5 EDITION

UTILIZATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION

Michael Quinn Patton
Charmagne E. Campbell-Patton

Utilization-Focused Evaluation

Fifth Edition

As a book co-authored by two generations of evaluators, we dedicate this book to
Intergenerational Evaluation,
a vision of evaluation grounded in the work of the field's founders while deepened, refreshed, and adapted through
young, emergent, and more diverse new generations of evaluators,
and in accordance with the vision of ongoing Intergenerational Evaluation
contributing to a more just and sustainable world,
we dedicate this book to our and all the world's
great-great-great-great-great grandchildren.

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

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Preface

This preface is in three parts: Michael's Preface, Charmagne's Preface, and our joint overview of the book.
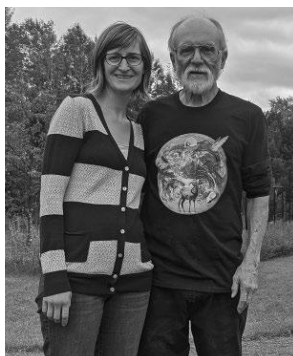
Michael's Preface

I've been an evaluation practitioner now for five decades. I've written several evaluation books, including four prior editions of this book. I've been president of the American Evaluation Association and have received several evaluation awards. But nothing in my career has given me as much satisfaction and joy as my daughter Charmagne's decision to become an evaluator, to join me in what is now our evaluation consulting business, *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*, and become a co-author of this fifth edition.

Several second-generation evaluators have emerged in the last two years which, I think, bodes well for the future of the profession. Our children witness up close what the life and work of an evaluator is like, so choosing to join the profession is a validation of the profession and its values. Second-generation evaluators know what they're getting into, have seen the ups and downs of evaluation practice observed through their parents. Those of us who helped create what is now the profession of evaluation are called "accidental evaluators." We came to this work without explicitly deciding to become an evaluation professional because the profession did not exist. We stumbled our way into this emerging field and helped build it. But 50 years ago, there were no evaluation associations, conferences, journals, training programs, websites, or communities of practice. Those doing evaluation were social scientists, program staff, researchers, and managers who picked up an evaluation assignment here or there. Gradually, a profession emerged from the fog of diverse evaluation efforts, associations were founded, journals were created, books were published, conferences were held, training programs were organized, and young and emerging evaluators were welcomed into the rapidly growing profession. Today evaluation is a global profession with more than 50,000 professionals and more than 200 voluntary professional associations at country, regional, and international levels. Today, people can choose to enter the evaluation profession and get formal training to do so. Most making that decision want to do work that is meaningful and useful. Utilization-focused evaluation emerged as a distinct approach 50 years ago to address those foundational values: making evaluation meaningful and useful.

Now we are seeing the emergence of second-generation evaluators several of whom we know. They come into the profession with a strong sense of commitment and deeply held values, wanting to make a difference in the world, and believing that practicing evaluation is a way to do so. Our hope is that for those of you new to evaluation, your engagement with this book, and with utilization-focused evaluation, will

encourage you to join our ranks. For those of you who are long-time practitioners, we hope that this new edition offers affirmation and revitalization.

Charmagne's Preface

While it's true that my generation has had more opportunities for official training and intentionality around becoming an evaluator, my journey still feels largely accidental. Though I grew up with not just one, but two evaluator parents, I did not grow up dreaming of becoming an evaluator. Rather, what I learned from watching them was that I could do something that I cared about and that would contribute to improving my community and the world. As a white descendent of settler colonialists, I see it as my responsibility to work to dismantle the systems of oppression that my ancestors built. After graduate school, I entered the nonprofit sector with a desire to align my work with my values. Through my work as a program manager at an education nonprofit, the importance of evaluation was clear. I often leaned on my dad's support and mentorship as I navigated our attempts to measure global competence in youth and track program developments in the highly complex, dynamic education system. The more I worked with Michael and saw the value in evaluation firsthand, the more I felt called to join him more intentionally in that work. I also saw the value that being a consultant offered as I entered parenthood and desired more flexibility in my work life.

Over the past 15 years, I have served as an internal and external evaluator, consulted with small local nonprofits, government agencies, international organizations, and multimillion-dollar foundations, and worked across a range of issues from criminal justice reform to youth civic engagement. What I have seen is that utilization-focused evaluation continues to deeply resonate with people who authentically want to make a difference in the world. As more organizations adopt a focus on equity and sustainability, evaluators play a critical role in supporting accountability and learning toward these important goals. To do so, however, requires that we follow the lead of the evaluators of the global majority (Black, Indigenous, and people of color), who have been calling for the field of evaluation to reconcile its relationship with colonialism and white supremacy. In this new edition, we have given more attention to the role of utilization-focused evaluation in this effort. There is much more work to be done and we are still learning as we go. We are grateful to have you join us on this journey, rooted in relationships. It is truly a family affair.

Evolution of Utilization-Focused Evaluation

Review of Prior Editions Leading up to This Fifth Edition

The Beginning: Discovering and Conceptualizing the Personal Factor

The first edition of *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* was published in 1978 and featured research on factors affecting use based on case studies of 20 federal health programs in the United States. With colleagues and students in the University of Minnesota Evaluation Methodology Program, we interviewed the evaluators and those for whom the evaluations were conducted. Only two factors emerged as consistently important in explaining utilization: (1) political considerations and (2) a factor we called "the personal factor." This latter factor was unexpected, and its clear importance to our respondents had, we believed, substantial implications for the use of program evaluation. The personal factor is the presence of an identifiable individual or group of people who personally care about the evaluation and the findings it generates. Where such a person or group was present, evaluations were used; where the personal factor was absent, there was a correspondingly marked absence of evaluation impact. Use is not simply determined by some configuration of abstract organizational dynamics; it is determined in large part by real, live, caring human beings. Once understood, this became the foundation of utilization-focused evaluation. Thus, the challenge of increasing use consists of two parts: (1) finding and involving those who are, by inclination, information users and (2) training and incentivizing those not so inclined.

Defining Use: Intended Use by Intended Users

The second edition of *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* published in 1986 offered, for the first time, a definition of *utilization*: "intended use by intended users." This specified the desired outcome of a utilization-focused evaluation. Building on discovery and conceptualization of the personal factor, primary intended users are people who have a direct, identifiable stake in the evaluation. Identifying them at the start of an evaluation (and continuing to work with them as an evaluation progresses) is critical to ensuring that an evaluation is utilization-focused. Put simply, without the engagement of primary intended users, there is no utilization-focused evaluation.

Discovering Process Use

The third edition of *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* published in 1997 introduced *process use*. When I, (Michael) established the Minnesota Center for Social Research in the mid-1970s, I began the practice of following up on every evaluation we conducted to find out how it was used. Those evaluations are the basis for many of the case studies and stories in my writings. Part of my preparation for doing each new

edition of *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* is reviewing client feedback from evaluations and workshops. When, in the mid-1990s, I went to prepare the third edition of the book and began reflecting on what had happened in the field in the 10 years since the last edition, I was struck by something that my own myopia had not allowed me to see before. When I have followed up my own evaluations over the years, I have enquired from intended users about actual use. What I would typically hear was something like this: "Yes, the findings were helpful in this way and that, and here's what we did with them." If there had been recommendations, I would ask what subsequent actions, if any, followed. But beyond the focus on findings and recommendations, what they almost inevitably added was something to the effect that "it wasn't really the findings that were so important in the end; it was going through the process." In reflecting on that feedback, I came to realize that *the entire field had narrowly defined use as use of findings.* We have thus not had ways to conceptualize or talk about what happens to people and organizations as a result of being involved in an evaluation process: what I have come to call "process use" (Patton, 1997, 1998, 2007). This idea of process use draws our attention to individual changes in thinking and behavior among those involved in the evaluation as a result of the learning that occurs during the evaluation process. This new edition further expands and elaborates the nature and importance of process use.

Globalization of Utilization-Focused Evaluation

The fourth edition of *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* published in 2008 gave significantly increased attention to international and cross-cultural factors that affect use. As evaluation became increasingly a global profession and enterprise, cultural competence has emerged as an issue affecting the credibility of evaluators to engage in diverse contexts with diverse stakeholders. This concern deepened the importance of beginning utilization-focused-evaluation with a situation analysis identifying the contextual, cultural, organizational, political, social, and economic factors that affect how evaluation findings are used for program improvement and decision-making.

Utilization in Complex Dynamic Systems

Essentials of Utilization-Focused Evaluation was published in 2012 and brought systems thinking and complexity theory into utilization-focused evaluation. In understanding context to inform situation analysis when working with intended uses around intended uses, the *Essentials* book distinguished simple, complicated, and complex situations. In working with intended users to consider these distinctions, it is illuminating to engage them in discussion about what aspects of what they do are relatively simple, relatively complicated, and relatively complex.

The challenge in the *Essentials of U-FE* book was how to portray utilization-focused evaluation as a series of sequential steps while also capturing the complex nature of the utilization-focused process as nonlinear, interactive, dynamic, and adaptive. Presenting utilization-focused evaluation as a series of steps was driven by the necessarily linear and sequential nature of writing and, to some extent, our human thinking processes involved in figuring out how to do something. But the utilization engagement process is not neatly linear and sequential. There are interactions among the steps, feedback loops, recursive iterations, interrelationships, and interdependencies among those involved in the evaluation, and other complex dynamics that can be

observed in any emergent system. For example, while identifying primary intended users occurs at the beginning of a utilization-focused evaluation, that process may be ongoing (Do we have the right intended users as evaluation questions emerge?) and new intended users have to be identified when there is turnover among those originally involved. In essence, the utilization-focused evaluator is asked to operate within two perspectives at the same time: one simple, stepwise, and neatly linear, the other complexly interactive and dynamic.

Utilization Heuristic

How do we manage complexity? Decision sciences have been identifying decision heuristics that cut through the messy, confusing, overwhelming chaos of the real world so that we can avoid analysis paralysis and take action. We rely on routine "heuristics"—rules of thumb, standard operating procedures, practiced behaviors, and selective perception (Kahneman & Tversky, 2000).

What, then, is the utilization heuristic? Basically, the utilization heuristic for managing situational complexity in utilization-focused evaluation is to *stay focused on use.* For every issue that surfaces in evaluation negotiations, for every design decision, for every budget allocation, and for every choice among alternatives, keep asking, "How will this affect use in this situation?" (Patton, 2012).

New Directions in This Fifth Edition: The Ongoing Evolution of Utilization-Focused Evaluation

This new edition for the first time presents and elaborates principles of utilization-focused evaluation. *Principles-Focused Evaluation* (Patton, 2018d) has emerged as a major utilization-focused inquiry framework. Principles constitute a distinct evaluand, a specific and unique focus for evaluation. Principles can guide application and adaptation. Principles connect theory with practice, questions with methods, and findings with follow-through actions.

The 21st century has brought major changes in the world and, correspondingly, in the evaluation profession. The global adoption of Sustainable Development Goals for Agenda 2030 manifests a commitment to equity and sustainability. The profession of evaluation, as part of the global community, has adopted a commitment to equity and sustainability through strategic decisions by evaluation associations. Utilization-focused evaluation joins that commitment.

This new edition also presents for the first time the role of utilization-focused evaluation in addressing issues of equity and sustainability in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and the global social justice uprising. As evaluators, we have a stake in having our evaluations used—and we have a stake in a more equitable and sustainable world. The implications for utilization-focused evaluation are substantial, dramatic, and controversial. Charmagne's preface above explains in personal terms the emergence and importance of this new direction for utilization-focused evaluation. This fifth edition explains this new direction as fundamental to the evolution and 21st-century practice of utilization-focused evaluation

Overview of the Book

The book is in three parts. The first part describes what utilization-focused evaluation is (Chapter 1) and why it matters (Chapter 4). For the first time, we identify the minimum specifications (MIN SPECS) that must be manifest to authentically call an evaluation utilization-focused (Chapter 2). Lots of evaluators call their approach utilization-focused. Many are, some aren't. Adherence to MIN SPECS identify which are and which aren't. Chapter 3 examines the increased importance of evaluative thinking in the last decade, that is, not just conducting evaluations but thinking evaluatively as a general approach to making sense of what is happening in any given context.

The second part of the book presents the single overarching principle of utilization-focused evaluation (Chapter 5) followed by 10 operating principles (a chapter devoted to each). As noted above, elaborating these principles is a new way of understanding the practice of utilization-focused evaluation.

The third and final part of the book takes on new directions in the evaluation and, correspondingly, new directions in U-FE. We begin with the contemporary context. Misinformation is rampant. Political ideologies trump evidence about what works. Social media make the spread of falsehoods easy and incessant. What is evaluation's role under these conditions? Chapter 17 offers a utilization-focused perspective.

Chapter 18 makes the case that evaluation can be used to contribute to a more equitable and sustainable world. This is no small claim. Nor is it without controversy. Traditionally evaluation's role has been to observe and judge but not to intervene. But, in wisdom going back as far as ancient Greece, *desperate times call for desperate measures.* The climate crisis qualifies as desperate times. Global inequities exacerbate the disparate effects of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. Under crisis conditions, the question becomes whether evaluation is part of the problem or can become part of the solution. Chapter 18 offers a vision of evaluation as part of the solution.

That vision becomes even more pronounced in Chapter 19 where we consider evaluation for transformation. *Transformation* has become the clarion call on the global stage. Humans are depleting the Earth's resources at levels, scales, and speeds that are changing Earth's ecological systems and, in so doing, warming, polluting, and degrading the environment at a level that threatens not just humanity, but the natural world. Transformation globally is urgently required to avoid catastrophe for humanity and biodiversity on Earth. Chapter 19 examines evaluation's role in and potential contribution to global and local systems transformations.

Chapter 20, the book's concluding chapter, reviews the principles of utilization-focused evaluation and applies them to the new and emergent directions for utilization-focused evaluation. The book concludes with the affirmation that utilization-focused evaluation has been on a developmental trajectory and moves into the future committed to continue to evolve and develop in taking on the challenges of contributing to a more just and sustainable world locally and globally.

Focus on the New With Access to What Has Come Before and Additional Resources

A major feature of this fifth edition made possible by advances in online platforms is that each chapter ends with online resources that go more deeply into the chapter topic. This means that we have removed from this edition some of the detailed history

and conceptual developments included in prior editions and placed that material online for readers to access. For example, the fourth edition of the book included an examination of the history of the evaluation profession. We have updated that history with developments over the last decade, but without repeating the past history, which we have placed online. The history of the qualitative-quantitative debate is likewise now accessible online rather than in print. Each chapter includes links to open-access materials online and a special and exclusive U-FE link to material not openly accessible. Combining new material in this print edition with past material online helps keep this book shorter (and less expensive) while maintaining a comprehensive approach. That comprehensive approach offers updated material for experienced evaluators while covering the basics for those new to evaluation and U-FE and an opportunity for experienced evaluators to review the basics through the new framing lens of U-FE principles.

To Experienced Evaluators

> In everything you do, refine your skills and knowledge about fundamental concepts in simple cases. Once is never enough. As you revisit fundamentals, you will find new insights. It may appear that returning to basics is a step backward and requires additional time and effort; however, by building on firm foundations you will soon see your true ability soar higher and faster.

> Edward B. Burger
> Author of *The Five Elements of Effective Thinking.*

This fifth edition offers an opportunity for experienced evaluators to refresh your knowledge of the basic premises and practices of U-FE but it also offers new directions in Part 3 as described above. The profession of evaluation has changed dramatically in the last decade as has our knowledge of the depth and scope of the climate emergency. Utilization-focused evaluation likewise has developed to acknowledge and address emergent challenges and future needs related to local and global systems transformations. A fundamental premise of this fifth edition is that evaluating transformation means transforming evaluation (Chapter 19). Experienced evaluators can lead the way in adapting the profession to support transformation toward a more just and sustainable future.

To Students

Becoming an evaluator in general, and a utilization-focused evaluator in particular, offers an opportunity to contribute to a better world through research, knowledge generation, and working to enhance the effectiveness of people providing direct services to people in need as well as advocates of change. The job market for evaluators is vast and diverse. Major philanthropic foundations have evaluators who help assess the impacts of philanthropic grants and programs. Government evaluation units in cities, counties, states, provinces, and the federal government in the United States have evaluation offices addressing for a broad range of public services: antipoverty programs, education programs, employment initiatives, environmental projects, health advocacy and programming, and criminal justice evaluations, to name but a few examples. Schools and universities employ evaluators to assess learning and employment after

graduation. All major international agencies have large evaluation units, organizations like the World Bank, United Nations agencies, Oxfam. Heifer International, the International Red Cross, and other development and humanitarian organizations.

Note About Cover Art

For this fifth edition, we have chosen to feature cattails. As we learned from the Indigenous botanist and scholar, Robin Wall Kimmerer, nearly every part of the cattail can be *used* by humans, be it for food, shelter, clothing, bedding, fires, first aid, or even diapers. With so many uses, we felt it was an appropriate symbol for utilization-focused evaluation.

Introducing Halcolm

Halcolm (pronounced "How come," as in Why) is Michael's internal philosophical alter ego and muse. Halcolm will pipe in every so often to remind us that evaluation methods, approaches, and decisions are grounded in fundamental philosophical underpinnings about how and why the world works as it does. Halcolm takes the form of a jester in some of the cartoons you will find throughout this edition.

The Companion Website

A website for this book at **edge.sagepub.com/patton5e** includes resources for instructors and students:

Instructor site: Essay questions, PowerPoint® slides, tables and figures from the book, and color photos and cartoons from the book.

Student site: Extra materials from Michael Quinn Patton, Charmagne E. Campbell-Patton and other evaluation authors, as listed in the end-of-chapter U-FE Online Resources sections.

Acknowledgments

About the Authors

Michael Quinn Patton is author of more than a dozen books on evaluation including *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (4th ed., 2015), *Blue Marble Evaluation* (2020), *Principles-Focused Evaluation* (2018), *Facilitating Evaluation* (2018), and *Developmental Evaluation* (2011). Based in Minnesota, he was on the faculty of the University of Minnesota for 18 years and is a former president of the American Evaluation Association (AEA). Michael is a recipient of the Alva and Gunnar Myrdal Evaluation Practice Award, the Paul F. Lazarsfeld Evaluation Theory Award, and the Research on Evaluation Award, all from AEA. He has also received the Lester F. Ward Distinguished Contribution to Applied and Clinical Sociology Award from the Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology. In 2021, he received the first Transformative Evaluator Award from *EvalYouth.* He is an active speaker, trainer, and workshop presenter who has conducted applied research and evaluation on a broad range of issues and has worked with organizations and programs at the international, national, state, provincial, and local levels. Michael has three children—a musician, an engineer, and an evaluator—and four grandchildren. When not evaluating, he enjoys exploring the woods and rivers of Minnesota, where he lives.

Charmagne E. Campbell-Patton is second-generation evaluator and twelfth-generation European settler based in Mnisota Makoce (Minnesota, USA). Her professional experience spans 15 years of program design, implementation, and evaluation work across a range of fields, including youth engagement, education, criminal and juvenile justice, and philanthropy. She specializes in qualitative research methods and utilization-focused developmental evaluation. Charmagne holds a BA in political science from Grinnell College and an MA in international peace and conflict resolution from American University's School of International Service. She has authored several articles and blog posts, but this is her first book. A global citizen with deep local roots, Charmagne resides near the Mississippi River on Dakota land in Minneapolis with her husband, two young children, and cat.

What Utilization-Focused Evaluation Is and Why It Matters

An Evaluation Version of the Creation Story

Every culture has a creation story explaining how a particular group of people came into the world. Here is an evaluation version of the Genesis story that illuminates the special role evaluators play in the world.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. Then God stood back, viewed everything made, and proclaimed "Behold, it is very good." And the evening and the morning were the sixth day. And on the seventh day God rested from all work.

God's archangel came then, asking, "God, how do you know that what you have created is 'very good'? What are your criteria? On what data do you base your judgment? Just what results were you expecting to attain? And aren't you a little close to the situation to make a fair and unbiased evaluation?"

God thought about these questions all that day and God's rest was greatly disturbed. On the eighth day God said, "Lucifer, go to hell."

Thus was evaluation born in a blaze of glory.

—From Halcolm's *The Real Story of Paradise Lost*

1

The What, Why, How, Who, When, and Where of Utilization-Focused Evaluation

The art and science of asking questions is the source of all knowledge.

Thomas Berger
American writer

Evaluation is rooted in inquiry. Questions are the backbone of any evaluation. So to introduce you to utilization-focused evaluation, we will begin at the beginning by answering the questions that make up the foundation of any comprehensive explanation: What? Why? How? Who? When? and Where?

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We all evaluate. We each do it every day when we decide what to wear or how to prioritize the various tasks that lay before us. The evaluation profession has developed systematic methods and approaches that can be used to inform judgments and decisions about programs and initiatives of all kinds. Because making judgments and decisions is involved in everything people do, evaluation is important in every discipline, field, profession, and sector, including government, businesses, and not-for-profit organizations. Program evaluation is a specialized application of evaluative thinking and methods.

What Is Program Evaluation?

Program evaluation is the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and results of programs to make judgments about the merit, worth, and significance of the program, improve or further develop program effectiveness, inform decisions about future programming, and/or increase understanding. This definition emphasizes three things: (1) the systematic collection of information about (2) a potentially broad range of issues on which evaluations might focus (3) for a variety of possible judgments and uses. It is clear from this definition that the focus and uses of a particular evaluation will have to be determined by someone. Utilization-focused program evaluation is evaluation done for and with specific intended primary users for specific, intended uses. Adding the definition of utilization-focused evaluation answers how the focus of an evaluation will be determined by specific intended users.

Examples of common evaluation questions include:

- What is the quality of a program?

- What outcomes are being achieved?

- Are the real needs of people being met?

- What works? What doesn't work? Why?

- How do culture and diversity variations affect what is done and achieved?

- What are the costs and benefits of a program?

- What unintended consequences or negative side effects occur?

- What are key success factors that others can learn from and use?

These are just a few of the many kinds of evaluation questions that can be asked—and answered—with evaluation information and data.

Here are three examples of program evaluations:

- University students complete a survey at the end of a course. That's an evaluation. In 2020 when the coronavirus pandemic led to courses being moved from the classroom to online platforms, evaluations focused on student feedback about how well the transition to virtual teaching went. What worked well? What kinds of problems emerged with virtual platforms and online teaching?

- Programs working with homeless families aim to help them find housing and get needed health and social services. Evaluations tracs how well these programs work in reducing homelessness and finding adequate housing with support services for families in need.

- When the COVID-19 emerged, public health programs educated the public about wearing masks, social distancing, and limiting social gatherings. Evaluations studied compliance with the recommended behaviors. What factors affected whether people wore masks? What approaches to public health communications worked well? What didn't work?

Utilization-Focused Evaluation

Premise	Evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use.

Answering evaluation questions is one thing. Using those answers is quite another matter. Getting answers to evaluation questions doesn't matter unless the findings are used. Barriers to use abound. This book is about overcoming those barriers. Utilization-focused evaluation begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use.

What Is Utilization-Focused Evaluation?

Utilization-focused evaluation (U-FE) is a comprehensive decision framework for designing and implementing an evaluation to fit a particular situation and, in that situation, meeting the information needs of primary intended users to enhance their intended uses of the evaluation. *U-FE is done for and with specific primary intended users for specific, intended uses.* Utilization-focused evaluation aims to support effective action and informed decision-making based on meaningful evidence, thoughtful interpretation, and engaged deliberation. Use concerns how real people in the real world experience the evaluation process and apply evaluation findings. Adding the definition of utilization-focused evaluation answers how the focus of an evaluation will be determined: by specific intended users.

Why U-FE?

The standards published by the Joint Committee on Evaluation Standards in 1981 dramatically spotlighted the importance of use. The standards were hammered out over five years by a 17-member committee appointed by 12 professional organizations, with input from hundreds of practicing evaluation professionals. Daniel Stufflebeam (1980), chair of the committee, summarized the committee's work as follows with emphasis on asserting the criterion of utility as primary:

> The standards . . . call for evaluations that have four features. These are utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy. And I think it is interesting that the Joint Committee decided on that particular order. Their rationale is that an evaluation should not be done at all if there is no prospect for its being useful to some audience. Second, it should not be done if it is not feasible to conduct it in political terms, or practicality terms, or cost effectiveness terms. Third, they do not think it should be done if we cannot demonstrate that it will be conducted fairly and ethically. Finally, if we can demonstrate that an evaluation will have utility, will be feasible and will be proper in its conduct, then they said we could turn to the difficult matters of the technical adequacy of the evaluation. (Stufflebeam, p. 90)

Informing action and supporting evidence-based decision-making is how evaluation contributes to a better world. Therefore, U-FE, consistent with the standards for evaluation excellence, begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use.

The field of evaluation has professional standards, guiding principles, and endorsed competencies, all of which call for making evaluations useful. But generating findings is one thing. Using findings is quite another matter. A great many evaluations are not used or are under-utilized (Patton, 2008b, 2015). Organizations and programs are drowning in evaluation evidence, but often fail to use findings effectively to improve results and inform decisions (Moss, Coffman, & Beer, 2020). Bridging the gap between generating and using evidence is what utilization-focused evaluation is all about.

Independent scholarly reviews of 50 years of research on evaluation consistently find that utilization-focused evaluation provides the most fully developed theory explaining how to enhance use (King & Alkin, 2019) and is rated as most influential by evaluation practitioners (Becho 2019; Haugh & Grodzicki, 2016; McDavid & Henderson, 2021; Urban et al, 2021). U-FE is the basis for the evaluation approach taken by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2017), major philanthropic foundations (Christie & Lemire, 2019), and international initiatives like the Global Alliance for the Future of Food (2021), a collaboration of some 30 philanthropic foundations from four continents. A substantial body of research supports the premises and principles of utilization-focused evaluation.[1]

How Is U-FE Done?

U-FE enhances use by facilitating the evaluation process and designing any evaluation with careful consideration for how everything that is done, from beginning to end, will affect use. U-FE provides systematic, research-based guidance and a set of principles for deciding what approach to evaluation is most appropriate for a particular situation and specific primary intended users. U-FE is pragmatic and eclectic so the U-FE

Independent Validation of U-FE

Daniel Stufflebeam (2001), the guiding leader of the standards movement in evaluation, undertook a comprehensive, exhaustive, and independent review of how 22 different evaluation approaches stack up against the profession's standards. No one was better positioned by knowledge, experience, prestige within the profession, and commitment to the standards to undertake such a challenging endeavor. He concluded, "Of the variety of evaluation approaches that emerged during the twentieth century, nine can be identified as strongest and most promising for continued use and development." Utilization-focused evaluation was among those nine, with the highest rating for adherence to the utility standards (p. 80).

toolkit encompasses every evaluation option methodologically, conceptually, theoretically, analytically, and processwise. Evaluation theorists, methodologists, and practitioners have generated an extensive, even daunting, menu of options to meet particular evaluation needs and demands, any of which can be made utilization-focused. U-FE doesn't prescribe what particular evaluation methods or approach to adopt but rather prescribes a process for determining how to conduct any evaluation with unwavering attention to intended uses by intended users. Part 2 of this book presents principles-based guidance on how to conduct a utilization-focused evaluation.

U-FE involves engaging with primary intended users to meet their information and decision-making needs. This may lead to conducting an evaluation asking common questions and using well-established methods, measurements, and procedures, but it may also lead to innovative and customized approaches. We will explore much more about the "how" of utilization-focused evaluation in the remainder of this book.

Who Is U-FE for?

Utilization-focused evaluation is done for and with specific primary intended users for specific, intended uses. In any evaluation, there are many potential stakeholders and an array of possible uses. Utilization-focused evaluation requires moving from the general and abstract, from possible audiences and potential uses, to the real and specific: actual primary intended users and their explicit commitments to concrete, specific uses. The evaluator facilitates judgment and decision-making by primary intended users. Since no evaluation can be value-free, utilization-focused evaluation answers the question of whose values will frame the evaluation by working with clearly identified, primary intended users who have responsibility to apply evaluation findings and implement recommendations. In essence, evaluation use is too important to be left to evaluators. U-FE is personal and situational. The evaluation facilitator develops a working relationship with intended users to help them determine what kind of evaluation they need.

A psychology of use undergirds and informs utilization-focused evaluation. In essence, research shows that intended users are more likely to use evaluations if they understand and feel ownership of the evaluation process and findings; they are more likely to understand and feel ownership if they've been actively involved; and by actively involving primary intended users, the evaluator is training users in use, preparing the groundwork for use, and reinforcing the intended utility of the evaluation every step along the way.

Perspective of Seasoned Evaluators

As seasoned evaluators committed to utilization-focused evaluation, we partner with clients to create questions and data analysis connected to continuous improvement. We stress developmental evaluation to help link implementation and outcome evaluation.

John and Maggie Cosgrove
Saint Louis Missouri
Cosgrove Associates (2019)

Each program is unique, but our fundamental principles for establishing a useful program evaluation process are the same: Use a collaborative and inclusive process to define what you are measuring; measure it; then use the results. Our approach here is based on the premise that you and your organization can build a culture of evaluation, collaboratively define measurable outcomes, create a plan, collect data, and report on and use the results.

Chari Smith
President and Founder Evaluation into Action
Author of *Nonprofit Program Evaluation Made Simple:*
Get Your Data. Show Your impact. Improve Your Programs (2021)

At the Improve Group, we deeply practice Utilization-Focused Evaluation. There is no project without meeting the needs of stakeholders—clients and their communities—the people they are serving. Utilization-focused evaluation is the reason for our existence.

Leah G. Moses
Founder and CEO The Improve Group.
https://www.theimprovegroup.com/

When Is U-FE Done?

U-FE begins at the beginning of an evaluation process. A common error is to wait until findings are generated to think about use. But if intended users don't know what they're going to do with findings before they get them, they won't know what to do with them when they get them. That may sound counterintuitive, but nothing magical happens in getting findings to ensure use. Indeed, whether findings will be useful depends on what questions get asked at the beginning and whose questions get answered. So attention to use undergirds U-FE from the moment the evaluation is conceived.

Attention to use also continues after findings have been generated. The utilization-focused evaluator works with intended users to apply findings and facilitate appropriate and informed use. The evaluation doesn't end with findings or a report. Follow through to support use is a critical feature of U-FE.

Where Is U-FE Done?

Utilization-focused evaluations have been implemented around the world, from grassroots evaluations in Burkina Faso, West Africa (D'Ostie-Racinea et al., 2019) to international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) like the Global Alliance for the Future of Food (2019). Context matters. U-FE is highly sensitive to and must

be adapted to context. That said, U-FE can be applied in any context where use is a priority. Where those involved in delivering, making decisions about, and funding programs want to learn, improve, and increase effectiveness, U-FE offers an energizing and results-oriented path forward. In a major review and synthesis of evaluation models and hypotheses on the nature of use, Contandriopoulos and Brousselle (2012) described U-FE as "the utilization paradise," the place where use flourishes (p. 70).

Questioning as an Inquiry and Design Framework

Who? Why? What? Where? When? and How? These questions constitute a basic inquiry framework for illuminating utilization-focused evaluation, as just demonstrated. These questions also constitute an inquiry framework for understanding any intervention—a program, project, or initiative aimed at change. Answering these questions can provide a foundation for designing both a program and an evaluation. Exhibit 1.1 summarizes and applies this basic inquiry framework to a generic program evaluation with added utilization-focused evaluation questions.

Exhibit 1.1 Parallel Design Questions for Interventions and Evaluations			
Questions	**Program Design Questions**	**Generic Program Evaluation Questions**	**Additional Utilization-Focused Evaluation Questions**
Who?	Who are the target participants for the program (intervention)? Who are the intended beneficiaries?	Who is actually served or reached by the program? Who benefited, in what ways, and who did not?	Who are the primary intended users of the evaluation?
Why?	Why is the program (intervention) being undertaken? Specify mission and purpose.	Why is evaluation being done?	Why would primary intended users care about evaluation? Learn their specific interests and information needs.
What?	What outcomes and impacts (goals and objectives) are intended?	To what extent were intended goals and objectives attained? What, if any, unintended consequences occurred?	What are the intended uses of the evaluation? In what ways will unintended uses and potential misuses be monitored?
Where?	Where is the program designed to implemented and delivered? (Identify contextual factors.)	Where did the intervention actually take place? How did contextual factors affect implementation and results?	Where will intended uses by intended users occur? (Understand contextual factors.)
When?	When will implementation occur (expected timelines) When are results expected? Differentiate short-term, medium-term, and long-term expected results.	When did implementation and results actually occur? Document milestones and actual short-term, medium-term, and long-term results.	When will utilization occur, both process uses (effects of the evaluation taking place) and uses of evaluation findings?
How?	How will outcomes be achieved? How will inputs and activities lead to outcomes and impacts for intended beneficiaries? (Identify causal linkages.)	How were measured outcomes achieved? How did hypothesized causal linkages between inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes occur?	How will the evaluation be conducted to enhance use?

Intended Use by Intended Users

The core of utilization-focused evaluation is to focus throughout an evaluation on intended use by intended users. Pragmatist philosophy has been especially influential as a foundation for U-FE. Being "pragmatic" means that the essential criteria for making design decisions are practical, contextually responsive, and consequential. *Practical* means asking straightforward questions that generate useful and actionable answers. *Contextually responsive* involves understanding the demands, opportunities, and constraints of the situation in which the evaluation will take place including attention to power dynamics and exercising cultural competence. *Consequential* means that the findings are relevant, significant, and applicable to the purpose intended. This is expressed in utilization-focused evaluation as ensuring intended use by intended users.

A pragmatic utilization-focused evaluation design asks five questions:

1. *Who are the primary intended users of the findings?* Different stakeholders will have different information needs and interests. With inevitable limitations of time and resources, whose evaluation questions get priority? Principle 2 (Part 2 of the book) will explain how to identify primary intended users and the implications of doing so.

2. *What are the intended uses of the findings?* Evaluations can be used to improve programs, make decisions about the future of programs, help programs adapt to new challenges like COVID-19, and many other uses. Principle 3 (Part 2) focuses on working with primary intended users to determine intended uses.

3. *What methods, measures, and design will provide relevant answers to priority evaluation questions?* As noted earlier, U-FE can use any methods, measures, or design. Part 2 will provide myriad examples of methodological options and how to match methods with questions and intended uses.

4. *How can a utilization-focused evaluation process be successfully carried out*, taking into consideration such issues as timely access to primary intended users, time available, evaluators' skills, and money or other resources required for the evaluation? We will address this question throughout the discussion of the 10 U-FE principles in Part 2.

5. *To what extent and in what ways will the results be practically usable and useful to primary intended users given the intended purpose of the evaluation?* Utilization-focused evaluators engage with primary intended users to stay focused on use. Principles 5 and 6 (Part 2) explore how to do this in depth.

Using the coronavirus pandemic as a focus, Exhibit 1.2 illustrates how different evaluation questions serve diverse uses for varying intended users.

The evaluation questions, intended uses, and intended users in Exhibit 1.2 are meant to illustrate the great variety of possible evaluation inquiries that are possible.

Exhibit 1.2   Examples of Utilization-Focused Evaluation Questions Applied to Diverse Coronavirus Pandemic Uses and Users

Evaluation Questions	Primary Intended Uses	Primary Intended Users
1. How can testing for COVID-19 be done effectively and efficiently?	1. Improve access to testing to get timely diagnoses and appropriate treatment of symptoms	1. Testing decision-makers and administrators of COVID-19 testing facilities; frontline doctors and nurses
2. What are the factors that support wearing masks?	2. Improve compliance with mask-wearing recommendations	2. Public health educators and advocates of mask-wearing
3. What are variations in how different cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious communities are affected by COVID-19?	3. a. Target health and education messages to be meaningful and influential to different groups b. Develop and implement policies to reduce health disparities	3. a. Leaders and health workers in different cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious communities b. Policymakers and political actors
4. How do school closures affect students, parents, and teachers?	4. a. Improve online education b. Provide additional services and interventions as needed and appropriate to deal with the effects of COVID-19	4. Educational leaders, parent groups, student advocates, teacher associations, and family social workers
5. What are the different policy approaches to the coronavirus pandemic in different communities, organizations, states, and countries?	5. Learn from natural variations in policy approaches to compare and contrast what works and doesn't work under varying conditions	5. Public health officials in national and international agencies who provide advice about prevention and treatment approaches

The key point of the exhibit is to spotlight the relationship between inquiry question, intended uses, and intended users which is the core of U-FE.

Begin by working with primary intended users to identify meaningful questions that will generate answers they care about. This involves ensuring that the evaluation questions are relevant. Relevance leads to ensuring that intended users will be able to do something with answers to their questions, that is, the answers are *actionable*. Questions that are relevant and actionable nurture commitment—engendering an expectation that primary intended users *will act* on meaningful findings. Utilization-focused evaluation helps engender that commitment and then follows through at every step along the way so that the commitment to use is realized.

Savoring Questions

[M]y question is about asking questions. How do we do that in ways that startle people, and ourselves, back into thought? How do we keep the questioning always in play, rather than using it to pry out answers, to test, to expose, to correct? How do we question to draw out meanings and to explore them? How do we question so that everything becomes more interesting and we, therefore, become more thoughtful?

Elizabeth Minnich (2019, p. 22)

Philosopher Elizabeth Minnich has devoted a distinguished career and, indeed, a lifetime to stimulating thinking through deep questioning. Her insights about questioning in general apply to evaluation questioning.

- *Questioning is thinking*—thoughtful questioning, serious questioning, authentic, open, and genuinely curious questioning—a way to deepen our thinking is to examine our questioning patterns and develop our questioning skills.

- *Questioning is an antidote to thoughtlessness*. Asking a question leads us to stop and think, at least momentarily, thereby hopefully avoiding precipitous and thoughtless action.

- *Skillful questioning deepens thinking*. A fundamental evaluation skill is learning to ask genuinely open-ended questions, questions that invite thoughtful engagement and responses. (Minnich & Patton, 2019, pp. 310–313)

At the 2019 annual conference of the American Evaluation Association, ARCevaluation of Menomonie, Wisconsin (now Catalyst), sponsored a poetry context. The winning entry, shown was submitted by Evgenia Valuy.
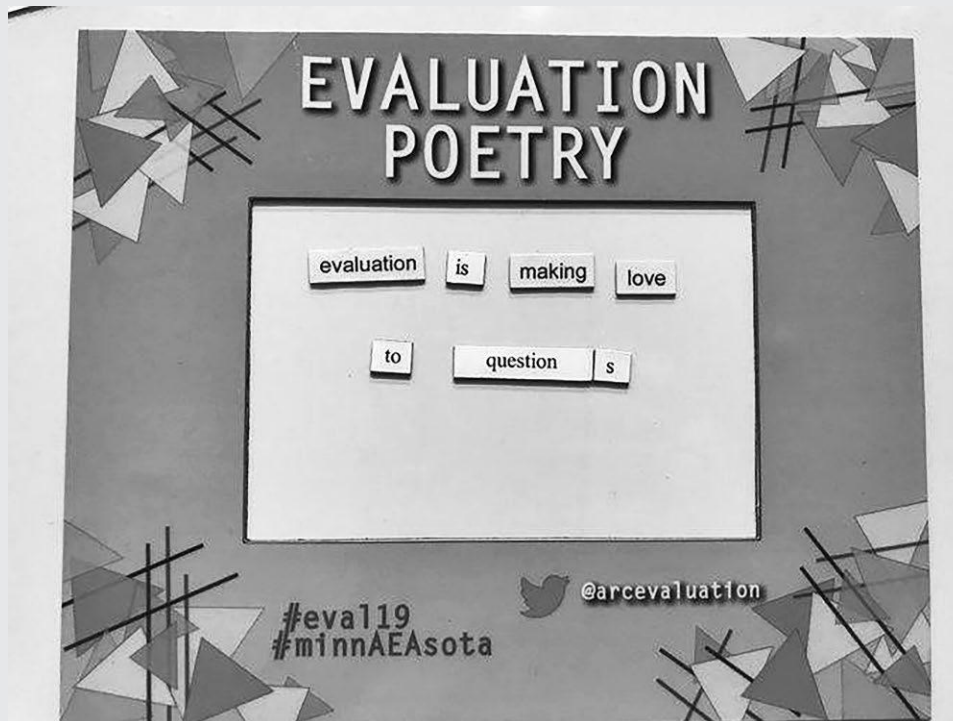
Alternatives and Barriers to Utilization-Focused Evaluation

This chapter has made the case for utilization-focused evaluation as a well-established, evidence-based, and practitioner-validated approach to increasing evaluation use. We close this chapter with alternative perspectives and barriers to conducting utilization-focused evaluations.

1. *Focus on research rigor*. The most pervasive alternative is to focus on methodological quality and rigor under the assumption that credible research findings are sufficient for use. The focus on research rigor means that evaluation researchers control the process, determine what questions to ask, and seek to use validated measurements, experimental and quasi-experimental designs, and report statistically significant findings. From a U-FE perspective, this approach risks asking the wrong questions, producing findings that are not immediately relevant to decision-makers, and generating results that nonresearchers don't understand.

2. *Focus on independence*. Another objection to utilization-focused evaluation comes from evaluators who advocate independent judgment as the top priority for evaluation credibility and use. They eschew interpersonal and direct engagement with primary intended users for fear that such interactions will undermine their actual or perceived objectivity. They take a stance of looking in at the program from the outside. From a U-FE perspective, skilled evaluators can interact with primary intended users while maintaining neutrality and credibility, but through those interactions ensure relevance, understanding, and mutual respect.

3. *Focus on evaluator competence and judgment*. This perspective posits that evaluation is the job of evaluators. Let evaluators do their job of rendering judgments of merit, worth, and significance without the distraction of interacting with non-evaluators and nonresearchers. Evaluators are typically trained to conduct methodologically rigorous studies but are not trained and competent to interact effectively with non-researchers. Indeed, those taking this position typically lack the facilitation and interpersonal skills needed to work effectively with non-evaluators and nonresearchers. Here again, however, from a U-FE perspective, the danger is asking questions and conducting studies that evaluators think are important but are not what primary intended users want and need to know. But the point that U-FE requires facilitation and interpersonal skills is well taken and is a major focus of this book. Utilization-focused evaluators do not just conduct evaluations but are also train primary intended users to think evaluatively and understand research findings thereby increasing the capacity for and likelihood of use.

4. *Focus on utility not utilization*. Many evaluators accept the notion that they should engage with stakeholders to identify relevant questions to enhance utility, but once those priority questions have been identified, they want to go about the business of conducting evaluation without further stakeholder involvement for the reasons listed above. From a U-FE perspective, however, identifying the right questions is only the beginning. Bringing primary intended users along throughout the entire process means

including them in making methods decisions, interpreting findings, and following through to take action on results. Ensuring potential utility by asking relevant questions stops short of the full stakeholder engagement process that leads to actual use.

The preceding views of some evaluators constitute one set of barriers to conducting utilization-focused evaluations. We turn now to some of the barriers within programs.

5. *Making evaluation a management function.* Program managers will sometimes argue that they don't need evaluation expertise or professional evaluators to do evaluation. They are reluctant to spend funds on evaluation done by professional evaluators. They posit that determining what's working and not working is a management function. Moreover, many of them have had experience with evaluation researchers who took up precious time and resources without yielding much, if anything, of use. Such negative experiences create resistance to evaluation. The problem is that they don't actually understand what utilization-focused evaluation offers and the long-term financial benefits of spending resources on useful evaluation to enhance effectiveness, impact, and efficiency. Utilization-focused evaluators must convey respect for program leaders and managers while helping them understand the benefits that flow from professionally conducted evaluations focused on use.

6. *Fear of evaluation.* Evaluation can be scary. Evaluators can be scary. Program directors and staff often fear that negative results will be not just embarrassing but could threaten the program's future and their livelihoods. These are real concerns. Building relationships of trust and mutual respect helps overcome those fears replacing them with the positive opportunity to learn and improve. We will be returning to this theme, and how to build such relationships, throughout the book.

© Michael Quinn Patton and Michael Cochran
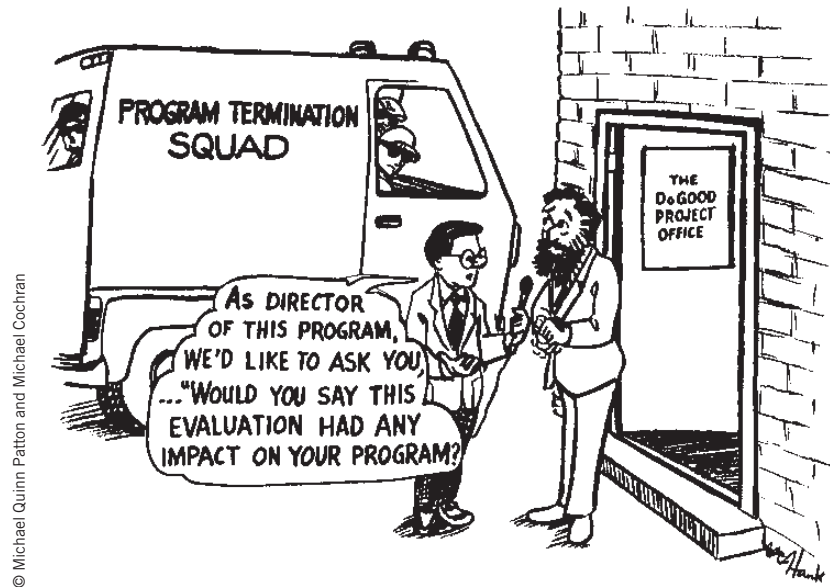
Evaluation Nightmare Dreamed by Anxious Director

7. *Treating evaluation as a compliance mandate.* U-FE isn't appropriate where a program is just going through the motions of evaluation because it is required and thus is undertaken with a compliance mentality. Where evaluation is viewed as merely a mandated paperwork exercise, as the pain that comes with receiving money from funders, U-FE will become a burden because it demands thoughtful engagement. Turning evaluation from a burdensome compliance activity into an engaging learning opportunity is one of the challenges of utilization-focused evaluation. We will discuss how to make this transition in future chapters.

Evaluation Use as a Value Proposition

In the business world, a value proposition is a promise of something valuable to be delivered to a customer. Someone trying to sell you something makes a value proposition. They make the case for the value of the product or service you are considering. Natalie Jones (2019) used crowdsourcing to study general public perceptions of the value and credibility of evaluation as expressed through contrasting "value propositions." She found that participants overwhelmingly viewed a *Use Value Proposition* for conducting evaluation as most credible and beneficial (Jones, 2019, p. 2.; see also Jones & Azzam, 2019). The Use Value Proposition tested the following rationale for conducting an evaluation: "To determine and improve the program's effectiveness, the evaluation will focus primarily on ensuring that the results of the evaluation will be useful for decision-making" (p. 22). One of the skills needed by utilization-focused evaluators is explaining and making the case for value of evaluation.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter opened with questions: What is utilization-focused evaluation? Why engage in U-FE? How is U-FE done? Who is U-FE for? When is U-FE used? Where is U-FE done? Exhibit 1.3 highlights and summarizes the answers to these questions. Taken together, the answers to these questions position utilization-focused evaluation as a well-established, evidence-based, and practitioner-validated approach to increasing evaluation use.

Exhibit 1.1 showed how the questions *What? Who? Why? How? When?* and *Where?* can provide an inquiry framework for both programs and evaluations. That exhibit also added utilization-focused evaluation questions to standard generic evaluation questions.

Exhibit 1.2 provided examples of utilization-focused evaluation questions applied to diverse coronavirus pandemic uses and users. The examples illustrate the great variety of possible evaluation inquiries that are possible while spotlighting the relationship between inquiry question, intended uses, and intended users which is the core of U-FE. Undergirding these exhibits and accompanying discussions has been the importance of asking and savoring questions as the foundation for evaluation. Everything flows from the questions we ask. Ask meaningful questions, you increase the likelihood of getting meaningful answers. Ask trivial questions and you increase the likelihood of getting . . . , well, you get the point. Asking meaningful, relevant, useful and actionable questions puts you on the path of utilization-focused evaluation. You journey on that path with primary intended users proceeding toward the destination of using findings to improve programs and enhance decision-making.

Exhibit 1.3 Overview of Utilization-Focused Evaluation

What is utilization-focused evaluation?	A framework and process for engaging in evaluation focused on generating useful and actionable findings to improve programs and enhance decision-making
Why engage in U-FE?	To enhance and deepen evaluation use toward a more just and sustainable world
How is U-FE done?	By evaluators working with primary intended users to identify relevant questions, select appropriate methods, make sense of findings, and act on the results
Who is U-FE for?	Primary intended users who are interested in using information to enhance their decision-making and achieve desired results
When is U-FE used?	From the beginning through all steps of the evaluation including follow-up to apply findings
Where is U-FE done?	Anywhere and everywhere where those engaged in trying to make the world a better place are prepared to examine whether what they hope they are achieving is what they are actually achieving, and to thereby reduce the gap between aspirations and actual accomplishments

We closed this chapter with alternative perspectives and barriers to conducting utilization-focused evaluations. Evaluation alternatives include focusing on rigorous methods as the top priority, emphasizing independence to avoid bias, elevating the role of evaluators in rendering professional judgments about merit, worth, and significance, and avoiding the distraction of engaging with non-evaluators and non-researchers. Program resistance includes making evaluation a management function, resisting evaluation for fear of negative findings, and treating evaluation as a paperwork compliance function.

Utilization-focused evaluation counters these concerns of both evaluators and program people with a use value proposition. One of the skills needed by utilization-focused evaluators is explaining and making the case that actively engaging with primary intended users throughout the evaluation process enhances the likelihood, meaningfulness, and depth of using evaluations in the intended ways for valuable purposes.

PRACTICE EXERCISES

1. *Applying the U-FE inquiry framework.* Use the questions in Exhibit 1.1 to describe a program or project that you know, for example, a class or course you have taken or are taking, or a project or program that you've participated in. Then answer the utilization-focused evaluation questions to design an evaluation relevant to the program design you've generated. Discuss the alignment between program design questions and evaluation design questions.

2. *Using U-FE criteria.* Identify an evaluation conducted and published in an area of your interest. Review the evaluation using utilization-focused evaluation criteria: (1) Are the evaluation questions clearly stated? (2) Is the primary intended use of the evaluation clear? (3) Are the primary intended users of the evaluation identified? (4) Can you tell if the primary intended users were involved in determining the priority evaluation questions and specifying intended uses of the evaluation?

3. *U-FE value proposition.* In your own words, with a specific program evaluation in mind (which you will describe), write out the utilization-focused evaluation value proposition in response to concerns about methodological quality, evaluator independence, and the nuisance of working with non-evaluators and nonresearchers.

4. *Overcoming resistance and fear.* In your own words, with a specific program evaluation in mind (which you will describe), write out the utilization-focused evaluation value proposition in response to program managers saying they can take care of evaluation themselves, program staff who fear evaluation, and treating evaluation as a paperwork compliance function.

GENERAL ONLINE RESOURCES

1. *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* website:
   https://www.utilization-focusedevaluation.org/

2. *Better Evaluation* website featuring U-FE:
   https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/utilization_focused_evaluation and https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/search/site/utilization-focused%20evaluation

3. *CDC Evaluation Framework*:
   https://www.cdc.gov/eval/

4. US AID *Utilization-Focused Evaluation Playbook*:
   https://usaidlearninglab.org/library/learning-lab-utilization-focused-learning-agenda-playbook-external-version

5. *Evaluation Use Theory, Practice, and Future Research* (Patton, 2020):
   Marvin Alkin and Jean King published three *American Journal of Evaluation* articles on evaluation use over four years, a coherent and comprehensive series covering the historical development of evaluation use, definitions and factors associated with use and misuse, and theories of evaluation use and influence, concluding with assessment of the first 50 years of use research. They conclude with recommendations for future theory development and research on evaluation. This article draws a different set of conclusions and pathway forward. Where they seek a common universal operational definition of evaluation use, this article proposes treating use as a thick sensitizing concept that invites diversity of context-specific meanings. Where they find evaluation use theory inadequate, this article argues that it is sufficient for its purpose. Where they seek more development of evaluation-specific utilization theory, this article proposes drawing on more established and validated theories from social sciences to explain and illuminate evaluation use as occurring in complex dynamic systems.
   https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1098214020919498

U-FE ONLINE RESOURCES

- *History of Utilization-Focused Evaluation* including the first research on evaluation use that led to conceptualization of U-FE. Chapter 1, U-FE (4th ed.):

edge.sagepub.com/patton5e

NOTE

1. A sample of research supporting the premises and principles of utilization-focused evaluation: Alkin & King, 2016, 2017; Cousins, 2020; Cousins et al., 2020; Cousins & Shulha, 2006; Fleischer, 2007; Patton, 2008c, Ch. 3; Poth et al., 2014; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997; Ramirez & Brodhead, 2020.

The Essence of Utilization-Focused Evaluation Expressed as Minimum Specifications

It seems essential, in relationships and all tasks, that we concentrate only on what is most significant and important.

Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855)
Danish Philosopher

Premise

Knowing what is essential directs focus.

Focus enhances use.

Use is essential for evaluation impact.

Core elements identify what is essential, that is, what is the minimum that must occur for an evaluation to be considered utilization-focused In the complexity literature, the shorthand for "minimum specifications" is MIN SPECS. The basic idea of MIN SPECS is to "establish only those very few requirements necessary to define something, leaving everything else open to the creative evolution of the complex adaptive system" (Zimmerman et al., 2001, p. 161; see also Patton, 2018d, 173–176).

MIN SPECS are a manifestation of what quality control leader Joseph Moses Juran (1951) called "the rule of the vital few." He demonstrated that the key to increasing the quality of any production or creation process was to identify and isolate the few vital factors that make the greatest difference. He found that quality problems were not, in general, due to a multiplicity of causes, but to a vital few that had a disproportionate impact. This notion has been formalized in the 80/20 principle: 80% of what gets done flows from 20% of the overall effort. (See sidebar on the 80/20 principle.) In evaluation, roughly 20% of the findings will provide 80% of what's worth knowing and acting on. The trick is finding that 20%, which is what utilization-focused evaluation (U-FE) aims to do.

80/20 Principle: The Rule of the Vital Few

The 80/20 principle, first articulated by economist Vilfredo Pareto in 1897 (he called it a "rule"), posits that roughly the top 20% of any distribution accounts for about 80% of what's important. Management consultant Richard Koch (1999) has studied applications of the 80/20 principle in biology, physics, psychology, sociology, political science, philosophy, business, and management. He has concluded that it can be applied to anything: "It is built into the fabric of the universe. In one important sense, it is how the universe works and progress occurs" (p. 220). Examples abound. In businesses, 20% of products account for about 80% of sales. Roughly 80% of computer problems are caused by 20% of coding errors. Around 20% of criminals account for 80% of crime; 20% of motorists cause 80% of accidents. Applied personally, the law of the vital few hypothesizes that 20% of your activities will account for 80% of your results. Koch (1999) is effusive about its relevance across a great variety of endeavors.

> The 80/20 principle can and should be used by every intelligent person in their daily life [and] by every organization . . . It can help individuals and groups achieve much more, with much less effort. The 80/20 principle conveys personal effectiveness and happiness. It can multiply the profitability of corporations and the effectiveness of any organization. It even holds the key to raising the quality and quantity public services while cutting their costs . . . This principle is one of the best ways of dealing with and transcending the pressures of modern life. (p. 3)

The utilization-focused evaluation aims for intended use by intended users. Evaluation utilization is a journey. In preparing for any trip, you have to decide what is essential. What do you absolutely have to bring? Traveling as light as possible can make the trip less burdensome and easier to navigate. In later chapters, we'll add more provisions and necessities for longer, more complex, and more difficult journeys. But we focus here on the MIN SPECS for any utilization-focused evaluation journey.

Exhibit 2.1 presents the five utilization-focused evaluation MIN SPECS for achieving intended use by intended users. We'll discuss each of these and illustrate them with U-FE exemplars.

Exhibit 2.1   Achieving Intended Use by Intended Users: MIN SPECS* for Utilization-Focused Evaluation

1. *Honor the personal factor*: Identify and engage primary intended users.

2. *Be purpose-driven*: Focus on priority intended uses.

3. *Facilitate process use*: Be active, reactive, interactive, and adaptive in engaging users in all aspects of the evaluation.

4. *Take a full-journey stance*: Focus on use from beginning to the end and every step along the way.

5. *Adapt to context changes:* When the context for an evaluation changes, the evaluation may need to change.

*MIN SPECS (minimum specifications) define what is essential and core.

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MIN-SPEC 1. Honor the Personal Factor: Identify and Engage Primary Intended Users

People use evaluation, not programs, not organizations, and not institutions. Evaluation is ultimately a people business. The *personal factor* is the presence of an identifiable individual or group of people who personally care about the evaluation and the findings it generates. Where such a person or group is present, evaluations are more likely to be used; where the personal factor is absent, there is a correspondingly lower probability of evaluation impact. From our first utilization study (Patton, 1978) to the present, we have more than 4 decades of research on evaluation supporting the critical importance of the personal factor (Patton, 2008b, 2015).

What we've learned over many years of research and practice confirms the original insight of the influential evaluation thought leader Lee J. Cronbach and his Stanford Evaluation Consortium, one of the leading places of ferment and innovation in evaluation during the late 1970s. They identified major reforms needed in evaluation by publishing a provocative set of 95 theses, following the precedent of Martin Luther. Among them was this gem:

> Nothing makes a larger difference in the use of evaluations than *the personal factor,* the interest of officials in learning from the evaluation, and the desire of evaluators to get attention for what they know. (Cronbach & Associates, 1980, p. 6; italics and plural voice added)

Premise	Identifying, organizing, and engaging primary intended users optimizes the *personal factor.*

Identifying, organizing, and engaging primary intended users optimizes the *personal factor,* which emphasizes that an evaluation is more likely to be used if intended users are involved in ways they find meaningful, feel ownership of the evaluation, find the questions relevant, and care about the findings.

Primary intended users are people who have a direct, identifiable stake in the evaluation. Identifying them at the start of an evaluation (and continuing to work with them as an evaluation progresses) is critical to ensuring that an evaluation is utilization focused and ultimately used. Put simply, *without the engagement of primary intended users, there is no utilization-focused evaluation.*

How to Do It

Apply the lesson of the importance of the personal factor in supporting evaluation use.

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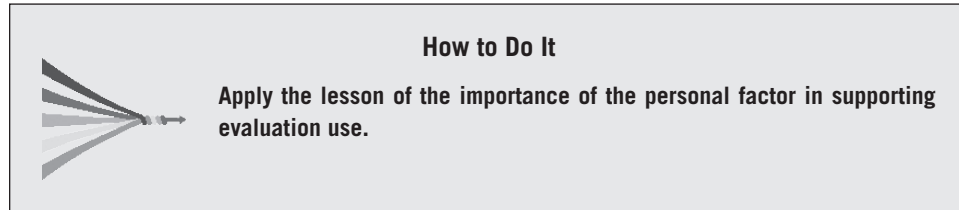
iStock.com/Rudzhan Nagiev

Find and involve primary intended users who are:

- **Interested** in being involved

- **Knowledgeable** about the program and evaluation needs

- **Open** to evaluation and the process of learning and improvement

- **Connected** to important stakeholder constituencies

- **Credible** in the eyes of other key users and stakeholders

- **Teachable** about utilization-focused evaluation

- **Committed** and available for interaction throughout the evaluation process

A Personal-Factor Exemplar:
Engaging Educational Leaders in Evaluation

Each year the American Evaluation Association (AEA) gives an Outstanding Evaluation Award. The very first award in 1998 was to the Georgia Council for School Performance's *School and System Performance Reports.* The accountability reporting system garnered high accolades for its utility. Schools have a multitude of stakeholders and a statewide education system magnifies the number and diversity of vested interests and competing perspectives. There are lots of potential audiences. But who were the primary intended users actually involved in the evaluation's design and use? In an

interview for the *American Journal of Evaluation*, lead evaluator Gary Henry described how the evaluation unfolded:

> We knew that it would be important to engage superintendents, school board members, teachers, and principals. Our work was overseen by six Council members who were appointed by the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, the Speaker of the Georgia House of representatives, and an ex-officio member, the State Superintendent of Schools. Members of the Council were emphatic about extending stakeholder status to members of the community in a highly inclusive way—including parents and others in the community. It took almost a year working with these groups to create the architecture of the accountability system . . . Once we all got on the same page, there was a great deal of creativity and excitement. The process focused on identifying what indicators we would use. We met in four separate groups—principals, superintendents, teachers, and community members—to reduce the influence of pre-existing power relationships on the deliberations. At three points during the process and twice after the system was being implemented we brought all four groups together. Turnout at the meetings was very high. (Henry quoted in Fitzpatrick 2000, p.109)

There are many ways of identifying and working with primary intended users. We'll provide more exemplars in this chapter, then in Part 2 of the book we'll discuss in-depth and detail how to identify and work with primary intended users. Let's turn now to the essential element of clarity of purpose.

MIN SPEC 2. Be Purpose Driven: Focus on Priority Intended Uses

> The purpose of an evaluation conditions the use that can be expected of it.
>
> Eleanor Chelimsky (1997)
> 1995 President, American Evaluation Association

Different people (program staff versus funders or policymakers) need information for distinctly different purposes. The purpose of improvement information is to make a program better by identifying its strengths and weaknesses. The purpose of evaluating overall effectiveness and efficiency is to inform decisions by funders and policymakers about the future of a program. Accountability evaluations determine if a program did what it was supposed to do and used its resources appropriately as illustrated by the Georgia Council for School Performance's *School and System Performance Reports* reviewed above. Developmental evaluations support innovation and adaptation in complex dynamic systems. Knowledge generation and learning lessons have emerged as purpose options.

Being clear about an evaluation's purpose is central to evaluating an evaluation, the source of our own professional accountability. The most important kind of accountability in evaluation is use that comes from "designed tracking and follow-up of a predetermined use to predetermined user." Chelimsky (1983) called this a "closed-looped feedback process" in which "the policymaker wants information, asks for it, and is interested in and informed by the response" (p. 160). This addresses the question of who the evaluation is for and the predetermined use becomes the criterion against which the success of the evaluation can be judged.

Premise	**Use flows from clarity about purpose.**

Primary intended users should review and prioritize evaluation use options to clarify the primary purposes and intended uses of the evaluation. Lack of clarity about the purpose of an evaluation can hinder the evaluation's utility and use. Deliberating on options and expressing preferences increases intended users' understanding of the implications of making certain choices and deepens ownership of the decisions and recommendations that emerge from the process.

How to Do It

Review purpose options with primary intended users.

Begin by explaining the importance of getting clear on an evaluation's purpose with primary intended users:

> *If you are going to buy a car, you have lots of choices and have to narrow the options to what kind you seek. How will the car be used? What features are critical? A good car salesperson will help you find a vehicle that matches your core needs and fits your budget given your priority uses of the car. The same process holds for any major purchase, like getting a new computer or buying a house, or, for that matter, any important decision, like what courses to take in college or what apartment to rent. The world is filled with options. And so is evaluation.*

The evaluator's facilitation task is to present and explain the primary purpose options and their implications for use. The primary intended users determine which purposes are primary. Choices have to be made. No evaluation can serve all possible purposes equally well. Priorities have to be established.
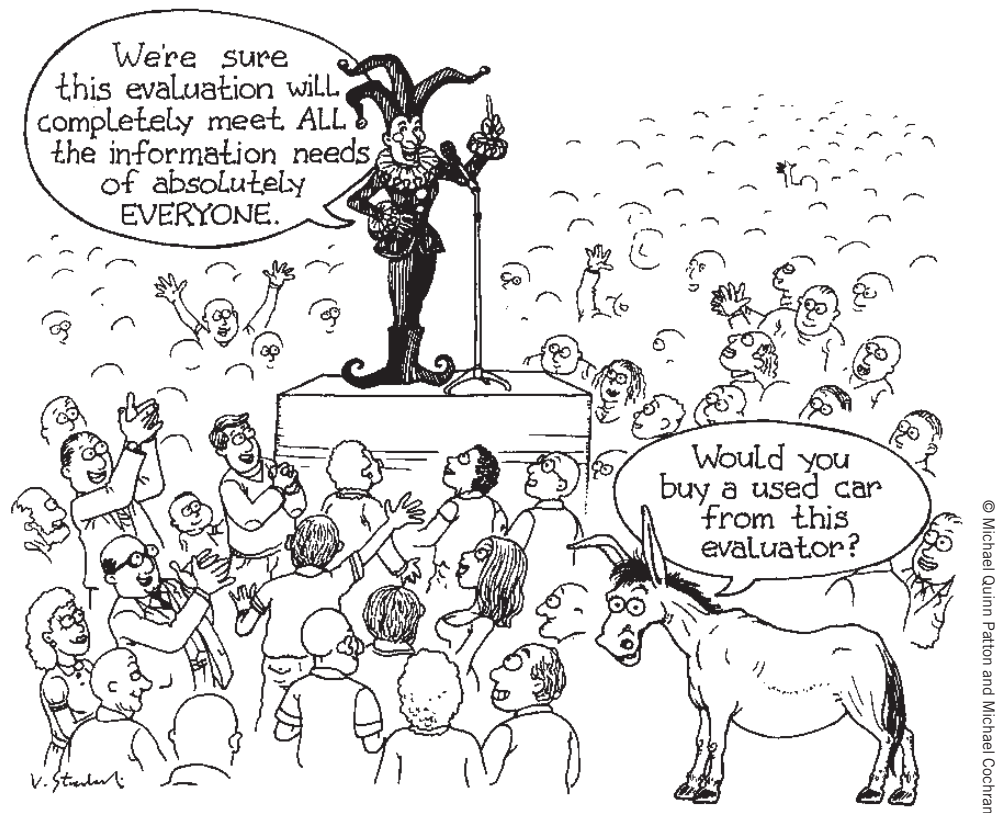
One way to determine an evaluation's priority purpose is to surface forthcoming decisions that an evaluation is expected to inform. Here are examples of questions to ask of intended users to establish an evaluation's intended influence on forthcoming decisions:

- What decisions, if any, are the evaluation findings expected to influence? There may not be any, in which case the evaluation's purpose may be simply to generate knowledge for understanding and future enlightenment. If, however, the evaluation is expected to influence decisions, clearly distinguish major decisions about program funding, continuation, or expansion from decisions about program improvement, and innovation development.

- When will decisions be made? By whom? When will evaluation findings be needed to be timely and influential?

- What is at stake in the decisions? For whom? What controversies or issues surround the decisions?

- What's the history and context of the decision-making process?

- What other factors (values, politics, personalities, promises already made) will affect the decision-making?

- What might happen to make the decision irrelevant or keep it from being made? In other words, how volatile is the decision-making environment?

- How much influence do you expect the evaluation to have—realistically? What needs to be done to achieve that level of influence? Include special attention to which stakeholders to involve for the evaluation to have the expected degree of influence.

- What data and findings will be especially useful to support decision-making?

- How will we know afterward if the evaluation was used as intended? In effect, how can use be assessed?

A Purpose-Driven Exemplar: Evaluation for Improvement

> Exemplary evaluations inspire and energize evaluation professionals.
>
> Stewart I. Donaldson
> 2015 President, American Evaluation Association

The Blandin Community Leadership Program, supported and operated by the Blandin Foundation, serves small, rural communities throughout Minnesota. Evaluation for improvement is often called *formative evaluation* in that it aims to both inform and form how improvement processes are identified and implemented, like an artist forming a clay pot on a pottery wheel, adding, shaping, smoothing, and removing clay until it is the way the artist envisions it. Leadership program staff were the primary intended users of the formative evaluation. The evaluation included surveys of participants, follow-up case studies of projects they undertook in their communities following the program, observations of the program in operation, review of program curriculum materials, and in-depth interviews with participants, staff, and community key informants. The formative evaluation findings were used to make major changes in many aspects of how the program operated. Recruitment processes were expanded. Program activities were adjusted based on feedback from participants. New curriculum elements and small group exercises were added and fine-tuned. Follow-up interviews with graduates led to new support initiatives after program completion. The program director and staff were hungry for feedback and eager to make improvements, which they did willingly and enthusiastically. U-FE is especially powerful where primary intended users are open to feedback and committed to using findings to make improvements. As we shall see, that is not always the case, but where primary intended users value evaluation and are willing to engage with feedback and findings, a partnership can be created between the program staff and the evaluators to ensure high-level and high-quality use.

The first MIN SPEC was the personal factor: identifying and engaging primary intended users. The second was being purpose-driven: Focus on priority intended uses. Let's turn now to the third U-FE MIN SPEC: *facilitating process use.*

MIN SPEC 3. Facilitate Process Use: Be Active, Reactive, Interactive, and Adaptive in Engaging Users in All Aspects of the Evaluation

> The facilitator's job is to support everyone to do their best thinking. To do this, the facilitator encourages full participation, promotes mutual understanding, and cultivates shared responsibility.
>
> Sam Kaner (2014, p. xxvii)
> *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*

Achieving intended use by intended users requires facilitation. The phrase *active-reactive-interactive-adaptive* captures 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.

Utilization-focused evaluators are, first of all, active in deliberately and strategically identifying intended users, then facilitating clarity of purpose and generating useful questions. They are reactive in listening to intended users and responding to what they learn about the particular situation in which the evaluation is unfolding. They are adaptive in altering evaluation questions and designs in light of their increased understanding of the situation and changing conditions. Active-reactive-interactive-adaptive evaluators don't impose cookbook designs. They don't do the same thing time after time. They become genuinely immersed in the challenges of each new setting and authentically responsive to the intended users of each new evaluation. It is the paradox of decision-making that effective action is born of reaction. Only when organizations and people take in information from the environment and react to changing conditions can they act in that same environment to reduce uncertainty and increase discretionary flexibility. The same is true for the individual decision-maker or for a problem-solving group. Action emerges through reaction, and interaction leads to adaptation. Exhibit 2.2 depicts this adaptive cycle.

Facilitating user engagement requires versatility, flexibility, creativity, political astuteness, responsiveness, cultural competence, and interpersonal skills.

> 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. (Stevahn & King, 2016, p. 68).

Exhibit 2.2   Working with Primary Intended Users: Adaptive Cycle

Adapt

Act

Evaluation
Negotiations

Interact

React

Premise
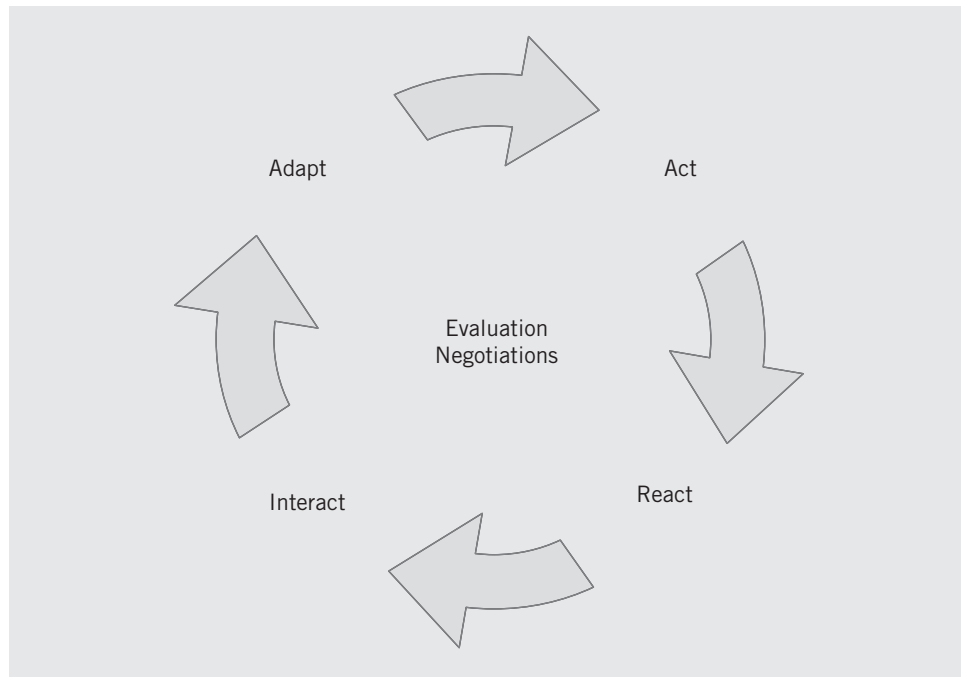
Evaluation use is enhanced by ensuring that primary intended users find the evaluation meaningful and credible.

Traditionally, training of evaluators has focused foremost on methodological competence assuming that methodological rigor is the primary determinant of evaluation credibility. But methodological credibility does not occur in a vacuum. What makes a particular evaluation credible depends on its purpose, context, and uses. The evidence from studies of use (Patton, 2008b) shows that how an evaluation is facilitated to support meaningful involvement of stakeholders and primary intended users affects those users' commitments to use, understanding of findings, judgments about the evaluation's credibility, and ultimately their behaviors and follow-through with regard to use. Based on that fundamental premise, an essential minimum specification for U-FE *is facilitation to enhance evaluation credibility and use.*

The Interpersonal Factor Is Personal and Cultural: Who You Are Matters in the Work

by Jara Dean-Coffey

I am Jara Dean-Coffey. I am a descendant of free, stolen, and enslaved people. I can trace to the 1600s on my paternal side my people working, living on, and eventually owning land from the territories of the Appomattox (Westmoreland, VA) and from the 1800s on my maternal side, working and living on the lands of the Minocan (Nelson Valley, VA) and the Lenape (Cayuga Valley, Ohio). I write this from the territories of the Coast Miwok also known as San Rafael, California. Preferred pronouns she/her/hers. I founded and lead *Luminare Group* and the *Equitable Evaluation Initiative*. I am in the third year of my American Evaluation Association board service. I celebrate my 25th year of marriage this year, own a home, parents married of 50+ still kicking it, together, and have a brother (who has a long-term partner). I was born in Philadelphia and grew up in what is euphemistically referred to as the Main Line. I am a Sagittarius, true and true. First born. INTJ. You now have a better sense of who I am. Now what I say or do, can be better put in context, and you can think about how it might differ, compliment, or challenge how you might experience the world and the ways in which we might be in relationship with and to one another.

For us as evaluators (if that is how we define ourselves) trust is an integral element of our work. We tend to lead with our methodological beliefs and execution on method as indicators of our trustworthiness. We (and the markets in which we work) have often placed greater worth on this than the human connection, understanding, and experience we have which would allow us to better understand and determine if and what methodological stance and methods might be best, and perhaps, even more importantly how best and with whom best to engage in our efforts. We have become less connected to the humans and thus the humanity of our work. It has made us less relevant, useful, and effective (however you wish to define that).

دَعْوَةٌ, 邀请, invitación

So this post is really an invitation to think about not only your values (what drives you to do and be in this work) but who are you. What about your life and that of your people do you bring to this work? What should you bring to this work? How would it deepen your understanding of and strengthen your relationships with your client partners, community, whomever it is that you interact with as part of your work? What work might you have to do to get to that place? Being an evaluator is a position of power and responsibility not only to your client partners/community but to yourself. Bring it all. Find the joy.

Source: Jara Dean-Coffey (2020)

"Just to be on the safe side, let's look into evaluation models that don't involve working with people."

How to Do It

Utilization-focused evaluation involves effective interpersonal facilitation to support intended users in identifying their priorities.

To be human is to engage in interpersonal dynamics.

Inter: between.

Personal: people.

Dynamics: forces that produce activity and change.

Combining these definitions, interpersonal dynamics are the forces between people that lead to activity and change. Whenever and wherever people interact, these dynamics are at work.

King & Stevahn (2013, p. 2)

Effective facilitation requires attending to both processes and outcomes. Outcomes flow from fulfilling the work and purpose of evaluation facilitation. A typical outcome