Caught in the Middle: The Challenge of Maintaining Effective Evaluator-Client Relationships with Both Programs and Their Funders

Evaluation 2015

Chicago, IL

Panel

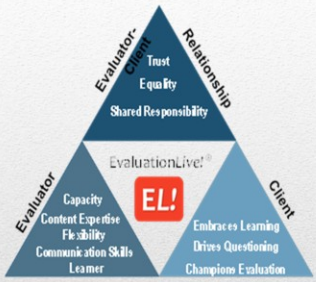
Patti Bourexis, The Study Group, Inc.

Kathryn Race, Race & Associates, Ltd.

Pat Mueller & David Merves, Evergreen Evaluation & Consulting, Inc.

Discussant

Melanie Hwalek, SPEC Associates



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Direct Experience of Three Evaluation Companies

Panel Inspiration

1. Serving the needs of an individual program and the external funder – who's the client?
2. Working with multiple programs sharing one funder.
3. Working directly for both funders and the programs they support.

Situations Where the Evaluator Can Get Caught in the Middle

Part One: Sharing of real-life experiences of working with programs and funders.

Part Two: Sharing practice with the audience.

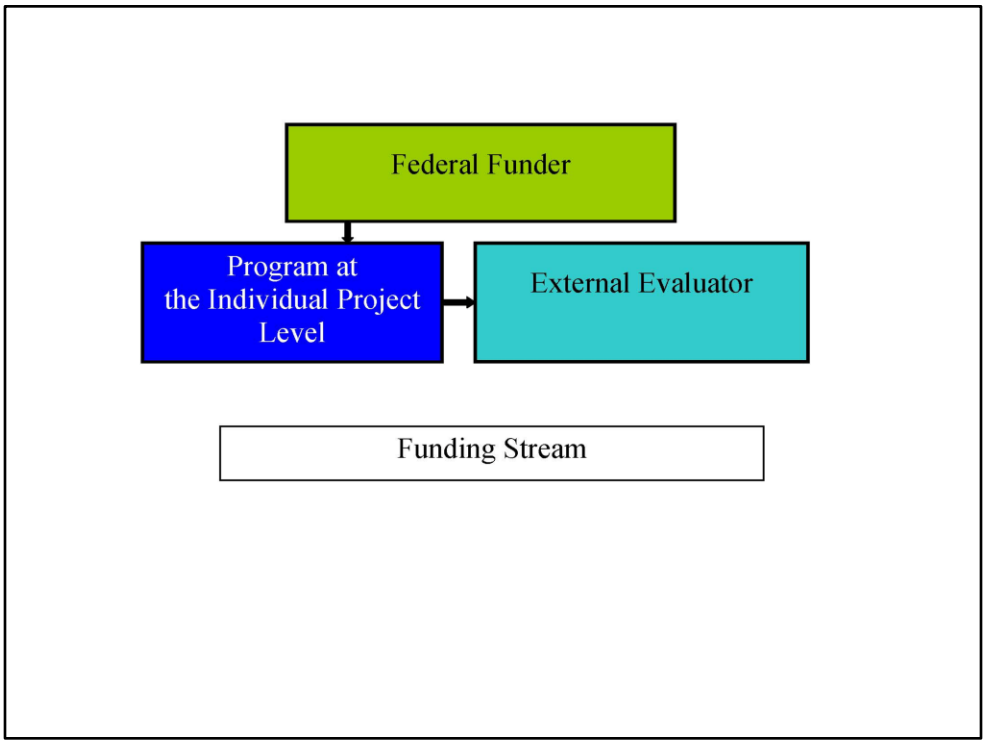
Part Three: Discussion with the Evaluation Live! Model developer.

Part Four: More discussion with the audience.

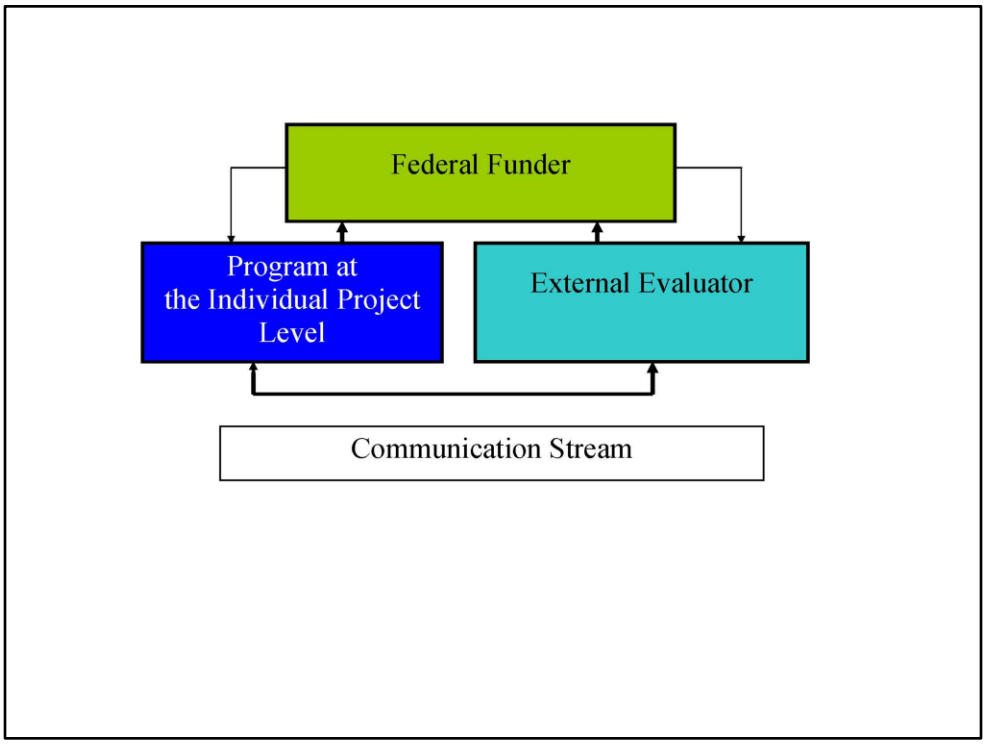
Breakdown of Today's Session

WHO'S THE CLIENT?

Kathryn Race
Race & Associates, Ltd.
www.raceassociates.com



I am discussing evaluations where there is a third party funder. This is often the Federal Government such as NIH, NSF or DOE; Program stakeholders at the individual project level and the evaluator. By a show of hands, how many of you in the audience have or had conducted evaluations where the program and the evaluator are funded through federal funds? In these circumstances, the evaluator is paid through some arm of the program's organizations, such as their Foundation or the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs. The evaluator is not paid directly by the federal funder. Can set up the expectation that the evaluator is "working for" the program. That is not the whole picture.



The communication stream is quite different from the funding stream. There is an expectation of communication, and this should be, between the evaluator and the program stakeholders. But there is also a formal communication stream from evaluator to federal funder through annual and final evaluation reports. And there are times when the federal funder communicates directly with the evaluator. Try and avoid the sense of only top-down communication.

Program staff **may** come into the evaluation:

Feeling skeptical, apprehensive, maybe fearful or anxious (Donaldson, Gooler & Scriven, 2002)

See it as a threat

See it as a requirement and not necessarily beneficial to the program

Counter this **early on** by letting stakeholders know that:

Evaluator will have one foot in each camp

And that the evaluation should be helpful to the program and there will be no surprises

Authenticity: Be True to Yourself

Use a communication style that is authentic to yourself, that encapsulates your values as a professional. Examples of communication styles include: **Intellectual** versus **Relational** (discussion is about the task versus discussion about the task *and* the person); **Direct** versus **Indirect** (meaning conveyed by words versus through suggestion). [http://www2.pacific.edu/sis/culture/pub/1.5.3_-_Communication_styles.htm]

Clarity: Be Clear

Acknowledge that the evaluator has a **dual** responsibility: to the program/project and to the funder.

Let stakeholders know that you may/will likely present views at times that align with the stakeholders **AND** at other times present views that align or agree with the funder. Be clear as to which party you are representing when presenting an idea or concern.

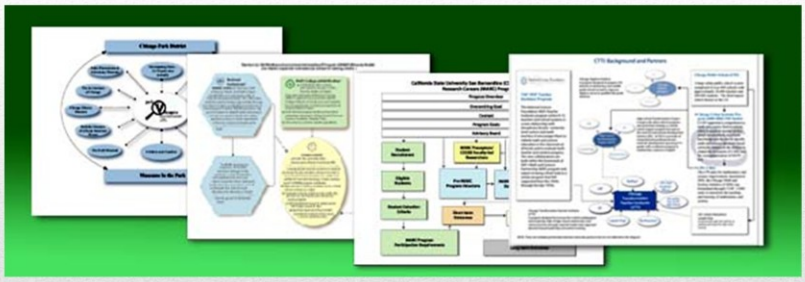
Emphasize that the **evaluation** should have **value** for the individual program or project.

The word "project" may be seen as de-valuing to your stakeholders at the individual program level, even pejorative (e.g., implied hierarchy, top-down from program to project; some funders are genuinely interested in bottom-up or "grassroots" lessons). Using the word "program" (at the individual entity level) may suggest stability or structure over time. The word "project" implies a beginning and an end date that is not necessarily implied by the word program.

Build Trust

Start with a Program Theory Model or Theory of Change Model

Program Theory Models or Theory of Change Models (expanded logic models) are proposed to aid program development and guide evaluation for many reasons. One advantage is that these models can help build trust.



Examples of Program Models

Program Theory Models or Theory of Change Models

Build trust through reducing ambiguity

Program stakeholders and evaluator have common understanding. (Donaldson, S. I. (2007). *Program theory-driven evaluation science: Strategies and applications.* New York: Lawrence Erlbaum.)

Help to establish your credibility

Use the program model – an expanded logic model – to build trust through reducing ambiguity related to the program and the evaluation. It creates a common understanding between program stakeholders and evaluators. Also, insulates the evaluation if there is significant turnover among program stakeholders.

Creating Trust through Model Building

May "demystify" the evaluation offering a description of what it will entail and what will be excluded from the evaluation

And in general

Treat stakeholders as the professionals they are

Helps to map out what the evaluation will look like – what's covered in the evaluation and what may be intentionally omitted. For those that have engaged in strategic planning, program model development may resonate with them early on. And in general treat stakeholders as the professionals that they are and integrate their expertise or content knowledge to the degree that you can. Patti, from the Study Group will talk about their approach to evaluation – where the client and evaluator form a "study group" to determine the best way to approach the issues at hand and what strategies to take to design and implementation a responsive evaluation.

Cutting across Clarity, Trust, Authenticity and Transparency (from the beginning and throughout the program):

No surprises. Mixed results will be discussed ahead of time with the stakeholders before informing the funder to give the stakeholders time to respond to or implement a plan to mitigate concerns or issues.

Offer a **fair and balanced** approach to presenting results -- both the positive findings and the challenges.

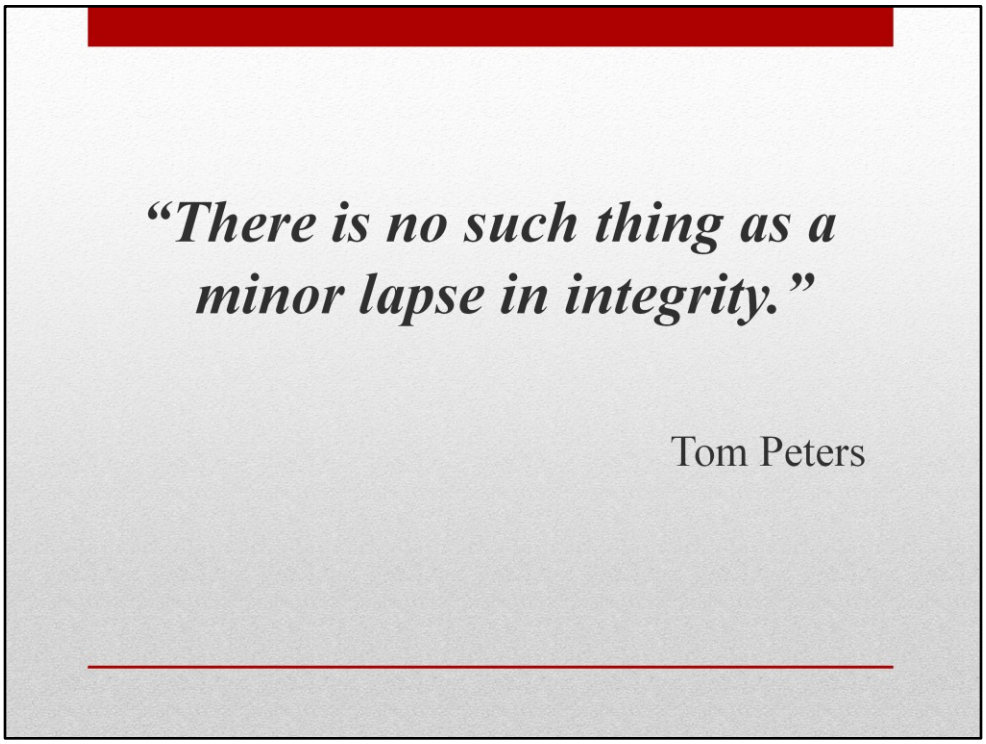
Describe yourself as a "critical friend" or a "collegial coach" remind stakeholders of this relationship as needed.

Take a **collegial** not adversarial approach.

Exercise critical listening skills.

Be **straightforward** with stakeholders and expect that from them.

A little bit of empathy can go a long way in effective relationships with program stakeholders.



Tom Peters, Author In Search of Excellence and other books on Leadership and Business Management and Practices

WORKING WITH MULTIPLE PROGRAMS SHARING ONE FUNDER

Pat Mueller & David Merves
Evergeen Evaluation & Consulting, Inc.
pat@eecvt.com & david@eecvt.com

- Grants/Cooperative Agreements
- Program Performance Measures
- External evaluation required
- Multiple clients within a Program area
- Two scenarios…

Client Context

Federal Agency funds Grants/Cooperative Agreements
Federal Agency sets Program Performance Measures
Federal Agency requires external evaluation
EEC provides services to multiple clients within a Program area

3 EC projects from one agency – focus area is the same (EC) but they address different aspects: data, personnel development; general TA. Program PMs are the same, but project PMs differ. Project Officers are different for each project.

States receive grants from Agency for professional development. Focus of PD within each state differs. Program PMs are the same. Project PMs are different.
Some states we are working with as ext. evaluator and others we were contracted to write their proposals, but not necessarily conduct the evaluation.

- Knowing the…
  - Client context
  - Project Officers
  - Performance Measures
  - Respondent pool
- Replicate instrumentation/data tracking
- Repeaters build relationship & investment
- Small community builds trust & sharing

All about leveraging!!

- High turnover of key leadership
- Project management vs. evaluation
- Maintaining authentic communication
- Travel/Budget implications
- Boundary issues
- Small community can breed distrust
- Confidentiality issues

WORKING DIRECTLY FOR BOTH FUNDERS AND THE PROGRAMS THEY SUPPORT

Patti Bourexis
The Study Group Inc.
studygroup@aol.com

OR

- Authenticity
- Clarity
- Trust

- Transparency
- Confidentiality
- Boundaries

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- **Expectations**
- **Consistency**
- **Management**
- **Ego**

What's Important

These are the elements mentioned by the panel to this point. Now we adding a few new ones and expanding/interpreting/understanding the ones we've already identified.

- Scope of work.
- Communications.
- Reporting.
- Posture toward both parties.
- Will do's and won't do's.

Expectations

- Behave in alignment with expectations 100% of the time.

Consistency

- Monitor the quality of the relationships.
- Address rumors, issues, & concerns.
- Renegotiate or exit unsatisfactory relationships.

Management

- Appreciate your success.
- Don’t get cocky.

Ego

- Authenticity
- Clarity
- Trust
- Transparency
- Confidentiality
- Boundaries
- Expectations.
- Consistency.
- Management.
- Ego

Recapping What's Important

These are the elements mentioned by the panel to this point. Now we adding a few new ones and expanding/interpreting/understanding the ones we've already identified.

SHARING PRACTICE

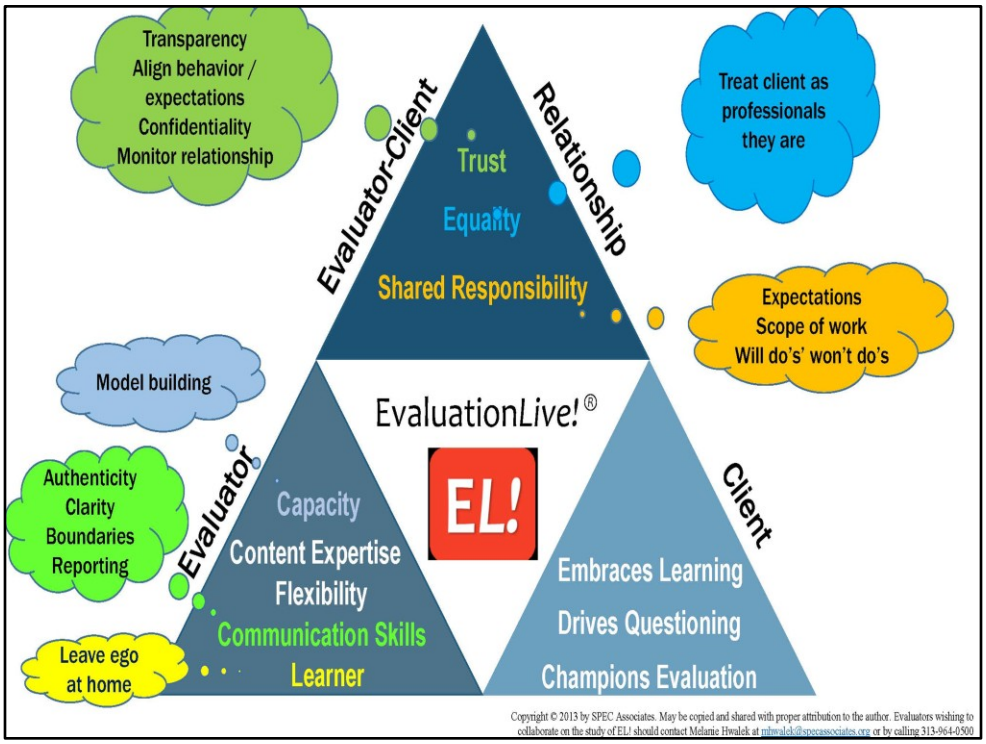
Discussion Between the Panel and Audience

1. Have you been in the same or similar situations as those described by the panel? Did the situation make you feel uncomfortable? How did you “stay out of the middle”?
2. Which of the critical elements described by the panel seem most important to you? Anything missing?
3. What opportunities do these situations present for evaluators?
4. How do you handle situations where equity is lacking between the program and the funder?

5. How do you resolve situations where the goals and objectives of your program client are not aligned with the funder's goals and objectives (and vice-versa)?
6. Have you ever turned down a work opportunity because of the potential to be "caught in the middle"?
7. What's your own list of critical elements for maintaining a positive evaluator-client relationship under these circumstances?

LET'S HEAR FROM OUR DISCUSSANT

Comments from the Perspective of the Evaluation Live! Model


Transparency
Align behavior / expectations
Confidentiality
Monitor relationship
Evaluator-Client
Relationship
Trust
Equality
Shared Responsibility
Treat client as professionals they are
Expectations
Scope of work
Will do's' won't do's
Model building
EvaluationLive!®
EL!
Authenticity
Clarity
Boundaries
Reporting
Evaluator
Capacity
Content Expertise
Flexibility
Communication Skills
Learner
Client
Embraces Learning
Drives Questioning
Champions Evaluation
Leave ego at home
Copyright © 2013 by SPEC Associates. May be copied and shared with proper attribution to the author. Evaluators wishing to collaborate on the study of EL! should contact Melanie Hwalek at mhwalek@specassociates.org or by calling 313-964-0500

Thanks!

Patti Bourexis, Study Group, Inc.
studygroup@aol.com

Kathryn Race, Race & Associates, Ltd.
race_associates@msn.com

Pat Mueller & David Merves, EECVT
david@eecvt.com

Melanie Hwalek, Spec & Associates
mhwalek@specassociates.org

Presenter/Discussant Contact Information