

# 4

## Be Guided by the Personal Factor

### The First Operating Principle

*“Nothing makes a larger difference in the use of evaluations than the personal factor.”*

Stanford Evaluation Consortium  
(Cronbach, 1980, p. 6)

*Toward Reform of Program Evaluation:  
Aims, Methods and Institutional Arrangements*

**The personal factor principle:** *Be guided by the personal factor.* Learn about the people you’ll be facilitating and adapt the facilitation process accordingly. At the same time, provide them an opportunity to learn about you, the evaluation facilitator.

**Rationale:** We call them *stakeholders*, but they’re actually people. You’re facilitating people, not robots. People vary immensely, in multiple ways. Make the evaluation facilitation fit the people. Personalize the process. In so doing, let them experience you as a person, not only as someone fulfilling a role.

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**The principle in practice:** Mutual trust and respect increase the effectiveness of the facilitation process and the quality of the results. Effective evaluation facilitation requires establishing some degree of relationship with the people engaged in an evaluation process. Getting to know each other builds relationships within the group and between the evaluation facilitator and group participants.

As I noted at the beginning of Part A, I've been doing evaluation facilitation for nearly a half century. My facilitation experiences include a broad range of purposes, groups, time periods, and challenges. One theme runs through all that diversity: the critical importance of establishing trust and credibility. Trust and credibility depend on developing mutually respectful and effective relationships. Knowing how to develop relationships comes from learning enough about the people I'll be working with that I can customize the evaluation facilitation process to enhance their involvement and achieve desired results.

## ● THE PERSONAL FACTOR

The personal factor highlights how the individual interests, values, experiences, and perceptions of key stakeholders in an evaluation affects evaluation use. When the people who are intended to use an evaluation care about it enough to be involved in ensuring its relevance and credibility, evaluations are more likely to be used; where the personal factor is absent, there is a correspondingly lower probability of evaluation impact. The importance and nature of the personal factor first emerged in my research in the 1970s on factors affecting evaluation utilization (Patton, 1978). The implications for facilitation hit me with *interocular significance* (like a blow between the eyes). I was trained as a sociologist. Sociology is all about organizations positions, roles, norms, patterns, routines, and systems. Individual people don't matter. Who fills a position doesn't matter. The position shapes the person. People are interchangeable. Effective organizations depend on consistent and predictable actions determined by position, structure,

and socialization. At least, that was my socialization into sociology. But the evidence from our research on evaluation use was that individual people did matter—a lot. Who is fulfilling a role matters. People’s perspectives, experiences, values, beliefs, attitudes, commitments, and temperament all matter.

Hofstetter and Alkin (2003) conducted a comprehensive review of research on evaluation use for the *International Handbook of Educational Evaluation*. They concluded, “In sum, numerous factors influence use. The ‘personal factor’ appears to be the most important determinant of what impact an evaluation has as well as the type of impact of a given evaluation” (p. 216). And what does this mean in practice? They found that the evaluator could enhance use by engaging and involving intended users early in the evaluation, ensuring strong communications between the producers and users of evaluations, reporting evaluation findings effectively so users can understand and use them for their purposes, and maintaining credibility with the potential users (p. 216).

Carol Weiss, one of the leading scholars of knowledge use, concluded in her keynote address to the American Evaluation Association,

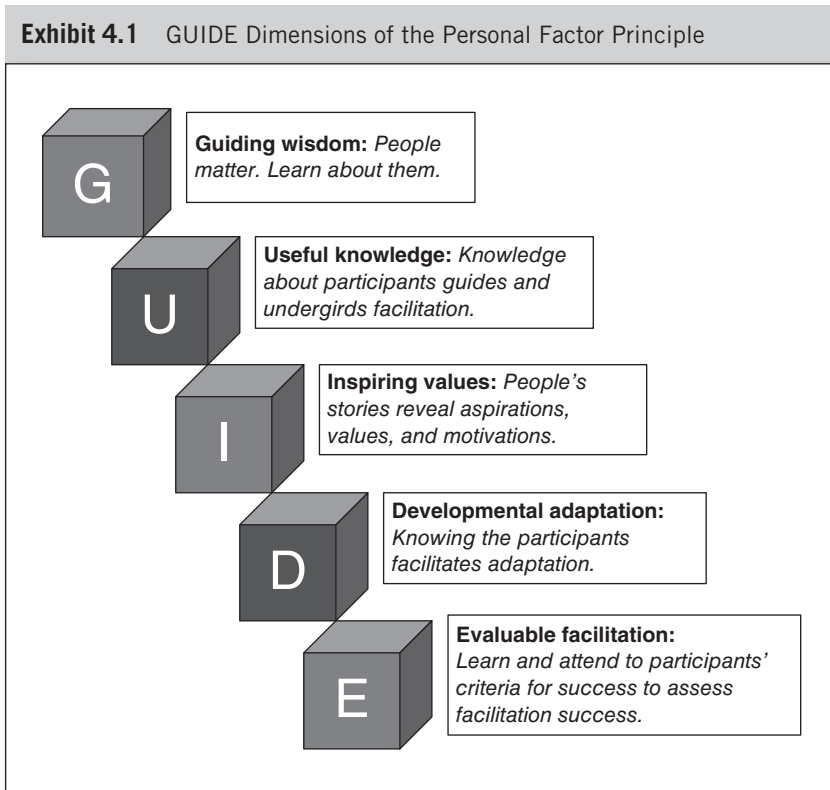
First of all, it seems that there are certain participants in policymaking who tend to be “users” of evaluation. The personal factor—a person’s interest, commitment, enthusiasm—plays a part in determining how much influence a piece of research will have. (1990, p. 177)

More recently, Cousins and Shulha (2006) reviewed a great volume of research on utilization of evaluation and knowledge found that “both social scientists and evaluators are learning that attention to the characteristics of knowledge users is a potent way to stimulate the utilization of findings” (p. 273).

Over the span of my career in evaluation, the profession has been deepening its understanding of how interactions with primary intended users affects actual use. Over that time, the evaluation literature has generated substantial evidence that attention to the personal factor—involving key stakeholders and working with intended users—can increase use (Patton, 2012). What I want to do in this book is extend what we’ve learned about how the personal factor affects evaluation use to a more general principle that can guide a broad range of evaluation facilitation opportunities and challenges

## ● GUIDE DIMENSIONS OF THE PERSONAL FACTOR PRINCIPLE

The GUIDE framework for principles, introduced in Chapter 3, provides a format for identifying the critical operational dimensions of the personal factor principle. Exhibit 4.1 highlights those core elements. In essence, facilitation is a people business. Effective facilitators have to get to know enough about the people who will be involved in the facilitation process to make it work for them.



### Guiding Wisdom

#### People matter. Learn about them

Knowing the people you're going to work with makes it possible to customize the facilitation process to meet their interests, needs, motivations, and predilections. People vary in all kinds of ways: personality, temperament, political perspectives, background experiences, and tolerance for group processes.

There are basically four ways to get to know the people you'll be facilitating:

1. Interview people in advance of the facilitation process.
2. Open the facilitation process with an exercise aimed at generating personal perspectives.
3. Learn from interactions with participants throughout the facilitation process.
4. Deepen knowledge of participants when facilitating a group multiple times, including getting to know them by working with them (especially for internal evaluation facilitators).

These are not mutually exclusive. Each is valuable and for facilitation that goes on over time, each is essential. I will review techniques for learning about participants using each of these approaches. Here are five primary aspects of individual perspectives, experiences, and preferences that can affect facilitation. Exhibit 4.2 provides an overview of the type of information it is useful to find out through these processes.

**Exhibit 4.2** What to Find Out

Factor	Key Question(s)	Example of Why This Matters
Motivation	Why are people participating? What's their interest, their stake?	In preparing to work with a foundation board, I learned that most of the trustees had personally known the founder of the foundation. They held the founder in high esteem and wanted to honor her legacy. In my pre-retreat interviews, these trustees made it clear that my credibility would depend on demonstrating that I knew about the founder's life, extensive charitable activities, and high status in the community. I had to do some homework to learn about the founder.

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**Exhibit 4.2** (Continued)

Factor	Key Question(s)	Example of Why This Matters
Relationships among participants	How do different members of the group interact? What are the power dynamics at play? What should I know about relationships within the group that can help me work effectively?	I became involved in facilitating the formation of a collaboration among three quite distinct entities. None of the three organizations wanted to collaborate, but a major foundation was forcing what one called “a shotgun marriage.” If there was no collaboration, there would be no funds for them separately. The funder was a participant in the process and strongly believed in the potential synergy of the three entities. I had to avoid taking sides, create opportunities to find common ground, and bring the funder into the perspective that the potential for collaboration should be treated as a hypothesis to be tested, not a goal to be achieved. That reframing proved critical to the mutual decision to abandon efforts at collaboration after a year of monthly meetings. The funder agreed to fund the entities separately. They asked me to continue facilitating their communications as a network rather than a collaboration, without the funder’s participation. They ended up collaborating on specific initiatives but not forming a formal collaboration. The funder was ultimately quite satisfied with this result.
Expectations	What are your expectations for this process? What would you like to see accomplished? What questions would you like to have answered? What	Failed facilitation means not meeting expectations. To meet expectations, you must manage expectations. To manage expectations, you must know expectations, which are likely to vary among participants. I was hired by an organization to help them create a new evaluation system as they expanded internationally and into new endeavors. I was to do so

Factor	Key Question(s)	Example of Why This Matters
	<p>would make this experience a success in your mind?</p>	<p>by facilitating a three-day retreat of senior managers. The core executive team wanted to come out of the retreat with a blueprint for the new system, one sufficiently detailed to move to design. I cautioned that, given the starting point (low evaluation capacity), history with evaluation (mainly compliance reporting), and strategic decisions still unfolding, a detailed blueprint was unrealistic and premature. I suggested scaling back expectations to establishing evaluation principles, parameters, intended uses, and intended users, then identifying a subgroup to begin operational planning. After considerable discussion, including the importance of a positive result that would build momentum, the executive director agreed to go slow in order to go fast (a principle to be discussed later). As an evaluator, I found myself in the unusual position of reducing expectations about evaluation instead of trying to increase commitment and elevate evaluation's role. The actual retreat exceeded expectations because some operational matters fell nicely into place as the big-picture strategic evaluation issues were successfully negotiated.</p>
<p>Knowledge about, experiences with, and perspectives on evaluation</p>	<p>What have been your past experiences with evaluation? What words do you associate with the word "evaluate"?</p>	<p>Evaluation comes with baggage. The very word can evoke strong feelings, bad memories, anxiety attacks, and unconscious (or conscious) resistance. Others welcome the opportunity to learn, improve, tell the program's story, and deepen their understanding of program participants'</p>

(Continued)

**Exhibit 4.2** (Continued)

Factor	Key Question(s)	Example of Why This Matters
		<p>experiences. In confidential pre-facilitation interviews, I encourage people to share with me “the good, the bad, and the ugly.” And they do. One person told me, “I hate evaluation. I’ve been planning to call in sick. But talking to you, I’m willing to give it a shot. (pause, laughter) But I may get sick over lunch and miss the afternoon.” I replied, “If it’s that bad, I’ll leave with you.” She became a strong and influential participant as the process unfolded.</p>
Things to avoid	What shouldn’t I do? What has not worked in the past with this group? Is there anything that worries you a bit about this process?	<p>Individuals and groups have had both good and bad experiences with facilitators. I want to hear about those experiences. Things I often hear are avoid jargon, don’t lecture us (my having a PhD and having been a university professor for a number of years raises such red flags), don’t let (Jim, Dave, Sue, or . . .) dominate the discussion, avoid sarcasm, don’t embarrass people, and don’t make it too complicated. I’ll share lots more on things to avoid as we go along. Keep in mind Newton’s facilitation law: Every positive action can have an opposite and equally powerful negative reaction. Be alert to for both the positive and negative.</p>

### Implementing the Personal Factor Principle through Pre-Facilitation Interviews

The guidance (G) provided by the personal factor principle instructs facilitators to get to know the people who will be involved in the process being facilitated. I do that, ideally, through pre-event, pre-facilitation,



confidential interviews with key knowledgeable and key informants—people identified as well-informed and influential. These are usually telephone interviews that take 30 to 45 minutes. Pre-facilitation interviews provide a chance to learn about individuals, interpersonal relationships, and conflicts that may exist within a group, the nature and depth of such conflicts, and how they may affect the dynamics of the group. Knowing these things helps anticipate and prepare for facilitation challenges.

Here are examples of the value of such interviews.

*Political Landmines.* In preparation for facilitating a strategic retreat with the board of directors and senior staff of a philanthropic foundation during the 2016 presidential campaign (Hillary Clinton versus Donald Trump), I interviewed each person who would be participating. Among other questions, I asked, “What should I know about board members to be an effective facilitator?” During the interviews, it was made clear to me that the board was politically conservative and supported Donald Trump, and they did not have a sense of humor about politics in general and Mr. Trump in particular.

I asked, “What mistake could I make as a facilitator? Based on your experiences with other facilitators, what mistakes have you seen them make made that I should avoid?” In one way or another, the board members got a common message across to me: they told me that it was important to *not* underestimate the knowledge, commitment, experience, and wisdom of these board members. “We can tell if you treat us with respect,” one board member told me.

*Learning the “Truth”.* Pre-facilitation interviews provide an opportunity to learn about the likely degree and nature of engagement of participants. In another set of pre-facilitation interviews, one person asked after reiterating the confidentiality of our interactions, “You want the truth?” I affirmed that I did. “Okay, then, you asked for it. A couple of us are just a year or two from retirement. We’ve been through hundreds of these things, these retreats. We’ve got our eyes on the exit door. Don’t expect much from us. Let me rephrase that: Don’t expect anything from us. We’re just biding our time.”

I suggested that it sounded like this person had accumulated a lot of experience and wisdom to offer the group. He replied, “Nobody here

pays any attention to me, nor have they paid any attention for a long time. I'm telling you this so you won't hassle me about talking more at the retreat. I'm telling you now, I've got nothing to say."

I opened the retreat with a norming exercise in which I asked participants to identify rules of engagement. These included putting away devices, listening attentively, sharing air time, respect for diverse points of view, and operating under what is known as the *Chatham House Rule*: "Participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed" (Chatham House, 2017).

I then asked how the group felt about variations in degree of participation: "Is everyone expected to participate fully? If so, is that something you want me as facilitator to monitor and invite engagement from those who aren't saying much? Or shall I just leave people alone and leave you each to decide your level of participation?" The group responded emphatically that the norm should be full participation from everyone. That legitimized my making an effort to include the more reluctant participants, which I did. Those near retirement ended up making important contributions, but I had to invite them to do so periodically. The advance interviews helped me plan how to handle the more resistant participants.

In another assignment, preparing for an evaluation design session with senior staff for a national nonprofit, I learned that they were under pressure from funders do more evaluation and that their primary funders were going to scrutinize the results of the evaluation planning session. Participants felt great pressure and anxiety. I knew that my facilitation job would be two pronged: (1) help them get a credible, meaning, and useful design and (2) alleviate their anxiety by building their confidence.

In yet another case, I learned that a new evaluation plan was to be a core element of the transition to a new chief executive officer. Beneath the surface of the evaluation to be designed, the primary agenda among participants was to get a feel for the perspective and leadership style of the new executive director.

Pre-facilitation interviews can reveal issues related to gender, race, age, and sexual orientation. Mutual respect, or lack thereof, can be affected by where people live and work: different neighborhoods, different travel routes to the office, and different modes of transportation. One group was divided into bikers and car drivers, with deep animosities toward each other.

In summary, the overall guidance provided by the personal factor principle is that people matter, so learn about the participants who will be involved in the facilitation process and use that knowledge to customize the facilitation process. In the remainder of this chapter, we'll look at the other GUIDE criteria as they apply to how the personal factor principle can be useful, inspiring, developmental, and evaluable.

## **Useful Knowledge**

### **Knowledge About Participants Guides and Undergirds Facilitation**

In pre-facilitation interviews, I find it useful to ask both specific questions about the draft agenda for the work to be undertaken as well as more general questions to get to know participants. I like to ask, "How did you become involved with this organization (or initiative, or program)? What have been the high and low points of your experiences with this group?" In the tools section at the end of this chapter, I offer an example of a pre-facilitation interview protocol.

It is useful for me as a facilitator to get a feel for the people I'll be working with, but it's also a chance for them to get a feel for me. So while I am interviewing them, I'm also sharing information about myself, reacting to what they say so that they get a sense of my style and what they can expect from me. For example, I tell those I'm interviewing that I may adapt the schedule, agenda, and process as the work unfolds. I alert them that my style is informal, flexible, and adaptive. I ask how that style fits with their preferences and expectations.

These are not research interviews. These are not evaluation data collection interviews. They are interviews to learn about people and have them learn about you, the facilitator. Those are the two dimensions of utility. You can use results of pre-facilitation interviews to plan how to approach the content and process of the facilitation, but you are also managing expectations and, hopefully, building the foundation for a trusting relationship that will contribute to positive outcomes for all those involved. Let me close this section with an example of the utility of pre-facilitation interviews in shaping a retreat I facilitated.

For large organizations with field operations, it is common to find divisions between people at headquarters and those in the field. I facilitated an evaluation use retreat for an international organization where field staff were frustrated, they told me in pre-retreat interviews,

by the lack of guidance from headquarters about strategic decisions they were facing on the ground. On the other hand, the senior staff at headquarters were frustrated by what they perceived as the lack of initiative by field staff. While the official purpose of the retreat was to review evaluation reports and extract lessons for improvement, the interviews revealed the need to address relationships between headquarters and the field and how adaptive decisions were to be made in the field and to clarify mutual expectations about roles and responsibilities between those at headquarters and those in the trenches at sites around the world. Failure to address that issue would have made the retreat inadequate and unsatisfying, no matter how much progress was made in extrapolating lessons from evaluation reports. The pre-retreat interviews told me that my job was to get both things done. That was useful to both the organization and me as facilitator.

## **Inspiring Values**

### **People's Stories Reveal Aspirations, Values, and Motivations**

To be an effective facilitator, I think it helps to be fascinated by people and their stories. Part of what I most enjoy about this kind of work is the chance to hear about other people's lives, experiences, perspectives, and commitments.

The deputy director of a nonprofit told me about her experience battling breast cancer and how that affected her view of everything she now did. She felt a strong sense of urgency and expressed high expectations for the work of the group I would be facilitating because of its personal importance to her.

In a pre-facilitation interview, a young woman told me about having recently gone through a divorce, her struggles as a single mom with two young kids, and how hard it had become for her to concentrate on work. She told me she might have to arrive and leave early and apologized in advance. I thanked her for the heads up and asked how I could time the issues discussed to be sure she was present for what she most cared about. She said it wasn't so much about particular issues, but because she was easily distracted, having someone lecture meant she tuned out. She said she liked small group exercises where people interacted and everyone got a chance to talk. I assured her that there would be such opportunities.

I've had the privilege of hearing stories of great courage; for example, one woman worked long hours every day, including weekends,

caring for HIV-infected orphans in a conflict zone in Africa. She said that the evaluation retreat session would be like a vacation for her. You don't hear that every day! Another woman told me of going to Cambodia on a tourist trip and visiting a small, impoverished village where she fell in love with the children and the villagers. Upon her return home, she raised funds for educational materials, desks, and computers. She ended up returning to the village and spending four years there as a teacher. She now worked for a refugee resettlement agency where evaluation had become a priority. When I asked her about any concerns she had about evaluation, she replied, "Making it humane. People aren't just problems and numbers. Evaluation should tell about the people, should be human, not just reports. Is that possible?" I assured her it was and that we'd address the issue as a central concern throughout the design session.

I've been deeply moved by the stories of counselors working with victims of sexual assault and rape, people caring for victims of torture, and people who have come out of poverty and now are working to help others escape its devastating effects. Pre-facilitation interviews are an opportunity to find out what drives the people I'll be working with, hear their stories, and learn about their values. As I was writing this book, I interviewed a man suffering from pancreatic cancer who told me that the upcoming retreat would be his last day of work and his last chance to contribute to an organization he'd given 20 years of his life to. Prior to my interviewing him, there was no agenda item for recognizing his situation and contribution. Indeed, I found that only a couple senior staff people knew how sick he was and that it would be his last day. I revised the agenda to provide time to acknowledge his longtime contributions to the organization.

## **Developmental Adaptation**

### **Knowing the Participants Facilitates Adaptation**

Learning about the people I'll be facilitating typically focuses on establishing the agenda and desired results of the session or retreat, but it is also an opportunity to find out about uncertainties that may have consequences for facilitation. For example, just prior to an evaluation design retreat with key stakeholders, I learned that the outcome of a major grant proposal was going to be announced. Whether the results were positive or negative would have a dramatic effect on the retreat. I needed to be prepared for either contingency.

A senior staff person who was having surgery told me that he might not be able to participate in the retreat in person, so contingencies needed to be considered, both for his possible virtual participation and not being able to participate at all.

Sometimes there are uncertainties about the facilities. I want to find out if any participants have had prior experience in the space where the session will occur. How much flexibility is there in the room arrangement? What is the lighting like? The acoustics? Will the room temperature (too cold or too hot) be a concern? Some of this can be learned by talking to the people at the facility where the event is to be facilitated. When possible, I like to visit ahead of time.

There are also other contingencies to become aware of: Who will be participating remotely by phone or by video on Skype? Are there likely to be people coming and going? It is not at all unusual for some people not to be able to attend for the whole time. Knowing when key people will be present and what issues are most important for involving them requires anticipating these possibilities.

## **Evaluable Facilitation**

### **Learn and Attend to Participants' Criteria for Success to Assess Facilitation Success**

The final criterion in the GUIDE framework is that the principle be evaluable. There are two dimensions to evaluating the personal factor principle. First, how effectively have you, the facilitator, been guided by the personal factor? The second evaluable dimension of getting to know participants is finding out what their evaluation criteria will be in judging the success of whatever evaluation activities and processes are being facilitated. For example, here are some standard core pre-facilitation interview questions: "What for you would make the experience a success?" "What do you want to have come out of our work together?" "How will you judge if the time was well spent?" Questions on the shadow side include the following: "What would constitute failure?" "What are you worried might happen?" "What should I be worried about?"

During preparation is also a time to consider and engage the question of how the facilitation itself should be evaluated. For example, should the evaluation process be evaluated formally or informally? What are the consequences either way? Should there be a form or questionnaire at the end of the facilitation? Should there be an opportunity for people to comment on the experience and evaluate it in real time?

These questions provide clues about expectations and stakes, including how much time must be preserved for whatever evaluation activities are to occur as a part of the facilitated process or event.

But if the evaluation facilitator is being guided by the personal factor throughout the facilitation process, then there will be ongoing assessment of how the participants are engaging with and responding to what is occurring. The power of being guided by the personal factor as an evaluation criterion is that it not only directs us to understand participants but that understanding also lets us make sense of, interpret, and adapt to their reactions. Harking back to Chapter 2, being guided by the personal factor involves being active, reactive, interactive, and adaptive in using personal factor insights. Evaluating our effectiveness in being guided by the personal factor is part of reflective practice and how we get better at using personal factor insights throughout facilitation and with diverse participants and situations.

## EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR FACILITATING EVALUATION ●

With the GUIDE framework as a foundation, let's turn to some specific facilitation practices based on attention to the personal factor principle.

### Opening Exercises That Facilitate Learning About Participants

Pre-facilitation interviews are ideal for adhering to the personal factor principle. But sometimes such interviews are not practical (there's insufficient time) or affordable. Not everyone can be interviewed if the group is large. Moreover, a common expectation is that the facilitation process will include ways for people to learn about each other. They seldom think about the fact that the facilitator is also learning about the participants. The resources section at the end of this chapter includes several exercises that can be used to help participants learn about each while also giving the facilitator important information about individuals and the group (see pp. XX). The group will function better if they know each other.

Here's the key point about facilitating opening icebreaker exercises from the specific perspective of an evaluation facilitator: Make the content about evaluation. There are hundreds of icebreaker exercises—indeed, thousands. There are routine and creative ways of facilitating people learning about each other. For example, ask people to share something that most people don't know about them. Or ask participants

to share something important going on in their lives outside work. But as an evaluation facilitator, I want to keep the focus on evaluation. See Chapter 7 for more on how to promote evaluative thinking.

### **Adhering to the Personal Factor Principle Throughout**

I've been emphasizing learning about people as preparation, but, as noted at the beginning, some facilitation processes extend over considerable time. This provides an ongoing opportunity for mutual learning and deepening relationships. The vice president of a foundation I've worked with for more than 20 years recently introduced me to new staff by saying, "We don't say we need a facilitator, an external evaluator, a critical friend, or an independent consultant. We just say, 'We need Michael.' He knows us. We know him. Together, we'll figure out next steps."

I report this not as a matter of self-congratulation but to affirm what it means when I say that facilitation is a people business, a relationship experience. At the same staff meeting where I was thusly introduced, I began the session, which included people I knew very well and new staff I had only interviewed on the phone, with this reflective practice exercise: "This organization prides itself on close connections with the community. How do you evaluate community relationships? How would you know if they'd turned sour? What do you do to nurture those relationships?" The ensuing discussion led to a revision of the organization's value statement, staff job descriptions, and their theory of change.

### **The Personal Factor Applied to the Facilitator**

Being guided by the personal factor means learning about the people you'll be facilitating and adapting the facilitation process accordingly. At the same time, you provide those you'll be facilitating with an opportunity to learn about you, the evaluation facilitator. Being active, reactive, interactive, and adaptive also offers opportunities for facilitators to learn about themselves. Reflective practice includes the commitment to evaluate and learn from facilitation experiences. That learning is not always planned, as I found out in one of the most powerful learning experiences I've ever had as a facilitator.

Some years ago, I co-convoked a ten-day graduate school colloquium with an African American colleague, Dr. Nancy Boxill. It was one of those intense, round-the-clock, marathon-like experiences that can wear down resistance and open the mind through exhaustion, if



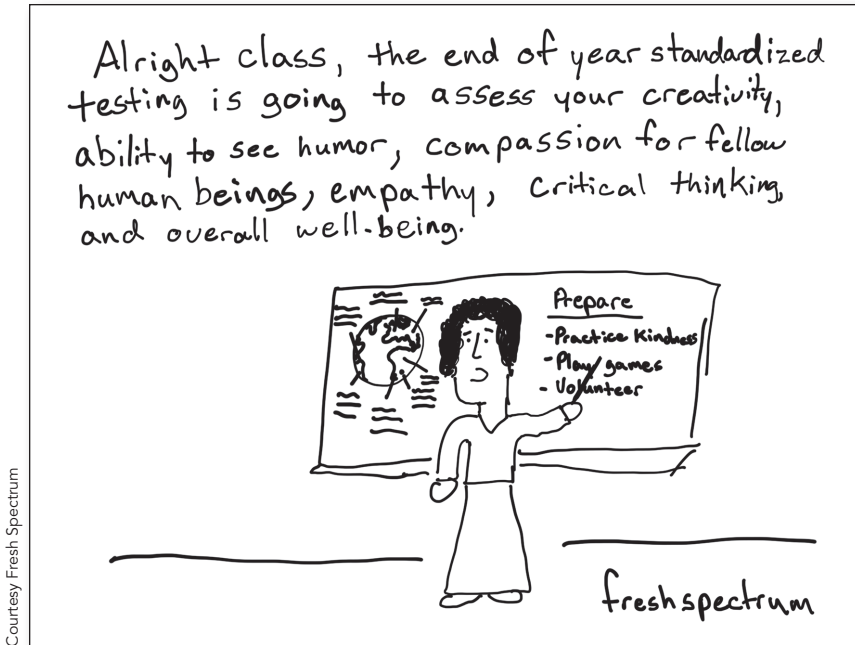
nothing else. In facilitating the group together, Dr. Boxill and I spent a lot of time sharing perspectives as part of our planning and ongoing debriefing processes. I expressed appreciation for the experience, knowledge, and commitment she brought to the group around issues of racism, among many other things. However, I also expressed hope that in our private collegial interactions, we could “get beyond race” and simply be “Nancy and Michael” together. She responded with uproariously disarming laughter. “You’re not aware that you’re a White male, are you?”

I replied defensively that it seemed to me we could and should get beyond such labels and categories. (I have since learned that this is a common White male position in talking with women and people of color, but at the time, I thought I was speaking from a position of intellectual individuality and enlightenment.) She proceeded gently, caring, and with good humor (indeed, often with hysterical laughter) to explain to me that she was always aware that she was an African American female. I set out to help her transcend what I perceived as a narrow, self-limiting, and false consciousness. She set out to help me become aware that I was a White male. The long-term follow-up results suggest that, fortunately for me, her intervention was the effective one. Here’s part of what she did.

Each morning, afternoon, and evening, we began colloquium sessions with a check-in with participants. During these sessions, she began asking me in front of the group: “Michael, are you aware that you’re a White male today?” At other times, when there was a break in the discussion, she would turn to me and ask suddenly, “Are you aware that you are a White male right now?” She took me into the streets of the city and taught me how to observe different ways people responded when I was alone, when she was alone, and when we were together. Gradually, and not without resistance, I became aware that I was, indeed, a White male. Thus began a journey of personal transformation that I, as a White male in a society where White males are privileged, could not undertake entirely on my own, without guidance and mentoring—a journey still unfolding, the transformation still in process.

What I’ve learned as part of that process is that my very lack of awareness of White maleness, the absence of that fundamental consciousness in everyday life, was, itself, a primary indicator of my privileged status. Those at the top of the hierarchy—the dominant ones who have the privilege of defining themselves as “the inclusive kind of human, but also as the norm and the ideal” (Minnich, 1990, p. 37)—benefit the most from racism and, concomitantly, are most likely to

deny being in its grasp. This transformative process has included reflection on the socializing racial experiences of my youth that formed my identity, values, and understandings. In writing about these experiences (Patton, 1999), I've gained additional insights into my own journey.



### The Personal Factor as a Window into Racism and Sexism

That colloquium experience and learning has helped me deal with issues of racism and sexism when they surface during evaluations and evaluation facilitations. In evaluating a portfolio of poverty programs, we documented that the staff of these programs were predominantly White while participants were predominantly people of color. We also reported that concerns about racism had surfaced often in our interviews with program participants. The philanthropic funders of the program (and of the evaluation) initially reacted strongly against including the word *racism* in the report. They experienced the word as a personal attack. They preferred that we talk about *misunderstandings*, *miscommunications*, and perhaps even *prejudice*, but not *racism*. We went back to our notes and then back to the interviewees, who made it clear that they were talking about racism as a matter of structural White privilege and power that went well

beyond personal prejudice. In facilitating sessions interpreting the data, we found that staff and participants had an easier time talking about racism than did the philanthropic funders. In the end, we retained the term in our report, but not without a certain amount of discomfort among some of the funders.

In another program evaluation of a human services initiative, we reported findings related to racial disparities and facilitated a session with staff interpreting the findings. The program had a multicultural staff and a White male director of openly liberal persuasion. He rejected outright staff and participant formative evaluation feedback and concerns about racism and sexism because, he said, he was personally opposed to racism and sexism, so it simply could not exist or be a program issue. He interpreted the feedback as staff and participant resistance to being held accountable, thereby shifting completely the framing of the issue to put himself in the right. As he began to become angry about the findings, I called for a break and met with him privately over the break to process his emotions. He did not return after the break but came back in the afternoon and apologized for his inappropriate reactions. He asked that a work group be formed to deal with issues of racism and sexism in the program.

I have experienced strong reactions to issues of racial, ethnic, and gender disparities often. I now anticipate the need to lay a better foundation for dealing with such issues, especially where pre-facilitation interviews reveal limited sensitivity to diversity issues. Sharing the story of my own journey as an evaluator and facilitator in acknowledging how being a White male limits my perceptions and has shaped my experiences allows me to set the stage for surfacing and dealing with these issues as and when they surface.

## FACILITATION LESSONS ●

1. *Be open and explicit about what's going on.* In pre-retreat interviews or in introducing opening exercises that set the stage for group work, I tell people that I'm operating on the personal factor principle, that our research shows developing relationships to be critical for effectiveness, mutual understanding and mutual respect. I don't like to dive in to request that people share details about themselves, their work, and their lives without some context. That context is provided by the personal factor principle: People matter. Relationships matter. Knowledge of each other matters.

2. ***Budget for preparation.*** When I am approached about a potential new facilitation commission, the budget that people have in mind is for the actual time on task doing facilitation. For a one-day retreat, the projected budget expense is for one day of professional facilitation time. Pre-facilitation interviews double the budget and, I argue, quadruple the quality of the results. As my father hounded into me, "A job worth doing is worth doing well." A facilitation job worth doing is worth preparing for well.
3. ***Open the first session with summary of the interviews.*** When doing pre-retreat or pre-facilitation interviews, the group will be curious about what was learned. I open the session, then, with some broad themes about what I heard. Here's an example of highlights from my opening remarks at a two-day retreat with a philanthropic board and senior staff:

Thank you for your openness, honesty, and insights in our conversations. I learned how much you care about this organization and its mission, how much you care about and respect each other, and how worried some of you are about the future. You all acknowledged that this is a time of transition, but the nature and extent of that transition is a matter of concern, and opinions vary. One person said emphatically, "If it ain't broken, don't fix it." (Everyone glanced at the board chair and it was obvious that I was not the first person to whom he had made that declaration. He smiled appreciatively, glad that he had been heard, or so I interpreted his expression.) Another person compared transitioning this organization to turning an aircraft carrier at sea. You want to build on the excellent work of the past but adapt to the challenges the future. You see better evaluation as part of that future, as a way to facilitate the transition into the future. You've told me what jokes to avoid, what landmines to sidestep, and, most of all, that you see this as a critical opportunity. I am honored to have the opportunity to work with you in making evaluation a more meaningful and useful part of this organization's future. Let's get at it.

4. ***Customize evaluation explanations and examples to connect with the experiences of people being facilitated.*** Chapter 1 offered as a resource a statement on *What is Evaluation?* I often

share that statement with groups new to evaluation. Beyond that, I have no standard examples to explain evaluation. I offer this advice: Find an example that is relevant to, understood by, and meaningful to the people you're addressing. Make it personally relevant. In Minnesota, my home state, where the state brand is "the Land of 10,000 Lakes," more than a third of the population fish and everyone is aware of the fishing season. I like to open my work with Minnesota groups by discussing the evaluation issues that arise in fishing: What's success? Number of fish? Size? Type (walleye, bass, northern pike, trout)? Who decides success? How does success vary by occasion: fishing with family members, teaching kids to fish, fishing with friends, ice fishing, competitive fishing? Discussing what constitutes success in fishing is a warm-up (or icebreaker) for discussing what will constitute success in our work together around evaluation. I invite participants to share their favorite fishing stories.

In preparing to facilitate an evaluation planning held conference in Orlando, Florida, I introduced Walt Disney's principles for Disney World as a starting point for discussing evaluation principles. In Brazil, I used Paulo Freire's pedagogical steps for entering a community and engaging residents. In Denmark, I used design criteria for Danish chairs as a contextually engaging way to start talking about evaluation criteria. When I learned in pre-facilitation interviews that several foundation board members were military veterans, I opened my facilitation introduction with the U.S. Army mission—readiness—and asked, "I'm ready. Are you? What do we need to do together to get ready?" One said in response, "Excellent, sir. I hadn't thought about preparation. You're getting ready; then we'd better get ready, too."

5. **Maintain confidences.** The promise of confidentiality is essential for building trust. I facilitated quarterly retreats with a school board for 20 years. I did so through five different superintendents and more school board members than I can remember. I think it is safe to say that I knew more confidential information about the relationships between those superintendents and school board members than anyone else in the district. Because of the sensitivity of things that I learned, I talked to no one about what I learned in interviews and what went on in the retreats. Not family members, not friends, not colleagues; no one. My

credibility depended on maintaining absolute confidentiality. I was asked about what happened by people who knew of my facilitation role, but I maintained confidentiality and those with whom I worked came to trust that I would do so.

## ● SUMMARY

A high-quality principle provides guidance, is useful, inspires, supports adaptation, and is evaluable. This chapter has addressed each of these criteria for the personal factor principle applied to evaluation facilitation. (See Exhibit 4.1.)

- **Guiding wisdom:** People matter. Learn about them.
- **Useful knowledge:** Knowledge about participants guides and undergirds facilitation.
- **Inspiring values:** People's stories reveal aspirations, values, and motivations.
- **Developmental adaptation:** Knowing the participants facilitates adaptation.
- **Evaluable facilitation:** Learn and attend to participants' criteria for success to assess facilitation success.

### Practice Exercise

The personal factor involves getting to know the people you'll be facilitating and letting them get to know you. Write a script for how you'd introduce yourself to the group you're facilitating. What would you tell them about yourself to help establish a connection and build trust?

## ● RESOURCES FOR APPLYING THE PERSONAL FACTOR PRINCIPLE

1. **Sample pre-retreat interview questions with a philanthropic foundation's trustees and senior staff.**

*Opening: Introduce myself (experience with foundations generally and boards particularly) and purpose of the interview. Emphasize confidentiality and candor.*

- A. "Let me start by asking you to share some of the highlights of your experiences with the foundation. What are some of the things that stand out as highlights and successes that you'd want me to know about as I prepare to work with the foundation?"

*(Probe, if needed: "Whatever comes to mind; I'm not looking for anything in particular, just whatever you consider important.")*

- B. "Are there any things that have happened, directions taken, or grants made that, with benefit of hindsight, weren't such a good idea? Sometimes we learn the most from somewhat bad experiences, mistakes, or even failures or less-than-hoped-for results. Anything along those lines that come to mind can provide lessons for the future."

- C. "Foundations change, evolve, adapt, and develop new directions over time. What are your thoughts about what should absolutely be preserved as the foundation moves into the future, and what strategic new directions or approaches you think should be explored?"

1. "First, what should absolutely be preserved?"
2. "Now, what strategic new directions or approaches should be explored?"

- D. "Sometimes I find in working with foundations that all the different elements don't quite align, that there are some things that get a bit out of sync, the parts don't quite make a well-functioning whole. I know that's kind of vague, but I don't want to suggest any particular concern. I just want to see if the idea of some things not being fully aligned, different elements not working together, or some tensions in how things work, if anything like that comes to mind."

*Probe, if clarification needed: "Let me use an everyday example instead of a foundation example. A lot of people intend to exercise but are busy with other commitments, so their belief in exercise and their actual practice don't align; they are in tension. Or people want to spend time with family but also have lots of other commitments, so balancing work and family or other commitments and family are a bit at odds—or even a lot at odds. Things like this happen in organizations as well, where values and practices don't*

quite come together. Does anything like that occur to you with the foundation?"

- E. "Turning specifically to the upcoming evaluation retreat, what would you like to have happen? What would make the retreat a success from your point of view?"
- F. "Based on your experiences with both the foundation and your experiences with other organizations and groups, are there any things you want to see avoided? Anything that worries you a bit?"
- G. "What should I know about how the board works, how trustees interact, relationships with staff, anything along those lines that can help me work effectively with all of you during the retreat?"

*Probe:* I would follow up and explore anything that emerges from these questions before closing with the following:

- H. "Anything else or anything in particular you want to share? Anything you'd add that I should know? I can do my best job for the foundation, and all of you, if I have the benefit of your experience and perspective. And, again, I want to emphasize that whatever you tell me, I hold in confidence."

2. **Facilitated exercises for implementing to the personal factor principle in initial group interactions.** Below are three opening exercises that help participants learn about each other and the facilitator learn about the participants. These are not standard opening icebreaker exercises. They are customized to evaluation facilitation.

- A. Associations with and perceptions of evaluation:

As a simple opening exercise at an evaluation launch workshop, I like to begin by asking participants to share words and feelings they associate with evaluation, then explore how the perceptions they've brought with them may affect their expectations about the evaluation's likely utility. I write the word *evaluate* on a flip chart and ask those present to free associate with the word: "What comes to mind when you see the word *evaluate*?" They typically begin slowly with synonyms or closely related terms: *assess, measure, judge, rate, compare*. Soon, someone calls out, "*Waste of time*." Another voice from the back of the room yells, "*Crap*." The energy picks up and more associations



follow in rapid succession: *budget cuts, downsize, politics, demeaning, pain, fear*. And inevitably, the unkindest cut of all: *useless*.

Clearly, evaluation can evoke strong emotions, negative associations, and genuine fear. People carry the emotional baggage of past experiences with them into new experiences. To ignore such perceptions, past experiences, and feelings people bring to an evaluation is like ignoring a smoldering dynamite fuse in the hope it will burn itself out. More likely, unless someone intervenes and extinguishes the fuse, it will burn faster and eventually explode. Many an evaluation has blown up in the face of well-intentioned evaluators because they rushed into technical details and methods decisions without establishing a solid foundation for the evaluation with clear purposes and shared understandings. To begin, both evaluators and those with whom we work need to develop a shared definition of evaluation and mutual understanding about what the process will involve and, in so doing, acknowledge anxiety and fears.

Whether evaluations are mandated or voluntary, those potentially affected by the evaluation may approach the very idea with trepidation, manifesting what has come to be recognized by experienced evaluations as *evaluation anxiety*—or what I jokingly refer to with clients as a clinical diagnosis of *pre-evaluation stress syndrome*. But the fear is often serious and needs to be acknowledged and managed. Signs of extreme evaluation anxiety include “people who are very upset by, and sometimes rendered virtually dysfunctional by, any prospect of evaluation, or who attack evaluation without regards to how well conceived it might be” (Donaldson, Gooler, & Scriven, 2002, p. 262).

Moreover, there are genuine reasons for people to fear evaluation. Evaluations are sometimes used as the rationale to cut staff, services, or entire programs. Poorly done evaluations may misrepresent what a program has done and achieved. Even when an evaluator has done a good job, what gets reported in the news may be only the negative findings—or only the positive findings—rather than the balanced picture of positives and negatives, strengths and weaknesses, that was in the full evaluation report. These things happen. There’s no point in denying them. Evaluations can be well done or poorly done, useful or useless. By acknowledging these realities, we can begin the discussion of, for this evaluation in this time and place, what we have to do to undertake an evaluation that will be useful, credible, meaningful, and fair.

- B. Incentives for and barriers to reality testing and evaluation use in program culture:

As I work with diverse stakeholders to agree on what we mean by evaluation and engender a commitment to use, I invite them to assess incentives for and barriers to reality testing and information use in their own program culture. Barriers typically include fear of being judged, cynicism about whether anything can really change, skepticism about the worth of evaluation, concern about the time and money costs of evaluation, and frustration from previous bad evaluation experiences, especially lack of use. As we work through these and related issues to get ready for evaluation, the foundation for use is being built in conjunction with a commitment to serious and genuine reality testing.

Sometimes—indeed, often—there are issues that people are reluctant to discuss openly. There may be huge personality conflicts with bosses or funders. There may be suspicions that key decisions have already been made and the evaluation is a pretense to justify and put window-dressing around those already-made decisions. Some may know of irregularities, even illegalities, that the evaluation could expose. A key person who is supposed to lead the evaluation internally may be viewed as incompetent and has been assigned to lead the evaluation as punishment or because the administrator needs to give that person something to do. How do you find out about these beneath-the-surface issues that may derail an evaluation? Here's what I do.

### **Confidential Feedback**

I give everyone a piece of paper. On this sheet of paper, I put the following:

Please tell me anything you think I should know about what goes on in this program or organization that could affect how the evaluation is conducted and used. As an outsider, what do you want me to know that may not surface in open group discussions? This information is for my eyes only. Please return this to me personally. Don't put your name or any identifying information on this paper. However, if you don't want to write down your concerns but wish to talk to me confidentially, please provide your contact information.

I always alert the evaluation client and those organizing the session I'm facilitating that I'll be doing this. Sometimes I learn little from asking for this feedback. At other times, amazing, important, and

disturbing things emerge. This is also a trust-building exercise and a chance to surface concerns early, when strategies can still be developed to deal with issues that might derail the evaluation if they are not addressed. I typically invite this feedback shortly before a break or at the end of the session so that I can collect the feedback myself as people are leaving the room. Once collected, confidentiality must be protected absolutely. This is context information to help navigate the sometimes-treacherous terrain of programs, organizations, and communities. As Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes had Don Quixote proclaim, “Forewarned, forearmed; to be prepared is half the victory” (1615/2003, p. 174).

This exercise is one I like to assign groups at an evaluation launch session or capacity-building workshop shortly before taking a morning or afternoon break. I ask them to think of a good idea they’ve had that didn’t work out in practice. It can be a work idea, something they’d tried in their personal life—anything at all. Something that seemed like a good idea at the time, but, well, things didn’t quite turn out as expected. And what evidence emerged that led them to realize that it hadn’t been such a good idea? Then we take the planned 15-minute break and when they return, I ask them to share their examples in small groups. Then each small group picks one example to share with the full group. Often, what they share is simple and funny. Nothing quite bonds a group together around a challenge like laughing together about life’s follies. Here are classic examples:

- “I thought it would be a good idea to buy the latest Microsoft computer operating system as soon as it came out. Crashed. Had all kinds of bugs. Took over my life doing updates and patches and rebooting. Now I wait until they work out the bugs.”
- “Trying to attract teenagers to a new program at our community center, we advertised free pizza. We had a great turnout and served the pizza right away to reward them for coming. But as soon as they had eaten, more than half left and didn’t stay for the program, didn’t even sign up for it. We learned to hold the pizza ‘til near the end.”
- “As a public service during the presidential campaign, we decided to sponsor a debate with local reps of the two parties. We’re an employment training program but don’t have anything to do with politics. We just wanted our participants

to be informed and experience democracy in action. Well, the two reps got very nasty with each other. Instead of thoughtful and respectful interactions, they attacked each other and made derogatory comments about each other's candidates. It was horrible. The evening denigrated into shouting. We were so naïve. We had done no screening of who was coming, set no ground rules, didn't have a skilled moderator. We just thought, 'It's an election year. Let's sponsor a little debate.' Bad idea, at least the way we did it."

These stories illustrate evaluative thinking at the most basic level. People had an idea about something they wanted to have happen (a goal). They tried it out (implementation). They observed what happened (data collection). Then they rendered judgment (evaluation) and took away a lesson for the future (learning). Sharing these stories sets a context for the evaluation work at hand. I follow up their stories with examples of good program ideas that didn't work out as hoped for. They get the message: We all have good ideas that don't work out in practice. Evaluation isn't about blaming and criticizing and filling out forms and complying with funder mandates. It's about separating good ideas that work from seemingly good ideas that turn out not to work. It's about learning what works and what doesn't work in order to do a better job in the future. As they absorb this message, they're getting ready to engage in whatever evaluation tasks are the focus of the activity I'm facilitating. Hopefully, the exercise helps them be open to learning and change.

- 3. Developing a user profile to inform facilitation based on the personal factor principle and the overall guiding principle of being utilization focused.** Canadian colleague Mark Cabaj has developed a user profile to guide collection of information about key stakeholders for utilization-focused evaluations. This can be used in planning an evaluation. It can also be adapted and used to guide evaluation facilitation based on the personal factor principle. My thanks to Mark for permission to include this tool in the book as a facilitation resource. This tool can be revised and customized for particular facilitation purposes. I especially like the idea of creating summary profiles (user profile cards) of the people I'll be facilitating. See Exhibit 4.3.

**Exhibit 4.3**

# User Profile Worksheet

Primary User	QUESTIONS: What are your evaluation questions?	USE: What kinds of decisions will you make with the answers to these questions? (See Tip 1.)	PREFERENCES: What are your preferences for you how we design the evaluation or communicate its findings? (See Tip 2.)	WINDOWS: When do you need the evaluation findings?
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				

**Tips**

1. See the Evaluation Table on the following page.
2. If primary users are stuck, ask them to share their best evaluation experience, what made it positive, and what they would like to see repeated. Alternatively, ask them about their worst experience with evaluation and what we should avoid in this assessment.

# Examples of User Profile Cards

Hypothetical Wrap-Around Project in Schools for At-Risk Youth



**NAME:** Ralph Smith  
**ORGANIZATION:** Community Foundation  
**ROLE:** CEO

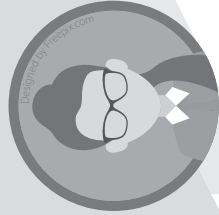
**QUESTIONS:**

1. To what extent is the program resulting in better outcomes for Kids' Grade Three reading rates?
2. Do local schools really want this or are we forcing it on them?

**USE:**

- To determine if—and by how much—to extend the three-year grant to project.
- To begin exploring the implications for scaling to new schools.

- PREFERENCES**
- Likes testimonials from students.
  - Do not include social return on investment data—board had bad experiences with it.
  - Likes strong executive summary—rarely looks at full report.
- WINDOWS**
- Funding decision is at the end of June, so foundation staff needs report by May 1.
  - Would like to present results to local funders' forum in September.



**NAME:** Mary Pickford  
**ORGANIZATION:** Rydale High  
**ROLE:** Principal

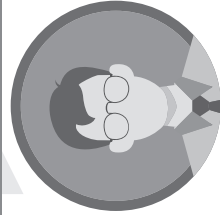
**QUESTIONS:**

1. Is this making a difference in the academic outcomes of kids, particularly in Grade Three literacy levels?
2. How much time is this project taking from teachers? Do they feel it helps or hinders their work?

**USE:**

- To sustain and expand support for the collaboration within the school staff and district leaders.

- PREFERENCES**
- Does not want academic metrics outside those already used by school—pleads that we don't spend time on new indicators.
  - Would prefer a lunch-hour focus group with teachers rather than surveys or interviews.
- WINDOWS**
- School planning takes place in late May so that they can send requests for approval, they would like to see evaluation findings by late March if possible.
  - Would like to present results to local funders' forum in September.



**NAME:** Casey Finnigan  
**ORGANIZATION:** Family Services Bureau  
**ROLE:** Program Director

**QUESTIONS:**

1. What is working well and not well in our wrap around model with community agencies and staff?
2. Will we be spread too thin to make our targets if we expand to another school?

**USE:**

- To improve the delivery model in the original pilot site.
- To begin exploring the implications for scaling to new schools.

- PREFERENCES**
- Has had success using the Collaboration Factors Inventory as a self-assessment tool in past.
  - Likes to do a planning first, and then a facilitated session in which collaboration partners develop conclusions and recommendations together.
- WINDOWS**
- The collaboration members meet in April to do planning for the next year; it's best to have results ready for this session.

## BETWEEN-CHAPTERS PORTAGE



**MQP Intro:** Donna Podems is a collaborative, utilization-focused evaluator. It's who she's been since I first met her as an entering graduate student and became her PhD adviser in the customized program she created for her doctorate specializing in evaluation. Facilitation has always been a core part of her approach and practice. Living and working in South Africa, Donna has become a global evaluator. As I was finishing this book, she was completing a book on democratic evaluation, using South Africa as a case study. She has written about feminist evaluation (Bamberger & Podems, 2002; Podems, 2010, 2014b), utilization-focused evaluation (Podems, 2007), evaluator competences (Podems, 2014a), democratic evaluation (Podems, 2017) and being a principles-focused evaluator (Podems, 2018). These writings and her extensive evaluation practice have been anchored in evaluation facilitation. My thanks to Donna for sharing her important, insightful, and unique reflections about kindness as an essential dimension of evaluation facilitation.

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### Kindness

by Donna Podems

When Michael asked me if I was interested in writing about how I facilitate evaluation, I said, "Oh sure, that's easy. I facilitate all the time. No problem." Turns out that explaining what I do is not so easy. Let me start by saying that I am biased in the true sense of the word: I think evaluation facilitation is one of the most important roles in any evaluative process, particularly when leading evaluation efforts. Given its importance in my own work, if there is one area where

I should be encouraging others, it's evaluation facilitation. So why is it so hard for me to write about?

Before I settled on this passage, I wrote several others explaining my approach to evaluation facilitation. Each passage, while providing well-constructed steps and explanations, seemed to lack something. I struggled with what that "something" was—and then last night, I put my finger on it. What was missing was something that I cannot easily defend with empirical data, it's hard to teach, and nearly impossible to measure, all of which makes it hard to write about. Let me explain.

The "something" lies in the heart of a person. I describe it generally as kindness: being thoughtful, caring, patient, sensitive to others' feelings and self-effacing. From here manifests a strong desire to want others to be