

Principles-focussed evaluation

Introduction to principles-focussed evaluation

The content of this fact sheet stemmed from a pre-conference workshop facilitated by Michael Quinn Patton at the 2018 Australasian Evaluation Society International Evaluation Conference. It is designed to provide the reader with an introduction to principles-focussed evaluation and how it could be used in the Queensland context. Readers are encouraged to access the additional resources (see end of fact sheet) for further information.

1. What is principles-focussed evaluation?

The landscape of evaluation is transforming, as a range of non-traditional approaches and new directions shift evaluation practice.

In the past, the focus was on evaluating discrete programs, projects and initiatives. Evaluation today is shifting focus to complex/dynamic interventions, policy and systems change, and evaluation of strategy, mission fulfilment, and now, principles.

Principles-focussed evaluation is an emerging area of evaluation practice, conceptualised by Michael Quinn Patton. It is different from other forms of evaluation in that it's a new evaluand—the unit of analysis is 'principles', as opposed to programs, policies or projects.

While many organisations and initiatives are driven or underpinned by principles, not all organisations follow their operating principles while conducting business as usual.

A principle directs attention to action, which should produce results.

It follows that valuing principles drives action and outcomes. Thus, a robust set of principles, if followed, should produce results and take the organisation where it needs to go.

Patton draws inspiration from principles-based social movements which emerge from common concerns, and are characterised by collective action driven by a desire for change (for example, righting a wrong).

Examples are Nelson Mandela's Principles of Truth and Reconciliation, Martin Luther King Jr.'s Nonviolent Resistance, and Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

Queensland's *Our Way* strategy is a local example of a principles-focussed, transformative social movement which could potentially be evaluated using a principles-focussed approach.

2. What's in a principle?

Principles are propositions or beliefs that inform and guide choices and decisions. Patton differentiates between **effectiveness** principles and **ethical** principles.

Effectiveness principles:

Patton defines effectiveness principles as:

Statements that provide guidance about how to think or behave toward some desired result (either explicit or implicit) based on norms, beliefs, experience, and knowledge.

Effectiveness principles are commonly used throughout the world, and come in many shapes and sizes. In certain cases, it may be appropriate to formulate an overarching principle, under which a set of operating principles are situated.

Principles can also (but do not have to) be sequential. That is, where principles are interconnected, it is sometimes the case that one (or more) principles must be achieved before another can be realised (for example, Mandela's principles of 'speak the truth to each other', 'forgiveness', and 'reconciliation' have a distinct order of operation).

Not surprisingly, this sequencing has implications for principles-focussed evaluation (that is, it would require consideration when assessing adherence and results).

Ethical principles:

Patton describes ethical principles as:

Normative statements that provide guidance about what is right

Organisations may be guided by both ethical principles and effectiveness principles.

However, an evaluation of ethical principles would differ from that of effectiveness principles in that the former is only concerned with adherence, while the latter would focus more broadly on the implications of these principles on operations and performance.



Principles-focussed evaluation

Are principles just rules?

Patton placed an emphasis on distinguishing principles from rules. An assessment of rules would be primarily focussed on compliance. However principles-focussed evaluation is less specific, highly contextual and involves analysis of meaningfulness, relevance, adherence and results generated from following the principles. The distinction between the two concepts is illustrated below.

Topic	Rule	Principle
Health	Do 30 minutes of aerobic exercise per day	Exercise regularly at a level that supports health and is sustainable given your health, lifestyle, age and capacity.
Culinary arts	Add ½ teaspoon of salt to the mix	Season to taste
Business	Final report must be delivered on specified date	Target delivery of findings should be timely and useful for informing decisions and learning opportunities. Situational developments may affect timeliness.

The language of principles is important, not least to facilitating evaluation. The way that principles are articulated has implications. Principles should:

- be clearly defined
- ideally be limited in number
- avoid conflict with other principles
- be tightly-framed to reduce confusion or ambiguity.

Where there is uncertainty in the meaning of the principles, it reduces the likelihood of adherence. This is likely to have downstream effects on the results.

This is particularly important where diverse stakeholders share a set of principles, such as in collective impact initiatives, whereby a range of disparate projects, programs and efforts are connected through a set of principles.

Tensions or conflicts may arise within a set of principles, which isn't uncommon. However, it is important to work through conflicts to arrive at a cohesive set of principles that *each* have meaning and value, can be adhered to, and produce results.

3. Evaluating effectiveness principles

Shaping effectiveness principles into *evaluable* principles can be a challenge, though when it is done well, can be rewarding. First and foremost, it is critical to use active language. Since effectiveness principles are a 'call to action', it is important that they are framed using imperative grammar (for example, *take action, provide assistance, reduce mortality*, etc.).

Gerund verb forms (that is, *taking, providing*) should be avoided because they represent weaker language which is consequently more difficult to evaluate. It is important to refrain from developing principles that contain superfluous or vague terminology, or that describe results (for example, "Strong shared purpose responds to a changing environment").

Patton argues that principles are essentially hypotheses until evaluated within some context to determine their relative meaningfulness, truth, feasibility, and utility for those attempting to follow them.

The key objective of principles-focussed evaluation is to treat principles as though they have meaning, will be enacted, and provide results. In effect, principles become business as usual (as opposed to being 'wallpaper').

Evaluation criteria for effectiveness principles are:

1. Meaningfulness (Are the principles meaningful?)
2. Adherence (If meaningful, have they been adhered to?)
3. Results (If adhered to, what are the results from principles-based interventions?)

Evaluating adherence to and results of a set of principles can be done through traditional evaluation approaches (that is, 'fidelity' and 'outcomes' evaluation, respectively). However, evaluating meaningfulness isn't as straight-forward.

To assist, Patton has developed the GUIDE Framework¹ (see Figure 1). For each principle, the GUIDE Framework can be applied to consider the extent to which the principle is:

- **Guiding** (Is it directional, and does it inform priorities? If we don't do it, what will happen?)
- **Useful** (Does it point to the results we aim to achieve? Does this principle support decision making?)
- **Inspiring** (Does this inspire a sense of purpose?)
- **Developmental** (Does this principle fit this context?)
- **Evaluable** (Is it clear enough that we can track results?).

Patton identifies a distinction between this approach and the logic model approach being the connection between process and outcomes. In a program logic, process and outcomes tend to be separated. However, in principles-focussed evaluation, process and outcomes are connected—the journey is as important as the destination.

¹ This can be likened to SMART goals, commonly in use throughout the world (that is, Specific, Meaningful, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely).



Principles-focussed evaluation

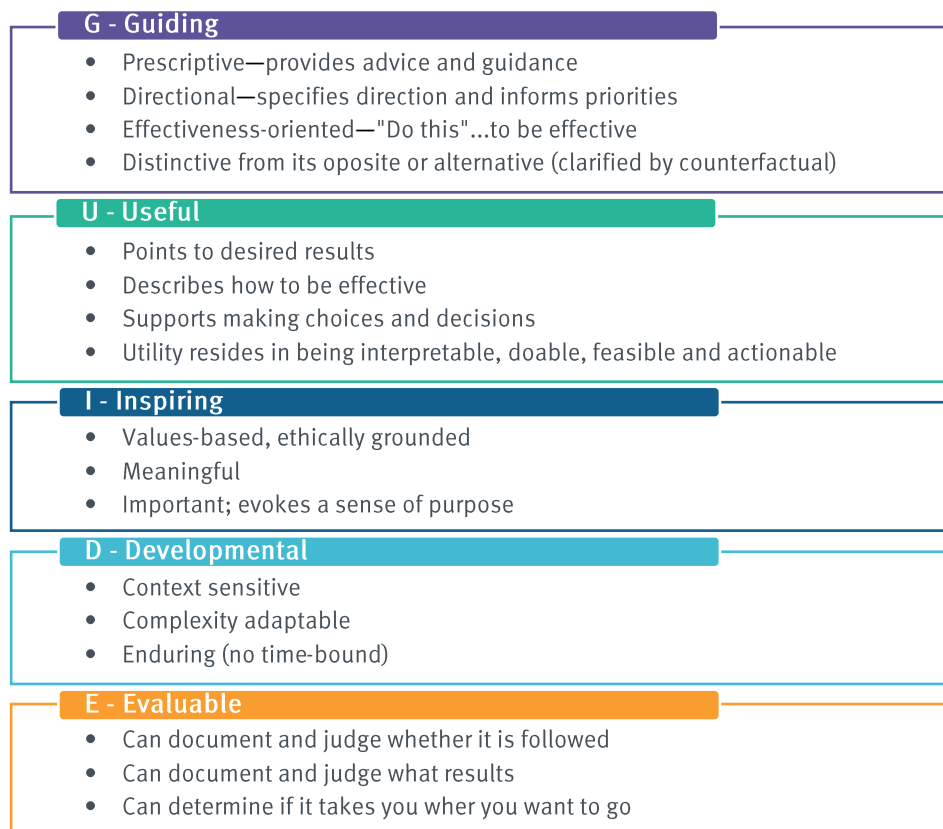


Figure 1: GUIDE Framework (Patton, 2018)

Traditional evaluation methods such as surveys and interviews can be used to collect the data required to answer the evaluation questions relating to meaningfulness, adherence and results. As with any form of evaluation, understanding stakeholders' perspectives and priorities is fundamental to informing the evaluation process, interpreting the data and increasing the utilisation of evaluation findings.

For most evaluations, a key evaluation question is "How well is the program/initiative being delivered?" However, a key question for principles-focussed evaluation would be "To what extent are the program/organisational principles evident in the design and delivery?" The results can be analysed using a rubric as a rating scale (see Table on the next page).

The GUIDE Framework, coupled with traditional evaluation approaches/methods, offers a new way of conducting evaluations. This isn't intended to replace traditional evaluation, but in time and with increased use, it may complement existing evaluation approaches and methods.

4. Practical application

Principles-focussed evaluation can be used by any organisation guided by a set of effectiveness principles. In the absence of effectiveness principles, the GUIDE Framework can assist with developing a meaningful and evaluable set.

Whether developing from scratch or refining an existing set of effectiveness principles, the first step is gather key stakeholders and engage in critical and evaluative thought about the meaning of the words embodied in the effectiveness principles. Early discussions should revolve around language.

Questions to ponder might include: "These words mean this to me, what do they mean to you? Are they the right words, or are there more appropriate words to describe our work? Do these words adequately capture our mission and inspire a sense of purpose?"

Principles-focussed evaluation

Rating	Description
Highly developed	Guiding principles fundamentally underpins design and delivery processes for the project
Consolidating	Guiding principles are (for the most part) strongly evident in design and delivery processes for the project
Developing	Guiding principles are somewhat evident in the design and delivery processes for the project
Not yet evident	Guiding principles are not clearly evident in the design and delivery processes for the project

The discussion should then progress from language to action. It is important to question the decisions that need to be made, the actions and considerations required, and the intended direction and purpose of the organisation to deliver in accordance with these principles.

Questions might include: “How does this principle affect decisions? Can you give me an example? What are the implications? If we didn’t take this course of action, what would happen?”

A critical discussion of this nature should help to clarify the language contained within, and action that will flow from, the effectiveness principles. Fortuitously, this also facilitates evaluation.

Principles-driven organisations with minimal evaluation capability or capacity may find value in this approach due to its relative simplicity and accessibility. It eliminates much of the evaluation language that non-practitioners may find confusing (for example, program logic, theory of change, etc.).

5. Final thoughts

The purpose of principles-focussed evaluation is to elevate principles to a point of informing action and decisions. Many organisations cite a set of principles, but do not ‘live and breathe’ them in practice. The role of evaluators in this context is to make principles useful, evaluable, inspiring, and guiding.

Principles-focussed evaluation is appropriate across all scales, but may be particularly useful for smaller non-government organisations with limited resources to better understand how, if followed, their guiding principles might be driving results.

Patton urges participants to match their evaluation approach, regardless of whether it is principles-focussed or not, to the program/initiative’s approach.

For example, if an organisation’s guiding principles relate to ‘Participation’, the evaluator should take a participatory or democratic approach to the evaluation (both in its design and implementation). The evaluator should think systematically about the inter-relationship between the parts of the evaluation (that is, concepts, methods, etc.) for consistency of approach.

To illustrate this point, Patton introduced the concept of ‘two-eyed seeing’, a guiding principle of the Mi’kmaw First Nations people of Canada.

Two-eyed seeing refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Westerns knowledges and ways of knowing... and learning to use both these eyes together, for the benefit of all.

“Two-eyed seeing is the gift of multiple perspectives treasured by many Aboriginal peoples. We believe it is the requisite Guiding Principle for the new consciousness needed to enable the Integrative Science work, as well as other integrative or transcultural or transdisciplinary or collaborative work.”

(Albert Marshall, Mi’kmaw Elder)

The question is, how can non-Indigenous evaluators adopt a two-eyed seeing approach? And, how can we ensure that both eyes are the same size?

Exercise:

YWCA Queensland believes the best way to empower women of the future is by focusing on three cornerstones of empowerment:



**Safety and
Wellbeing**

**Economic
Participation**

**Women’s
Leadership**

Turn these cornerstones of empowerment into effectiveness principles. Choose the most appropriate verb (note that the verb you choose will alter the meaning!), and use the GUIDE framework (see Figure 1) to ensure the principles are guiding, useful, inspiring, etc.

Reference

Patton, Michael Quinn. (2017). *Principles-Focused Evaluation: The Guide*. The Guilford Press. New York. 1 Edition.