

Special resource for
*Utilization-Focused
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The Interpretive Dance of Evaluation Cofacilitation

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As a relatively novice evaluator, I've come to really appreciate the value of cofacilitating evaluation. There are many benefits to cofacilitation, as well as some drawbacks. On the one hand, I've found that cofacilitating can boost my confidence, allow me to be more tuned into the needs of the group, and fill in gaps in knowledge and expertise that I may lack. Thinking of evaluation facilitation as a dance, it can be helpful to share the stage with someone who can back me up, help me read the crowd, and catch me when I stumble. On the other hand, it can also slow my ability to react and adapt if my cofacilitator and I are not on the same page. Interpretive dance can get a little messy when dancers are moving to a different rhythm. Below are a few guidelines for making evaluation cofacilitation go well.

Know Yourself

First, choosing a cofacilitator starts with self-awareness. Identifying your own strengths and weaknesses can help you identify a cofacilitator who can fill in some of the gaps. For example, I recently cofacilitated an evaluative thinking workshop with the staff of an environmental nonprofit. My cofacilitator was a member of the staff who had been the internal evaluation champion. She had the subject matter expertise and knew the group well, while I brought evaluation expertise and an outside perspective. She knew the audience, I knew the tango. Together, we were able to guide the group through a reflective practice on embedding evaluative thinking into the organization that would not have been as rich or fruitful if one of us had done it alone.

Another consideration is your own background and cultural competence relative to the group you will be facilitating. As a White woman from the Midwest, I was hired to facilitate an evaluation capacity-building workshop with an organization serving primarily African American youth in the South. It wasn't appropriate for me to facilitate a training on my own, but I was able to work with members of their staff from the community to cofacilitate the training in a way that was culturally competent and brought together their strengths of the community and my evaluation expertise.

Style is also a factor. Sometimes it helps to bring on a cofacilitator with a complimentary style, while other projects may benefit from a contrasting style. My style tends to be more reflective and discussion oriented, which may work well with some groups. But sometimes it helps me to work with someone with a theatre or arts background to make the activities more engaging. A good friend of mine is a professional hip-hop dancer; sometimes she collaborates with other hip-hop artists on her shows, while other times, she works with modern, tap, or even flamenco dancers, depending on what she is trying to achieve with her piece. The same is true of evaluation facilitation.

One way to gauge your style is to get feedback on your facilitation from those who have experienced it. A quick feedback form can provide useful feedback, particularly when the prompts get at strengths and improvements. Another option is to record yourself facilitating a group—with their permission, of course. This can also serve the evaluation itself, as it will provide documentation of any evaluation decisions that are made at the workshop. Dancers frequently watch tapes of their performances in order to improve.

Find a Complementary Cofacilitator

Once you've gotten a handle of your strengths and weaknesses, finding a cofacilitator who can complement you may take some time. As with the example above, sometimes it is a matter of identifying someone with program or subject expertise. In that instance, cofacilitation can also be part of a larger evaluation capacity-building effort within an organization.

Finding a mentor in the evaluation field to supplement your evaluation knowledge is a great way to develop your own facilitation skills. Consider attending an evaluation conference and paying particular attention to facilitation styles at workshops or sessions you attend. If you identify someone who facilitates in a way you'd like to learn, approach them. Perhaps they have a project

on which they could use a cofacilitator. It's also important to budget for cofacilitation if it's something you want to do in a project. If you plan to approach an expert evaluator, be sure you've budgeted enough to cover their time.

Get on the Same Page

Once you've found your cofacilitator, it helps to be on the same page. Cofacilitation can greatly enhance your ability to observe, interpret, and adapt. While one evaluator is facilitating, another can be reading the group and gauging where they are at and what they might need next. But if the facilitators are not communicating well during the facilitation, that can also slow the process of adapting. Cofacilitators may also interpret what they are observing differently. One way to get around these challenges is to practice a process for modeling evaluative thinking in front of the group when one facilitator notices something that they feel might need to change.

Finding Your Groove

Often, dancers will talk about being "in the pocket," which is a term that comes from the jazz world and essentially means that all the players are playing at the same tempo. For dancers, getting in the pocket means that moves transition with the music. But the pocket goes beyond timing. It also means dancers have found the groove of the song, not mechanically moving from move to move, but feeling the music and moving with it. Once you've found your metaphorical cofacilitation pocket, it becomes much easier to move in sync and on beat together. I recently attended a cofacilitated evaluation training where it was clear that the cofacilitators had been working together for quite a while. They were excellent at modeling their evaluative thinking in front of the group together, bringing their different perspectives and backgrounds to enrich the experience. They had found the pocket, which made the experience not only more enriching for me as a participant but also more engaging and enjoyable.

So, whether facilitating on your own or with a partner, may you find your pocket, hit your groove, and move toward more meaningful and useful evaluations.

