facilitated to support meaningful involvement of stakeholders and primary intended users affects those users’ judgments about the evaluation’s credibility and their behaviors with regard to use. Based on that fundamental premise, the overall framework for this book is facilitation to enhance evaluation credibility and use.

BEING ACTIVE, REACTIVE, INTERACTIVE, AND ADAPTIVE ●

I use the phrase *active, reactive, interactive, adaptive* to portray the nature of the consultative and facilitative interactions that go on between evaluators and intended users. The phrase is meant to be both descriptive and prescriptive. It describes how real-world decision making actually unfolds—act, react, interact, and adapt. Yet, it is also prescriptive in alerting evaluation facilitators to consciously and deliberately act, react, interact, and adapt in order to increase their effectiveness in working with stakeholders and intended evaluation users. This requires versatility, flexibility, creativity, political astuteness, and responsiveness. Exhibit 2.2 presents the responsibilities that flow from each element of this evaluation facilitation quartet of roles.

Effective evaluation facilitators—being active, reactive, interactive, adaptive—don't impose cookbook designs or standardized processes. They don't do the same thing time after time. They are genuinely immersed in the challenges of each new setting and authentically responsive to the intended users of each new evaluation. That requires responsive and adaptive facilitation skills and techniques. Here are two examples of tips for effective facilitation that you'll find throughout this book.

Exhibit 2.2 Responsibilities of the Evaluation Facilitator

Facilitation Responsibilities	Tasks and Processes Involved in Fulfilling Facilitation Responsibilities
1. <i>Being active</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying and getting to know primary intended users • Explaining the purpose of the group's work • Staying focused on the intended purpose of the process • Setting the agenda • Framing questions for the group to address • Creating exercises to accomplish the group's work • Modeling evaluative thinking • Facilitating establishment of group norms and rules of engagement

(Continued)

Exhibit 2.2 (Continued)

Facilitation Responsibilities	Tasks and Processes Involved in Fulfilling Facilitation Responsibilities
2. <i>Being reactive</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designing a process appropriate to the characteristics, experiences, interests, and concerns of primary intended users • Using language that is meaningful and understandable • Responding to questions and issues that arise • Dealing with problems, conflicts, dissents, and disagreements • Assessing the group's knowledge and skills and building evaluative capacity as needed and appropriate
3. <i>Being interactive</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being a real person to participants; the facilitator gets to know them and they get to know the facilitator • Establishing rapport, trust, and mutual respect • Engaging in exchanges, dialogues, discussions, and deliberations as appropriate • Being both facilitator and evaluator, thereby offering the group evaluation expertise as needed and appropriate • Engaging the participants in monitoring and assessing how the process is going and identifying markers of progress toward desired results
4. <i>Being adaptive</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing the process as needed • Reconfiguring time allotments as the work unfolds • Introducing new techniques and exercises that move the work forward • Helping individual participants who may struggle with some parts of the process or have difficulties with others in the group • Monitoring the flow of the work and alternatively nudging, pulling back, pushing, giving the group space, getting the group back on task, solving problems, working through bottlenecks, ensuring engagement by all participants, and providing positive reinforcement • Adapting the flow to ensure priority tasks are accomplished and desired outcomes achieved on time

FACILITATION LESSONS ●**1. Facilitate High-Quality Interactions among and with Primary Intended Users**

Quality, quantity, and timing of interactions with intended users are all important—but quality is most important. A large amount of interaction between evaluators and users with little substance may backfire and actually reduce stakeholder interest. Evaluation facilitators must be strategic and sensitive in asking for time and involvement from busy people and be sure they're interacting with the right people around relevant issues. Increased contact by itself is likely to accomplish little. Nor will interaction with the wrong persons (i.e., people who are not oriented toward use) help much. It is the nature and quality of interactions between evaluators and decision makers that is at issue. My experience suggests that where the right people are involved, the amount of direct contact can sometimes be reduced because the interactions that do occur are of such high quality.

2. Nurture Interest and Develop Capacity to Engage in Evaluation

Evaluation facilitators will typically have to work to build and sustain interest in evaluation use. Evaluation facilitation is part nurturance and part capacity building. Participants in an evaluation design process with low opinions of or little interest in evaluation may have had bad prior experiences or not have given much thought to the benefits of evaluation. Even people initially inclined to value evaluation will still often need support and encouragement to become effective information users.

Some stakeholders will come to the evaluation process with backgrounds and experiences that make them ready to fully engage. Others will need help, which means training and support to understand evaluation options, make methods choices, and interpret findings. This is usually a learnbydoing experience in which the evaluator is both facilitating the evaluation decision process while also teaching primary intended users about evaluation. This teaching is often subtle and implicit or may be overt and formal. However it is done, and to whatever extent it is done, involving primary intended users typically requires some attention to increasing their capacity to be effective evaluation users. There are things to learn. That learning is actually one of the benefits that those involved get from their involvement. I treat every session with intended users as both an engagement opportunity

to get work done on the evaluation and as a capacity-building opportunity to increase user competence. This increased competence serves both the immediate evaluation being worked on as well as future evaluations in which they may become involved.

Practice Exercise

This chapter closes with a facilitation resource for assessing your readiness for evaluation facilitation. Read the purpose of the reflective practice exercise that follows, then complete the self-assessment instrument in Exhibit 2.3.

- **FACILITATION RESOURCES FOR SKILL ASSESSMENT AND DEVELOPMENT**

1. *Assessing Evaluator Readiness for Evaluation Facilitation*. This chapter opened by presenting the range of evaluation competencies needed to work effectively as an evaluation professional. This includes interpersonal competence and evaluation facilitation skills. As a baseline competency assessment, this chapter concludes with a tool to help you assess your readiness for evaluation facilitation (see Exhibit 2.3). It's meant as a reflective practice tool to get ready for delving more deeply into the mindset and skills needed for effective evaluation facilitation as you proceed through this book.
2. *Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators*, Jean King and Laurie Stevahn (2015): <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/OLPD/MESI/spring/2015/KingStevahn-EssentialCompetencies.pdf>
3. *IAF Core Competencies*, IAF (2015): <https://www.iaf-world.org/site/professional/core-competencies>
4. *Developing Facilitation Skills, Community Tool Box* (2016): <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/group-facilitation/facilitation-skills/main>
5. *Facilitation Skills: Developing Facilitative Leadership, Pickett Institute Curriculum, ILJ* (2002): http://www.ilj.org/publications/docs/Facilitation_Skills_Developing_Facilitative_Leadership.pdf
6. *Facilitator Guide*, Tom Siebold: <http://www.workshoexercises.com/Facilitator.htm>

Exhibit 2.3 Evaluation Facilitation Self-Assessment Inventory

Evaluation Facilitation Skills	I Am Fully Competent	I Am Fairly Competent	I Have Some Competence	I Have Minimal to No Competence	Strengths	Weaknesses
1. Explaining evaluation to non-evaluators						
2. Helping a group coalesce around a common purpose						
3. Identifying diverse perspectives and their implications for group process						
4. Negotiating compromises among conflicting positions						
5. Balancing group process needs with work on tasks						
6. Reading how a group is progressing						

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Exhibit 2.3 (Continued)

Evaluation Facilitation Skills	I Am Highly Competent	I Am Fairly Competent	I Have Some Competence	I Have Minimal to No Competence	Strengths	Weaknesses
7. Offering a variety of process options for accomplishing the group's work						
8. Embedding evaluative thinking in evaluation facilitation						
9. Being active, reactive, interactive, and adaptive						
10. Ensuring that the group achieves its intended results						

Reflection Questions:

1. What evaluation facilitation skills do you want to develop and enhance?
2. Write a statement describing your approach to evaluation facilitation, one you could share with those with whom you work.

7. *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making (3rd edition)*, Sam Kaner (2014)
8. *Evaluation and Facilitation*, Rita Sinorita Fierro, Alissa Schwartz, and Dawn Hanson Smart (2016)
9. *Developing Facilitation Skills: A handbook for group facilitators (3rd edition)*, Patricia Prendville (2008)
10. *Standards for Professional Learning, Facilitator Guide*, Learning Forward: <https://learningforward.org/docs/pdfs/facilitatorguide.pdf?sfvrsn=2>
11. *Collaborative, Participatory, and Empowerment Evaluation*, Chris Lysy:
<http://diydatadesign.com/courses/159186/lectures/2385827>

BETWEEN-CHAPTERS PORTAGE

To guide us from one chapter to the next, I've invited experienced evaluation facilitators to share their reflections. These between-chapter portages are an opportunity to hear different voices and encounter diverse perspectives on evaluation/facilitation.

MQP Intro: Jean King and I have worked together in Minnesota for some 40 years. She founded the Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute, which has offered professional development opportunities annually for more than 20 years. She has led the evaluation profession in identifying essential evaluation competencies. Over the years, we've had lengthy discussions about virtually every aspect of evaluation theory and practice. One of those discussions, long ago, was about facilitation being a core cross-cutting evaluation skill. Jean recognized that before anyone else and turned it into a facilitation-focused approach to evaluation she calls *interactive evaluation*. In this between-chapters portage, Jean reflects on the centrality of facilitation to evaluation practice.



Photo © Phil Goldman

Interactive Evaluation Facilitation

by Jean A. King

University of Minnesota
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Evaluation Institute

My first job after college was teaching English to five groups of seventh graders a day. While many have told me they can't imagine any worse fate, I absolutely loved it. My students helped me learn to be a good facilitator

because, when I wasn't, chaos reigned in Room 21 and it was exhausting. Nothing got done. So I figured out to juggle multiple balls simultaneously as I inevitably adapted whatever lesson I had planned to the situations that arose each hour—how to engage David (who couldn't sit still) and manage Chester (who loved to answer every question) and support Laura (who didn't read easily) and all of their peers who kept me ever on my toes. These many years later, I still remember their faces and the incredible feeling of—as Mr. Kelts, our assistant principal, put it—"a successful lesson well taught."

Imagine my delight upon becoming an evaluator when I realized that the facilitation skills I'd learned at Boynton Junior High School applied equally well to my evaluation practice. My first evaluation involved an educational program in a nearby district. My mentor, Jay Millman, needed someone who understood school teaching—did I ever—and asked me to meet with him and district staff to figure out how to proceed. While there was considerably less squirming at that meeting than in my classroom, the different perspectives and potential conflict in the room required thoughtful facilitation, a bridging of two very different world views between the researchers and the school staff who would participate in the evaluation. Knowing both views, I facilitated their coming together in a plan. Lesson learned: Facilitation is an essential skill set in an evaluator's tool kit because ultimately (as I have said elsewhere), all evaluation is participatory. Even those studies that are completely in the hands of the evaluators require interactions in context to ease the process from its beginning to its conclusion.

That first evaluation took place in 1978 and my practice over nearly 40 years has only affirmed what I learned early on. I would even go so far as to say that evaluation is facilitation because, absent the ability to get people to interact successfully and make the process straightforward, your evaluation may well be doomed to failure. What's frightening is that you may not realize it. If you, for example, can't get the office administrator who controls access to existing data to let you have it, you're stuck. If you're not able to manage a set of powerful stakeholders' negative interventions in a study, the evaluation can't be a success, even if it moves forward. If a proposed design mandates active participation of a sizeable group of diverse community members and you're not able to provide opportunities for meaningful interaction and trust building, the study is over before it begins. As a facilitator, an evaluator needs to be excruciatingly sensitive to what people are saying, doing, and—to the extent possible—even thinking. It is a challenge.

For almost 20 years, I've been part of teams working on evaluator competencies, detailing the specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions that program evaluators need to be effective. Initial work at the turn of the century led to draft competencies (King, Stevahn, Ghere, & Minnema, 2001) and then to the *Essential Competencies for Program Evaluators* (Stevahn, King, Ghere, & Minnema, 2005). Over a decade later, I am leading a Competencies Task Force for the American Evaluation Association (AEA) as the latest step in the association's move to professionalize the field. If, then, evaluation is facilitation, where does facilitation fit among the competencies?

Some would argue that facilitation belongs to the interpersonal domain, and it surely does. Facilitation is literally central to all the interpersonal evaluator competencies, including the following:

- 5.1. Values positive interpersonal relations as foundational for effective evaluation practice.
- 5.2. Uses appropriate social skills to enhance interaction for effective evaluation practice.
- 5.6. Facilitates constructive interaction among those involved in the evaluation.
- 5.9. Addresses conflicts and disputes constructively in evaluation (AEA, 2016).

But to say that facilitation is limited *only* to the interpersonal domain strikes me as inaccurate. Not surprisingly, facilitation for me is a skill set across multiple domains of evaluator competencies. Consider the four remaining domains:

- Professional—This domain focuses on what makes evaluators distinct as practicing professionals. Being an ethical and culturally responsive professional evaluator who contributes to the general and public welfare requires the ability to interact successfully with many types of people in many different settings. Included here, too, is reflective practice among groups of evaluators. This requires facilitation skills.
- Methodology—Imagine designing an evaluation that includes evaluators who are committed to competing methodological framings or a team of evaluators making sense of data triangulated from different methods and sources. This requires facilitation skills.
- Context—Every evaluation setting is unique, a specific place that changes continually over time. Evaluators must be able to facilitate viable studies within any of the settings they enter, including engaging stakeholders with differing perspectives and attending to the information needs of intended users. This requires facilitation skills.
- Management—This domain focuses on evaluation logistics—schedules, time lines, budget, and technology. Arranging these details requires frequent interaction with multiple stakeholders. This, too, requires facilitation skills.

Given the importance of facilitation skills across all five competency domains, it surprises me how little attention appears to be paid to teaching them either in university programs or professional development sessions. My colleague Laurie Stevahn and I wrote our book, *Interactive Evaluation Practice* (King & Stevahn, 2013), to detail what we had learned about facilitating evaluations. While there are no guarantees—trust me, I still experience the occasional facilitation flop, that person who either can't or will not cooperate or that group that simply can't get along—the good news is that evaluators *can* learn these skills and in doing so, to my mind, improve their practice.

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