Australasian Evaluation Society Conference Adelaide 2012
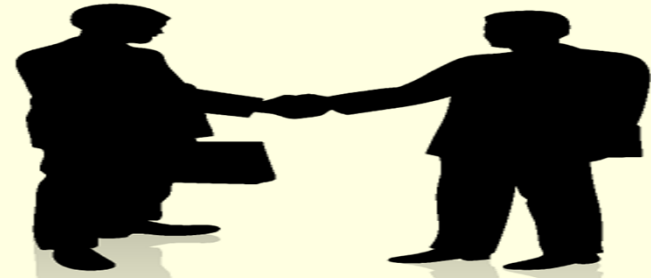## *Managing the Political Context to Evaluation*

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AND ASSOCIATES

Why this Topic?

- Evaluation takes place in a political context
- Evaluation is influenced by stakeholders
- This context results in challenges to Independence & Objectivity
- Skills of communication, negotiation & problem solving are more important to the success of evaluation than the technical skills of data collection & analysis (Michael Quinn Patton, 2003).

Why this Mini Workshop?
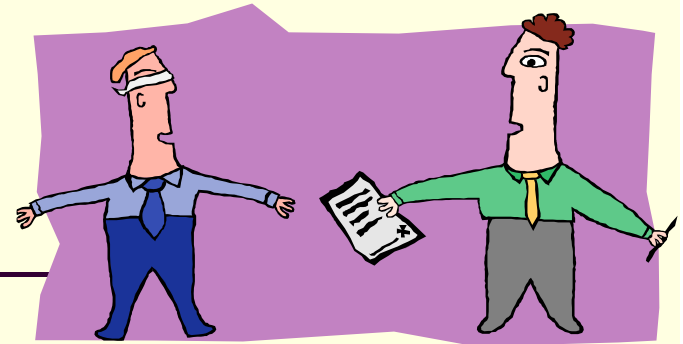
- Evaluation is a political process and successful evaluations require careful negotiation & problem solving

The Mini Workshop will outline:

- Challenges to the credibility of evaluations

- A framework for responding to challenges in evaluation through mindful and active negotiation & problem solving

Part 1: The Context

- Evaluation takes place in a **political context**

- Evaluation supports **stakeholder** involvement reflective of different interests and positions

- Impact of political and stakeholder influences can lead to compromises to *Independence* and *Objectivity* and therefore the *Credibility* of Evaluation

Challenges for Evaluation

To respond to
the inevitable
influences
resulting from political and policy
considerations, together with interests
generated by active stakeholder
involvement, with the **credibility** of the
evaluation, particularly in relation to its
findings

The Premise

Strategies need to be developed to ensure Evaluation is:

Politically Grounded

Policy Relevant

Participatory

AND

Objective and Independent

THERFORE

Credible

The Political Context

Evaluation is a:

- Political act as well as an investigatory process (Guba & Lincoln,1989)

- Process where evaluators are 'power players in a game where the rules are subject to manipulation….' (Patton, 1997)

- Process 'saturated with political concerns' (Berk & Rossi 1990)

- Socially constructed and politically articulated process (Taylor and Balloch 2005)

Political Influences

- Pressures from government agencies & politicians
- Requirements of funding or regulatory agencies
- Pressures from stakeholders
- Differences of opinion within an evaluation team re evaluation approaches or methods
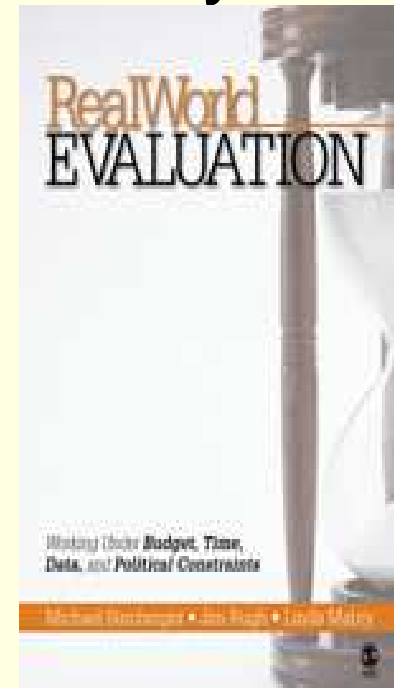
Michael Bamberger (2006) "Real World Evaluation"

Political Influences: Design/ Implementation/Reporting

- Selection of evaluators/ their orientation
- Choice of evaluation design/data collection
- Choice of stakeholders to involve or consult
- Selection of internal/external evaluation
- Allocation of budget and time
- Changing role of evaluator & relationships
- Selection of audiences for reports & findings
- Contents and language of reporting

Michael Bamberger (2006) Real World Evaluation
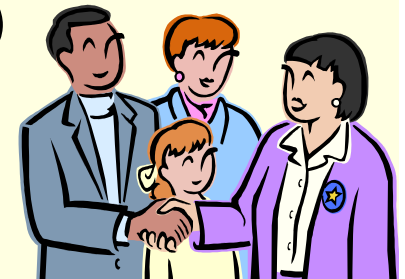
Stakeholders in Evaluation

- There are three broad groups of stakeholders:
  - Policy Makers and Senior Management Staff
  - Practitioners or community members who operationalise/deliver the program, and
  - Service users, beneficiaries or clients and their representatives
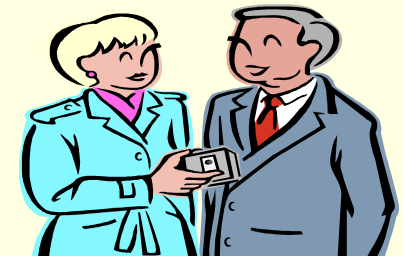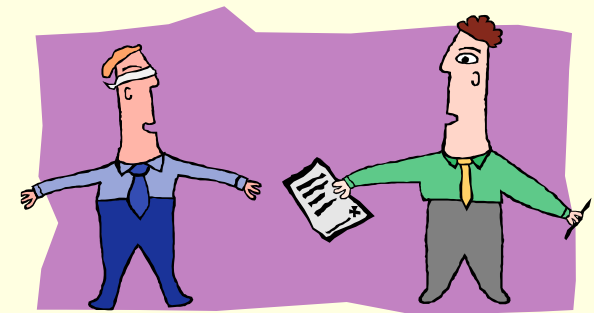
Stakeholders in Evaluation

Evaluation models acknowledge the importance of including multiple stakeholders based on either utilisation or participation principles:

- Stake's responsive model (1983)
- Patton's utilisation focused evaluation (1997)
- Guba and Lincoln's 4th generation model (1989)
- Cousins and Earl's participatory evaluation (1995)
- Fetterman's empowerment evaluation (1996)

Multiple Interests

- Evaluations reflect multiple interests and many different stakeholder groups.
- Different expectations re process and outcomes.
- Differences need to be negotiated to enable evaluation to move forward with common expectations.

The Stakeholder Context

Evaluator: retains firm control or hands control to stakeholders and beneficiaries?

No Participation ▶ Information ▶ Consultation ▶ Partnership ▶ Control
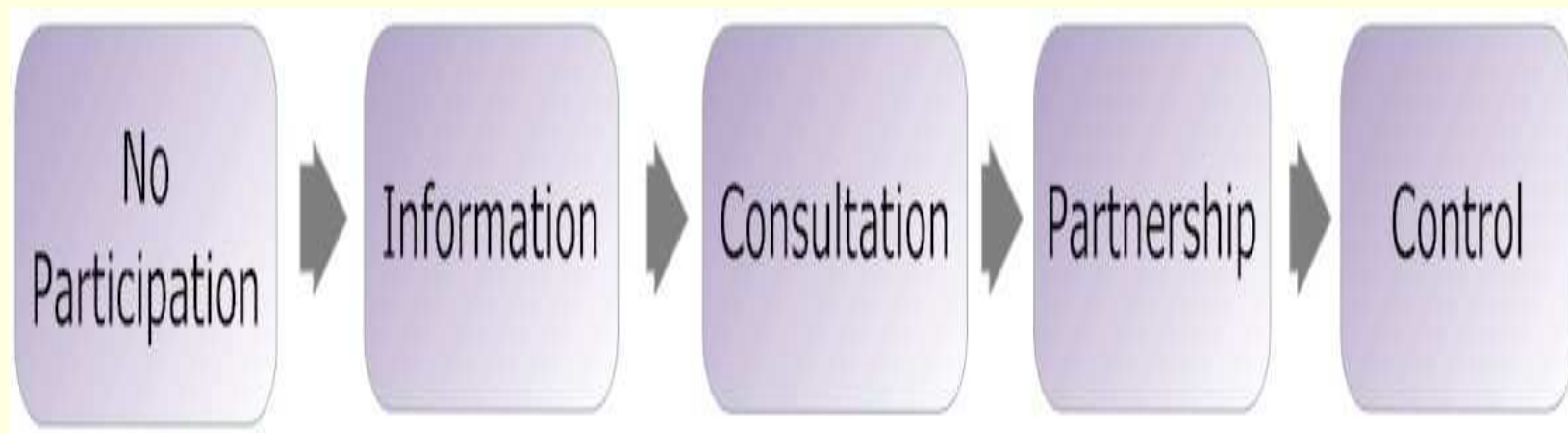
Independence & Objectivity

- Credibility maintained through adoption of concepts of independence and objectivity

- Terms independence & objectivity often used interchangeably to depict process of adopting an autonomous & impartial position

- They are distinct but inextricably linked concepts

Independence

- Evaluator being awarded freedom to conduct the evaluation without undue control exerted by the commissioners of the evaluation, the organisation or program delivery personnel
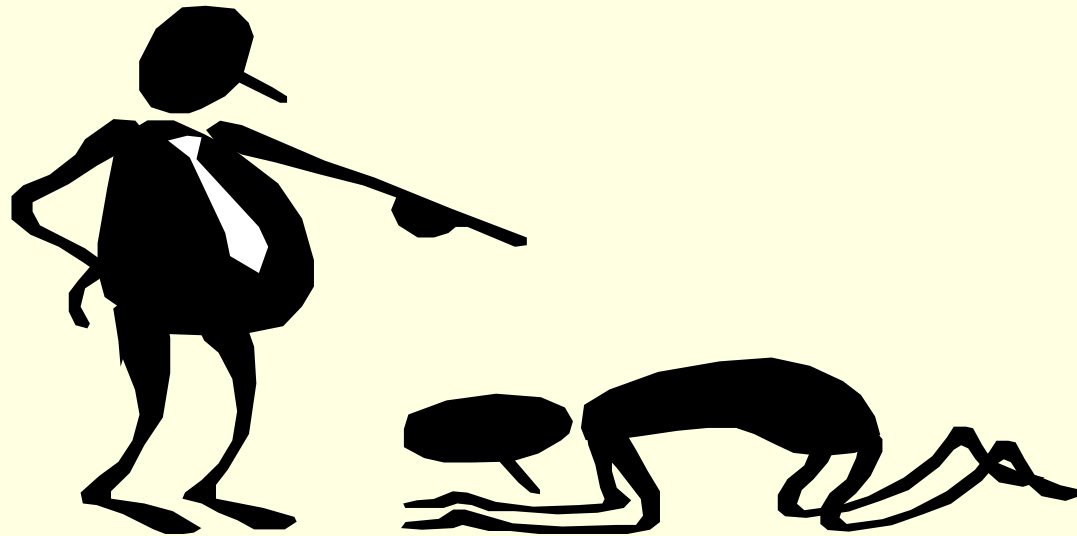
Objectivity

- The evaluator's capacity to undertake un-biased and objective assessments and form conclusions during the evaluation
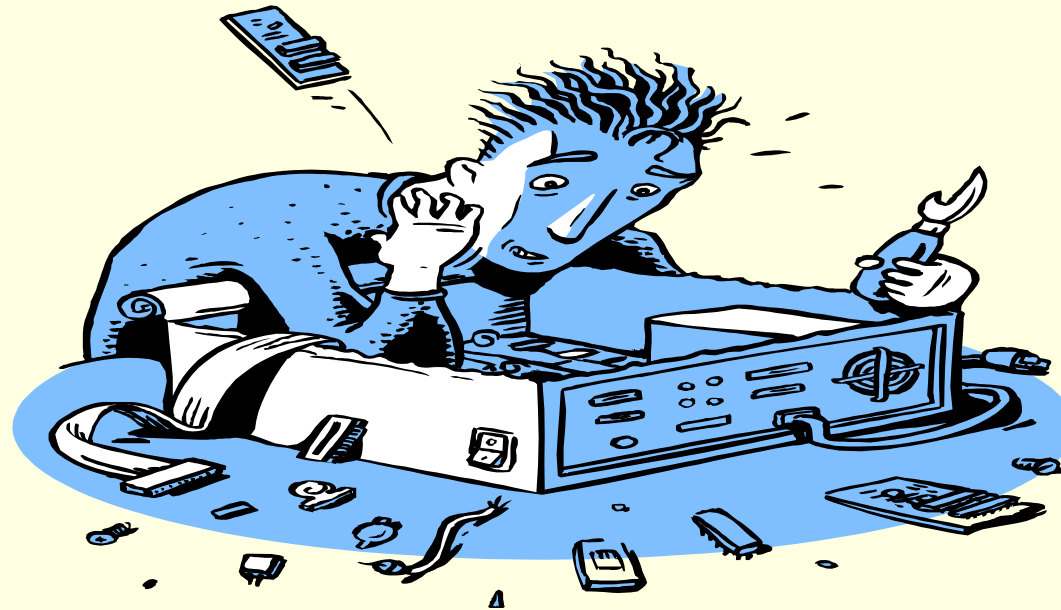
Independence & Objectivity

- Independence: freedom of the evaluator to pursue the rigour of the evaluation without compromise to imperatives and pressures from the political and organisational context, the commissioners or stakeholders

- Objectivity: impartiality exercised by the evaluator in their selection of evaluation methodology, approach to the conduct of the evaluation and the interpretation of findings

Credibility of Evaluations

It has been long warned that political and commercial pressures on evaluation clients and on evaluators lead to a priori bias in evaluation reports

(Chelimsky, 1987; Palumbo, 1987; Schwartz, 1998; Weiss,1973; Wildavsky, 1972)

Mao Tse-tung

Churchill

Lenin

Credibility of Evaluations

'The success of the current boom in the use of evaluative information will remain largely dependent on its credibility….. Perceptions that evaluative information misrepresents reality (intentionally or not) are likely to render it useless—other than as a tactical weapon in political and bureaucratic skirmishes. There is some evidence suggesting the risk of a credibility crisis regarding much evaluative information' (Schwartz and Mayne 2005).

Credibility of Evaluations

- "Why do many international development evaluations have a positive bias? Should we Worry"? Michael Bamberger, Evaluation Journal of Australasia (2009)

- Budget and time constraints

- Limited access to data

- Way evaluations are commissioned & managed

- Political and organisational constraints and pressures

Application of Context to Evaluation Practice

- Scope & Focus: *parameters and priorities*?
- Budget & Resources: *how much on what*?
- Boundaries: *included/excluded?*
- Breadth & Depth: *spanning across/drilling down?*
- Level of Detail: *how much is included*?
- Method & Orientation: *approach*?
- Timelines: *when are deliverables due*?
- Findings and Recommendations: *what is wanted/needed?*
- Dissemination and Use:*results/findings?*

Case Study 1

- Evaluation commenced 12 months prior to completion of pilot period of funding
- Program found to be to be largely underperforming according to its stated goal and objectives
- State election announced and government showcased 'successful' strategies on this particular social issue
- Evaluators pressured to reframe data, rephrase findings and re-word recommendations to provide a more positive evaluation than the data supported

Case Study 2

- During evaluation it became clear that the commissioning client had decided to cease funding - program staff given notice and midway during the evaluation program ceased to operate

- Findings were that program had been performing well and had developed a great level of support from the target communities

- Pressure placed on evaluators to adopt a more critical response to the program and identify greater areas of under-performance than data supported

Discuss

Have you had any experiences in the context of evaluation where you have felt pressured or influenced to:

- Highlight positives and dilute/reframe negatives?

- Highlight the negatives and dilute/reframe the positives?

- If so, how did you respond?
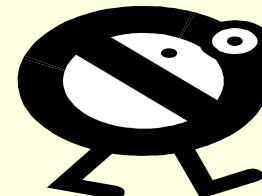
SUMMARY

- Strategies
- Tips to Take Away

Suggested Strategies

- Outline *requirements* for independence & objectivity specifying compliance with code of ethics/practice guidelines

- Discuss importance of preserving independence & objectivity for *credibility* of evaluation

- Establish

conflict resolution

processes

Good Relationships- Clarity & Communication

TOR:

- Clear and realistic TOR: goals, purpose, scope, expectations & timeframes
- Open to input into TOR and some flexibility in its application

Communication:

- Regular meetings: open & honest communication
- Mutual trust and respect
- Shared understanding of outcomes wanted
- Joint commitment to credible and useful evaluations

Negotiation Strategies

- Be clear about your position but also prepared to listen to and understand the position of the client/consultant.

- Carefully unravel the interests which sit underneath positions, in an attempt to respond to these interests rather than the more fixed positions put forward.

- Use the range of micro-interpersonal skills (active listening, paraphrasing, open ended questioning) to facilitate the above.

Negotiation Strategies

- Look for areas of compromise and 'give and take' bargaining to achieve a 'win-win' outcome for both parties.
- Be mindful that there are certain areas which are not open to compromise such as reducing the independence of the product, and that the standards of the AES act as a guide to this. Explain this to the client.
- Record all agreements made to ensure there is clarity in any negotiated outcomes.
- Effective negotiation should avert negative outcomes and relationships for both parties.