

What Utilization-Focused Evaluation Is and Why It Matters

PART

1

An Evaluation Version of the Creation Story

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

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

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

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

Thus was evaluation born in a blaze of glory.

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

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

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

Thomas Berger
American writer

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



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Premise

Everyday informal evaluation is different from formal systematic evaluation.

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

What Is Program Evaluation?

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

Examples of common evaluation questions include:

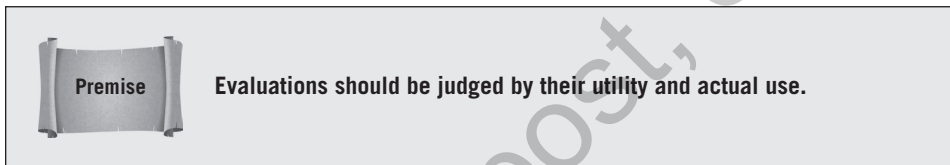
- What is the quality of a program?
- What outcomes are being achieved?
- Are the real needs of people being met?
- What works? What doesn't work? Why?
- How do culture and diversity variations affect what is done and achieved?
- What are the costs and benefits of a program?
- What unintended consequences or negative side effects occur?
- What are key success factors that others can learn from and use?

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

Here are three examples of program evaluations:

- University students complete a survey at the end of a course. That's an evaluation. In 2020 when the coronavirus pandemic led to courses being moved from the classroom to online platforms, evaluations focused on student feedback about how well the transition to virtual teaching went. What worked well? What kinds of problems emerged with virtual platforms and online teaching?
- Programs working with homeless families aim to help them find housing and get needed health and social services. Evaluations track how well these programs work in reducing homelessness and finding adequate housing with support services for families in need.
- When the COVID-19 emerged, public health programs educated the public about wearing masks, social distancing, and limiting social gatherings. Evaluations studied compliance with the recommended behaviors. What factors affected whether people wore masks? What approaches to public health communications worked well? What didn't work?

Utilization-Focused Evaluation



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

What Is Utilization-Focused Evaluation?

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

Why U-FE?

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

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

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

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

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

How Is U-FE Done?

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

Independent Validation of U-FE

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

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

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

Who Is U-FE for?

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

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

Perspective of Seasoned Evaluators

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

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

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

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

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

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

When Is U-FE Done?

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

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

Where Is U-FE Done?

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

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

Questioning as an Inquiry and Design Framework

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

Exhibit 1.1 Parallel Design Questions for Interventions and Evaluations

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

Intended Use by Intended Users

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

A pragmatic utilization-focused evaluation design asks five questions:

1. *Who are the primary intended users of the findings?* Different stakeholders will have different information needs and interests. With inevitable limitations of time and resources, whose evaluation questions get priority? Principle 2 (Part 2 of the book) will explain how to identify primary intended users and the implications of doing so.
2. *What are the intended uses of the findings?* Evaluations can be used to improve programs, make decisions about the future of programs, help programs adapt to new challenges like COVID-19, and many other uses. Principle 3 (Part 2) focuses on working with primary intended users to determine intended uses.
3. *What methods, measures, and design will provide relevant answers to priority evaluation questions?* As noted earlier, U-FE can use any methods, measures, or design. Part 2 will provide myriad examples of methodological options and how to match methods with questions and intended uses.
4. *How can a utilization-focused evaluation process be successfully carried out,* taking into consideration such issues as timely access to primary intended users, time available, evaluators’ skills, and money or other resources required for the evaluation? We will address this question throughout the discussion of the 10 U-FE principles in Part 2.
5. *To what extent and in what ways will the results be practically usable and useful to primary intended users given the intended purpose of the evaluation?* Utilization-focused evaluators engage with primary intended users to stay focused on use. Principles 5 and 6 (Part 2) explore how to do this in depth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Savoring Questions

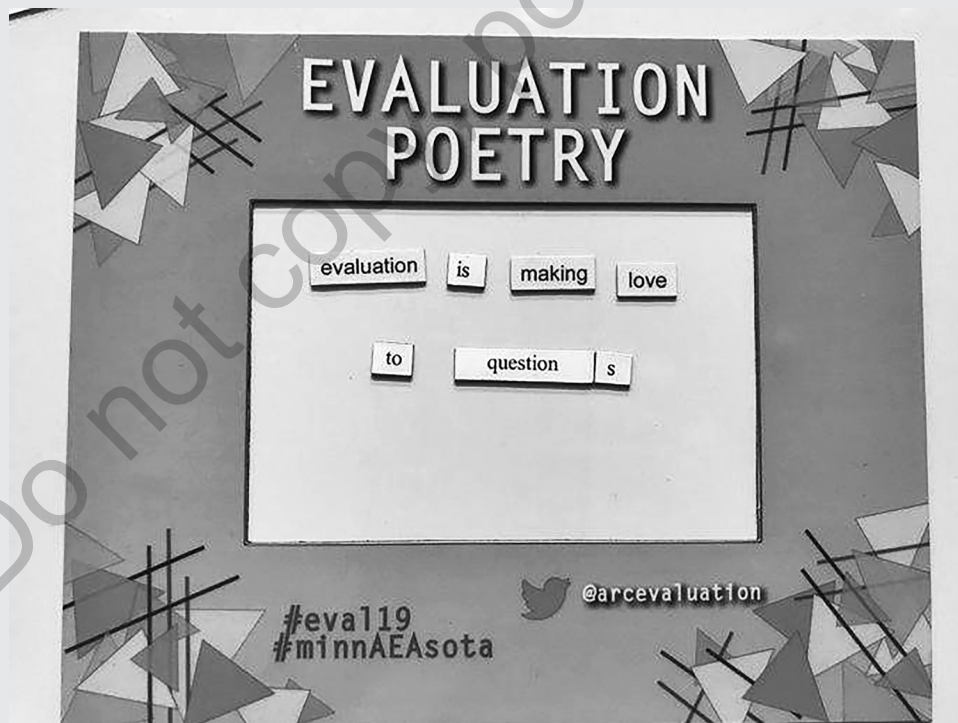
[M]y question is about asking questions. How do we do that in ways that startle people, and ourselves, back into thought? How do we keep the questioning always in play, rather than using it to pry out answers, to test, to expose, to correct? How do we question to draw out meanings and to explore them?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

Elizabeth Minnich (2019, p. 22)

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

- *Questioning is thinking*—thoughtful questioning, serious questioning, authentic, open, and genuinely curious questioning—a way to deepen our thinking is to examine our questioning patterns and develop our questioning skills.
- *Questioning is an antidote to thoughtlessness*. Asking a question leads us to stop and think, at least momentarily, thereby hopefully avoiding precipitous and thoughtless action.
- *Skillful questioning deepens thinking*. A fundamental evaluation skill is learning to ask genuinely open-ended questions, questions that invite thoughtful engagement and responses. (Minnich & Patton, 2019, pp. 310–313)

At the 2019 annual conference of the American Evaluation Association, ARCEvaluation of Menomonie, Wisconsin (now Catalyst), sponsored a poetry context. The winning entry, shown was submitted by Evgenia Valuy.



Alternatives and Barriers to Utilization-Focused Evaluation

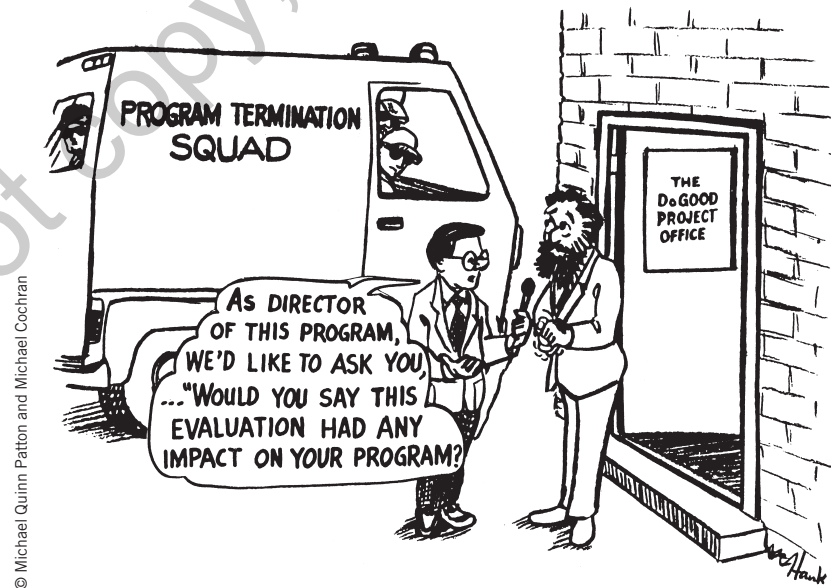
This chapter has made the case for utilization-focused evaluation as a well-established, evidence-based, and practitioner-validated approach to increasing evaluation use. We close this chapter with alternative perspectives and barriers to conducting utilization-focused evaluations.

1. *Focus on research rigor.* The most pervasive alternative is to focus on methodological quality and rigor under the assumption that credible research findings are sufficient for use. The focus on research rigor means that evaluation researchers control the process, determine what questions to ask, and seek to use validated measurements, experimental and quasi-experimental designs, and report statistically significant findings. From a U-FE perspective, this approach risks asking the wrong questions, producing findings that are not immediately relevant to decision-makers, and generating results that nonresearchers don't understand.
2. *Focus on independence.* Another objection to utilization-focused evaluation comes from evaluators who advocate independent judgment as the top priority for evaluation credibility and use. They eschew interpersonal and direct engagement with primary intended users for fear that such interactions will undermine their actual or perceived objectivity. They take a stance of looking in at the program from the outside. From a U-FE perspective, skilled evaluators can interact with primary intended users while maintaining neutrality and credibility, but through those interactions ensure relevance, understanding, and mutual respect.
3. *Focus on evaluator competence and judgment.* This perspective posits that evaluation is the job of evaluators. Let evaluators do their job of rendering judgments of merit, worth, and significance without the distraction of interacting with non-evaluators and nonresearchers. Evaluators are typically trained to conduct methodologically rigorous studies but are not trained and competent to interact effectively with non-researchers. Indeed, those taking this position typically lack the facilitation and interpersonal skills needed to work effectively with non-evaluators and nonresearchers. Here again, however, from a U-FE perspective, the danger is asking questions and conducting studies that evaluators think are important but are not what primary intended users want and need to know. But the point that U-FE requires facilitation and interpersonal skills is well taken and is a major focus of this book. Utilization-focused evaluators do not just conduct evaluations but are also train primary intended users to think evaluatively and understand research findings thereby increasing the capacity for and likelihood of use.
4. *Focus on utility not utilization.* Many evaluators accept the notion that they should engage with stakeholders to identify relevant questions to enhance utility, but once those priority questions have been identified, they want to go about the business of conducting evaluation without further stakeholder involvement for the reasons listed above. From a U-FE perspective, however, identifying the right questions is only the beginning. Bringing primary intended users along throughout the entire process means

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

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

5. *Making evaluation a management function.* Program managers will sometimes argue that they don't need evaluation expertise or professional evaluators to do evaluation. They are reluctant to spend funds on evaluation done by professional evaluators. They posit that determining what's working and not working is a management function. Moreover, many of them have had experience with evaluation researchers who took up precious time and resources without yielding much, if anything, of use. Such negative experiences create resistance to evaluation. The problem is that they don't actually understand what utilization-focused evaluation offers and the long-term financial benefits of spending resources on useful evaluation to enhance effectiveness, impact, and efficiency. Utilization-focused evaluators must convey respect for program leaders and managers while helping them understand the benefits that flow from professionally conducted evaluations focused on use.
6. *Fear of evaluation.* Evaluation can be scary. Evaluators can be scary. Program directors and staff often fear that negative results will be not just embarrassing but could threaten the program's future and their livelihoods. These are real concerns. Building relationships of trust and mutual respect helps overcome those fears replacing them with the positive opportunity to learn and improve. We will be returning to this theme, and how to build such relationships, throughout the book.



Evaluation Nightmare Dreamed by Anxious Director

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

Evaluation Use as a Value Proposition

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

Summary and Conclusion

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

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

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

Exhibit 1.3 Overview of Utilization-Focused Evaluation

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

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

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

PRACTICE EXERCISES

1. *Applying the U-FE inquiry framework.* Use the questions in Exhibit 1.1 to describe a program or project that you know, for example, a class or course you have taken or are taking, or a project or program that you've participated in. Then answer the utilization-focused evaluation questions to design an evaluation relevant to the program design you've generated. Discuss the alignment between program design questions and evaluation design questions.
2. *Using U-FE criteria.* Identify an evaluation conducted and published in an area of your interest. Review the evaluation using utilization-focused evaluation criteria: (1) Are the evaluation questions clearly stated? (2) Is the primary intended use of the evaluation clear? (3) Are the primary intended users of the evaluation identified? (4) Can you tell if the primary intended users were involved in determining the priority evaluation questions and specifying intended uses of the evaluation?

3. *U-FE value proposition.* In your own words, with a specific program evaluation in mind (which you will describe), write out the utilization-focused evaluation value proposition in response to concerns about methodological quality, evaluator independence, and the nuisance of working with non-evaluators and nonresearchers.
4. *Overcoming resistance and fear.* In your own words, with a specific program evaluation in mind (which you will describe), write out the utilization-focused evaluation value proposition in response to program managers saying they can take care of evaluation themselves, program staff who fear evaluation, and treating evaluation as a paperwork compliance function.

GENERAL ONLINE RESOURCES

1. *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* website:
<https://www.utilization-focusedevaluation.org/>
2. *Better Evaluation* website featuring U-FE:
https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/utilization_focused_evaluation and
<https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/search/site/utilization-focused%20evaluation>
3. *CDC Evaluation Framework*:
<https://www.cdc.gov/eval/>
4. *US AID Utilization-Focused Evaluation Playbook*:
<https://usaidlearninglab.org/library/learning-lab-utilization-focused-learning-agenda-playbook-external-version>
5. *Evaluation Use Theory, Practice, and Future Research* (Patton, 2020):
Marvin Alkin and Jean King published three *American Journal of Evaluation* articles on evaluation use over four years, a coherent and comprehensive series

covering the historical development of evaluation use, definitions and factors associated with use and misuse, and theories of evaluation use and influence, concluding with assessment of the first 50 years of use research. They conclude with recommendations for future theory development and research on evaluation. This article draws a different set of conclusions and pathway forward. Where they seek a common universal operational definition of evaluation use, this article proposes treating use as a thick sensitizing concept that invites diversity of context-specific meanings. Where they find evaluation use theory inadequate, this article argues that it is sufficient for its purpose. Where they seek more development of evaluation-specific utilization theory, this article proposes drawing on more established and validated theories from social sciences to explain and illuminate evaluation use as occurring in complex dynamic systems.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1098214020919498>

U-FE ONLINE RESOURCES

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

edge.sagepub.com/patton5e

NOTE

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

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