Facilitating Evaluation to Lead Meaningful Change

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Abstract

Evaluation education and training has traditionally emphasized methodological skills and ignored soft skills. A review of routine evaluation tasks, however, reveals that evaluation typically requires the evaluator to work with groups of people for organizing and managing an evaluation, as well as in collecting and analyzing data; that is, evaluators must frequently facilitate group interactions to conclude an evaluation successfully. A juxtaposition of evaluator and facilitator competencies shows significant overlap between them. Furthermore, evaluations of increasing complexity call for higher levels of facilitation. Transformational evaluations call for significant self-development and strengthening of leadership competencies. Through development and use of facilitation tools and techniques, facilitation can be used to enhance the effectiveness and use of an evaluation. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc., and the American Evaluation Association.

What Does It Mean to “Facilitate” Evaluation?

Evaluation is an intervention and a process, one that requires the facilitation of interactions at multiple steps along the way. The evaluator engages in facilitation throughout the course of an evaluation,
beginning with negotiating the terms of reference, contract agreement, appropriate permissions, participation of those who fund the evaluation, and those who are evaluated or are otherwise affected by the evaluation. So the question is not whether evaluators facilitate process and relationships, it is how well they do so. Evaluators need to understand how facilitation influences evaluation outcomes, assess their own level of facilitation competence, and determine appropriate paths for enhancing their facilitation skills for evaluation.

In considering the role of facilitation in evaluation, Michael Doyle provides a striking definition of a facilitator as “content neutral”—someone who does not promote a particular point of view but rather advocates for “fair, open, and inclusive procedures to accomplish the group’s work” (Kaner et al., 2007, p. xiii). This essential aspect of the facilitator’s role is also important in evaluation. In their role, evaluators engage in the following activities:

- bring a structure for engaging clients and stakeholders, grounded in their evaluation methodology (e.g., planning meetings or conducting interviews, focus groups, and surveys);
- contribute to the potential effectiveness of teams by offering them accurate and reliable data that are easy to understand and use in making decisions and improving programs and organizational performance; and
- remain independent, aiming to include different perspectives in the evaluation without taking sides.

There is wide consensus in the evaluation community about the importance of conducting useful evaluations (see, for example, Patton, 2008, and Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1995) in which the potential for use is built in from the beginning and discussed in the planning stages. Patton and Fetterman each write of the need to incorporate participatory methods to ensure that evaluation responds to the burning questions of program implementers; in this way, evaluation becomes relevant for evaluation clients—those who fund the evaluation, and those who are evaluated.

In collecting data, evaluators know the importance of facilitation skills in creating a safe space to elicit honest and complete feedback. Focus group guidance calls for a facilitator or researcher who will enable participants to feel “respected, comfortable, and free to give their opinions without being judged” (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 4). Furthermore, some evaluations require the evaluator to help clients understand, accept, and make use of the results, a stipulation that places further demands for facilitation on evaluators. Good facilitation of the evaluation process increases client engagement and buy-in, fosters a safe place for honesty, and creates a neutral space for airing different views with an impartial and independent evaluator. When an evaluation is complex or controversial, good facilitation enables the
evaluator to receive more honest inputs and to challenge assumptions without getting participants so angry that they disengage from the evaluation.

**What Does “Facilitation” Mean in Evaluation?**

Put simply, every part of every evaluation that involves contact with people needs to be facilitated. It follows, therefore, that the more skilled evaluators are in facilitation, the more effective they will be in working through the issues and challenges that arise during typical evaluations. Patton (2011) makes this need clear, suggesting (somewhat wryly) that the evaluation is much enhanced when the evaluator is

A skilled communicator, an excellent facilitator, culturally sensitive, methodologically competent and eclectic, manifesting a strong tolerance for ambiguity, flexible and responsive, and fundamentally a good person—that is, an all-round saintly type with exemplary character. (p. 68)

Despite acknowledgement of the importance of facilitation by some of evaluation’s most prominent practitioners, evaluation instruction has traditionally emphasized methods, leaving out facilitation competencies even as many methods explicitly require those competencies. Limited instruction has left many evaluators to their own devices to figure out what facilitation skills they need, and how to develop them.

With so many facilitation techniques available, their use depends on the objective of the assignment and on the style, skill, and sophistication of the facilitator. As evaluators, how do we select the skills we need to support our work? Let us review facilitation at three levels of sophistication and examine the intersection with evaluation at each level.

**Level 1: “Basic” Facilitation**

In facilitation’s simplest form, we might imagine a pleasant person in front of a room helping participants get along and get their work done. In fact, even basic facilitation—just like evaluation—is a complex field with different schools of thought, conceptual models, frameworks, and tools. The International Association of Facilitators (IAF) has a list of competencies it requires of trained facilitators; these competencies are important for evaluators as well.

Table 1.1 demonstrates a clear relationship between facilitation and evaluation competencies and a definite link between facilitator competencies and several of the American Evaluation Association’s (AEA’s) guiding principles. Just like facilitators, evaluators have to build and maintain constructive relationships with stakeholders, manage engagement with people (e.g., for evaluation steering committee meetings, focus groups, and group
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IAF(^a) facilitation competencies</th>
<th>Relevant IDEAS(^b) evaluation competencies</th>
<th>Relevant AEA(^c) guiding principles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Create collaborative client relationships</strong></td>
<td>Builds and maintains constructive relationships with partners, evaluation commissioners, and other stakeholders</td>
<td>Evaluators respect the security, dignity, and self-worth of respondents, program participants, clients, and other evaluation stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plan appropriate group processes</strong></td>
<td>Undertakes appropriate upfront exploration and planning for an evaluation, including stakeholder engagement</td>
<td>Ensure that the evaluation team collectively possesses the education, abilities, skills, and experience appropriate to the evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Create and sustain a participatory environment(^b)</strong></td>
<td>Displays appropriate cross-cultural competencies and cultural sensitivity</td>
<td>Ensure that the evaluation team collectively demonstrates cultural competence and uses appropriate evaluation strategies and skills to work with culturally different groups</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Guide group to appropriate useful outcomes</strong></td>
<td>Develops or assists in developing the strongest feasible design to answer the evaluation questions and respond to the evaluation’s purpose. Provides guidance to others within and external to the organization on development evaluation planning and design, methods, and approaches</td>
<td>Provide competent services to stakeholders. In addition, this facilitator competency particularly resonates with facilitators concerned with evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Build and maintain professional knowledge</strong></td>
<td>Knows literature, concepts, and methods, participates in professional networks, and works toward self-improvement</td>
<td>Seek to maintain and improve their competencies in order to provide the highest level of performance in their evaluations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model positive professional attitude</strong></td>
<td>Knows the IDEAS Code of Ethics and behaves in accord with it(^c)</td>
<td>Integrity and honesty(^d)</td>
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</table>

\(a\)International Association of Facilitators.  
\(b\)International Development Evaluation Association.  
\(c\)American Evaluation Association.  
\(d\)This IAF core competency includes the need to “cultivate cultural awareness and sensitivity”.  
\(e\)The Code of Ethics is extensive, covering honesty, conflict of interest, empowering stakeholders, promoting equity, and so forth.
interviews), maintain a participatory environment within and across cultures, and achieve results.

Beyond the core competencies, facilitators—just as evaluators—continue to add new knowledge and skills through different methods, such as:

- *Open Space*, a method for engaging groups to define the agenda they wish to address and self-manage subsequent conversations (Owen, 2008);
- *Future Search*, a “task-focused” method that “helps people transform their capability for action very quickly” (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010, p. 1);
- *The Art of Convening*, which seeks to bring “authentic engagement and authentic leadership in … meetings, gatherings, and conversations” (Neal & Neal, 2011, p. xiii);
- *Appreciative Inquiry*, a process that directs respondents to study success (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006); and
- *World Café*, a group-engagement method used to foster increased understanding, learning, or common ground (Brown, 2005).

Whatever methods facilitators adopt, the core competencies are similar and include the same ingredients—relationships, communication, participation, respect, asking good questions, ethics, engagement, and quality—every one of which also matters for evaluation.

**Level 2: “Advanced” Facilitation**

As one may expect, more demanding situations—dealing with an organization’s senior leaders, groups experiencing hostility, post-conflict trauma, and other challenges, for example—require higher levels of competence. To perform well in such cases, facilitators need not only advanced skills, but also a high level of self-development. Advanced facilitators have “done their own work” to reach high levels of authenticity, self-awareness, and self-management.

More challenging evaluations require similarly advanced facilitation competencies, particularly competencies in leadership development and coaching. Why should we, as evaluators and facilitators of evaluation, care about leadership development? In complex and challenging situations, there is a convergence of roles—evaluation, facilitation, leadership development, executive coaching, and organizational development—around the common goal of enabling our clients and evaluands to understand their situation and shape a constructive way forward based on reliable evidence.

When evaluators work on complex issues characterized by political sensitivity, conflict, or other challenges, or with groups that do not get along, they need to have the fortitude and ability to navigate through to
a successful evaluation. This is all the more important when we seek to engage in “transformative” evaluation.

Level 3: Facilitation for “Transformative” Evaluation

One type of complex evaluation goes beyond usefulness, aiming to catalyze change in clients, stakeholders, and society as a whole. Several leading evaluation thinkers call for this type of complexity in equity-focused, developmental, and “transformative” evaluation. Mertens (2009) suggests that the evaluator’s role is a transformative one, which seeks to promote social justice by intervening in what Chambers (2012) has called the “perpetual tension between a dominant paradigm of things and a subordinate paradigm of people” (p. xv). In such cases, evaluators are challenged to think carefully about the role they see themselves playing.

What kind of facilitation competencies do we need to engage in transformative evaluation—to become, as Schaetti, Ramsey, and Watanabe (2008) suggest, “skilled change agents”? Patton (2008) suggests we engage in “reflective practice,” and Mertens (2009) agrees, suggesting that we need more than skills and techniques: we need self-knowledge and cultural knowledge. We want to challenge program managers and policy makers to think evaluatively, strategically, systemically, and clearly. To think differently takes abilities beyond one discipline, so that one can see the links between inputs and broader impact, listen for understanding, and overcome resistance to ideas that do not fit into existing paradigms. Thinking differently also means having the courage to raise difficult issues, acknowledge limitations in oneself and make changes, and the ability to communicate a compelling vision. How else can we find the voice to raise issues our clients may wish to ignore, in ways that increase their capacity to listen and change, while empowering those who have been silent to speak up?

Challenging Evaluators to Become Skilled Facilitators

This discussion of the intersection of facilitation and evaluation is incomplete without a look at practice. To help me think through this question, I spoke with Michael Quinn Patton and Donna Mertens. Patton, who has worked recently on evaluation competencies for leaders, is known for incorporating systems thinking and creative facilitation in his work. Mertens is a leading thinker in transformative evaluation who boldly pushes for self-development in her courses. Working in different spheres and with different styles, Patton and Mertens each challenge those they train in evaluation to go to places of discomfort, aiming to bring about some level of transformative personal growth that, ultimately, helps participants become skilled facilitators. High-level facilitation skills enable the evaluator both to get out of the way and to push people and organizations to make their own decisions and find a way forward.
“It’s All Data”: Facilitating Reflection in Evaluation Training

For Patton, the link between evaluation and facilitation is so obvious that he calls himself a “facilitator of evaluation,” rather than an evaluator. He always teaches aspects of facilitation when he teaches evaluation, organizing people in “learning circles” where he encourages them to ask systems questions to find out what is known and unknown. Participants practice interviewing, and he tells them to “listen long enough so they might begin to understand” (M. Patton, personal communication, April 24, 2014).

Patton described a tough facilitation challenge he had experienced while conducting a workshop on qualitative methods for 12 senior ministry staff (of an unnamed country) who had been sent to his workshop without being consulted. When Patton asked them to participate in an exercise at the start of the workshop, they stayed seated, arms crossed, with clearly hostile body language. He was shocked—this had never happened to him before—but he persevered. Showing nothing to the group, he told himself, “it’s all data.” With that mind-set, he asked the group to tell him what was going on. The participants voiced their frustration with the “useless” workshops their minister regularly imposed on them. On the spot, Patton offered to work with them to do a collaborative, qualitative assessment of the practice of workshops, and develop a participatory report with their analysis and suggestions for the minister.

Patton’s story shows us that, in the moment, when the facilitator/evaluator is under significant pressure and attracting a lot of negative emotions, it is the advanced competencies of self-knowledge, courage, and reflective practice that get him or her through to a constructive place. Strong facilitator skills help the evaluator not to take sides or defend when attacked, but to turn that negative energy around, using it as data, in a process of discovery.

Facilitation: A “Neglected Area” in Evaluation

In reflecting on the intersection of evaluation and facilitation, especially from the perspective of transformative research, Donna Mertens called facilitation “a neglected area” of evaluation practice. She believes that engagement with people is something that must occur before an evaluation’s purpose can be established. First, we need to ask ourselves, “How do I approach people in ways that are appropriate given culture, status, and power?” (D. Mertens, personal communication, April 25, 2014).

For Mertens, having facilitation competencies is a minimum requirement for evaluators. She calls for self-awareness—knowing the answer to the questions, “Who am I?” and “Who am I in relation to this community?” She wants you, the evaluator, to think about what you will do when something makes you uncomfortable. Mertens pushes her students’ transformation in every way possible: through action research, homework that asks for interaction with others, and role-plays in the classroom. For example, she
teaches a group on evaluation related to gender discrimination and disability in Brazil, Albania, and other countries. Mertens requires her students to go into communities to explore cultural constructions of disability, review the status of relevant legislation, and investigate any actions the country has taken. In essence, these students are engaged in transformative action research. In meeting community organizations, they are working to suspend their assumptions so they can really see what is going on, and then to structure evaluation in ways that enables those being evaluated to engage with evaluation more openly and courageously. Their evaluation work is leading up to an action plan, and the alliances they are developing along the way help them find out what works, and what should be done.

Mertens, like other experts (see, for example, Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009), recognizes that no single technique will give a facilitator (or an evaluator) the skills to suspend judgment and listen deeply, the fortitude to listen to attacks calmly, or the courage to challenge the status quo.

Marvin Weisbord, who developed the Future Search methodology, entitled his most recent facilitation book, Don’t Just Do Something, Stand There: Ten Principles for Leading Meetings That Matter (Weisbord & Janoff, 2007). The title is one of Weisbord’s favorite challenges to facilitators—something that is very hard to do without self-discipline and self-confidence. That is exactly what Patton and Mertens want to instill in evaluators.

Facilitation to Reframe the Theory of Change: The ASADI Evaluation

In exploring the link between evaluation and facilitation, I find it useful to reflect on my experience as project manager of an independent evaluation of the African Science Academy Development Initiative (ASADI). In this example, facilitated evaluation processes helped project implementers transform their perception of theory of change, partner roles, and priorities, which led to effective changes in their strategy and relationships, and, in turn, resulted in improved program outcomes that surpassed expectations.

Launched in 2004 to foster a more evidence-based approach to health and development on the African continent, ASADI was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and implemented by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), which was seen as an excellent model for ASADI. NAS initially selected three academies in Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda for higher funding and intensive technical assistance. The plan was to transfer lessons from these three main partners once they became stronger institutions that could teach their counterparts in other African countries.

Early on, NAS issued a call for proposals for a “highly participatory” independent evaluation to support learning through evaluation as NAS refined its theory of change. NAS wanted to monitor the experience of African academies and develop their evaluation capacity. My company, EnCompass LLC, and a South African firm, OtherWISE, were selected to carry out the
evaluation. As project manager, I worked closely with the NAS team and with ASADI Director Dr. Patrick Kelley. The perceptions presented here represent my reflections on the role of facilitation in this evaluation project.

At the end of the first year, the evaluation team had gathered important findings that challenged assumptions in NAS's theory of change. When NAS asked for a first-year evaluation report, we asked for a facilitated meeting to review the findings jointly and come up with interpretations and recommendations together. Our assessment was that our findings would be seen as critical of the hard work of the NAS and that our client would not know how to use it constructively; a facilitated meeting, however, would offer the NAS the opportunity to consider our findings gradually and through a new lens of self-analysis, thus leading to constructive use of findings. The agenda for the meeting incorporated several facilitation methods (listed in parentheses):

- Appreciative interviews to reflect on successful aspects of ASADI and explore existing interventions (Appreciative Inquiry, Values Analysis, and Visioning)
- Identification and in-depth discussion of issues (Reflective Practice)
- Revisiting the role of evaluation for ASADI (modified Johari Window)
- Reflection on the day (Reflective Practice)

Several important things happened during that heavily facilitated session. As we reviewed participants’ experiences and data from the field from the first year, we began together to challenge and abandon a few key assumptions in ASADI's original theory of change. Dr. Kelley and NAS's advisors had already experienced the shock of administrative complexities of working in Africa (e.g., how many steps are involved in making even one simple decision, resistance to early planning for conferences, etc.). In some cases, they had gotten stuck trying to figure out administrative matters rather than doing programmatic work. In several academies, processes took significantly longer than expected and, rather than focusing on scientific and professional discourse, NAS staff had sometimes found themselves in the unpleasant and unfulfilling role of policing administrative practices.

The breakthrough in this one-day session came from using the data the evaluation team had collected and facilitating NAS staff to step out of their own shoes and imagine how their African colleagues were experiencing them. NAS staff surprised the evaluation team with their insights from the reflective practice. Two of their conclusions in particular demonstrated how significantly participants reconsidered their assumptions about the African academies as a result of the facilitated day. First, as implementation of ASADI unfolded, the African academies, their governments, and NAS staff all experienced a deepened appreciation of the value of creating a trusting partnership. Second, as differences in culture and work habits made it necessary to stop and address unanticipated issues, staff from NAS
and the African academies began to understand the need for shared values (such as transparency, collaboration, valuing of women, and seniority) as a precursor to the specific technical assistance that had formed a large part of the initial theory of change.

After that first-year meeting, the NAS team often slipped into a “reflection space” during meetings to monitor progress or prepare for evaluation team site visits. Dr. Kelley once joked that they saw me as their “evaluator/psychologist.” When the time came for the final report, Dr. Kelley asked instead for individual reports for the three academies, because he valued the independent voice of the evaluation and the insight it gave him into the perspective of each African academy.

Reflecting later on the facilitation aspect of the ASADI evaluation, Dr. Kelley told me,

You were effective at understanding the theory of change of what we were trying to do. You helped me organize my thoughts about what was needed in ASADI. When we started, it seem[ed] that everything needed to be done. We did not have a route to change. We thought we would do all these things simultaneously. ... You were helpful in giving us a high-level approach to see how we were organizing our work. [After the facilitated meeting,] we listened to and truly understood the African academies. (P. Kelley, personal communication, April 24, 2014)

After that first year, Dr. Kelley and his team refocused their efforts on board development, bringing African academy scientists to their headquarters for consultations, building relationships, and developing shared visions. By the end of the grant, many ASADI academies—their number grew as the project evolved—went on to be very successful, and most have become sustainable.

**Conclusion**

At a minimum, evaluators need basic facilitation skills to organize, negotiate, and carry out an evaluation. Experienced facilitators and organizational development experts consistently employ deliberate, structured, and experiential processes that enable groups and individuals to strengthen awareness of the self and others, develop a deeper understanding of issues (in an organization or a program), discover common ground among stakeholders, and work together constructively toward a desired future that is expressed in measurable outcomes and feasible recommendations. Evaluators may often find themselves in situations in which they have to “facilitate” their way through political sensitivities, misunderstandings, competing interests, confusion, apathy, or refusal to cooperate. To reach their highest level of effectiveness, evaluators should cultivate advanced skills in facilitation, and if possible, leadership development and executive coaching. Evaluators can
benefit from these competencies not only to be effective in their work, but also to advance their personal and professional development.

References


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