

Empowerment evaluation: a stakeholder involvement approach

Program evaluation has long been recognised as a core competency for health promotion practitioners in Australia.¹ Evaluation designs and frameworks, as well as the methodological and technological sophistication, have resulted in significant contributions to policy and strategies.² The future of health promotion in Australia, however, depends on current and future efforts to build evaluation capacity. The NSW Ministry of Health has taken substantive steps in this direction.³

Empowerment evaluation represents another recognised approach to building evaluation capacity. It is practiced throughout the United States and in over 16 countries, ranging from Australia to Israel and Japan to the South Africa. The work in Australia began as early as 2005 focusing on a national school breakfast program.⁴ In addition, the Kinnect Group has provided empowerment evaluation workshops and training, focusing on work with Maori communities.⁵ It has been applied to a wide-variety of settings, including Google,⁶ Hewlett-Packard's \$15 Million Digital Village Initiative,⁷ Stanford University's School of Medicine,^{8,9} Arkansas' tobacco prevention programs,¹⁰ NASA/Jet Propulsion Laboratory's prototype Mars Rover,¹¹ and townships and squatter settlements in South Africa.^{12,13}

The empowerment evaluation approach celebrated its 21st anniversary with a panel of luminaries at the American Evaluation Association's annual national conference, including Alkin, Donaldson, Patton and Scriven.¹⁴⁻¹⁷ They presented both complements and critiques. The most common observation was an empowerment evaluators' ability to listen, engage in the discourse and improve practice. For example:

- While the exchanges were invigorating and overflowing with evaluation wisdom, the most remarkable memory was how David modelled empowerment evaluation's characteristic orientation to openly and honestly engage in self-reflection and critique throughout the debate.¹⁸ David and his colleagues have used this critical feedback to refine and improve their conceptual clarity and methodological specificity [15, p137].
- I have had the privilege over the years of engaging in dialogue with David, Abe and others about various aspects of empowerment evaluation. Certainly, one of the ways in which empowerment evaluation is exemplary is its openness to dialogue and reflective practice [16, 139].
- A powerful and possibly unique (in practice) level of the ethical and pragmatic use of meta-evaluation. I try to match David on this, and

indeed advocate to David on this, by going further than his enthusiasms for the use of the "critical friend" to the use of "critical enemy" but I am less successful. However, I never think of empirical evaluation without reflecting on his inspirational example of treating his critics as friends – and not just friends but helpers – as they indeed are. The connection between us is close because we are both part of that small group who really believe that proposition and act on it [17, p138].

Empowerment evaluation's development and refinement has greatly benefitted from decades of discourse.^{12,14,19-28}

1 | EMPOWERMENT EVALUATION AND THE INTELLECTUAL LANDSCAPE

Empowerment evaluation, collaborative evaluation and participatory evaluation are stakeholder involvement approaches to evaluation. They have become increasingly popular over the last couple of decades. They address concerns about relevance, trust and use in evaluation. They also build capacity and respond to pressing evaluation needs in the global community. Defining and differentiating among stakeholder involvement approaches to evaluation serves to enhance conceptual clarity. It also informs practice, helping evaluators select the most appropriate approach for the task at hand.

One essential way to highlight the differences between approaches and place empowerment evaluation in context is to focus on the role of the evaluator.

- Collaborative evaluators are in charge of the evaluation, but they create an ongoing engagement between evaluators and stakeholders, contributing to a stronger evaluation design, enhanced data collection and analysis, and results that stakeholders understand and use.²⁹
- Participatory evaluators jointly share control of the evaluation. Participatory evaluations range from program staff members and participants participating in the evaluator's agenda to participation in an evaluation that is jointly designed and implemented by the evaluator and program staff members [³⁰ p14].
- Empowerment evaluators view program staff members, program participants and community members as the ones in control of the evaluation. However, the empowerment evaluators serve as critical friends or coaches to help keep the process on track, rigorous, responsive and relevant.³¹

Developmental evaluation is also a stakeholder involvement approach. The evaluator is an internal member of the team, guided by the innovators' values. The approach emphasises learning. However, developmental evaluators' efforts differ from many other evaluation efforts by focusing specifically on the development of innovation in a complex environment (rather than adhering to traditional summative or formative models). Developmental evaluation is best used to frame concepts, test rapid iterations and surface issues.³² All stakeholder involvement approaches have a deep respect for people, including their knowledge, values, beliefs and capacity.

In contrast, there are many exemplary evaluation approaches that are not stakeholder involvement in nature or tone. Realistic evaluation, for example, is an extremely useful and popular approach. Realist evaluators explain an intervention and test it with empirical data. They attempt to identify "what works in which circumstances and for whom?" It is a theory-driven form of evaluation.³³ Pawson and Tilley view the evaluator as "in charge" and the role for stakeholders is extremely limited. From their perspective: "The research act involves "learning" a stakeholder's theories, formalising them and "teaching" them back to that informant who is then in a position to comment upon, clarify and further refine the key ideas." This brief review of similar and different approaches helps place empowerment evaluation in context before providing a detailed description and explanation of the approach.

2 | DEFINITION OF EMPOWERMENT EVALUATION

Empowerment evaluation is the use of evaluation concepts, techniques and findings to foster improvement and self-determination.³⁴ They are conducted by community and program staff members, with the assistance of a professional evaluator. It is an approach that "aims to increase the likelihood that programs will achieve results by increasing the capacity of program stakeholders to plan, implement and evaluate their own programs [28, p28]. Empowerment evaluation can be conducted by small groups, as well as large-scale comprehensive (place-based) community change initiatives. It is mainstreamed as part of the planning and management of the program or organisation. In essence, empowerment evaluation is a tool to help people produce desired outcomes and reach their goals.

Empowerment evaluation in practice is typically applied along two streams. The first is practical and the second being transformative. Practical empowerment evaluation is similar to formative evaluation. It is designed to enhance program performance and productivity. It is still controlled by program staff, participants and community members. However, the focus is on practical problem solving, as well as programmatic improvements and outcomes.

Transformative empowerment evaluation³⁵ highlights the psychological, social and political power of liberation. People learn how to take greater control of their own lives and the resources around

them. The focus in transformative empowerment evaluation is on liberation from predetermined, conventional roles and organisational structures or "ways of doing things." In addition, empowerment is a more explicit and apparent goal.

3 | ESSENTIAL FEATURES

Empowerment evaluation's essential features include a conceptual framework guided by empowerment and process use theory, as well as theories of use and action. Additional features include: the role of the critical friend, 10 principles and specific steps (three-step and 10-step approaches). Combining these features provide an insight into the dynamic and synergistic nature of empowerment evaluation. Each of these elements is described further in a summary format below. A more detailed description of empowerment evaluation is provided in *Empowerment evaluation: knowledge and tools for self-assessment, evaluation capacity building, and accountability* by Fetterman, Kaftarian and Wandersman,¹² and *Collaborative, Participatory, and Empowerment Evaluation: Stakeholder Involvement Approaches* by Fetterman, Rodriguez-Campos, Zukoski and Contributors,³⁶ which was recently reviewed by the *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*.³⁷

4 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Empowerment theory is about gaining control, obtaining resources and understanding one's social environment. Empowerment theory processes contribute to specific outcomes. Linking the processes to outcomes help outline a chain of reasoning. This enables community members to determine the logic behind their actions.

Process use represents much of the rationale underlying empowerment evaluation in practice, because it cultivates ownership by placing the approach in community and staff members' hands. The more that people are engaged in conducting their own evaluations the more likely they are to believe in them, because the evaluation findings are theirs. This makes them more likely to make decisions and take actions based on their evaluation data. This way of thinking is at the heart of process use. A by-product of conducting an empowerment evaluation is that people learn to think evaluatively. This occurs when people conduct their own evaluation with the assistance of an empowerment evaluator. Teaching people to think evaluatively is like teaching them to fish. It can last a lifetime and is what evaluative sustainability is all about – internalising evaluation.

Once the groundwork is laid with empowerment and process use theories, conceptual mechanisms become more meaningful. Theories that enable comparisons between use and action are essential. For example, a *theory of action* is usually the espoused operating theory about how a program or organisation works. The theory of action is often compared with the theory of use. *Theory of use* is the actual program reality, the observable behaviour of

stakeholders.^{38,39} People engaged in empowerment evaluations create a theory of action at one stage and test it against the existing theory of use during a later stage. It helps people determine consistencies and inconsistencies in organisational and community behaviour. A group can identify where and when it is not “walking its talk.” This dialectic in which theories of action and use are routinely juxtaposed in daily practice creates a culture of learning and evaluation.

5 | PRINCIPLES

Empowerment evaluation principles provide a sense of direction and purposefulness throughout an evaluation. Empowerment evaluation is guided by 10 specific principles [23, p1-2, 27-41,42-72]. They include:

1. Improvement – helping people improve program performance
2. Community ownership – facilitates community control
3. Inclusion – promotes involvement, participation and diversity
4. Democratic participation – participation and decision-making are open and fair
5. Social justice – addresses social inequities in society
6. Community knowledge – respects and values community knowledge
7. Evidence-based strategies – respects and uses the knowledge base of scholars (in conjunction with community knowledge)
8. Capacity building – enhances stakeholders’ ability to conduct evaluation and to improve program planning and implementation
9. Organisational learning – data are used to help organisations learn from their experience (building on successes, learning from mistakes and making mid-course corrections)
10. Accountability – focused on outcomes and accountability (within the context of existing policies, standards and measures of accountability); did the program or initiative accomplish its objectives?

Empowerment evaluation principles help evaluators and community members make decisions that are in alignment with the larger purpose, including capacity building and self-determination.

6 | ROLE OF A CRITICAL FRIEND

A critical friend is one of the most important roles played in an empowerment evaluation.⁹ A critical friend is an evaluator who facilitates the process and steps of empowerment evaluation. They believe in the purpose of the program, but provide constructive feedback designed to promote improvement. A critical friend helps to raise many of the difficult questions and, as appropriate, tells the hard truths in a diplomatic fashion. They help to ensure the evaluation remains organised, rigorous and honest.

The role of the critical friend merits attention. This role can be used to leverage and maximise the potential of a group. The empowerment evaluator can differ from many traditional evaluators. Instead of being the “expert” and completely independent, separate and detached from the people they work with, so as not to get “contaminated” or “biased,” the empowerment evaluator works closely with and along-side program staff members and participants. Empowerment evaluators are not in charge. The people they work with are in charge of the direction and execution of the evaluation. Empowerment evaluators are critical friends or coaches. They believe in the merits of a particular type of program but they pose the difficult questions. Some people ask how can an empowerment evaluator be objective and critical if they are friends and in favour of a type of program? The answer is simple: an empowerment evaluator is critical and objective because they want the program to work (or work better). They may be in favour of a general type of program, but do not assume a position about a specific program without data.

Empowerment evaluators are trained evaluators with considerable expertise. They provide it as needed to keep the evaluation systematic, rigorous and on track. They are able to function in this capacity by advising, rather than directing or controlling an evaluation. They provide a structure or set of steps to conduct an evaluation. They recommend, rather than require, specific activities and tools. They listen and rely on the group's knowledge and understanding of their local situation. The critical friend is much like a financial advisor or personal health trainer. Instead of judging and making pronouncements about successes or failure, compliance or non-compliance, the empowerment evaluator serves the group or community in an attempt to help them maximise their potential and unleash their creative and productive energy for a common good. Important attributes of a critical friend include: (i) creating an environment conducive to dialogue and discussion; (ii) providing or requesting data to inform decision-making; (iii) facilitating rather than leading; (iv) being open to ideas and inclusive; and (v) willing to learn.⁸

Empowerment evaluators help cultivate a culture of evidence by asking people why they believe what they believe. They are asked for evidence or documentation at every stage, so that it becomes normal and expected to have data to support one's opinions and views.

7 | STEPS

There are many ways in which to implement an empowerment evaluation. In fact, empowerment evaluation has accumulated a warehouse of useful tools. The three-step⁴⁰ and 10-step Getting-To-Outcomes⁴¹ approaches to empowerment evaluation are the most popular tools in the collection. The three-step is highlighted in this discussion. The three-step approach includes helping a group: (i) establish their mission; (ii) take stock of their current status; and (iii) plan for the future. The popularity of this particular approach is in part a result of its simplicity, effectiveness and transparency.

8 | MISSION

The group comes to a consensus concerning their mission or values. This gives them a shared vision of what's important to them and where they want to go. The empowerment evaluator facilitates this process by asking participants to generate statements that reflect their mission. These phrases are recorded on a poster sheet of paper. These phrases are used to draft a mission statement (crafted by a member of the group and the empowerment evaluator). The draft is circulated among the group. They are asked to "approve" it and/or suggest specific changes in wording as needed. A consensus about the mission statement helps the group think clearly about their self-assessment and plans for the future. It anchors the group in common values (Figure 1).

8.1 | Taking stock

After coming to a consensus about the mission, the group evaluates their efforts. First, the empowerment evaluator helps members of the group generate a list of the most important activities required to accomplish organisational or programmatic goals. The empowerment evaluator gives each participant five dot stickers, and asks the participants to place them by the activities they think are the most important to accomplish programmatic and organisational goals (and thus the most important to evaluate as a group from that point on). Their use of the dots can range from putting one sticker on five different activities to putting all five on one activity if they are concerned that activity will not get enough votes. The top 10 items with the most dots represent the results of the prioritisation part of taking stock. The 10 activities represent the heart of part II of taking stock: rating (Figure 2).

The empowerment evaluator asks participants in the group to rate how well they are doing concerning each of the activities selected, using a 1 (low) to 10 (high) scale. The columns are averaged horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, the averages provide the group with a consolidated view of how well (or poorly) things are going. The empowerment evaluator facilitates a discussion and dialogue about the ratings, asking participants why they gave a certain activity a 3 or 7.

Mission

1. Democratic
2. Transparent
3. Group Values
4. Honor existing mission but go where the energy is in the room
5. Giving Voice and Making Meaning



FIGURE 1 Mission

The dialogue about the ratings is one of the most important parts of the process. In addition to clarifying issues, evidence is used to support viewpoints and "sacred cows" are surfaced and examined during dialogue. Moreover, the process of specifying the reason or evidence for a rating provides the group with a more efficient and focused manner of identifying what needs to be done next, during the planning for the future step of the process. Instead of generating an unwieldy list of strategies and solutions that may or may not be relevant to the issues at hand, the group can focus its energies on the specific concerns and reasons for a low rating that were raised in the dialogue or exchange (Figure 3).

8.2 | Planning for the future

Many evaluations conclude at the taking stock phase. However, taking stock is a baseline and a launching off point for the rest of

Taking Stock (Part I)

- List activities
- Prioritize (dots)



Activities	Prioritization with Dots
Communication	●●●●●
Teaching	●●●●●●●●●●
Funding	●●●●

FIGURE 2 Taking stock: Part I

Taking Stock (Part II)

- Rating 1 (low) – 10 (high)
- Dialogue



Activities	DF	DE	SEC	AVG.
Communic	3	6	3	4
Teaching	4	5	9	6
Funding	5	2	1	2.67
Prod Dev	1	8	4	4.33
Average	3.25	5.25	4.25	4.25

FIGURE 3 Taking stock: Part II

Planning for the Future

- Goals
- Strategies
- Evidence

FIGURE 4 Planning for the future

the empowerment evaluation. After rating and discussing programmatic activities, it is important to do something about the findings. It is time to plan for the future. This step involves generating goals, strategies and credible evidence (to determine if the strategies are being implemented and if they are effective). The goals are directly related to the activities selected in the taking stock step (Figure 4).

Many programs, projects and evaluations fail at this stage for lack of individual and group accountability. Individuals, who spoke eloquently or emotionally about a certain topic should be asked to volunteer to lead specific task forces to respond to identified concerns. They do not have to complete the task by themselves. However, they are responsible for taking the lead concerning a specific group goal and reporting the status of the effort periodically at ongoing management meetings. Similarly, the group should make a commitment to reviewing the status of these new strategies as a group (and be willing to make mid-course corrections if they are not working). Conventional and innovative evaluation tools are used to monitor the strategies. An evaluation dashboard is a particularly useful tool to monitor change or progress over time. It consists of baselines, milestones and goals. For example, a minority tobacco prevention program empowerment evaluation in Arkansas has established:

1. Baselines (the number of people using tobacco in their community)
2. Goals (the number of people they plan to help stop using tobacco by the end of the year)

MISRGO Evaluation Dashboard

Family Youth Enrichment Network
Document Support for Tobacco Free Policies

	1 st Qtr	2 nd Qtr	3 rd Qtr	4 th Qtr
Actual	25	158	275	
Benchmark	25	50	75	100
Goal	100	100	100	100
Baseline	0	0	0	0

Exceeded Annual Goals

FIGURE 5 Comparing baselines with milestones and goals

3. Milestones (the number of people they expect to help stop using tobacco each month or quarter)
4. Actual Performance (the actual number of people they help to stop smoking at each interval throughout the year)

These metrics are used to help a community monitor program implementation efforts and enable program staff and community members to make mid-course corrections and substitute ineffective strategies for potentially more effective ones as needed. These data are also invaluable when the group conducts a second taking stock exercise (3-6 months later) to determine if they are making progress towards their desired goals and objectives. Additional metrics enable community members to compare, for example, their baseline assessments with their milestones, as well as their goals (Figure 5).

9 | CONCLUSION

Empowerment evaluation's essential features include a conceptual framework consisting in part of: empowerment theory, the theory of process use and theories of use and action. In addition, it includes: the role of the critical friend, 10 principles and specific steps. Together they provide guidance for practitioners in the field and help people help themselves.

Moreover, the use of empowerment evaluation has significant implications for health promotion policy and practice. Stakeholders own and inform the evaluation practice. They typically know their programs and communities better than any external party. They also have a vested interest in making them work to improve community health. Their insights and understandings guide the work and as a consequence are more credible than evaluations divorced from local context and meaning. People respond to empowerment evaluation findings and follow recommendations because they are theirs. Empowerment evaluation fosters self-determination: people taking charge of their lives and the resources all around them. The ripple effect of ownership is pride and sustainability. A renewed sense of purpose and a desire for a better/healthier life for our children and ourselves helps all of us "keep our eyes on the prize."

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