DE 201:

A Practitioner's Guide to Developmental Evaluation

Elizabeth Dozois
Marc Langlois
Natasha Blanchet-Cohen

CONTENTS

PREFACE

To paraphrase a well-known oxymoron, is there any phrase more likely to strike fear in grant recipients than, "We are your evaluators and we're here to help you"? For grantees, evaluation can seem as welcome as a visit from the Canada Revenue Agency auditors; for grant-makers, it is perhaps more frustrating than scary, like looking for a pearl in a pile of oyster shells.

We at the McConnell Foundation have had our share of evaluation frustration: piles of data that yield little in the way of understanding or insight, and tussles with evaluators more committed to methodological rigour than to formulating helpful recommendations. The pursuit of "accountability" at all costs and the market mantra of value-for-money have cemented the view that evaluation is designed mostly to provide cover for the giver, not useful information for the recipient. Efforts to re-focus evaluation to help the do-er rather than to serve the granter are received with skepticism or outright disbelief. And the cycle of frustration deepens.

"Developmental evaluation" is one outcome of this frustration. Pioneered by Michael Quinn Patton, it overturns many of the assumptions of more traditional approaches; it is embedded rather than detached, continuous rather than episodic, and—most importantly—it has as its goal learning, not judgment. As this Foundation shifted its funding to complex, long-term initiatives that are not so much pre-planned as emergent, the inadequacy of the usual evaluation methods became evident. We needed a compass, not a roadmap. We needed to know we were on the right track, not that we had arrived at a pre-determined spot, on budget, and at the specified time.

Of course, formative and summative evaluations have an important role. But many of the McConnell Foundation-funded initiatives work in uncertain territory, developing and testing their strategies as they proceed; there are no blueprints for empowering youth, attacking poverty, or promoting innovative approaches to solve entrenched social problems. What is most useful for such efforts is not an *ex post facto* assessment of success or failure but constant feedback from a critical, supportive observer. As Buckminster Fuller said, "There is no such thing as a failed experiment, only experiments with unexpected outcomes." He might have added that the real failure is the inability to learn from experience.

The Foundation believes that Canada faces an innovation deficit, most particularly in the realm of social policy and programs. We want to work with people who have fresh ideas on how to tackle homelessness or improve early child development or better health outcomes. Such people already face obstacles and naysayers as they strive to implement, test, and fund their ideas. The last thing they need is an evaluation that shuts down a promising initiative before it has a chance to prove itself, or that constricts the emergence of a radically new approach.

Developmental evaluation is a work-in-progress; an evolving methodology. This guide builds on the contribution of an earlier booklet by Jamie Gamble entitled *A Developmental Evaluation Primer*, published by the Foundation in 2008. It contains the lessons and insights of a group of practitioners who collaborated on a program called YouthScape, which aimed to support the engagement of young people in their communities—a program that by its nature was clearer on its goals than on the means to attain them, and which involved all the stakeholders in an intense learning process.

I want to thank all the participants in the YouthScape program for what they have taught us about ways to work with young people, and I also want to thank the authors of this booklet and the Institute for Child Rights and Development for sharing the lessons with us in such a clear and forthright fashion.

Tim Brodhead,
President and CEO,
The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation

INTRODUCTION

The practices outlined in this guide are based on a national initiative called **YouthScape** (www.youthscape.ca). YouthScape is a three-year comprehensive community initiative that centred on building community resiliency through youth engagement. Project sites included Victoria, Calgary, Saskatoon, Thunder Bay, Montreal and Halifax. Developmental evaluators were attached to each of the sites, and a lead DE helped to support the initiative at the national level. Developmental evaluation was a good fit for this initiative because of the scale and complexity of the work: YouthScape brought together a diverse range of community stakeholders to work towards systems-level change around youth-friendly places and spaces.

Developmental evaluation has emerged fairly recently as a way to support adaptive learning in complex and emergent initiatives. Combining the rigour of evaluation with the flexibility and imagination required for development, this new form of evaluation brings critical thinking to bear on the creative process in initiatives involving high levels of uncertainty, innovation, emergence, and social complexity (Gamble, 2008).

As a relative newcomer to the field of evaluation, developmental evaluation has comparatively few resources associated with it. In 2008, the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation published *A Developmental Evaluation Primer* (Gamble, 2008) to capture some of the high level principles associated with this type of work. The primer provides a basic foundation for developmental evaluation, describing core elements, identifying the necessary skills and capacities, and touching on some of the issues and challenges associated with this type of evaluation.

DE 201: A Practitioner's Guide to Developmental Evaluation is intended to build on the concepts outlined in the primer by articulating some of the key practices associated with this work. These practices were identified and developed through a

three-year multi-site case study involving developmental evaluators (DEs) at six sites across the country (see text box, p. 10). While several DEs had evaluation experience, most were new to developmental evaluation. Together, we formed a learning community to document practices and challenges, and further our understanding of this emergent discipline.

Our discussions resulted in the identification of three entry points for DEs and four core practices that characterize the work. (Table 1, p. 12).

In this guidebook, we explore each of these key activities, offering suggestions for practice, insights from other DEs, and further resources for you to explore.

Before we get to the *how* of developmental evaluation, however, we need to set a bit of context. We'll start by briefly touching on the *what*, *when*, and *who* of developmental evaluation, explaining:

- The purpose of developmental evaluation (What)
- The conditions in which developmental evaluation is most appropriate (When)
- The capacities needed to be an effective DE (Who)

After setting the context with these sections, we dive into the practices associated with developmental evaluation (How) and end by briefly exploring some of the challenges and issues associated with the practice.

TABLE 1: **ENTRY POINTS AND ONGOING PRACTICES**		
ACTION		DESCRIPTION
ENTRY POINTS	Orienting yourself	DEs undertake investigative work early in the initiative in order to build a deeper understanding of the identified problem/opportunity, resources, stakeholders, and broader context.
	Building relationships	As a DE, the quality of your relationships determines the degree to which you can access information and influence change. For this reason, relationship building is critical to building a strong foundation for your work.
	Developing a learning framework	It is important to develop a learning framework early in the process. Co-created with key stakeholders, a learning framework helps to guide development by mapping key challenges and opportunities, high-lighting potential areas for learning, and identifying feedback mechanisms.
ONGOING PRACTICES	Orienting the group	A key part of a DE's role is to help stakeholders surface and test their assumptions, articulate and refine their models, extend their understanding, and culti-vate a culture that supports learning. These activities help groups to develop and maintain an adaptive orientation in complex and unknown territory.
	Watching	DEs carefully observe the unfolding situation in order to help the group identify leverage points, as-sess their efforts, and stay true to the core intent and principles of their initiative. DEs intentionally watch (1) Key developmental moments; (2) Group dynam-ics; (3) Structure; (4) Action/inaction; and (5) Threats and opportunities.
	Sense-making	Sense-making is largely participatory in develop-mental evaluation: DEs work with the group to help them identify patterns, integrate new information, and consider the implications of what they're seeing.
	Intervening	DEs are embedded in the initiative as a member of the team. They actively help to shape the work by (1) Asking questions; (2) Facilitating discussion; (3) Sourcing or providing information; (4) Modeling; (5) Pausing the action; (6) Reminding; and (7) Con-necting.

WHAT?

WHAT IS DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION?

Developmental evaluation emerged in response to the need to support real-time learning in complex and emergent situations. Traditional forms of evaluation work well in situations where the progression from problem to solution can be laid out in a relatively clear sequence of steps (Gamble, 2008). However, initiatives with multiple stakeholders, high levels of innovation, fast paced decision-making, and areas of uncertainty require more flexible approaches (Patton, 2008). This is where developmental evaluation comes in.

Developmental evaluation differs from traditional forms of evaluation in several key ways:

- The primary focus is on adaptive learning rather than accountability to an external authority.[1]

- The purpose is to provide real-time feedback and generate learnings to inform development.

- The evaluator is embedded in the initiative as a member of the team.

- The DE role extends well beyond data collection and analysis; the evaluator actively intervenes to shape the course of development, helping to inform decision-making and facilitate learning.

- The evaluation is designed to capture system dynamics and surface innovative strategies and ideas.

- The approach is flexible, with new measures and monitoring mechanisms evolving as understanding of the situation deepens and the initiative's goals emerge (adapted from Westley, Zimmerman & Patton, 2006).

Michael Quinn Patton (2008), who pioneered this form of evaluation, defines it this way:

> "Developmental evaluation refers to long-term, partnering relationships between evaluators and those engaged in innovative initiatives and development. Developmental evaluation processes include asking evaluative questions and gathering information to provide feedback and support developmental decision-making and course corrections along the emergent path. The evaluator is part of a team whose members collaborate to conceptualize, design and test new approaches in a long-term, on-going process of continuous improvement, adaptation, and intentional change. The evaluator's primary function in the team is to elucidate team discussions with evaluative questions, data and logic, and to facilitate data-based assessments and decision-making in the unfolding and developmental processes of innovation."

---

[1] Accountability is still a key part of developmental evaluation; however, accountability priorities shift from supporting oversight to supporting learning and impact.

WHEN?

WHEN IS DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION APPROPRIATE?

Developmental evaluation is suited to situations that are:

- Highly emergent and volatile (e.g., the environment is always changing)

- Difficult to plan or predict because the variables are interdependent and non-linear

- Socially complex, requiring collaboration among stakeholders from different organizations, systems, and/or sectors

- Innovative, requiring real-time learning and development (Patton, 2008; Gamble, 2008)

Developmental evaluation is not appropriate for every initiative. Before accepting a contract or position as DE, be sure to meet with members of the initiative to assess:

Fit: Is the situation complex and emergent? Does the group want to test new approaches?

Readiness: Do current conditions support learning (or could they be shifted to support learning)? (See the "Assessing Readiness" tool in Appendix A)

AT WHAT POINT IN THE INITIATIVE SHOULD A DE GET INVOLVED?

DEs can play a key role in the initial stages of an initiative by helping the group to determine an actionable focus, articulate governing principles, and map out system dynamics. This groundwork is critical to establishing a strong foundation for the initiative. For this reason, DEs should be brought in as early as possible. Early involvement will also help to establish the DE as a member of the team.

WHO?

WHAT COMPETENCIES ARE NEEDED TO BE AN EFFECTIVE DE?

Many people assume that the best person to conduct a developmental evaluation is someone with an evaluation background—but that's not necessarily the case. While traditional evaluation consultants have a lot to offer, they may not be able to tolerate the kind of ambiguity that is associated with emergent initiatives. Developmental evaluation requires a range of competencies and capacities, some of which are not generally associated with traditional evaluation. At a *minimum*, a DE needs to have some facility with strategic thinking, pattern recognition, relationship building, and leadership.

STRATEGIC THINKING

In the fog of complexity, it's easy to become lost. An effective DE helps the group develop a sense of direction by cultivating an actionable focus and principles to guide the way. He or she also supports the group in identifying promising paths and strategic lines of inquiry. This type of work requires the ability to pull back and identify high level principles and purposes. Domain expertise[2] is also an asset as it gives DEs much more to draw on in their role as strategic coach.

PATTERN RECOGNITION

Pattern recognition involves grouping similar phenomena together to create meaningful categories. These categories help us to manage complexity and understand the broader "rules" or behaviors associated with a particular system. (Rush hour, for example, is a predictable behavior associated with the traffic

---

[2] By domain expertise, we mean expertise within the system that the group is trying to influence.

system). When we understand how a system behaves, we are better able to design our interventions and change efforts.[3] For this reason, pattern recognition is a critical DE competency. DEs help groups identify overarching patterns amidst the flow of complex information, relationships, and activities. They support effective decision-making by using their analytical skills to categorize information, identify emergent themes, and make critical connections.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Developmental evaluation requires outstanding people skills. DEs need to be able to help groups capitalize on their strengths and sustain a productive team environment. They also need to be able to ask difficult questions, introduce uncomfortable information, and deal with tensions in the group that could take the initiative off-track. DEs who are sensitive, grounded, and perceptive are more likely to be successful in their role as "critical friend"; a role that requires high levels of trust, credibility and finesse.

> **DE INSIGHT**
>
> "What I have used a lot is asking them 'How can I best support you?' Sometimes, I framed it as 'What do you want to learn? What are you curious about? What is keeping you back?'"

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Leadership is not usually associated with other types of evaluation; however, an element of leadership

---

[3] For a dramatic example of the relationship between pattern recognition and the capacity to influence change, check out the story of Ignaz Semmelweis, a 19th century physician who contributed to one of the most significant changes in medical practice. Based on his analysis of patterns in obstetric clinics, Semmelweis advocated for physicians to wash their hands before examining pregnant women. Hand washing was not standard practice in the 19th century and physicians were infecting young women with deadly pathogens from sick patients and corpses. By understanding the behaviors of the system, Semmelweis was able to introduce a simple intervention that ultimately saved countless lives. http://www.experiment-resources.com/semmelweis-germ-theory.html

is involved in developmental evaluation because the DE is actively helping to shape the initiative. *How* that's done makes a world of difference to the effectiveness of their work. DEs need to understand the principles of servant leadership: to support the work, not to drive their own agendas or claim the spotlight (Greenleaf, 1970). A DE whose first orientation is to serve has a far better chance of helping an initiative more effectively get past its "knots" as a learning organization.

OTHER ASSETS

In addition to these core competencies, the following capacities and skills are very helpful in the developmental evaluation context:

- Community connectedness and/or domain expertise
- Curiosity
- Appreciativeness[4]
- Facilitation skills
- Communication skills (written and oral)
- Time management skills
- Flexibility and resourcefulness
- Active listening skills

HOW?

---

[4] See www.appreciative-inquiry.org

HOW IS DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION PRACTICED?

How is developmental evaluation practiced? The short answer is: *any way that works*. Developmental evaluation is an adaptive, context-specific approach. As such, there is no prescribed methodology. The "right" method is determined by need and context, and may be drawn from any number of disciplines, including organizational development, traditional evaluation, research, and community development to name just a few.

While it's not possible to offer step-by-step instructions for developmental evaluation, it is possible to outline some of the broader functions and practices associated with this work. In the sections that follow, we explore a few key entry points and practices that are common to developmental evaluation. As a developmental evaluation practitioner, it will be up to you to discern how these practices apply to your own context.

ENTRY POINTS

Where do you start? This section explores some of the key entry points that help to build a foundation for your work. They include:

1. Orienting yourself
2. Building relationships
3. Developing a learning framework

These entry-points will give you a sense of the landscape you'll be working in and help you to identify key areas of focus.

1. ORIENTING YOURSELF

Your effectiveness as a DE is determined, in part, by how well you understand the initiative and the broader context in which it is situated. Developing a deeper level of understanding requires a significant investment of time in the early phases of the initiative. You will need to actively explore the territory to orient yourself to the key dynamics of the initiative and the larger system it's trying to influence. Review existing documentation, meet with stakeholders, ask questions, conduct mini-interviews, explore related research, take people out for coffee, conduct stakeholder analyses. Do whatever you can to start filling in the details of the situation, the venture[5], and the people who are on the journey.

Below are some of the questions you might want to explore when you're first brought into the project:

Situation and Venture

- What is the primary focus of the initiative? What issue or opportunity is the group trying to address?

- How did the initiative emerge? What/who were the key drivers? How was need/opportunity assessed? How was the focus determined?

- What resources (human, social, and financial)[6] do they have to work with?

- Where are the leverage points? (e.g., Where is there energy

---

5   A venture is an undertaking that involves some risk: The potential payoff, while promising, is uncertain. The word venture evokes the idea of an ongoing journey, rather than an endpoint or final destination. We deliberately chose to use this word in the context of complex initiatives because the goal posts are not fixed and the path is not clear and predictable.

6   Human resources means having the right people with the right skills who have time to devote to the initiative. Social resources refers to assets like community connections, influence, credibility, the capacity to "open doors," etc. Financial resources refers to access to money and in-kind contributions.

and focus? What activity in the initiative do people seem most animated about?) Where is there the most potential for impact? Where are the quick wins?

- What are the potential challenges, gaps and road blocks? What personal, organizational, social, commercial, or political barriers might stand in the way?

- Who else is working on this issue locally and nationally? How are they connected and/or how *should* they be connected?

- What has already been tried? What can we learn from past attempts and others' efforts?

Stakeholders

- Who are the key stakeholders? (Stakeholders can include partners, program beneficiaries, funders, policy makers, advisory boards, volunteers, major oppositional voices, and key decision-makers.)

- How do they envision their roles and responsibilities?

- What expectations, interests, and assumptions do they hold?[7]

- What is their level of interest and influence? (See "Stakeholder Analysis," Appendix B)

- How do they interact with one another? Where is there conflict? Where is there energy?

- What is their tolerance for risk and failure?

- How does the group make decisions?

---

[7] Each of the key stakeholders will carry expectations and assumptions for particular structures, strategies, and/or operating principles. It is important to clarify these early in the initiative. To leave these unaddressed creates conditions that could suppress innovation and effective program development.

- What are the power dynamics among the group? Who are the gatekeepers? Who are the influencers?

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the group?

We tend to want to spring into action to establish our role in an initiative, but it's critically important to take time up-front to orient yourself to key aspects of the initiative. It is also helpful to chart your understanding of the initiative visually, mapping high level dynamics, relationships and influences. This will serve as a reminder of the big picture when things get hairy. It also serves as a good starting point. As your understanding grows, you can fill in more details on your map and correct inaccuracies.

2. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Relationship building is absolutely critical to developmental evaluation; it plays a far more prominent role than in other types of evaluation for two reasons:

1. **Access to information:** In a complex initiative, data collection can be messy. While traditional data collection methods are necessary, they are not sufficient. You will also be tracking decisions that are made in the informal spaces of an initiative—in coffee shops, parking lots, hallways, and emails. You will rely on the eyes and ears of individual stakeholders to help you identify emerging threats and opportunities. You will be gauging the quality of personal interactions and watching for breakdowns and energy points in the dynamics of the collaborative. For access to all

> **TIPS AND TOOLS**
>
> A stakeholder analysis helps you map out types and levels of influence and interest which, in turn, tells you something about how to engage with diverse stakeholders.
>
> We've included the "Stakeholder Analysis" tool in the Appendix (Appendix B, p. 44).

these kinds of data, you will need to have strong relationships with individuals within the group. When people don't understand or value the DE role, they're unlikely to think about including or informing you of key developmental moments that arise.

2. **Capacity to influence:** Developmental evaluation is designed to support real-time feedback, learning, and changes in direction. The only way that you can do this is if you have credibility with stakeholders; and credibility is developed, in part, through relationships.

If you are intentional about building relationships and see this as a key piece of your work, you will have a far greater chance of being able to observe the behind-the-scenes dynamics of an initiative and support effective decision-making.[8]

3. DEVELOPING A LEARNING FRAMEWORK

If you have an evaluation background, you will be used to developing an evaluation framework to guide your work. In complex and emergent initiatives where the goal posts are always changing, it's not possible to develop traditional outcomes, targets and indicators so an evaluation framework is not appropriate in these circumstances (at least, not as it's been traditionally conceived).

In the absence of an evaluation framework, what can DEs use to guide their work? Rather than a framework that focuses on measurement and assessment, we suggest the development of a learning framework. A learning framework maps the key challenges and opportunities, identifying (1) what the group needs to pay attention to as they go forward; and (2) what they need to learn. The fundamental function of a learning framework is to *set direction for learning and project development*. In addition to supporting the work of the group, the learning framework helps DEs be strategic and intentional about where they focus their energy and attention.

Ideally, the components of the framework should be developed by the group so that there is collective agreement on what information is needed and how it will be used. There are many ways to facilitate this. One way is to use rapid assessment techniques to gather information and then work with the group to interpret the data. For example, you could conduct one-on-one interviews, asking stakeholders to identify the top five threats and opportunities going forward. Bring the key themes forward to the group and support them in thinking through the implica-

---

8 It's important that your relationships extend beyond the stakeholders who are easy to work with or engage. We've found that stakeholders operating on the fringes of an initiative sometimes offer valuable insights and perspectives because they are not influenced by group-think and are potentially less invested in the status quo. Similarly, those who are frustrated, disgruntled, or challenging to work with offer different perspectives that can enrich the group's understanding of the initiative.

tions (e.g., if these are the key threats, what does that tell us about where we need to focus our energy and learning?)[9]. The themes that emerge from this process can be put into a one-page chart to serve as a touchstone for the group as they navigate through complex territory. (Appendix C offers an example of a learning framework that was developed for an initiative in Calgary).

Needless to say, a learning framework is a living document; it should be updated regularly so that it reflects current learning challenges. This helps you to keep focused as a DE and make good judgments about where to invest your time and energy.

PRACTICES

The key functions of a DE are to support real-time learning, decision-making, and development. How do you do that? Below are four major practices associated with developmental evaluation,[10] drawn from the experiences of the DEs associated with our multi-site initiative. These practices include:

1. Orienting
2. Watching
3. Sense-making
4. Intervening

In the sections that follow, we explore each of these practices

further, offering concrete suggestions for how they can be integrated into your work.

1. ORIENTING THE GROUP

In complex and emergent situations, it's easy to lose sight of broader strategic aims and be overwhelmed by the confusion of what's happening on the ground. Therefore, a key part of a DE's role is to help stakeholders develop and maintain an adaptive orientation; one that helps them to find their way through complexity.

Our ability to be adaptive is dependent upon our capacity to orient ourselves effectively to what's actually happening. This can be difficult to do at the best of times. All kinds of things get in the way of developing mental models that accurately reflect key aspects of the terrain we're trying to navigate.[11] However, it's especially difficult to maintain an accurate and adaptive orientation in times of ambiguity, confusion, and rapid change (Richards, 2004), which is why the DE role is so important to complex initiatives. DEs help stakeholders to frame and define key elements of the initiative and test their models for accuracy

---

9 A threat is only a threat if you're not equipped to deal with it. Similarly, an opportunity is only an opportunity if you know how to make something of it. Therefore, identifying threats and opportunities helps to set direction for learning and capacity building.

10 These are not linear processes; they happen concurrently and are highly interactive. (For example, what you watch and how you make sense of what you see determines the success with which you are able to orient the group or intervene for greater effectiveness). All of these practices shape ongoing planning and action.

11 Some of the things that constrain our ability to effectively orient ourselves include habits of thought, cultural biases, self-justification, and the need for self-affirmation. For an insightful book on barriers to learning and effective orientation, check out *Mistakes Were Made, but not by Me: Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts* by Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson.

and comprehensiveness. In doing so, they support the group in orienting itself to the broader context and in understanding their roles and responsibilities within it.

There are at least four key aspects that you need to help the group define:

- Direction
- Principles
- System features and boundaries
- Strategies and progress markers

Each of these is explored briefly below.

a) Direction

In an emergent situation, planning and action are concurrent. (Think of a chess game. You can't plan everything out in advance; with each move, you need to reassess the playing field in order to understand what series of options to consider next). To keep this kind of development on track, you need to have a very clear sense of the intended trajectory or direction of the initiative.

Developing a clear and compelling vision or direction is easier said than done as it entails striking a very fine balance. If the vision is too detailed, it will quash innovation; but on the other hand, a vague and ambiguous understanding of the fundamental purpose of an initiative can be *deadly*. As a DE, you will need to help your group develop an *actionable focus*—

DE INSIGHT

"You don't implement a complex vision via a single hyper-rational plan. You get there by making sure everyone knows that vision, (ideally helped to build it), has the knowledge tools and authority to make changes and is rewarded when they do. It's premeditated opportunism. It works."

something that is compelling enough to motivate stakeholders and clear enough to set direction. An actionable focus helps to:

1. Support decision-making in the midst of chaos and uncertainty

2. Provide guidance in situations where there is no formal direction

3. Allow stakeholders to act on their own initiative to further the collective undertaking of the group (Richards, 2004)

If after developing a focus, your group still struggles to make decisions and move forward collectively, you may need to further clarify and refine the direction of the initiative.

b) Principles

Guiding principles can be a powerful touchstone if they are effectively developed. Having an agreed upon set of principles can energize a group and offer clarity and focus. This is especially true in a complex initiative where you're making your way through unmapped territory. You may not always have a clear sense of where you are or what comes next, but you'll be able to chart direction and progress if you have an actionable focus and meaningful guiding principles. This becomes a powerful tool for a DE—a filter for assessing decision-making and action.

TIPS AND TOOLS

Sometimes guiding principles are just window dressing. We agree on a few motherhood statements about how we want to operate, put them in the terms of reference, and never really look at them again. To develop guiding principles that are meaningful requires vivid imagination and strong commitment. A group needs to think through the implications of the principles for their work and imagine how they might be enacted. They then need to commit to being guided by those principles and agree to remind one another when the principles are not being embodied. The DE can help to support this work.

c) The System

Developmental evaluation was designed to support learning and development in complex and emergent situations.

These kinds of situations cannot be represented by simple "if-then" logic models because the variables involved interact within a network of feedback loops that behave in non-linear ways. You can imagine the challenges this presents for community change agents. Hence the need for developmental evaluation!

Part of your role as a DE is to help the group capture system[12] dynamics, interdependencies, models, and emergent interconnections (Gamble, 2008). Sometimes called "bounding the system," the process of defining the system includes:

- Defining the problem/opportunity
- Identifying key aspects of the system (e.g., those parts that contribute to, influence, and/or are affected by the situation)
- Understanding the patterns associated with system behavior, including *how* and *why* each of the critical parts function the way they do, and how they interact to reinforce or stabilize other parts of the system[16]

- Identifying leverage points that will create shifts in the system

Foster-Fishman, Nowell, and Yang (2007) have developed an analytical framework for "understanding and identifying the fundamental system parts and interdependencies that can help to explain system functioning and leverage systems change." The framework involves four key components, as outlined in the summary table, "Systems Analysis Framework," in Appendix D. Each of these components is further explained in their article, which also offers a series of guiding questions to help practitioners identify and understand each of the components within their own context. This is a helpful place to start if you have not done a lot of systems mapping.

As you begin to identify leverage points within the system, you will formulate ideas about ways you can intervene to change the way the system functions. Helping the group articulate

---

12 "At their most basic level, systems are generally considered to be a collection of parts that, through their interactions, function as a whole. […] Given this broad definition, the term 'system' can be used to describe a wide array of phenomena. For example, from a social science perspective, systems include a family, a neighbourhood, an organization, a school district, a human service delivery network, a coalition of organizations, or the federal welfare system." (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Yang, 2007)

13 http://www.sas2.net

14 http://www.visual-literacy.org

15 http://www.springerlink.com/content/u25171h118271rl4/fulltext.pdf

16 This component cannot be overemphasized. Too often, we identify "root causes," but do not cultivate a real understanding of how and why they function the way they do. There's a big difference between being able to identify the pieces and being able to understand how they function together. Think about the human body, for example. You can probably locate most of the major organs, but unless you have a sense of how they function and interact, you'd better let someone else perform the surgery. In the same way, community change agents sometimes identify key players, policies, resources, activities and attitudes that have a bearing on their issue but they don't go any further to understand how they function together. The limitations of our conceptual frameworks often holds us back from being able to effectively intervene.

TIPS AND TOOLS

Outcome Mapping is a useful methodology in the context of assessing progress. Outcome Mapping represents "a shift away from assessing the products of a program to focus on changes in behaviour, relationships, actions, and activities in the people, groups, and organizations it works with directly. In doing so, Outcome Mapping debunks many of the myths about measuring impact. It will help a program be specific about the actors it targets, the changes it expects to see, and the strategies it employs and, as a result, be more effective in terms of the results it achieves." (Earl, Carden, Smutylo, 2001).

You can access a free version of *Outcome Mapping: Building Learning and Reflection into Development Programs* online.[17]

their theory of change is also part of the DE role. Unlike conventional program models that remain fairly static, models in developmental initiatives change and evolve over time. As the group learns more, they are increasingly able to confirm, modify, or overturn initial assumptions and can fill in more of the detail in areas that were initially uncertain.

The Tinkertoy approach

What do we mean when we talk about developing a "model"? A theory of change? Key intervention points within a system? Principles and parameters? Minimum specifications? Relationships between key variables in a system? Any or all of these pieces might constitute part of your model. It's helpful to think of a model not as a one-page visual depiction of your initiative, but as the synthesis of all of the pieces that help to inform your understanding of the work. Like a Tinkertoy, your model will consist of many different pieces that are connected in a way that gives the approach shape and dimension. (If you're too young to remember Tinkertoys, just search for an image on Google and you'll get the idea).

System mapping and modeling takes time and effort

Most of the mental models we work with are simplistic and inadequate to support effective diagnosis and design. It requires enormous effort and discipline as well as accurate observation and reflection to develop something that comes close to resembling how things actually work in the real world. You may need to help the group to develop the patience, humility, and curiosity it takes to engage in ongoing iterations of systems mapping and model development.

A word of caution

Once we develop a model, we have a tendency to commit to it in ways that makes it impervious to change. We see only the evidence that supports it, and are blind to anything that would force us to question and revise how we think. This is a tendency that DEs have to be aware of and work hard to manage in themselves and others. You need to actively look for evidence that might disprove your theory or model and always check for errors in the way you're putting things together.

d) Strategies and Progress Markers

Strategy development, testing, and refinement are inherent in the idea of system mapping and model development (discussed above); however, we have pulled these elements out separately here to give them added emphasis as they are such an important part of the DE role. In many ways, you function as a strategic coach for the initiative, helping to identify promising paths and evaluate their effectiveness. Innovation never follows a single path, so the group will likely need to try a number of things. You can help them to identify and reinforce the ones that succeed.

---

17 http://www.idrc.ca/openebooks/959-3

Part of this role involves identifying progress markers or indicators so that the group can understand not only whether specific strategies are successful, but how they contribute to the broader venture. Progress markers can be described as observable changes in behaviors, actions and relationships. They help to answer the questions: Are we on the right track? Are we seeing the change we anticipated? What improvements or corrections might we consider? For a DE, progress markers serve as a basis for check-ins with stakeholders, supporting collective assessment, and providing a focus for observations and feedback.

Developing progress markers in complex and emergent initiatives can be tricky. First, like everything else, you can expect your indicators to shift as the initiative evolves. Second, they will probably be difficult to measure, and attribution will be messy.[18] Don't let this discourage you. Embrace the messiness. It's a good sign that you're striving towards *meaningful* progress markers. (Too often, evaluators sacrifice significance for clarity and convenience, measuring what's easy rather than what is significant.)

2. WATCHING

"*How well your orientation matches the real world is largely a function of how well you observe*" (Richards, 2004).

One of the challenges of developmental evaluation is the sheer volume of data to manage (Gamble, 2008). Given the limitations of time, you will have to make decisions about where to focus your attention. However, the work you have done with

the group to articulate direction, frame and map the system, agree on guiding principles, and identify initial strategies and indicators will help you to know how to position yourself and what to watch. The learning framework you developed will also aid in determining important areas of focus.

As a DE, you are instrumental in ensuring a continuous flow of meaningful information about the unfolding situation. Your observations will help the group orient themselves, identify leverage points, assess their efforts, and stay true to the core intent and principles of their initiative. In addition to the specific areas of focus identified in the project's learning framework, there are five general aspects of an initiative that you should be keeping an eye on as a DE. These include:

Key developmental moments

Developmental moments are instances when the initiative shifts or moves forward in some significant way; moments of clarity, strategic insight, serendipity, connections, and/or movement. Michael Quinn Patton (2008) points out that key developmental moments don't usually happen in formal meetings; they happen off-line. Someone has an idea while they're taking a shower; then they call one of the other members of the initiative to discuss it. Those two meet a third for coffee and work out the details. Eventually, it morphs into a plan that might or might not be brought forward to the steering committee, but by then it's already solidified, and the opportunity to assist in the development of the idea becomes more difficult.

You don't need to be a part of every developmental moment, but you do want to support the critical ones when you can. In our experience, this generally requires two things:

1. **Relationship building:** If people value and trust you, they are more likely to include you in informal decision-making.

[18] In complex situations, cause and effect are difficult to sort out because many variables play a role. Gamble (2008) suggests the following: "Where attributions are difficult to make, one approach in emergent modeling is to do a contribution analysis. Various perspectives are sampled to gather different perceptions about the degree of impact an effort has made on observed results. While not perfect, it can offer a general perspective about the influences that an effort is having in a given area."

2. **Group awareness:** People aren't used to this kind of relationship with an evaluator, so they usually don't think to include you in informal conversations and emails. You may need to help the group unlearn some of their preconceptions about evaluation by offering gentle reminders, providing clear examples, and reinforcing positive actions by group members. Once you've demonstrated the value of the DE role in supporting developmental shifts, people won't need reminders to keep you in the loop.

Group dynamics

Even the best of initiatives can go sideways because of conflict, misunderstanding, lack of communication, and mistrust among stakeholders. Conversely, sluggish initiatives can be propelled forward by productively channeling group strengths and leveraging points of energy and excitement. For these reasons, you need to pay careful attention to the flow of energy, communication and power among the group. Below are some of the things to watch:

*   **Dynamics in meetings,** including body language, spoken language, vocal tone, laughter, pregnant pauses, inattention, excitement, interruptions, questions, repeated absences, and power plays.

*   **What happens when two or more systems come together.**[19] This is fertile ground for observation and support because the individuals in each system will have different ways of interpreting and conveying information; different perspectives, priorities, behaviors, and norms; and different forms of power and resources. In principle, this is a good thing—diversity makes the initiative stronger. However, it can also lead to tension. DEs can play a role in helping systems anticipate and prevent potential problems and misunderstandings. They can also help to manage them when problems do arise and leverage the opportunities they present.

*   **Power dynamics:** Who's setting the agenda? Whose voice gets heard? How are decisions made? Who's unengaged? Why?

*   **Learning dynamics:** Does the culture support learning? Are people willing to take risks? How do they handle failure? Are they able to speak openly about challenges? Do they share what they've learned?

*   **Informal exchanges:** Where are the natural alliances or understandings? Where are the conflicts or misunderstandings? How are ideas generated and brought forward? What kind of discussion and decision-making happens via email? Who initiates those exchanges? Who participates? Who doesn't?

Structure

Social structure (e.g., committees, hierarchies, staffing, terms of reference) can either enhance or impede innovation, communication, and effective decision-making (Emery, 1999), so it's an important component for DEs to watch. Anyone who

> **DE INSIGHT**
>
> "YouthScape brought together the cultures of academics, researchers, youth, private foundations, seasoned and young adult youth-workers, evaluators, not-for-profits, activists, students, Aboriginals, Francophones, Anglophones, and more—each with their own distinct role, language, practice and biases. It was in coming together, in the 'common spaces,' that there was the greatest opportunity for co-creation, learning and innovation. It was also in those spaces that DEs found fertile ground for their work."

---

19 A system can be any group considered to be a collection of parts functioning as a whole (e.g., an organization, a coalition, a funding body, or a group of community residents).

"In retrospect, form preceded function when we set up our steering committees. I think one of the ways that DEs can support communities is by helping them to first come to a good under-standing of what they want to do. Once they've figured that out, they'll have a better sense of what type of structure can best support that function."

has worked in a large bureaucracy can tell you what a controlling, top-heavy structure can do to individual initiative and the capacity for real-time decision-making. On the other hand, inadequate structure can leave the group floundering. Through observation and interventions, DEs can help to ensure that the initiative's structures support learning, offer stakeholders variety and meaning-fulness in their engagement, and allow for effective decision-making.

In the multi-site initiative we worked on, the communities moved towards establishing steering committees early in the process. The DEs at each of the sites were carefully observing how the commit-tees functioned. At four of the five sites, the steering committee structure actually seemed to be impeding momentum, and the DEs supported the groups in transitioning to a more adaptive structure.

In the same initiative, the staffing structure became problemat-ic, stifling momentum and hindering communication. Each of the sites had hired coordinators to serve as the point person for the initiative. In cases where the coordinator was an effective communicator and participatory in his or her decision-making, this worked well; but in many of the sites, the staffing structure created a bottleneck for communication and decision-making. Again, the DEs played a role in helping the group to address this issue.

Action

In the midst of complexity, taking action can be daunting because there is always more you to that might increase your chances of success. However, you won't learn much if you never actually *try* anything. DEs play an important role in helping groups understand the importance of quick iterations; of learn-ing by doing. If your group is all talk and no action, encourage some movement.[20] Even small actions can energize a group and generate new learning.

Threats and Opportunities

In complex systems, variables are inter-related, and changes made in one area have consequences in others. Because of this, each move you make potentially creates a new set of threats and opportunities. DEs have an important role to play in helping groups identify emergent opportunities and anticipate po-tential problems. The same processes that are used to support ongoing development can be used to identify potential threats and opportunities, including mapping the patterns associated with system behavior and gathering intelligence through rapid reconnaissance techniques.

---

20 Here's a story from *Certain to Win* (Richards, 2004) that might help your group understand the importance of quick iterations. "In 1981, […] Yamaha opened an enormous factory and announced that it would become the world's largest motorcycle manufacturer. At that time, Honda held the honor and had no intention of relinquishing it. Most companies in the US as well as in Japan would have challenged force with force and built a factory even larger than Yamaha's. […] Honda, however, chose to attack through speed and agility. Over the 18 month period of the 'H-Y War,' Honda introduced 113 new models to replace the 60 it had in the beginning. In contrast, Yamaha was only able to bring out 37. Honda wasn't cranking out new models for the fun of it. *They were learning from how the public accepted, or not, each new model and made changes accordingly*. The result was that both Honda and public tastes evolved dur-ing the course of the campaign. By the end of the war, a Yamaha looked drab and unimagina-tive parked next to a Honda. Yamaha accepted an embarrassing surrender, publicly stating 'We want to end the H-Y War. It was our fault.'" (Emphasis added)

TIPS AND TOOLS

Interpreting data in complex systems can be tricky. As humans, we've evolved to think about cause and effect in fairly linear ways. In complex systems, cause and effect does not behave this way and this creates huge challenges for thinking and decision-making. In his book *The Logic of Failure: Recognizing and Avoiding Error in Complex Situations* (1996), Dietrich Dörner identifies common errors people make when they are working in complex systems. The book offers real life illustrations and should be required reading for anyone working in complex systems.

3. SENSE-MAKING

Making sense of the vast and complex array of data that emerges in any complex initiative is a huge and daunting task—one that requires perceptiveness, imagination, discipline, and rigour. Sense-making involves two main components: analysis and synthesis. Each is briefly explored below.

Analysis

In developmental evaluation, meaning-making is a collective process. DEs work with the group to help them make sense of what they're seeing and support them in integrating the learning into their ongoing work. Shifting responsibility for the meaning-making process from the evaluator to the entire team can help to:

- Build capacity for evaluative thinking among other team members
- Create a sense of ownership
- Increase understanding of the findings
- Increase the likelihood that the findings will actually be used (Patton, 2008)

This does not mean that all stages of analysis will be conducted collaboratively; it just means that you should be intentional

about supporting other team members to look at the emerging data, articulate what they're seeing, and consider the implications for their work.

Learning how to analyze data takes a bit of time and practice. If you are new to data analysis, we strongly encourage you to explore some of the resources listed in Appendix E. The following questions[21] can also serve as a guide:

- What patterns or themes emerged?
- Are there any deviations from these patterns? (If yes, are there factors that might explain these deviations?)
- Are the different data collection methods you used showing similar or different results? Why do you think that is?
- Are there alternative explanations for the results?
- What are the possible limitations of the data?
- Are there any findings that are surprising? (If so, how do you explain these results?)
- Do the results make sense?
- Are your results consistent with theories which have been supported through previous research?
- Do the results lead to additional questions that should be explored?
- What do the results tell us about our model(s)? How should they be modified?
- What will we do as a result of these findings?

---

21 Adapted from the Minnesota Office of Justice 2008, Health Communication Unit, The Centre for Health Promotion, University of Toronto, 2007

Synthesis

The process of synthesis involves bringing data together in a meaningful way so that groups can use the findings to inform future development. DEs play an important role in (1) helping the group to track important information, turning points, challenges, and learnings; and (2) documenting this information in a way that facilitates ongoing learning and integration. There are many ways to capture developmental data, including formal reports, video documentation, stories, visual mapping, informal notes, spreadsheets, graphs, and photographs. You will need to determine which combination best meets the needs of the initiative. Keep in mind that use is the primary consideration. Adapt your methods to the learning priorities and preferences of the group to ensure that the findings get integrated into ongoing work (Patton, 2008).

4. INTERVENING

One of the significant ways in which developmental evaluation differs from traditional evaluation is that the DE participates as a member of the team and has opportunities to influence and shape the development process. At times, the group will get stuck, off-track, disheartened, or confused, and they will require your help. An intervention from a DE can take many forms. Table 2 on the next page outlines some of the more common ones.

TABLE 2: **TYPES OF DE INTERVENTIONS**	
ASKING QUESTIONS	Good questions create openings, expose assumptions or misapprehensions, push thinking, surface values, highlight common ground, and reveal differences that, if not dealt with, could impede development (or, if looked at appreciatively, could become a strength). Ideally, they result in the release of new or tied up assets in a system (e.g., the capacity to capitalize on a relationship, use a hidden skill, draw on in-kind resources, or set an idea in motion).
FACILITATING	All of the practices associated with quality facilitation can be used to good effect with developmental evaluation, including active listening, surfacing assumptions, clarifying, synthesizing, ensuring a diversity of voices are heard, and ensuring that the conditions in the room support learning.
SOURCING OR PROVIDING INFORMATION	Bringing information into the system is another key form of intervention. This can take many forms. For example, it might involve surfacing tensions and concerns by conducting stakeholder interviews and sharing the themes that emerged with the group. Or it might involve doing some research around promising practices, alerting the group to a complementary initiative, identifying a helpful resource, or conducting an environmental scan.
MAPPING AND MODELING	Helping the group to articulate, extend, clarify, and correct their mental models is critical to adaptive development. DEs play a significant role in helping to surface assumptions and visually map out the political, economic, social, and cultural forces, interconnections, barriers, and leverage points relevant to the initiative.
PAUSING	There are times when a pause in the action would be very helpful. For example, when ideas are being generated and dismissed before there's really time to give them some thought, or when someone is heading down a conceptual path that no one else is following. A DE can ask the group to pause and then support whatever action is most needed (e.g., clarification, synthesis, thoughtful consideration, group discussion, celebration, etc.).
REMINDING	In the chaos of complexity, it's very easy to lose touch with the core intent of the initiative or forget agreed-upon principles. Groups can become focused on chasing the next best thing and lose track of higher level purposes. Effective DEs help stakeholders to align their thinking and conduct with their vision and values by reminding them of the agreements they've made about their principles and priorities. Another aspect of "reminding" is to serve as lore keeper—someone who keeps track of past failures and successes so that the group can build on the learning that has gone on before. Bringing the history of an initiative forward is also part of this; understanding how and why decisions were made helps to orient new members as well as inform others who are doing similar kinds of work.
MATCH-MAKING	Matchmaking can involve connecting the group with people, organizations, resources, or ideas. Any DE can play this role, but the connections will likely be more meaningful if you have some experience and expertise with the system you are trying to influence. They can also help the group to consider social resources available to them (e.g., existing connections, potential champions or door-openers) that they are not yet leveraging.

Whatever the form, every intervention requires careful listening, skilful communication, and a good dose of humility. Interventions also benefit from an appreciative approach which helps to identify strengths, highlight what is working, build on momentum, and create a "culture of the possible."

Prioritizing Your Interventions

Triage[22] is an important concept for DEs. In any complex, collaborative initiative, there will be a range of things that need addressing: people who are obstructing movement forward; partners who are becoming increasingly disengaged; decision-makers who are pushing through their own agenda; coordinators who are impeding the flow of information; stakeholders who are clashing with one another. If you were to intervene to try to address everything you felt could be improved, intervening would be your full time job. More importantly, the people you're working with would likely organize a mutiny and throw you off the ship. A DE can only make so many intervention-type visits to the common space, so you have to use them carefully.

While it may seem counter-intuitive, the same principle applies to more positive interventions. Words of praise and encouragement lose their power when they are over-used. For this reason, we suggest that you prioritize your interventions, making sure that you deal with the biggest threats and opportunities first. If there's still some room to maneuver after that, you can begin addressing the next most important issues, and so on.

---

22 Triage is a term that is used in medical practice to describe the process of allocating aid on the basis of severity, urgency, and the potential benefit of an intervention. If you've ever visited an Emergency Room with a minor injury, you probably saw a few people who came in after you get admitted first. This is because the nurse who assessed them felt their problem needed more urgent attention. The same strategy can be applied to developmental evaluation; prioritize your interventions so that you are addressing the most urgent issues and the ones that can most benefit from your support.

Multi-Staged Interventions (or Untying Knots)

Some interventions are simple: you ask a fruitful question or bring forward a critical piece of information and you set in motion a series of shifts that help to move the system forward. Other interventions are more complex. In the national initiative we worked on, we came to think of some problems as knots that required a series of interventions—and a great deal of reflection and learning between interventions—to undo.

By intentionally phasing an intervention and taking strategic pauses along the way, you build in time for the system to adjust to smaller efforts and create space for you to observe what has happened before you formulate the next intervention.

Here's what a phased intervention often looks like:

1. Identifying a specific issue or an area that requires more clarity

2. Figuring out how to gather information that will help you to understand the issue better

3. Collecting and validating the information

4. Reflecting on how to gracefully put the information back into the system

5. Strategically bringing information or suggestions forward to relevant stakeholders

6. Following up on the results of the intervention

This is, of course, an iterative process. The information you gather when you follow up on an intervention is likely to lead to new insights that send you through another iteration of the process.

CHALLENGES

In his developmental evaluation primer, Jamie Gamble (2008) discusses a number of issues and challenges associated with developmental evaluation. These include:

- Perceptions of credibility
- Ambiguity and uncertainty
- Volume of data
- Sustainability/building evaluation capacity
- Keeping a results focus

In our multi-site case study, we experienced variations of all of these types of challenges as well as a number of others. Additional challenges are briefly outlined below.

OBJECTIVITY

DEs are embedded in an initiative and this gives us an enormous advantage, potentially offering us an opportunity to acquire a richer, more fully developed understanding of the initiative. However, that kind of proximity can compromise our ability to be objective. You will need to adopt disciplines that will help you to maintain rigour in your analysis.[23]

In addition to methodological discipline, you can enhance your capacity for objectivity by:

- **Understanding more about common types of biases.** Familiarizing yourself with some of the more common biases is the first step to identifying potential blind spots and shortcomings in your meaning-making. Here are a few types of biases that you may want to explore:

  - **Framing[24] bias:** When your values, beliefs, stereotypes, and emotional filters influence how you interpret events, relationships, and information.

  - **Bandwagon effect:** When you go along with what others do or think without doing your own analysis.

  - **Ethnocentrism:** When you interpret issues, events, or behaviors based on your own cultural frame of reference.

  - **Confirmation bias:** When you selectively notice or focus on evidence that supports what you already believe or want to be true, while ignoring the evidence that would serve to disconfirm those beliefs or ideas.

  - **Selection bias:** When you make generalizations based on an individual or a group that may not be representative.

- **Cultivating self-awareness through reading and reflection.** Developmental evaluation is demanding work that calls for high levels of self-awareness. Taking time to regularly reflect on your feelings, interpretations, beliefs, and values can help you to develop greater self-knowledge. Reading books and articles that challenge your thinking and expose you to new ideas can also help to extend your understanding. (As an added bonus, they might provide ideas and inspiration, thereby helping to renew your energy and focus.)

- **Working with a peer learning community or a DE mentor.** Other developmental evaluators can serve as a sounding board, helping you to verify your interpretations and share learnings. Connecting with a DE who has more experience

---

23 Some of the disciplines that help to enhance rigour are discussed in the following: Lennie, J. "Increasing the rigour and trustworthiness of participatory evaluations: learnings from the field." *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, Vol. 6 (new series), No. 1, pp. 27-35. http://www.aes.asn.au/publications/vol6no1/v6n1%20increasing%20the%20rigour%20and%20trustworthiness.pdf

24 Another framing issue is the tendency to frame problems and solutions in such a narrow way that the "fix" that is imposed creates even bigger problems down the road (e.g., creating irreparable damage to the environment for short term financial gain). DEs need to be aware of the boundaries they are putting around their thinking, caring, and inquiry.

than you and with whom you can safely discuss your initiative can be helpful in working through ideas and improving your practice.

- **Conducting short check-ins with other stakeholders to verify your perceptions.** DEs need to be careful not to move too fast on first impressions. Make it a habit to check in with peers or stakeholders to verify your perceptions before moving forward. Check-ins don't need to take a lot of time; they can be conducted via a quick telephone call or happen opportunistically (e.g., during a coffee break). While it is comforting to find people who think like you, it's critical to seek out other perspectives. In the process of trying to develop greater objectivity, your most important ally will likely be the person whose life experience differs significantly from yours, giving him or her a completely different lens through which to view ongoing events.

POSITIONING

In the multi-site initiative we were involved in, the DEs were positioned in different ways, with some being external consultants and some being hired internally. Our experience suggests that there is no ideal way to position a DE. Each type of positioning comes with its own set of challenges. In Table 3 on the following page, we share the main challenges associated with each type of positioning, with the hope that they may be anticipated and mitigated to some degree.

TABLE 3	
POSITIONING	ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES
DE AS INTERNAL STAFF MEMBER	• Internal staff members often struggle with credibility as developmental evaluators, particularly if their previous roles within their organizations have not been focused specifically on evaluation. • They may be seen as less objective. • Their capacity to "speak truth to power" may be compromised by their need to keep their job. • Their position as DE is sometimes diluted because they are also expected to fulfill other roles within the organization. • Relational patterns have already been established. In some cases, this is a significant advantage. In other cases, it creates problems. In the words of one DE, "people have ways to politic around you." • On the upside, they have tacit; insider knowledge that an outsider may never acquire. • They are situated where the action is, giving them lots of opportunities to observe the situation as it unfolds.
DE AS EXTERNAL CONSULTANT	• External consultants are generally considered to be more objective or neutral, as they are not party to internal politics and history. • A disadvantage is that they have less insider knowledge. • The external consultant will have to work harder to build relationships and get access to important pieces of information.[25] • If the consultant has been working in the field for a long time, he or she will have more points of comparison to bring to the initiative and a broader network of information and influence to draw on. • It can be easier for external consultants to focus on the task because they do not have other obligations within the organization. • External consultants are generally more expensive, and the initiative may have to limit hours as a result.

----

[25] One of the DEs in our initiative was an external consultant who had a great deal of internal relationships. In many ways, this was the best of all worlds; offering insider knowledge, mutual trust, and perceived objectivity and credibility.

TIME ALLOCATION

The time it takes to truly map out and understand functional relationships between critical variables within a system is significant. Our operations and routines are not generally geared to this kind of slow, detailed work, and this has an impact on people's expectations. In our experience, clients often expect DE-type results on a timeline that is more attuned to traditional forms of evaluation. However, developmental evaluation takes time. DEs don't just swoop in, collect data, write a report, and disappear. They embed themselves in an initiative, attending meetings, tracking correspondence, testing and developing new iterations of the model, and working with stakeholders to understand and influence complex systems. All of this takes time, and usually happens over years, not months. (On average, most of the DE contracts that we have undertaken have been for three years).

Another related challenge is that DEs cannot tie time estimates to pre-determined deliverables. Developmental evaluation is emergent—necessarily so—as it is designed to support ongoing development. While DEs can agree to some broad deliverables (e.g., develop a learning framework, facilitate group sense-making sessions three times a year, etc.), they cannot know in advance precisely how their time will be spent over the course of the initiative. Activities and hours are negotiated en route, requiring a far more flexible contractual relationship than traditional evaluation contracts. This can be a bit scary for funders and clients—especially if they are new to developmental evaluation.

NEGATIVE REACTIONS

When an evaluator conducts a summative evaluation, he or she submits the results and then (generally) moves on to the next contract. DEs, on the other hand, have to continue to function as part of the team, even after bringing forward uncomfortable or unpleasant information. This can be extremely challenging. In what she refers to as her "dark day," one of the DEs in our multi-site initiative offered feedback on a set of practices that needed to shift. To some extent, she was punished for her efforts, and the move jeopardized the relationships she had with the rest of the team.

Figuring out how to introduce uncomfortable information into the system is an art—one that every DE will need to develop. But even when that's done with grace and sensitivity, you can often count on some blow back. How you manage your responses to the fall out is critical, not only to the ongoing health of the initiative, but also to your own mental, emotional, and professional health. Having a trusted peer or mentor to consult with in difficult times can be a real gift.

CONCLUSION

In preparation for his 1914 Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, Ernest Shackleton placed the following ad:

Wanted. Men for hazardous journey. Low wages. Bitter cold. Long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in the event of success.

Despite its promise of inevitable hardship, the ad resulted in hundreds of applicants—courageous souls willing to endure adversity for the thrill of adventure.

Developmental evaluation attracts some of the same kinds of people: men and women who are drawn to the challenge of exploring new frontiers. While the practice won't expose you to sub-zero temperatures, the journey *is* challenging and "long hours of complete darkness" are likely, if only metaphorically. But you'll never be bored. And you'll have the satisfaction of working at the edge of your capacities; pushing yourself and others to think, care, learn, and act in increasingly effective and significant ways.

Are you ready for an adventure?

Wanted. Caring individuals to support a hazardous but important journey. Must be able to play a variety of roles: coach, strategist, observer, researcher, facilitator, cheerleader, lore keeper, map maker, and critical friend. High tolerance for complexity and uncertainty important. People skills critical. Must be passionate about creating positive social change.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: ASSESSING READINESS

TIPS AND TOOLS

When you are assessing organizational readiness, keep in mind that organizations are not homogenous, cohesive entities. Every organization has systems within systems (e.g., different departments, teams, initiatives, etc.). Any one of these systems may be assessed as more or less ready for developmental evaluation than another.

Sometimes an initiative can be a good fit for developmental evaluation, but the organization or collaboration is simply not ready for this type of evaluation (e.g., no buy-in for DE from key players, risk-averse, organizational culture doesn't tolerate failure/support learning, decision-making processes are not overly participatory, etc). In these cases, you will need to decide whether or not you can work with the group to develop their capacity for developmental evaluation.[26]

The following questions can be used to help assess the readiness of a group for developmental evaluation:[27]

- Is there buy-in for developmental evaluation? (If no, is there a champion who can help you to cultivate buy-in?)

- Does the culture of the group support learning? (How do they handle failure? How do they handle feedback? Are they willing to take risks? Is there mutual trust?)

- Is the group willing to allocate the appropriate resources to support innovation?

- Does the leadership within the group understand the need for participatory processes? (How are decisions made? What are the power dynamics of the group?)

- Do they have experience working in complexity?

- Is it willing to adapt its structure (e.g., language, rules, routines, procedures) to accommodate new ways of doing things?

- Are the values and practices of the key stakeholder organization(s) in line with the principles and capacities needed for the initiative?

- Are there any major issues that could interfere with the process (e.g., in-fighting, an unclear mandate, unstable financial support)?

- Where are the challenges, gaps, and potential road blocks?

---

26 In some cases, this will involve a considerable investment of time. For this reason, the funders may need to be involved in the decision.

27 Not all of these conditions have to be met; however, the more they exist, the more you can do as a DE. You will need to use your own judgment in determining where to draw the line.

APPENDIX B: STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

Stakeholder engagement is critical to community initiatives. The matrix that follows helps you to analyze stakeholders on two key dimensions: power (as in power to influence the system you are trying to shift) and interest (as in level of engagement in the initiative). The matrix is helpful because you will need to engage and communicate with different types of stakeholders in different ways. The matrix helps you think through different strategies for engagement.

STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS: POWER VERSUS INTEREST GRID		
	LOW-POWER STAKEHOLDERS ◄──────►	HIGH-POWER STAKEHOLDERS
HIGH-INTEREST STAKEHOLDERS	**High interest, low power** Support and enhance their capacity to be involved, especially when they may be affected by findings, as in the case of program participants. Their involvement increases the diversity of the evaluation.	**High interest, high power** High potential as primary intended users. These are often "key players" who are in a prime position to affect use, including using it themselves as well as drawing the attention of others.
LOW-INTEREST STAKEHOLDERS	**Low interest, low power** Inform them about the evaluation and its findings. Controversy can quickly turn this amorphous crowd of general public stakeholders into a very interested mob.	**Low interest, high power** Need to cultivate their interest and be alert in case they pose barriers to use through their disinterest. They are "context setters" (Eden and Ackermann 1998:122).

Source: Patton 2008:80.

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE LEARNING FRAMEWORK

On the next page, we've included an example of a learning framework that was developed for RADAR[28], an initiative in Calgary. This one-pager was developed by asking key stakeholders about the top threats and opportunities associated with that stage of the initiative. Their responses were analyzed thematically, and the top five themes were used to identify the learning and developmental needs of the initiative. (Note: this one-pager was supported by a longer document that offered more detail around each of the themes. It also included additional themes that emerged with less frequency.) This served as a basis for the group to begin structuring their learning and developing progress markers.

---

28 Re-engaging Academically Disconnected Adolescents Respectfully

RADAR LEARNING FRAMEWORK:

What do we need to pay attention to as RADAR takes flight?[29]

1. COLLABORATION DYNAMICS

- Roles and responsibilities
- Commitment/investment
- Ownership
- Potential for system clashes
- Communication

1A) DEVELOPING AN ADAPTIVE STAFFING MODEL

- Accountability
- Adaptive allegiances
- Transcending organizational cultures, mandates, policies

1B) GOVERNANCE

- Need for a management function
- Decision-making structure
- Ensuring the structure fuels , rather than constricts, the energy of this initiative

2. LEARNING AND EVALUATION

- Assessing impact and effectiveness
- Capturing learnings at both the programmatic and systems levels

3. SUSTAINABILITY

- Ensuring adequate and sustainable resources for this initiative, including funding and staffing resources

4. INTEGRITY & MOMENTUM

- Maintaining the integrity of the initiative
- Guarding against undue influences
- Maintaining momentum and energy
- Ensuring the big vision doesn't get lost in operational details

5. KEEPING YOUTH AT THE CENTRE

- Ensuring RADAR remains youth focused
- Finding ways to support youth in shaping this initiative

---

29 Based on interviews with ten key stakeholders, including representatives from BGCC (2), CBE (2), CSSD (2), City of Calgary, Strengthening Families, Woods, United Way

APPENDIX D: SYSTEMS ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK— KEY COMPONENTS

This framework is taken from "Putting the system back into systems change: a framework for understanding and changing organizational and community systems" (Foster-Fishman PG, Nowell B, Yang H, 2007). In order to effectively interpret the framework, we suggest you read the full article.

ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF TRANSFORMATIVE SYSTEMS CHANGE	
BOUNDING THE SYSTEM	• Problem [and/or opportunity] definition • Identification of the levels, niches, organizations, and actors relevant to the problem [or opportunity]
UNDERSTANDING FUNDAMENTAL SYSTEM PARTS AS POTENTIAL ROOT CAUSES	• System norms • System resources • System regulations • System operations
ASSESSING SYSTEM INTERACTIONS	• Reinforcing and balancing interdependencies • System feedback and self-regulation • Interaction delays
IDENTIFYING LEVERS FOR CHANGE	**Identifying Parts to Leverage for Change** • Exerts or could exert cross-level influences • Directs system behavior • Feasible to change **Identifying Interactions and Patterns to Leverage for Change** • System differences that create niches compatible with systems change goals • Long standing patterns that support or hinder change goal • Gaps in system feedback mechanisms • Cross-level/sector connections that are needed

Source: Foster-Fishman PG, Nowell B, Yang H. "Putting the system back into systems change: a framework for understanding and changing organizational and community systems." *Am J Community Psychol* (2007) 39:197-215.

APPENDIX E: DATA ANALYSIS RESOURCES

If data analysis is fairly new to you, you will need to familiarize yourself with some of the methodologies. Below are a few resources that might be helpful.

Bryman, A. Teevan, J., & Bell, E. (2009). *Social research methods*. (2nd ed). Oxford University Press.

Creswell, J. W. (2002). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. (3rd ed). Sage Publications.

Flick, U. (2006). An *introduction to qualitative research*. (3rd ed). Sage Publications.

Denzin N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. (2005). *The sage handbook of qualitative research*. (3rd ed). Sage Publications.

WORKS CITED

Berkun, S. (2007). *The myths of innovation*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, Inc.

Dörner, D. (1996). *The logic of failure: Recognizing and avoiding error in complex situations*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Earl, S., Carden, F., & Smutylo, T. (1999). *Outcome mapping. Building learning and reflection into development programs*. Ottawa: International Development Research Center.

Emery, M. (1999). *Searching: The theory and practice of making cultural change*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamin Publishing Co.

Foster-Fishman, P. G. Nowell, B. & Yang, H. (2007). *Putting the system back into systems change: a framework for understanding and changing organizational and community systems*. American Journal of Community Psychology, 39:197-215.

Greenleaf, R. (1970). *Servant leadership*. New York: Paulist Press.

Lennie, J. (2009). *Increasing the rigour and trustworthiness of participatory evaluations: learnings from the field*. Evaluation Journal of Australasia, 6 (1) : 27-35.

Patton, M. Q. (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation*. (4th ed). CA: Sage Publications.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. (3rd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Richards, C. (2004). *Certain to win: the strategy of John Boyd applied to business*. Xibris.

Tavris, C. & Aronson, E. (2007). *Mistakes were made, but not by me: Why we justify foolish beliefs, bad decisions, and hurtful acts*. Harcourt.

Westley, F., Zimmerman, B., & Patton, M. Q. (2006). *Getting to maybe. How the world is changed*. Canada: Random House.

AUTHORS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ELIZABETH DOZOIS

Elizabeth is a Calgary-based consultant, offering qualitative research, facilitation, and adaptive learning support to initiatives and organizations in the not-for-profit sector. She also develops learning resources and has written guides and curricula in a range of content areas, including planning and evaluation, leadership, cancer patient navigation, literacy, and family violence.

MARC LANGLOIS

Marc Langlois has spent thirty years in the voluntary sector as a front-line youth worker, founder, executive director, educator, and researcher. He is now completing a PhD program at Concordia University to deepen his exploration of youth involvement in social justice and community development initiatives. He holds a Masters of Management in the Voluntary Sector degree from McGill University; a National Certificate in Voluntary & Non Profit Sector Management from Henson College; and two Recreation diplomas.

NATASHA BLANCHET-COHEN

Natasha Blanchet-Cohen is an applied researcher who has worked in various national and international initiatives aimed at building the capacity of the multiple arenas that affect young people's lives. From 1997 to 2009, she was research director at the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD) in Victoria and led the research in YouthScape. She is currently an assistant professor at Concordia University in the Applied Human Sciences Department, and an IICRD associate.