When Bad Things Happen to Good Evaluators

Dealing with the UNEXPECTED in Program Evaluation
“It seems to me the main thing you learn from a failure is that it’s entirely possible you will have another failure.”

-Nora Ephron
Hoped-for outcomes

• Understand the limits of evaluation practice and what an evaluator can and cannot expect to control
• Identify several potential challenges in evaluation and possible responses
• Apply potential responses to case examples
Beginning with your input. . .

What are worst case scenarios you can imagine for an evaluation study you are involved in?
WHAT AN EVALUATOR CAN AND CANNOT EXPECT TO CONTROL

Understanding the limits of evaluation practice
What power do evaluators have?

• As the moon reflects the sun, an evaluator reflects the power of another
• Our so-called power is bounded, typically a function of our relationships with those who hold positional authority
  • Internal evaluators
  • External evaluators
Why is the **unexpected** a problem?

- People prefer easy answers, explicit directives to solve problematic issues: *If this occurs, then respond in this way*
- But, every case is **unique** (context, individual players, the specific evaluation, and even the evaluators)
- There are no lock-step, one-size-fits-all solutions
What’s to be done?

The best defense is a good offense
POTENTIAL CHALLENGES IN EVALUATION

Why are there so many?
Categories of potential issues/woes

• Environmental issues
• Client/user issues
• Evaluation process or results issues
• Evaluator issues

Categorize the scenarios you raised
Environmental issues

• External environment
  • “Big picture”
  • Program environment

• Internal program environment
  • Highly visible program
  • Underfunded program
  • Dysfunctional program
Client/user issues (1/2)

- Internal leadership
  - Key leaders not interested
  - Impossible requests
- Internal support for the evaluation
  - General lack of support
  - Political issues affecting the study
Client/user issues (2/2)

• Individual responses to the process
  • Those who are threatened
  • Culturally different
  • Gatekeepers
Evaluation process/results issues

• Implementation problems
  • Limited resources
  • Unrealistic timelines

• Technical problems
  • Mistakes
  • Things beyond your control
Evaluator issues

- Personal problems
- Professional skills
- Interpersonal issues
So what can you do to address the unexpected?
From Interactive Evaluation Practice

PRINCIPLES FOR HANDLING THE UNEXPECTED
Seven IEP principles

1. Get personal.
2. Structure interaction.
3. Examine context.
4. Consider politics.
5. Expect conflict.
6. Respect culture.
7. Tale time.
## Principles for handling the unexpected

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<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>What to Do</th>
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| **1. Get personal.** | • Anticipate the unique and unexpected issues that individuals may bring to any evaluation context  
• Know your clients and primary intended uses well to be able to respond to surprises in productive ways  
• Analyze key individuals in the evaluation process to better understand diverse perspectives and what those might mean for the evaluation study.  
• Identify people in the program/organization who can help problem solve. |
| **2. Structure interaction.** | • Acknowledge the unexpected when it occurs and structure interactions aimed at problem solving.  
• Realize that handling the unexpected often requires high-quality, face-to-face interactions.  
• Consider that both internal and external evaluators can structure interaction that build on the inherent strengths of their respective roles. |
### Principles for handling the unexpected

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<td><strong>3. Examine context.</strong></td>
<td>• Remember that evaluators can never know every detail about an evaluation context, even with the most thorough planning.</td>
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<td>• When things go wrong, consider aspects of the evaluation context that might be contributing to the problem.</td>
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<td><strong>4. Consider politics.</strong></td>
<td>• Accept the fact that political factors may negatively affect an evaluation, or even bring it to an abrupt halt.</td>
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<td>• Remember the clout factor in handling the unexpected; people who have power in the program/organization may be able to get the evaluation back on track.</td>
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<td>• Consider internal and external evaluator roles; either may assist or limit an evaluator’s success in tackling unexpected issues.</td>
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<td>5. Expect conflict</td>
<td>- Know that the unexpected and conflict often go hand in hand; be ready to apply conflict skills.</td>
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<td>- Take advantage of the benefits that conflict can bring; positive change often evolves from problematic situations.</td>
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<td>6. Respect culture</td>
<td>- When something goes wrong, consider aspects of culture that may be involved in the situation.</td>
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<td>- Be alert to people who may potentially insult the cultural identities of diverse others; be ready to confront them.</td>
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<td>- Acknowledge cultural insensitivities that unintentionally occur and apologize; work to make the situation right.</td>
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<td>7. Take time.</td>
<td>• Make time to recognize and address the unexpected; to ignore this is to risk the success of the evaluation.</td>
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<td>• Acknowledge the unique opportunities that unexpected problems may bring if you take the time to leverage them for change.</td>
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How does this work in practice?

APPLYING POTENTIAL RESPONSES
Two scenarios

• Internal evaluator in a State Department of Natural Resources
• External evaluation team facing an interpersonal conflict
For the scenario you receive

• Read it and identify the unexpected concerns
• Discuss what could be done to handle the situation
• Identify what you believe to be a good response with a rationale for why
Outcomes for this session?

• Understand the limits of evaluation practice and what an evaluator can and cannot expect to control
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Thank you!

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