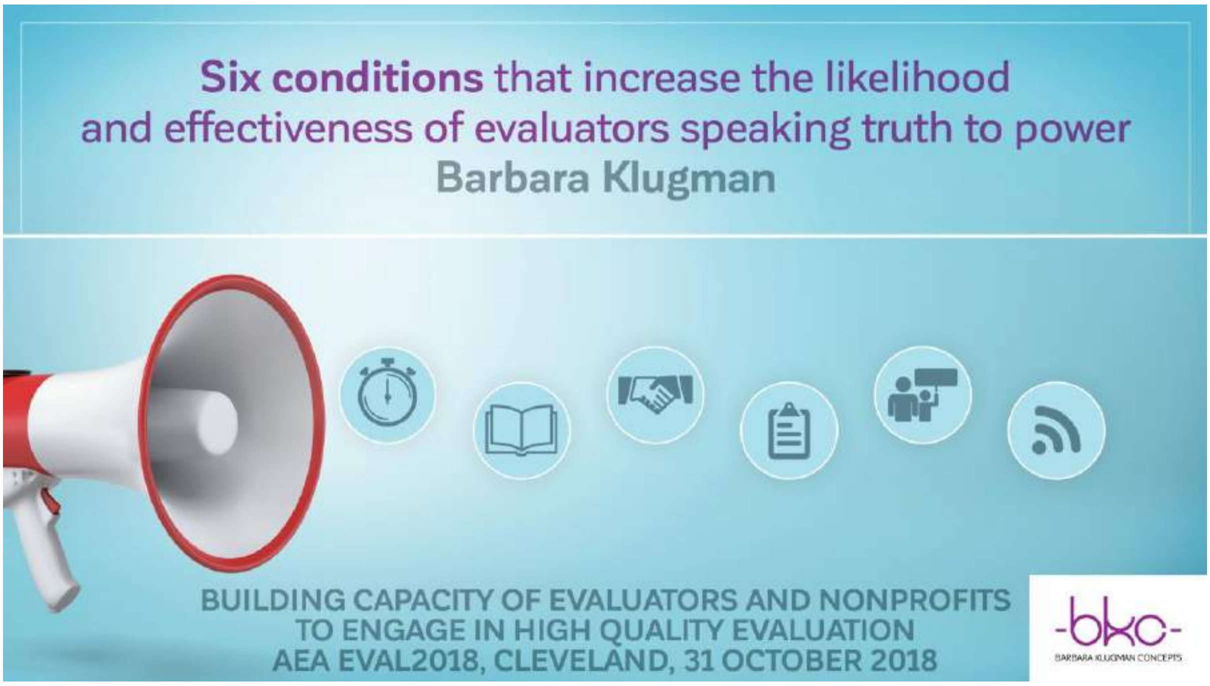

Abstract

This presentation offers six conditions that position an evaluator to use evaluation evidence to effectively speak truth to power. These are illustrated drawing on a summative evaluation of the Ford Foundation's $54m Strengthening Human Rights Worldwide global initiative, and a developmental evaluation of the Atlantic Philanthropies' Tekano Atlantic Fellows for Health Equity leadership development programme. The factors are: 1) timing of the evaluation; 2) willingness of both evaluation commissioner and evaluand to learn and improve; 3) the evaluator's capacity for and practice of relationship trust-building; 4) the production of high quality evidence; 5) commitment to and comfortableness with the role of evaluator as advocate, as long as this does not undermine the ability of those involved to speak for themselves; and 6) terms of reference that allow and fund the evaluator to independently communicate findings in ways most likely to influence the practice of the evaluation commissioner and broader constituencies.

BARBARA KLUGMAN CONCEPTS (PTY) LTD
70 7th Street, Parkhurst, Johannesburg • Telephone 0720999644/ 011 4470456 • Email bklugman@mweb.co.za
Reg no 2014/082340/07 • VAT no 4760269284

The Conference theme is Speaking Truth to Power. I am not interrogating the concept as we were invited to do in the plenary. I'm taking it as given.

One of the sectors in which this is particularly difficult is philanthropy, where grantees frequently feel vulnerable in challenging their funders, for fear of losing their funding support and funders frequently prefer to keep their difficulties quiet. This is, similarly the case between staff of nonprofits and their boards. In these contexts, evaluators can play a useful intermediary role by providing both the evidence and the facilitation required to open space for honest communication. However, the way in which an evaluation is commissioned may determine whether it can actually contribute towards shifting practices of funders, boards or other interested parties. This presentation unpacks six factors that an evaluator can consider or influence to develop realistic objectives for the evaluation and use of its findings.

You may ask why 'six conditions' so I have to deviate for a moment to make a comment on cultural competency. As you can hear I am a foreigner, born and bred in South Africa. When I joined this learning community, one of the things I noticed is that – if I may be forgiven for generalising – there's a great interest in quantification – ORSImpact's 10 considerations for advocacy evaluation planning' or the Center for Evaluation Innovation's Nine principles of evaluation for strategic learning, Betterevaluation's 9 points for 'managing evaluation', Ricardo Wilson-Grau has 6 steps for Outcomes Harvesting. … So, I am trying to harness this cultural comfortableness with listing things to share some broad insights from my experience in what factors have enabled me to speak truth to power as an evaluator.

They are:

1. Timing of the evaluation
2. A willingness by all parties to learn and improve
3. Evaluator capacity for trust-building
4. The production of high quality evidence
5. Evaluator ease & confidence with the role of evaluator as advocate
6. The independent right and resources to communicate findings

1. Timing of the evaluation is a key determinant of both grantee and funder interest in the outcomes.

Urgency of findings to support funder decision-making

I'm currently the developmental evaluator of an Atlantic Philanthropies' funded leadership development initiative in South Africa. The organisation has two years in order to demonstrate at minimum that they're making continually improving, in order to convince the board of Atlantic Philanthropies that it should give it 15 years' worth of funding. This is a perfect moment for an evaluation, and a moment where an evaluator's voice, speaking truth to power, can make a significant impact. The evaluator and the organisation have a shared interest in success, and recognise the need for rapid improvements in programme quality and organisational strengthening. In this context, my independent voice, even when it is asking tough questions, or presenting tough findings, is mostly heard and acted upon by both staff and board. Of course, that doesn't mean it's always easy; sometimes it is exceedingly uncomfortable, but the situation gives me a high sense of responsibility to engage even with discomfort or conflict.

On the other hand, the funder is about to close down its operations, so insights the grantee or I generate the funder's ways of operating in this initiative, are not of particular value to them and there's not much point in me focusing too much of my advocacy in that direction, except when I think that something the funder is doing is not conducive to the effectiveness of the grantees' efforts.

When it's too late to matter – there isn't a 'now what'

In contrast, last year I coordinated an international team conducting a learning review of Ford Foundation's 54 million dollar "Strengthening Human Rights Worldwide global initiative." It supported 13 organisations with large grants to strengthen the voice of human rights advocates from the global south in the international human rights movement. Ford has ended the initiative and grantees knew that. Ford's purpose in commissioning the review was to generate lessons for itself but more so for the field rather than with and for the grantees.

Drawing on the principles of utilisation-focused evaluation, we hoped that even though this particular funding initiative was ending, grantees would find value in contributing to shaping the evaluation design, and sense-making using evaluation data in order to generate evidence on their achievements and insights about how they work, that could inform their strategies moving forward, and their ability to motivate the value of their work to other funders. In reality, however, they felt obliged to engage in the process with us because of accountability to the funder, but they were mostly unhappy that the funding was ending, and were focusing their energy on their work and on identifying new funders. In this context, it was much harder for our team to use our voices effectively.

In addition, the funder was in the process of shifting its strategies and indeed the responsible programme officer had left the organisation, so despite that we generated significant insights about what kind of funding strategy is needed to effectively strengthen a global movement, the moment for listening within the Foundation did not feel ideal.

The implications for action are that if you are an evaluator, timing may influence your thinking about whether or not to agree to do an evaluation. If you are a commissioner of evaluations, I'd suggest you seriously consider commissioning in time to ensure evaluations are actually used and evaluator voice has value for you.

2. A willingness by all parties to learn and improve.

My second condition for increasing the likelihood and effectiveness of evaluators speaking truth to power is a willingness by all parties to learn and improve. If a criterion for evaluating success of an initiative an organization, is demonstrating capacity for improvement, this is an ideal context for evaluators to be heard. It's about creating an environment that welcomes insights to strengthen effectiveness; interest in improvement removes much of the fear and risk from evaluation.

Linked to my first point about timing, as evaluators our ability to speak truth to power, or perhaps more to the point, the likelihood of us being heard, is affected by the orientation of those the evaluation seeks to influence. Some of this is about personality – there are people whose way of being and mode of work is profoundly open and reflective; there are people who tend to be defensive, or uncomfortable with critical reflection. In my experience, one of the factors that influences this, is the extent to which the evaluation talks to the grantees' interests. In the Ford Foundation learning review I've just described, since there would be no further funding, there were no immediate dangers to the grantees if our findings and voice challenge their ways of seeing or operating.

In contrast, in the case of the fellowship programme, one of the key enablers of my ability to speak truth to staff, board and funder, is that the criterion being used by the funder, is **capacity for improvement.** If that is the goal of an evaluation, it's an ideal space for openness to the evaluator's findings and insights.

Can you influence this condition? As you know there's a literature on how to assess or build evaluation readiness, [1,2,3] but you're not going to be able to do this overnight.

3. Evaluator capacity for trust-building is my third condition.

Irrespective of the context, as noted in the AEA's guiding principles, behaving in an ethical manner is essential in and of itself. It is also essential for enabling one to speak truth to power. If one is perceived as having a hidden agenda, or interests different from those laid out in the evaluation terms of reference, there is little chance of building relationships of trust with the evaluation's intended users or others one hopes to influence; there's little chance of using one's voice effectively, or perhaps more accurately, little chance of doing so ethically.

One insight I have gained is that a high degree of transparency helps. This may require establishing rules of engagement that allow certainty to those with least power that they will not be blindsided by evaluation processes or outcomes.

On such rule of engagement that can be helpful is to commit not to share findings with those with power before those with less power have engaged those findings and worked out if and how to make changes to their practice in response to the findings. So, for example, I made a commitment to the board and staff of the leadership development programme not to share findings with the funder before board and staff had had time to consider the findings and work out how to address them. This has mostly worked well.

---

[1] Readiness for Organizational Learning and Evaluation (ROLE). The ROLE (Preskill & Torres, 2000) The ROLE consists of 78 items grouped into six major constructs: 1) Culture, 2) Leadership, 3) Systems and Structures, 4) Communication, 5) Teams, and 6) Evaluation. Four of these – Culture, Leadership, Systems and Structures, and Communication – are further divided into sub-constructs. The ROLE instrument is available as an appendix in Russ-Eft, D. & Preskill, H. (2001) Evaluation in organizations: A systematic approach to enhancing learning, performance, and change. New York, NY: Basic Books; Morariu 2012: https://www.innonet.org/media/tear_sheet_core-innovation_network.pdf; Easterling et al.'Foundation Readiness for Evaluation: Putting the Learning Environment in Place', *Presentation to American Evaluation Association Annual Meeting, Denver CO, October 17, 2014; http://comm.eval.org/nonprofits/viewdocument/creating-readiness-f*

[2] Quinn Patton, M. Essentials of Utilization-Focused Evaluation, Sage Publications, 2012

[3] Zaveri et al 'Confirming tools for collaborative evaluation' AEA 2018 Session 1583: Skills Building Workshop; Fri, Nov 10, 2017 - http://comm.eval.org/viewdocument/confirming-readiness-for-collaborat

Nevertheless, the dynamics can be complex, particularly when there are layers and layers of power in an organisation and layers of accountabilities – who one should share findings with, when, can itself become a matter of contestation among those involved in the evaluation. What if perceptions of staff and management differ, or staff and board? There is some navigation required which is that much easier if you have been engaging transparently, (consistent with the overall ethical values laid out in the AEA's Guidelines), and are perceived by all involved in the evaluation, and by primary intended users, as trustworthy.

4. The production of high quality evidence

The fourth condition, the production of high quality evidence, while self-evident, will be more effective in speaking truth to power if all parties understand and ideally participate in deciding on what mix of methodologies will be used and on what basis success will be evaluated. The intended users and any others you wish to influence with your findings need to believe that those findings are based on methods implemented with high quality technical standards. More to the point if you're to speak truth to power, you have to have confidence in your findings.

This will not stop those you're communicating with from contesting findings. In the case of the Ford Foundation evaluation, while many groups were pleased with some of our findings because they demonstrated their effectiveness, and such groups have cited those findings subsequently, that was their main interest. They wanted to see the work praised. So perhaps it's not surprising that some of the feedback we got were concerns that we'd not made strong enough findings in support of particular grantees' work. We had to just hold our own in such contexts – using our evidence to speak truth to the grantees, when our findings did not match their sense of self.

The implication of course, is that in planning an evaluation you need to be confident that the methods chosen will deliver the kind of high quality information required, to answer the evaluation questions, within the available time and resources, as will your analysis or your collective analysis with participants.

5. Evaluator ease with the role of evaluator as advocate

The fifth condition, a commitment to and comfortableness with the role of evaluator as advocate, assumes that the evaluator understands her work as a values-based practice that aims to contribute towards improvement and change. The evaluator needs to speak truth to power where those with power threaten the integrity of the evaluation process including evaluation use.

In my case, before I became an official evaluator I was an activist for social change and engaged in multiple forms of advocacy. So, my sense of self, of personhood, is somewhat defined by commitment to and experience of speaking truth to power.

This may not be the case for all evaluators. When I shifted my roles, initially from activist to funder and then to evaluator, I was no longer an independent change-maker in my own right; I lost my voice for a good while. I felt that it was not for me to say anything publicly about lessons I was generating and learning.

This is partly a good thing, – my primary commitment was to create platforms for those whose work I evaluated, and who are historically disadvantaged by poverty and discrimination, to speak for themselves.

For example, rather than presenting myself, I enabled the general-secretary of the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa to speak at Ariadne (the European Funders for Social Change and Human Rights). The funder, too, spoke at that platform.

At the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association Conference, I arranged a platform for a group of social justice advocacy organisations to share lessons I had documented with them, on factors enabling effective advocacy to improve health services.

So, one certainly has to work out with those whose work you're evaluating, when it is appropriate for them to speak, and when for the evaluator to speak; and this may include giving substantial support to them to have the confidence to speak truth to power on certain platforms in ways that they will be heard.

But I would nevertheless argue that the confidence to play an advocacy role, and experience in shaping one's advocacy message and style, is a great help in speaking truth to power as an evaluator.

In the two evaluations I raised at the start, this has meant being willing and confident enough to share findings that would be likely to be contested, but doing so in a thoughtful way, using the evidence to support my points. At times, it has meant doing so first with individuals who hold power in order to help them get to grips with an issue, before raising the issues in broader spaces.

I have noticed in this role that those with power may not be averse to bullying the evaluator, whether covertly or openly – this can be the funder, or it can be the head of an organisation. And there's something about bullying that is insidious, it may be couched in terms that appear reasonable. So, one has to be very, very clear of the basis of one's findings, and the independence of one's role, in order to hold one's own in speaking truth to power. And one has to try to remain kind, aware of how threatening evaluation may feel – all of which takes us back to my earlier point about trust-building.

6. The independent right and resources to communicate findings

The sixth and last condition for speaking truth to power is something one can build into evaluation terms of reference – that is the right to share findings publicly and some resources to enable you to do so.

In my experience, this is extremely unusual. One of the biggest losses to the field in usual evaluation practice is that findings belong to the commissioner and the evaluand alone, such that lessons aren't shared publicly. Also, the commissioner usually contracts its right to shape the public messages, which limits the veracity of any public versions of an evaluation report. While recognising the concomitant ethical responsibility to do no harm, the right and resources to publish findings is critical to the ability of an evaluator to speak truth to power beyond the bounds of the immediate evaluation stakeholders.

Perhaps because they fear public knowledge of any weaknesses or poor aspects of their performance, neither funders nor groups being evaluated routinely share their findings except where the primary purpose of an evaluation is to produce learning for the field. So, if there is potential value in communicating evaluation findings for others to learn from, or to advocate for shifts in practice among those with power, one needs to try to anticipate this and negotiate for the right to share findings, and resources to do so, to be in the terms of the reference. My best experience of this has been with the Ford Foundation initiative I've already explained. Because the Foundation's purpose was to share learning with the field, their call for qualifications – from which they selected the evaluators to undertake the learning review – emphasised the ability to communicate findings with diverse audiences. In our engagement with them as we developed the Inception Report, we agreed firstly, that they would have the right to review all materials, but not to demand any changes. Secondly, we agreed that our review team would develop and implement a communications strategy to reach diverse audiences particularly human rights activists, researchers, and funders; as well as evaluators. This meant including in our team both a multilingual journalist and a videographer. It has meant moving beyond the evaluation report to produce blogs, short videos, a webinar for funders, a powerpoint presentation that grantees and the funder can use – with a lot of attention to data visualisation as we are so often reminded by the AEA. The budget included resources for this. In my experience, this is most unusual.

Resources to identify who would benefit from hearing the findings enable the evaluator to give time to shape findings appropriately for different audiences – and I should say one thing I've learnt is that one needs ample time AFTER finishing the formal evaluation report and process of engagement with primary intended users, to then develop and disseminate materials appropriately. With the Ford review, for example, it was only in September this year, that we did a webinar for human rights funders, despite finishing at the end of 2017; similarly, we had to wait for various magazines and journals to be doing editions appropriate to our subject-matter and for the week in which AEA's Policy and Evaluation TIG was responsible for AEA365 blogs.

We also offered opportunities and support to grantees to share their learnings with the field. The findings of the learning review provided evidence on issues of interest to diverse audiences and our positioning as independent evaluators gave the messages a perceived legitimacy.

So, these are the six conditions I have identified that enable evaluators to speak truth to power, and are worth thinking through when developing or negotiating terms of reference. Thank you so much for coming to listen and for your attention.

I would be very keen to hear your own experiences in using your evaluation findings to speak truth to power – including in how you have overcome the barriers – whether in your own sense of your role, or in your terms of reference, or in the external environment.

THANK YOU.