

Evaluation Advisory Groups: Considerations for Design and Management

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Abstract: *An evaluation advisory group can be a vital resource, particularly for evaluations of collaboration-driven initiatives, but only if we effectively design the groups and engage their members. We discuss evaluation advisory groups using four themes: purposes, structures, processes, and pitfalls. Insights from a review and synthesis of the evaluation advisory group literature are integrated and illustrated with our own real-world experiences with evaluation advisory groups on a national and state/provincial scale, and in university and health system settings.*

Keywords: *advisory groups, advisory groups collaboration, collaboration evaluation, evaluation advisory*

Résumé : *Un groupe consultatif d'évaluation peut être une ressource vitale, en particulier pour les évaluations d'initiatives axées sur la collaboration, mais seulement si nous appliquons les compétences et les connaissances nécessaires à leur utilisation efficace. Dans cet article, nous discuterons les fondements des groupes consultatifs d'évaluation sur quatre thèmes: les buts, les structures, les processus et les pièges. Nous discuterons des idées tirées d'un examen et d'une synthèse de la littérature des groupes consultatifs d'évaluation et illustrerons avec nos propres expériences du monde réel de l'élaboration et de la mise en œuvre de groupes consultatifs d'évaluation à l'échelle nationale et à l'échelle de l'État, dans un milieu universitaire et au sein du système de santé.*

Mots clés : *groupes consultatifs, collaboration entre les groupes consultatifs, évaluation collaborative, consultation en évaluation*

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Evaluation advisory groups (EAG) hold tremendous potential for optimizing evaluations and their impact, and particularly for the utilization of results. Presentations on this topic by the authors to fellow evaluators have identified that, increasingly, funding bodies are requiring advisory groups as part of evaluations.

[Mattessich \(2012\)](#) defines evaluation advisory groups as a group of individuals, invited by the evaluator or by the evaluator's client, who jointly offer guidance ... on at least one of the following: evaluation design, data-collection instruments and procedures, data analysis and interpretation, and the content and formats for reporting of evaluation results. [Baizerman et al. \(2012\)](#) define EAG as an intentionally organized and managed formal structure composed of competent and willing individual members who have agreed to offer useful advice on how to create, conduct, and use one or more evaluation studies. Whether known as an advisory group, committee, team, or panel, in our experience, realizing the EAG's potential requires evaluators' attention to four areas:

- establishing a sense of purpose that is aligned with the context, clearly articulated, and owned by its members;
- an EAG design, structure, and composition that reflect an agreed upon purpose and address key factors that influence the effectiveness of evaluation and utilization;
- understanding and managing collaborative processes, building capacity, and awareness of power relations; and
- understanding issues and limitations, and avoiding pitfalls.

In this article, we offer starting points to consider in each of these four areas, with the goal of co-creating an advisory team that optimizes the evaluation and its impact. This article draws from literature and authors' experience.

We performed an extensive literature review using Google Scholar, PubMed, and PsychInfo databases. Search terms included Evaluation Advisory Group, Evaluation Consultation Group, and Evaluation Advisory Committee. We reviewed the articles' abstracts to identify which were relevant, and found additional articles by reviewing the citations of the relevant articles. Twenty four articles reported on experiences using EAGs. Readers should note that, while the articles included in the literature review are not all cited in this article, they are included in the supplement to this article.

The second data source was the authors' reflections on experiences in forming, facilitating, integrating, and learning with EAGs in our evaluation work. Our experiences include multiple simultaneous EAGs to plan and perform a national multi-site evaluation of professional training centers, plan and implement programs in health-care settings, and developing and evaluating innovations in health and social services. As we offer our reflections from practice and gleanings from literature as a base to build on, we also recognize that evaluators are limited by mandate and resources available to co-create influential EAG designs and development.

SENSE OF PURPOSE: CLEAR, ALIGNED, OWNED

We believe that to optimize the evaluation and its utilization and impact, EAGs need a clear sense of purpose that aligns with the context and is strongly owned by members. We have found that investing time in establishing this foundation eases design decisions, including decisions about composition, structure, member roles and expectations, capacity building, accountability, and management. A clear understanding of the evaluation context, includes factors that could influence the group, quality of the evaluation, and the likelihood of utilization is essential. We found it helpful to start with brainstorming ideas with the client and a few trusted others, as possible. These can then be developed further with all EAG members so they are more likely to be understood and “owned” and considered.

We believe having the EAG identify the purpose of the group early on is essential for the success of the group. Our analysis of the literature uncovered 10 purposes, as identified by at least two articles:

- improve evaluation appropriateness—for example, attending to ethical, cultural, and political sensitivities (Baizerman et al., 2012; CDC, 2011; Johnston-Goodstar, 2012);
- enhance technical/methodological quality—particularly where external methodological expertise would add value (Baizerman et al., 2012; Baizerman & VeLure Roholt, 2012; CDC, 2011);
- validate evaluation design, tools, processes, and results (CDC, 2011; Fetterman et al., 2018; Johnston-Goodstar, 2012);
- facilitate navigation and logistics—help to open otherwise closed doors, point to easier ways (Cohen, 2012; VeLure Roholt & Baizerman, 2012a);
- facilitate data access/collection—particularly with complex interventions, dynamic contexts, and special populations (e.g., children, vulnerable, etc.) (CDC, 2011; Cohen, 2012; VeLure Roholt, 2012);
- champion and represent—act as ambassadors to improve interactions and overcome tensions among diverse stakeholders and/or sectors (Fetterman et al., 2018);
- provide a way for individuals to speak to their organizations—the group can speak to issues which individuals do not have permission to speak (Fetterman et al., 2018, Johnston-Goodstar, 2012);
- generate conclusions and recommendations—ones that are appropriate, helpful, and/or actionable based on members’ understanding of their organizations and the larger context (CDC, 2011; Fetterman et al., 2018; Johnston-Goodstar, 2012);
- facilitate utilization—by personally representing implications and recommendations as insiders, and helping to overcome internal and inter-organizational barriers to decisions for positive change (Baizerman et al., 2012; Baizerman & VeLure Roholt, 2012; Johnston-Goodstar, 2012); and
- facilitate evaluation capacity building—in general as well as in specific skill areas and/or in knowledge mobilization and utilization (CDC, 2011; Cohen, 2012; Fetterman et al., 2018).

COMPOSITION

As evaluators, we were the key facilitators of our EAGs, but may or may not have been involved in establishing the criteria for selecting EAG members. Membership should depend on the purpose of the evaluation as well as the EAG and could include program staff, organizational leaders, funders, collaborators, key decision makers, policy experts, and advocacy groups. With very few exceptions, the beneficiaries – clients and members of the population impacted by the program or policy or evaluation – also deserve a seat at the table and a voice in decisions. The evaluation may benefit from technical advisors, political advisors and others who can advise on how best to design and implement the evaluation, and promote its use (VeLure Roholt & Baizerman, 2012b). Compton & Baizerman (2012) suggest that the main function of an EAG is to give a voice to those who contribute to the evaluation. These groups can be classified into three categories: users of the evaluation, technical experts, and contextual experts. Sometimes a single EAG meets multiple needs. For example, a youth advisory committee would potentially include youths as stakeholders, intended beneficiaries, and topic experts (Richards-Schuster, 2012). When the evaluator is less familiar with the evaluand, EAG members can provide the contextual knowledge needed to determine the purpose and perform an impactful evaluation.

There is no consensus in the literature on the right number of people to include in an EAG. Cohen (2012) recommends five to seven members; Richards-Schuster (2012) created a youth advisory group with 12 members; CDC (2011) created an EAG with 32 members. Small EAGs, coupled with good facilitation, can help ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute to the dialogue. An EAG that is too small may have trouble making decisions when a member is absent and might lack representation from important stakeholders.

In our experience, the number of members depends on the group's purpose and contextual factors. If the program has multiple funders, then inviting them all may be appropriate. If the EAG is for evaluation expertise, then having three to four experts in the topic or methodology is appropriate.

Recruitment is a critical process, but can be time-consuming (Cohen, 2012). Options to identify EAG members include gathering recommendations from partners, community directories, and newspaper articles related to the topic, program, or organization. When recruiting EAG members, the evaluator must be aware of diverse perspectives so these are represented (Cohen, 2012). The evaluator can ask EAG members to identify who else needs to be at the table. There may be a need for the evaluator and client to screen potential members for fit, and to prepare them so they can contribute effectively (Baizerman et al., 2014; VeLure Roholt & Baizerman, 2012a, 2012b).

STRUCTURE

Determining the structure of an EAG begins with understanding the different possible roles that EAG members can take (CDC, 2011). Depending on the

number of people in the EAG and the level of formality required, defining clear roles for the chair, facilitator, coordinator, and/or notetaker can be important (McLean et al. (2017)). The evaluator may play the role of the EAG chair, coordinator, evaluation expert, or facilitator. If there is a lack of time, funding, or people, the evaluator could play any of several roles. The role of the facilitator is critical to the EAG's functioning and outcomes and deserves some additional comments.

FACILITATION

The facilitator should assist the chair in keeping the EAG following the agenda and ensuring that the goals of the meetings are met. They should defuse group conflict, build consensus, and keep members engaged. Without a skilled facilitator, an EAG can contribute to existing tensions among stakeholder groups and jeopardize the evaluation. For this reason, the evaluator should consider using an external facilitator that is not a stakeholder. VeLure Roholt & Baizerman (2012b) and Compton & Baizerman (2012) recommend that the EAG facilitator be someone other than the evaluator because there may be tensions between the facilitator and evaluator roles. If the evaluator needs to facilitate the EAG, then they need to pay attention to these tensions. Resource limits may require individuals to perform multiple roles. Regardless, the EAG must be organized and facilitated, the purpose and roles agreed to by all members, and continual effective communication maintained (VeLure Roholt & Baizerman, 2012a).

PROCESSES AND POWER

If we invite people to be part of an EAG, it implies that there is a participatory element to the evaluation. There are many ways to think about participation in evaluation, including participatory (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003), collaborative (Cousins & Whitmore 1998), and empowerment (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005) approaches. We must consider the level of engagement of the members of the EAG, the processes involved, the need for capacity building, and the power and inclusion that are part of any participatory endeavor. Shulha et al. (2015) suggested principles to guide a collaborative process:

1. clarify the motivation for collaboration;
2. foster meaningful relationships;
3. develop a shared understanding of the program;
4. promote appropriate participatory processes;
5. monitor and respond to resource availability;
6. monitor evaluation progress and quality;
7. promote evaluative thinking; and
8. follow through to realize use.

The first principle, clarifying the motivation for collaboration, addresses both the context and purpose of the evaluation. At this point, levels of engagement by the

EAG can be clarified. Will the process be evaluator-driven? How involved will the EAG be in decisions and processes concerning the evaluation? EAGs can include people with varying levels of power and authority over the program, including the program's funding, and program decisions. When this occurs, the evaluator could consider using multiple EAGs and whether this might alleviate or exacerbate tensions related to power differences. In our experience, if multiple EAGs are not appropriate, the EAG coordinator and facilitator should develop ground rules, ensure the space is safe for people to speak up, and use facilitation skills to navigate the power dynamics. [Shulha et al. \(2015\)](#) suggest that power dynamics of decision making can be addressed through the principle of appropriate participatory processes. This principle lends itself to creating spaces for all voices to be heard.

ISSUES AND LIMITATIONS OF EAGs

There are issues and limitations that evaluators working with EAGs experience. Not all evaluators are comfortable working in a collaborative process due to a lack of skill in facilitation, negotiation, conflict resolution, or capacity building, or simply from personal preference. Time can be another limitation. Participatory processes require time for discussion and reflection, and may very well require capacity building. The capacity-building process with group members may change the evaluation approach, design, and even the evaluation questions themselves. Even the time to determine the purpose when working with large groups, such as regional departments of a government agency, or universities, takes time. In our experience, appropriate representation or turnover is a concern. Decision makers may be at the table at the start, but as time goes on they may have other priorities or lose interest, so other staff should be appointed with varying leadership levels in the organization. Stakeholders may change positions; this requires a continuous orientation cycle, slowing the process. When there are competing agendas, there needs to be an environment that is open and honest ([Cohen, 2012](#)).

PITFALLS

Another thread through the EAG literature concerns ways in which an EAG might go off track. Three important pitfalls are scope creep, low levels of participation, and misdirection. This section touches on each in turn and closes with points of advice.

Well-meaning EAGs sometimes advocate for activities that are out of scope for the evaluation, which can drain resources from other important tasks. Examples include a desire to conduct large-scale research despite a small budget, or to over-extend review processes for data collection instruments ([Mattessich, 2012](#)).³ Define scope early. Establishing decision-making rules up front can help prevent delays in critical evaluation tasks. Budgeting time and resources to support EAG member participation throughout the evaluation can help participation stay focused and productive. It may be necessary to provide active facilitation of any technical activities the EAG is asked to assist with, such as instrument

development, and to enable members to provide advice in a variety of ways for flexibility (CDC, 2011; Mattessich, 2012).

It is important to remember, however, that an overemphasis on efficiency can inhibit the meaningful engagement of the group. For example, too much focus on speed or productivity in meetings can be alienating or suppress dissent. This can be the case especially if there are unaddressed power imbalances or if a focus on task efficiency conflicts with the cultural norms of members (Cohen, 2012). Similarly, filling a meeting with procedural tasks intended to move a project forward can leave members with too little time or energy to engage critically in topics of substance. This can be demoralizing for EAG members and can even lead to a perception that their involvement is symbolic, which can weaken relationships with stakeholders (Cohen, 2012).

Another challenge can occur when EAG members offer ambiguous advice. An expert's tacit knowledge can be difficult to explain in operational terms or across cultures, leaving evaluators open to error (Baizerman et al., 2012). Advice can also sometimes be technically correct but not feasible. Other EAG members may recognize flawed advice and not alert the evaluator; this is less likely when the processes for running the EAG encourage open discussion, awareness of power differentials, and capacity for giving and receiving critique.

Some ways to help EAGs avoid pitfalls are as follows:

1. Conduct a premortem to identify likely challenges in advance.
2. Ask members for feedback on the evaluation process and the EAG processes along the way.
3. Watch for indicators of process failure:
 - highly formalized and agenda-focused meetings;
 - very limited time for open discussion;
 - EAG member advice is respectfully recorded, but not actioned;
 - members are asked to review highly polished reports (not drafts) or to give input under very short timelines;
 - sudden silence or discomfort in meetings, which may signal unspoken disagreement;
 - no disagreement being voiced, even after a few EAG meetings;
 - irregular attendance, or members sending proxies;

If you see indicators of process failure, seek informal, one-on-one advice from members

4. Reflect with your team.
5. Advocate for resources and/or make process changes as needed to get back on track.

CONCLUSIONS

EAGs can help to improve evaluations and knowledge utilization in many ways, including enhancing stakeholder engagement and collaboration, evaluation

methodology, data gathering, analysis, and integrating planning for knowledge utilization. Special care should be given to selecting members, establishing a shared sense of purpose, facilitating to ensure group effectiveness and and striving for efficient, satisfying use of members' time. Before an evaluator forms an EAG, s/he should consider the purpose and context of the EAG, EAG interaction and decision-making processes, power dynamics, composition, structure, facilitation, and practices to monitor and improve effectiveness. At the end of the project and evaluation, the consensus should be that the EAG added significant value to the evaluation and knowledge utilization.

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