CHAPTER

2

The Essence of Utilization-Focused Evaluation Expressed as Minimum Specifications

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

Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855)
Danish Philosopher

Knowing what is essential directs focus.
Focus enhances use.
Use is essential for evaluation impact.

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

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

80/20 Principle: The Rule of the Vital Few

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

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

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

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

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

1. *Honor the personal factor*: Identify and engage primary intended users.
2. *Be purpose-driven*: Focus on priority intended uses.
3. *Facilitate process use*: Be active, reactive, interactive, and adaptive in engaging users in all aspects of the evaluation.
4. *Take a full-journey stance*: Focus on use from beginning to the end and every step along the way.
5. *Adapt to context changes:* When the context for an evaluation changes, the evaluation may need to change.

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

© Simon Kneebone

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How to Do It

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

iStock.com/Rudzhan Nagiev

Find and involve primary intended users who are:

- **Interested** in being involved
- **Knowledgeable** about the program and evaluation needs
- **Open** to evaluation and the process of learning and improvement
- **Connected** to important stakeholder constituencies
- **Credible** in the eyes of other key users and stakeholders
- **Teachable** about utilization-focused evaluation
- **Committed** and available for interaction throughout the evaluation process

A Personal-Factor Exemplar: Engaging Educational Leaders in Evaluation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Use flows from clarity about purpose.

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

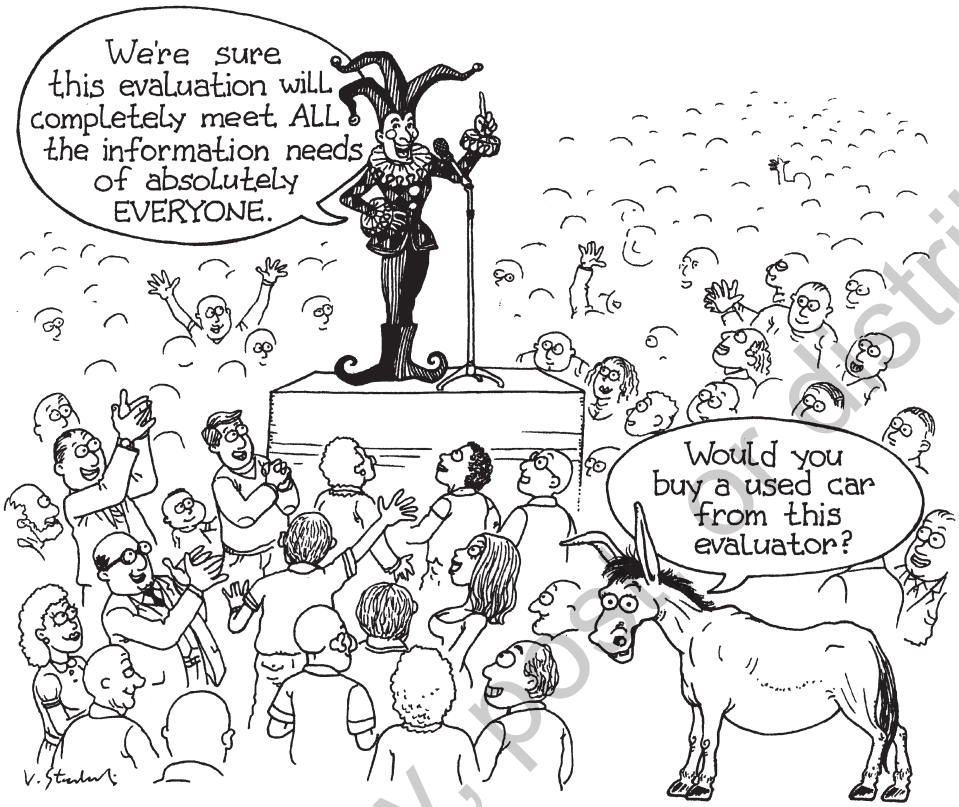
How to Do It

Review purpose options with primary intended users.

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

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

The evaluator's facilitation task is to present and explain the primary purpose options and their implications for use. The primary intended users determine which purposes are primary. Choices have to be made. No evaluation can serve all possible purposes equally well. Priorities have to be established.



© Michael Quinn Patton and Michael Cochran

One way to determine an evaluation's priority purpose is to surface forthcoming decisions that an evaluation is expected to inform. Here are examples of questions to ask of intended users to establish an evaluation's intended influence on forthcoming decisions:

- What decisions, if any, are the evaluation findings expected to influence? There may not be any, in which case the evaluation's purpose may be simply to generate knowledge for understanding and future enlightenment. If, however, the evaluation is expected to influence decisions, clearly distinguish major decisions about program funding, continuation, or expansion from decisions about program improvement, and innovation development.
- When will decisions be made? By whom? When will evaluation findings be needed to be timely and influential?
- What is at stake in the decisions? For whom? What controversies or issues surround the decisions?
- What's the history and context of the decision-making process?

- What other factors (values, politics, personalities, promises already made) will affect the decision-making?
- What might happen to make the decision irrelevant or keep it from being made? In other words, how volatile is the decision-making environment?
- How much influence do you expect the evaluation to have—realistically? What needs to be done to achieve that level of influence? Include special attention to which stakeholders to involve for the evaluation to have the expected degree of influence.
- What data and findings will be especially useful to support decision-making?
- How will we know afterward if the evaluation was used as intended? In effect, how can use be assessed?

A Purpose-Driven Exemplar: Evaluation for Improvement

Exemplary evaluations inspire and energize evaluation professionals.

Stewart I. Donaldson
2015 President, American Evaluation Association

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

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

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

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

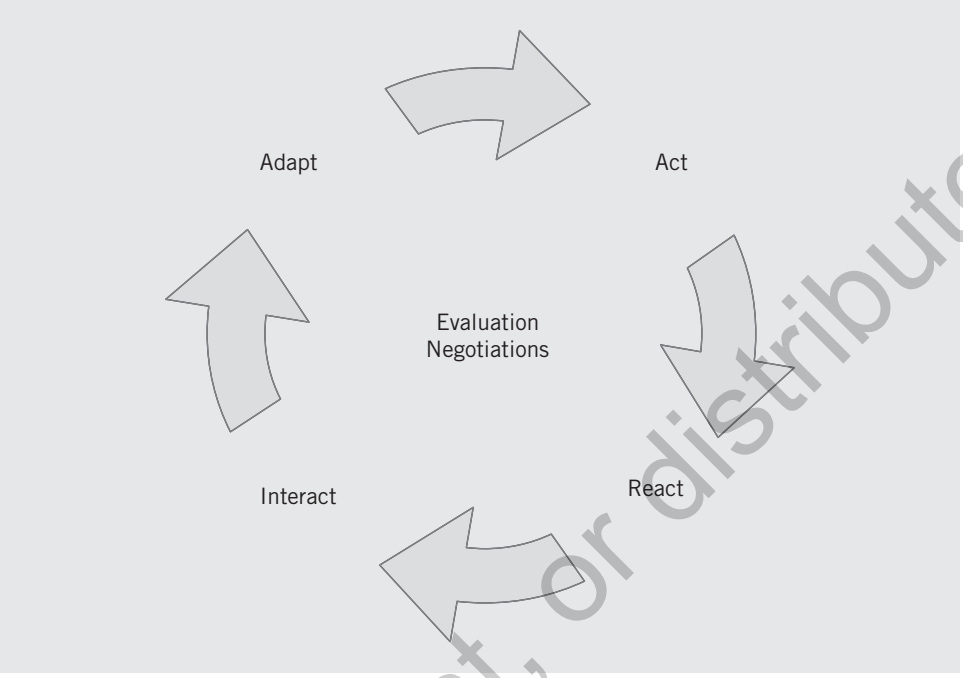
Achieving intended use by intended users requires facilitation. The phrase *active-reactive-interactive-adaptive* captures the nature of the consultative and facilitative interactions that go on between evaluators and intended users. The phrase is meant to be both descriptive and prescriptive. It describes how real-world decision-making actually unfolds—act, react, interact, and adapt. Yet, it is also prescriptive in alerting evaluation facilitators to consciously and deliberately act, react, interact, and adapt in order to increase their effectiveness in working with stakeholders and intended evaluation users.

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

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

> The interpersonal factor: this matters for actually conducting the evaluation, because creating, managing, and mastering interpersonal dynamics increases the likelihood of successfully interacting with and constructively involving others in doing the work of evaluation. Simply put, evaluators must interact with people, particularly primary intended users, to successfully conduct evaluations that will produce useful results and, therefore must be able to skillfully facilitate interactions that promote constructive interpersonal dynamics with and among those involved. (Stevahn & King, 2016, p. 68).

Exhibit 2.2 Working with Primary Intended Users: Adaptive Cycle



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

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

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

by Jara Dean-Coffey

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

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

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

Source: Jara Dean-Coffey (2020)

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

How to Do It

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

To be human is to engage in interpersonal dynamics.

Inter: between.

Personal: people.

Dynamics: forces that produce activity and change.

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

King & Stevahn (2013, p. 2)

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

is an evaluation design that is deemed relevant, credible, and potentially useful to the stakeholders involved in the design process. Attending to the process means ensuring that interactions among those involved are meaningful and engaging. Finding the appropriate balance between process and outcomes, between interaction time and on-task time is a core skill and function of effective facilitation. People accomplish tasks by creating an effective working group. That is how facilitators facilitate getting the work done. Facilitation typically involves working with diverse groups of people so cultural sensitivity and competence are important. Human groups inevitably manifest power differentials, diverse patterns of interaction, variations in emotional engagement, and whatever is brought into the group from the larger society and culture: gender, race, political, social, cultural, and language issues, to name but a few. These issues frame and contextualize evaluations and therefore, inevitably, must be addressed in evaluation facilitation. Skilled evaluation facilitators anticipate and have ways of dealing with whatever emerges at the intersection of society and evaluation on the path to group success in determining what options are most appropriate for the situation at hand. Making informed decisions is empowering.

We'll return to evaluation facilitation skills and cultural competence again and again because they are so essential. As a harbinger of what you'll learn in subsequent chapters, Exhibit 2.3 presents the responsibilities that flow from each element of the evaluation facilitation quartet of roles: being active-reactive-interactive-adaptive.

Exhibit 2.3 Responsibilities of the Evaluation Facilitator

Facilitation Responsibilities	Tasks and Processes Involved in Fulfilling the Facilitation Responsibilities
1. *Being active*	- Identifying and getting to know primary intended users - Explaining the purpose of the group's work - Staying focused on the intended purpose of the process - Setting the agenda - Framing questions for the group to address - Creating exercises to accomplish the group's work - Modeling evaluative thinking - Facilitating establishment of group norms and "rules of engagement" - Exercising cultural sensitivity and competence
2. *Being reactive*	- Designing a process appropriate to the characteristics, experiences, interests, and concerns of primary intended users - Using language that is meaningful, understandable, and culturally appropriate - Responding to questions and issues that arise - Dealing with problems, conflicts, dissents, and disagreements - Assessing the group's knowledge and skills and building evaluative capacity as needed and appropriate - Translating evaluation concepts in ways that are culturally sensitive and meaningful

(Continued)

Exhibit 2.3 (Continued)

Facilitation Responsibilities	Tasks and Processes Involved in Fulfilling the Facilitation Responsibilities
3. *Being interactive*	- Being a real person to users and stakeholders; the evaluation facilitator gets to know them and they get to know the facilitator - Establishing rapport, trust, and mutual respect - Engaging in exchanges, dialogues, discussions, and deliberations as appropriate - Being both facilitator and evaluator, thereby offering the group evaluation expertise as needed and appropriate - Engaging the participants in monitoring and assessing how the process is going and identifying markers of progress toward desired results - Drawing out and engaging with culturally and situationally important dynamics
4. *Being adaptive*	- Changing the process as needed - Reconfiguring time allotments as the work unfolds - Introducing new techniques and exercises that move the work forward - Helping individual participants who may struggle with some parts of the process or have difficulties with others in the group - Monitoring the flow of the work and alternatively nudging, pulling back, pushing, giving the group space, getting the group back on-task, solving problems, working through bottlenecks, ensuring engagement by all participants, and providing positive reinforcement - Adapting the flow to ensure priority tasks are accomplished and desired decisions get made in a timely fashion, including getting findings, used appropriately and on time

The Impacts of Process Use

Process use also includes the impacts on programs of getting ready for evaluation. When program staff engages in goals clarification, constructs a model of the program with the evaluator's guidance, or identifies measures for outcomes, those processes can have an impact on program operations and outcomes before data are ever gathered. Staff becomes more focused as goals get clarified and what gets measured gets done. That's an impact of the facilitated process, not use of findings. We'll devote a lot of attention to process use on this U-FE journey.

Process Use as Capacity Building

Process use focuses attention on the ways that evaluations have impact beyond use of findings. Those intended users and stakeholders who are involved in the evaluation process learn from their participation. Process use, then, refers to the impact on those involved in learning and using the logic, employing the reasoning, and being guided by the values that inform U-FE. Process use is distinct from use of the substantive findings in an evaluation report. It's equivalent to the difference between learning how to learn versus learning substantive knowledge about something. Learning how to think evaluatively is to think critically, and those who become involved in an evaluation learn by doing.

Process as Outcome

Facilitating evaluative learning and thinking opens up new possibilities for impact that organizations and funders are coming to value because the capacity to engage in this kind of thinking can have enduring value. This especially resonates for organizations interested in becoming what has come to be called popularly "learning organizations." A learning organization makes learning an explicit part of the organization's identity, strategy, and values and therefore devotes systematic time and resources to learning and extracting lessons from reviews of work completed. Such learning needs to take place in a timely manner. Findings have a very short "half-life"—to use a physical science metaphor; they lose relevance quickly. Specific findings typically have a small window of applicability. In contrast, learning to think and act evaluatively can have ongoing relevance. The experience of being involved in an evaluation, then, for those actually involved, can have a lasting impact on how they think, on their openness to reality-testing, and on how they view the things they do.

Any evaluation can have these kinds of effects. What is different about utilization-focused evaluation is that the process of actively involving intended users increases these kinds of evaluation impacts. Furthermore, the possibility and desirability of building an organization's capacity to learn from evaluation processes as well as findings can be made intentional and purposeful. In other words, instead of treating process used as an informal side effect, explicit and up-front attention to the potential impacts of evaluation logic and processes can increase those impacts and make them a planned purpose for undertaking the evaluation. In that way, the evaluation's overall utility is increased. Later chapters will go more deeply into evaluative thinking as an important outcome of utilization-focused evaluations.

A Process Use Exemplar: Organization-Wide Learning

An excellent example of process use is illustrated by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) headquartered in Ottawa, Canada. IDRC helps developing countries use science and technology to find practical, long-term solutions to the social, economic, and environmental problems they face. The evaluation unit observed that routine program reporting had become boring, tedious, and not much used. The evaluation staff helped create an innovative reporting process dubbed the "Rolling Project Completion Report" (rPCR). The new system emphasized learning rather than paperwork accountability. Early in the life of a project, a junior staff member interviews a project officer to gather data about project design, start-up lessons, and issues that will need attention going forward. In the middle of a project, team leaders interview project officers to capture lessons about implementation and interim outcomes, as well as update work on key issues. After the end of a project, senior managers interview project officers to complete the project reports, identify results, and capture any final learnings. Major learnings are highlighted at an Annual Learning Forum. This new rPCR process replaced the old paperwork requirement with an interview process that has people at different levels in the organization talking to each other, learning about each other's work, and sharing lessons. The process was designed so that interview responses are entered into the learning system in real-time, as the interview takes place, with subsequent opportunities for project managers to make corrections and append supporting documentation and cross-reference information sources (Carden & Earl, 2007). The old project completion reports, long disdained, were replaced by this new interactive reporting process. It became a source of energy, enlightenment, and evaluation use.

As we turn now to the fourth U-FE MIN SPEC, *being full-journey oriented,* we leave you with this closing thought about process use: *Process matters*. It's not just where you end up but how you get there. Things happen along the way. Important things. Pay attention. The most significant impacts may not be found in the findings at the end of the utilization journey, but along the way. Process matters.

"It seems someone made off with my methods bag. They won't get far without the others."

MIN SPEC 4. Take a Full-Journey Stance: Focus on Use From Beginning to the End

> To look beyond our horizons is to acknowledge that we've hemmed ourselves in by creating them in the first place.
>
> Craig D. Lounsbrough, Psychologist

The traditional boundaries of evaluation have been the design proposal on the front end and the report on the backend. Utilization-focused evaluation expands the boundaries on both ends. On the front end, attention to preparation, readiness, and commitment precede formulating the design. On the back end, utilization-focused evaluators follow-up report findings and recommendations to facilitate use. Along the way, pay attention to how everything that is done may affect use.

Readiness

> People get ready
>
> There's a train a-coming
>
> You don't need no baggage
>
> You just get on board.
>
> Curtis Mayfield (1965)
> "People Get Ready" song lyrics

When we engage with people in programs to undertake evaluation, we are asking them to subject their perceptions and beliefs to empirical test: Is what they hope for and believe in actually happening? It takes some preparation to help people embrace this question. Farmers till the soil before planting. Preparing for evaluation requires tilling the metaphoric program soil so that those involved can receive the seeds of evaluation and those seeds can grow into useful findings that actually get used. That's why utilization-focused evaluation begins by assessing program and organizational readiness for evaluation—and facilitating stakeholders in getting ready.

Readiness

Readiness refers to a project's willingness to allocate staff time, resources and management commitment to evaluation and communication. We have learned that some projects need support to build up and sustain readiness and this support may include an early briefing session with management to sensitize them to the [U-FE] approach and its benefits.

Ricardo Ramirez & Dal Brodhead (2017)
Evaluation and Communication Decision-Making: A Practitioner's Guide

A common error made by novice evaluators is believing that because someone has requested an evaluation or some group has been assembled to design an evaluation, the commitment to reality-testing and use is already there. Quite the contrary, these commitments must be engendered (or revitalized if once they were present) and then reinforced throughout the evaluation process. Utilization-focused evaluation makes this a priority.

The utilization journey begins by meeting key people (fellow travelers on the inquiry journey) to learn about the organizational and political context for the evaluation and get a sense of the issues the evaluation will need to address. That leads to formal stakeholder engagement. For that initial engagement, we like to assemble key people for a half-day workshop (sometimes a full day) aimed at laying the groundwork (tilling the program and organizational soil) for reality-testing. People invited to this opening workshop include key program and organizational leadership, staff, funders, board members, and long-time program participants or graduates who are knowledgeable about the program. We facilitate the development of an evaluative mindset among those who will be involved in, affected by, and use the evaluation. In Chapter 7, we'll discuss in detail several options for facilitating this opening meeting. We conclude this section with a meditation on beginnings.

Beginnings matter.

Where you begin a journey and the route you take

will determine what you see and the experience you have.

It has always been so.

Pay attention, then, to where and how you begin.

Pay Attention Along the Way

Utilization-focused evaluative thinking involves staying focused on intended use by intended users throughout the utilization journey. It's that simple—and that complex. For every issue that surfaces in evaluation negotiations, for every design decision, for every budget allocation, and for every choice among alternatives, keep asking, "How will this affect use in this situation?"

Evaluation involves a great many decisions: who to involve, what questions to ask, which design to use, what kinds of data to collect, sampling strategy, analysis approach, presentation of findings, and on and on and on. For each of these decisions ask, "How will that affect use?" In deliberating on options, compare their implications for use. In setting priorities, think about which are most useful for intended users. *Obsess about use*. Keep it front and centrer in all you do. That's what it means to be utilization focused.

Endings: Follow Up to Support Utilization

It ain't over till it's over.

Yogi Berra, Baseball legend, 1973

Reporting evaluation findings is not use. Producing findings and a report are outputs. Use is the desired outcome. Achieving that outcome means working with primary intended users after the findings and report are presented to facilitate use—that means acting on the findings.

One of the greatest barriers to working with intended users to actually apply and act on findings and recommendations is that evaluation designs, work plans, and contracts typically end with production of the report. That means that no time and money has been allocated to the critical processes of following up with primary intended users to facilitate action and ongoing use. Evaluators should not be expected to engage in follow-up work as a matter of goodwill.

Follow-up to facilitate use is the payoff for months, sometimes years, of work. No matter how good the report nor how clear the recommendations, utilization is served by working with primary intended users to monitor what happens to the findings and recommendations, and to watch for additional opportunities to apply findings, which can include opportunities for broader dissemination.

Full-Journey Stance Premise

"One can pour out of a jug only what is it in." (Ancient adage.) The evaluation use jug is being filled throughout the evaluation so that it is full to brimming when the sweet nectar of use is ready to be poured and savored by users.

The utilization journey begins with preparation and laying the groundwork for intended use by primary intended users. The journey continues through until conclusions, findings, and recommendations, if any, are applied.

How to Do It

Thoughtful preparation leads to a promising start paving the way for ongoing work with primary intended users.

Readiness: Baseline Associations With and Perceptions of Evaluation

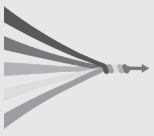
As a simple opening exercise at an evaluation launch workshop, we may begin by asking participants to share words and feelings they associate with the evaluation. Write the word *EVALUATE* on a flip chart and ask those present to free-associate with the word: "What comes to mind when you see the word *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 with them into new experiences the emotional baggage of past 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 in 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 we 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 et al., 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 what, for this evaluation in this time and place, do we have to do to undertake an evaluation that will be useful, credible, meaningful, and fair.



How to Do It

Attention to use guides decision-making and interactions with primary intended users throughout an evaluation.

The most common organizational approach to evaluation communications is the boilerplate midterm and end-of-project timing of evaluation reports. Take a three-year project. The midterm evaluation is aimed at assessing progress toward achieving full and intended implementation objectives. It is supposed to serve the purpose of guiding improvements. In contrast, the end-of-project evaluation is aimed at determining whether the project (or program) should continue, be expanded, reduced, or even terminated. This logic has been translated into evaluation contracts required by philanthropic foundations, government agencies, private sector initiatives, and international organizations. The framework is logical. Assess progress in midterm and make major decisions on effectiveness at the end.

The problem is that the world does not operate according to that logic. Think about the decision of whether to continue, expand, reduce, or terminate a program. Such a decision must typically be made months before the end of the project. Indeed, in a three-year program, the decision about the future will typically have to be taken at least a year in advance. Staff have to know whether they have a job. Office leases must be renewed. Contractual collaborations and relationships must be affirmed. Budget cycles run at least a year in advance of the activities funded. Under this scenario of how the world really works, the midterm evaluation is likely to provide the best available information to inform a future decision about the program. Then, if the decision is to continue the program, the end-of-project decision would suggest ways of improving the project in the next phase. This reality of how decisions are timed is exactly the opposite of evaluation's standard logic. The midterm evaluation for improvement is really going to become the basis for a major continuation decision, not the end-of-project evaluation, which comes too late to usefully inform a continuation judgment. That means that the best an end-of-project evaluation can do is inform improvements for the next phase or offer lessons for future projects.

Better yet, instead of routinely doing midterm and end-of-project evaluations, find out when decisions will be made—budget decisions, annual Workplan decisions, strategy adjustments, improvements—and time delivery of findings to inform those decisions. Exhibit 2.4 contrasts utilization-focused thinking with contract-compliance thinking.

Exhibit 2.4 Contrasts in Timing Evaluation Reports

Meeting Contract Obligations	Utilization-Focused Timing
Deliver the report on time: the dates specified in the contract (e.g., midterm and end-of-project).	Target delivery of findings to be timely and useful for informing decisions and learning opportunities. Monitor situational developments that may affect timeliness.

How to Do It

Build on the momentum of having generated findings and conclusions to support applying those findings and conclusion thereby achieving use.

Lessons about the importance of follow-through to enhance use begins with planning for follow-up. This means building into evaluation budgets time and money to engage in follow-up. Follow-up can involve keep findings in front of those who can use them and adapting findings for different audiences. It also involves watching for emergent opportunities to reinforce the relevance of findings.

In moving from findings to action, resistance may emerge. Don't be surprised. This is common. Be prepared to work with primary intended users to strategize about how to deal with resistance. Likewise, be on the lookout for and guard against misuse, for example, misinterpreting findings to support a decision that runs contrary to the evaluation results.

A utilization-focused evaluator is a champion for use of the findings, but not a champion for the program. This difference is crucial to maintaining the evaluator's integrity and credibility.

Follow-up has implications for future evaluations including possible interest in a new round of evaluation to address longer-term impact questions or design of an evaluation for the next phase of an intervention. Bottom line: There's a lot of work to be done beyond generating a report.

A Full-Journey Stance Exemplar: Developmental Evaluation as Māori

Our full-journey exemplar comes from New Zealand. Nan Wehipeihana is Māori. Kate McKegg is a sixth-generation *Pakeha* (non-Māori New Zealander of European settlers lineage). Together they facilitated a developmental evaluation of an innovative Māori sport and recreation initiative. They worked with community leaders and program staff to develop an innovative approach to health and recreation attuned to Māori culture. They have described the beginning of the utilization journey as dialoguing with

"a wonderful Māori woman (Ronnie), who had this big bold vision to reclaim and build a space for Māori in sport and recreation, to participate *as Māori*. And in our sports mad country (passionate rugby and netball followers), her vision for achieving this through revitalizing traditional Māori sport and recreational activities was both exciting and courageous" (Wehipeihana & McKegg, 2011). Increasing participation *by Māori* in programs and services such as education, health, for example, had been the usual focus of most government policy, programming, and evaluation. Participation as *Māori* was a ground-breaking conceptual shift.

The concept of *as Māori* also recognizes the desire of Māori to have control over their future direction as well as the strong motivation for Māori to determine the solutions that work for them. Furthermore, it affirms the validity and legitimacy of Māori knowledge and ways of doing things, of the need for space for Māori to live and participate in New Zealand as Māori (Wehipeihana & McKegg, 2011).

The evaluation involved documenting what emerged as the program developed and extracting principles and lessons for further development, then working with community members, program staff, and initiative leadership to apply the principles and lessons to ongoing initiative development, adaptation, and innovation. The evaluation was awarded the Best Evaluation Policy and Systems Award from the Australasian Evaluation Society in 2013.

MIN SPEC 5. Adapt to Context Changes: When the Context Evaluation Changes, the Evaluation May Have to Change

> Separate text from context and all that remains is a con.
>
> Stewart Stafford, American novelist

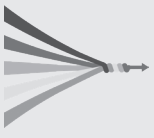
A con involves deception. To maintain the "text" (original design and contract language) of an evaluation when the context has changed significantly is a con because it involves the deception that nothing has changed and so business (the evaluation) goes on as usual. Evaluators may con themselves because they don't want to change as much as they may con others. Utilization-focused evaluators are artists (creative designers) but not con artists.

Context matters. Context can change. When the context for an evaluation changes, the evaluation may have to adapt to the new context. Turbulent and dynamic contexts require ongoing adaptation.

Program evaluation is undertaken to inform decisions, clarify options, identify improvements, and provide information about the effectiveness of programs and policies within contextual boundaries of time, place, values, and politics. The ever-increasing pace

of change pressures evaluators to produce findings faster, shortened feedback timelines, and exponentially expanded opportunities for widely disseminating findings. Simultaneously, demands have increased for greater contextual sensitivity and adapting evaluation to local conditions and constraints. The immensity and speed of change show no signs of slowing, so utilization-focused evaluators must monitor the evaluation's context as the work unfolds and be prepared to adapt as significant changes occur.

Burry (1984) and Alkin (1985) of the UCLA Center for the Study of Evaluation synthesized research on factors that affect evaluation use in a three-part framework that has endured the test of time, work that built on their empirical research (Alkin et al., 1979). They organized factors affecting use into three major categories: human, evaluation, and contextual factors. Human factors include people's attitudes toward and interest in the program and its evaluation, their backgrounds and organizational positions, and their professional experience levels. Evaluation factors refer to the actual conduct of the evaluation, the procedures used in the conduct of the evaluation, and the quality of the information provided. Contextual factors include any mandates, standards, and financial agreements affecting the evaluation, and relationships between the program being evaluated and larger trends occurring organizationally, politically, economically, socially, and culturally. Changes in context can affect both human factors (how stakeholders react) and evaluation factors (how the evaluation is conducted).



How to Do It

Stay adaptive. Adaptation is both an attitude and a behavior, both a mindset and an action, and both a process and an outcome.

Here are three practical tips for generating and maintaining an adaptive mindset that enhances taking adaptive actions.

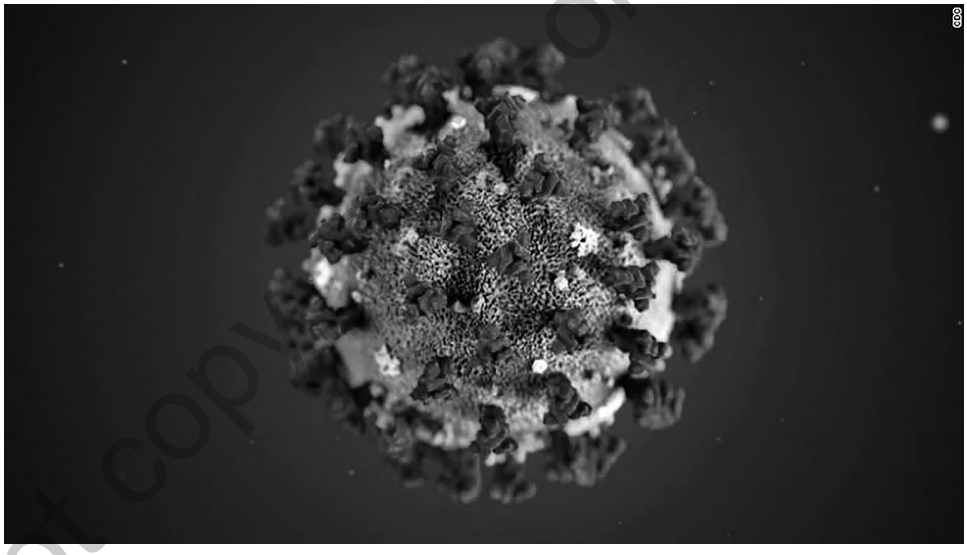
1. Include in evaluation designs and contracts language specifying that significant changes in context may lead to changes in the evaluation. Identify what process will be used to negotiate changes in the evaluation. Be prepared for change contractually and mentally.
2. Pay attention to trends and patterns that may affect the evaluation. Changes in organizational leadership or elected officials after elections may have evaluation implications. Political or economic changes may invite new questions as new policies are considered. Crises in an organization or community may spill over into the evaluation. On July 6, 2016, Philando Castile, a 32-year-old African American man was pulled over for a driving infraction which ended up with a police shooting. He was well-known in the African American community where we were conducting an evaluation of an after-school program for African American primary school students.

The ensuing crisis affected the program, schools, human service agencies, city government, the community, the police—and the evaluation.

A year after that crisis, in the third year of a three-year evaluation, United Way, which was a major funder of the after-school program, changed its priorities and ended funding for after-school programs. The evaluation, which has been focused on improving and developing the program with staff, had to quickly shift gears to produce findings about the unique culturally designed program model, its outcomes for African American students, and its contributions to the African American community—findings aimed at the larger community and other potential funders. The change in funding required a major adaptation in all aspects of the evaluation even though the evaluation was halfway through its final year.

3. Be open to change. Relevance is contextual. Use is contextual. It may be easier to continue doing what was already planned, but when what was already planned is no longer relevant, it will not be useful.

A Contextual Adaptation Exemplar: The 2020 Global Health Pandemic



CDC/ Alissa Eckert, MSMI; Dan Higgins, MAMS

The coronavirus emerged in China, in December, 2019. In January it began spreading around the world. By the end of March, roughly four billion people—half the world's population—had been asked to stay at home to minimize transmission of the virus. More than one million people across 172 nations had tested positive for the contagion while the estimates for actual infection rates were much higher. More than 100,000 people had died. Classrooms for 90% of the world's students were closed. The global economy went into recession.

In March, 2020, we produced and posted on our utilization-focused evaluation website a statement providing guidance for evaluators worldwide (the primary intended users) about the implications of the pandemic for evaluation adaptation.

Fifteen items were included in that guidance. Here are the first four to give you a sense of the magnitude and speed of change that contextual adaptation can involve.

Evaluation implications of the coronavirus global health pandemic emergency

1. **Adapt evaluation plans and designs now**. All evaluators must now become developmental evaluators, capable of adapting to complex dynamics systems, preparing for the unknown, for uncertainties, turbulence, lack of control, nonlinearities, and for emergence of the unexpected. This is the current context around the world in general and this is the world in which evaluation will exist for the foreseeable future.
2. **Be proactive.** Don't wait and don't think this is going to pass quickly. Connect with those who have commissioned your evaluations, those stakeholders with whom you're working to implement your evaluations, and those to whom you expect to be reporting and start making adjustments and contingency plans. Don't wait for them to contact you. Evaluation is the last thing on the minds of people who aren't evaluators. They won't be thinking about how the crisis affects evaluations. That's your job as an evaluator. Get to work doing that job. Adjustments need to be made now, sooner rather than later. Offer help in updating your evaluation. This doesn't necessarily mean delaying data collection. It may mean accelerating it to get up-to-date information about the effects of the crisis. For example, a planned survey of parent involvement in schools becomes a quick survey about how families are adjusting to school closures.
3. **Make it about use not about you**. The job of the people you work with is not to comfort you or help you as an evaluator. Your job is to help them, to let them know that you are prepared to be agile and responsive, and you do so by adapting your evaluation to these changed conditions. This may include pushing to keep evaluations from being neglected or abandoned by showing the ongoing relevance of evaluative thinking and findings—which means adapting to ensure the ongoing relevance and utility of evaluative thinking and findings. For example, in an international project with many field locations, instead of continuing to administer a routine quartering monitoring survey, to be more useful we've created a short open-ended survey about how people are being affected and adapting at the local level, and what they need now from headquarters.
4. **Real-time data rules.** Channel your sense of urgency into thinking pragmatically and creatively about what data you can gather quickly and provide to your evaluation users to help them know what's happening, what's emerging, how needs are changing, and consider options going forward. At the same time, help them document the changes in implementation they are making as a result of the crisis—and the implications and results of those changes. You may be able to gather data and provide feedback about perceptions of the crisis and its implications, finding out how much those affected are on the same page in terms of message and response. That's what developmental evaluators do. (See #1 above.) (For the full statement *see Utilization-Focused Evaluation*, 2020)

Summary and Conclusion

> In an increasingly complex, fast moving and polarized world, it's easy to argue that progress—perhaps even our survival—depends in part of the ability of social innovators, evaluators and all those who support them to build the muscle of *min-spec* thinking and practices.
>
> Mark Cabaj (2021)
> Canada-based evaluator

We have illustrated MIN SPECS through exemplary evaluations. The exemplary evaluations reviewed in this chapter run the gamut of diverse intended users, distinct purposes (intended uses), different types of process use facilitation, and variable full-journey timelines for utilization and contributions to program improvements and decision-making:

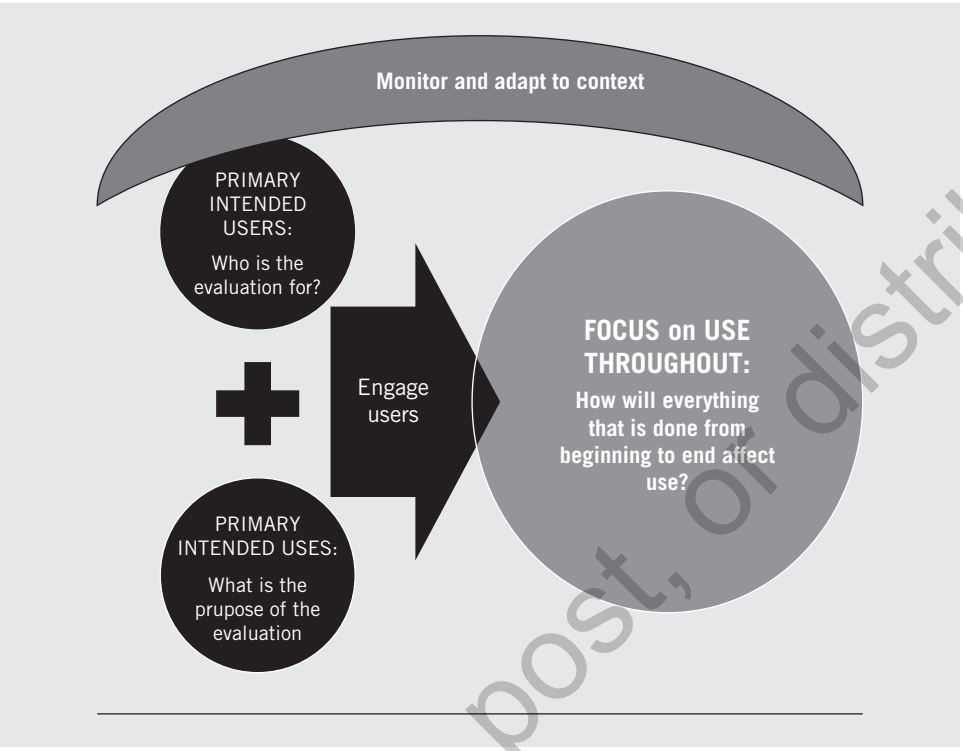
1. The Georgia Council for School Performance's *School and System Performance Reports* served an accountability purpose for policymakers and educators.
2. The Blandin Foundation community leadership program in rural communities worked with staff as the primary intended users of findings aimed at improving the program.
3. The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) used an innovative interview process to support organizational learning.
4. The Māori health and recreation initiative was aimed at supporting innovation through developmental evaluation working with community leaders and program staff from the early design phase through to application and adaptation of findings and lessons.
5. Guidance was developed for evaluators about how to adapt to the global Coronavirus pandemic.

The core U-FE elements running through these exemplars are the focus on intended use by intended users through active-reactive-interactive-adaptive facilitation and attention to use from beginning to the end, where the beginning is facilitating readiness and the ending includes follow-through and engagement to apply findings (as opposed to ending with submission of a final report). We shall examine these MIN SPECS principles in greater depth in later chapters.

1. *Honor the personal factor*: Identify and engage primary intended users.
2. *Be purpose driven*: Focus on priority intended uses.
3. *Facilitate process use*: Be active, reactive, interactive, and adaptive in engaging users in all aspects of the evaluation.
4. *Take a full-journey stance*: Focus on use from beginning to the end.
5. *Adapt to context*: When the context for an evaluation changes, the evaluation may have to change.

Exhibit 2.5 depicts the MIN SPECS graphically.

Exhibit 2.5 MIN SPECS Framework for Utilization-Focused Evaluative Thinking



PRACTICE EXERCISES

1. *Apply MIN SPECS to review published evaluations.* Do an internet search for program evaluations in an area of interest to you, for example, evaluation of health programs or education. Select two evaluations you find to review and see if they meet the utilization-focused evaluation MIN SPEC criteria: (1) clearly identifying primary intended users, (2) clearly identifying primary intended uses, (3) engaging primary intended users in all aspects of the evaluation, (4) evidence of having given attention to use from beginning to the end, and (5) adaptation to context changes. (See Exhibit 2.1) Write a review and critique of what you find.
2. *Apply MIN SPECS to personal and professional skills.* Think about some skill (e.g., public speaking or data visualization), practice (e.g., yoga or meditation), or commitment (e.g., regular exercise or cooking) you engage in consistently. Identify and briefly describe the MIN SPECS involved in that skill, practice, or commitment. Assess your skill level on the MIN SPECS you identify. Identifying MIN SPECS for yourself will help you facilitate MIN SPECS when working with others.
3. *Assess your interpersonal facilitation skills.* Exhibit 2.3 presents some of the facilitation responsibilities of a utilization-focused evaluator. What are your strengths and weaknesses as a facilitator? Write an assessment of your facilitation skills that could be included in a resume.

4. *Use the 80/20 principle* (see p. 20). The 80/20 principle posits that 80% of results flow from 20% of effort. Review the sidebar on the 80/20 principle in this chapter and identify a manifestation in your personal life and in your professional or schoolwork. Discuss the implications of the 80/20 principle for yourself.

GENERAL ONLINE RESOURCES

1. *Utilization Focused Evaluation: A primer for evaluators* (2013), Ricardo Ramírez and Dal Brodhead:

   https://evaluationandcommunicationinpractice.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Ramirez-Brodhead_UFEPrimerEn_2013.pdf?189db0&189db0%20&9023db&9023db

2. *Evaluation and communication decision-making: A practitioner's guide*, Ricardo Ramírez and Dal Brodhead (2017):

   https://evaluationandcommunicationinpractice.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ebookv10.pdf?9023db&9023db

3. *Min Specs: Liberating Structures*:

   https://www.liberatingstructures.com/14-min-specs/

4. Understanding the Pareto Principle (The 80/20 Rule):

   https://betterexplained.com/articles/understanding-the-pareto-principle-the-8020-rule/

5. Adapting evaluation to the global pandemic:

   https://bluemarbleeval.org/latest/evaluation-implications-coronavirus-global-health-pandemic-emergency

U-FE ONLINE RESOURCES

- Min specs as foundational for operating in complex systems, Mark Cabaj.
- Facilitating evaluation using the 80/20 rule, Michael Quinn Patton.

Both available at **edge.sagepub.com/patton5e**