



*Developmental evaluators* can use an array of methods including interviews, focus groups, surveys, email questions and observation, as well as group analysis and interpretation. These methods are common to any evaluation process; the difference in Developmental Evaluation is that evaluation accompanies the development process so that questioning and learning happen simultaneously with action. Developmental Evaluation creates a space to challenge and question in a way that doesn't stifle creativity, including building the conditions for attention to the evaluation process. The common assumption is that evaluation is a mechanical process and once it's in place, everyone can ignore it and "get on with the work." In developmental evaluation, the evaluation process is in fact part of the work.

### Accompaniment

As a team member, the developmental evaluator contributes to the core group of innovators, moving through a range of roles such as observer, questioner and facilitator. As observer, the evaluator is watching both content and process. What is being tried? What is being decided? How is it being done? How is it being decided? Observations are offered with the intent to generate useful feedback for the team; for example, by asking:

*"We seem to have changed direction, are we OK with that?", "There are implicit goals that we haven't yet stated but that are shaping our actions – should we clarify those?", "There are assumptions that underlie what we are talking about – let's frame them as assumptions so we can better check for their validity as we move forward."*

As facilitator, the evaluator can help move a conversation forward. By framing and synthesizing ideas that the group has explored, the evaluator can help them make sense of their deliberations, fine-tune and move on. In the same way, the evaluator as facilitator supports the group as it interprets data so that it can feed directly into the development process. In some cases, the evaluator is present in meetings that are not evaluation-focused but instead are specific to project tasks or strategy discussions already taking place. Here, the evaluator may probe to clarify intent and purpose, or may capture information for use at another time.

### Collecting data

Developmental evaluators are attuned to two streams of data. First, there is information that assists in validating certain decisions, approaches or assumptions. In other circumstances, data may inform the evolving understanding of particular situations. Data collection provides a rigorous means of complementing the innovation process, enabling it to become iterative and (hopefully) strengthening reflective capacity, stimulating creativity or informing intentional changes to the innovation in question.

The second stream of data documents the innovation process. In innovation, both means and ends can be emergent. The tracking provided through developmental evaluation helps provide accountability; by documenting the "forks in the road," the implications of each decision are considered and a more robust memory of the initiative's creation results. In contrast, a series of cumulative decisions can establish a new direction for something without any specific decision being made about an overall change in direction.



Capturing existing data is less resource-intensive than generating new data. Data can also originate from non-traditional sources such as e-mail exchanges or the process of shaping an agenda. Sometimes, the absence of something is important to note. To the extent possible, developmental evaluation attempts to build data collection into the organization's processes. It may be helpful for participants to maintain and share blogs or reflective journals

### Framing and reporting

Data is only useful if it can be made sense of in ways that inform action. In a developmental evaluation, the distillation of data into knowledge is part of the evaluation. For this reason, a shared interpretive framework is important. The evaluator may see patterns that prompt a different way of organizing the data, generating new perspectives and insights for the team. Having a shared interpretation of evaluative findings leads to joint ownership of the results and a more informed understanding of what's happening.

The notes of a developmental evaluator differ from the more traditional minutes of a meeting. The developmental notes may identify:

- process observations;
- points of tension;
- implicit decisions;
- assumptions made; or
- emerging themes and patterns.

Building a shared interpretation involves an interactive process where various perspectives on selected data are examined openly in the light of evaluation logic: Do the interpretations really follow from the data? What does the data say? And what is missing because of inevitable data inadequacies and real-world uncertainties?

### Strategy

Developmental Evaluation closely hinges on the process of strategy development and execution. Evaluation is sometimes implicit in strategy conversations; for example, "taking stock" suggests defining a baseline, and "identifying key areas for growth" suggests framing the aspirations and targets of a group against its baseline.

In a Developmental Evaluation process, pushing the organization to sufficient clarity about process provides a means for comparing against its baseline. *"So, here's where we are now. Where do we expect to be in a year? Or two years?"* The organization becomes clearer about its goals, the process by which they are reached and the structures needed to support them, while allowing for the dynamism and flexibility of a developmental process. Although it's sometimes challenging to set specific goals in innovation, finding what isn't wanted while in the process of doing things, is a valuable form of developmental feedback.



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## Applying Developmental Evaluation

Moreover, Developmental Evaluation can monitor expectations and surface what people don't want. The role of the developmental evaluator is to explore the implied criteria of these expectations as they emerge and confirm whether the group is ready to render judgment or if they're open to further experimentation.

*What evidence would indicate that the process is working? Or not working?*

*What are the organization's real-time feedback mechanisms for tracking changes/growth?*

*Given where we are (baseline) and where we want to go, what are the foreseeable decision points and timelines at which we determine how we're doing? What information will we want at those decision points to make any needed adjustments?*

One of the classic tensions in developing strategy is between “nuts and bolts” decisions and overall strategic direction. Some of this may have to do with learning styles: highly concrete, sequential thinkers are most comfortable with the nuts and bolts, while more abstract thinkers are comfortable with broader strategic concepts. Developmental evaluation can help to bridge the two approaches.

### Indicators

Conceptualizing and generating a shared sense of what a group values and expects can provide useful insight into the work at hand. It should also generate indicators that are more useful to the evaluation. In the developmental sense, indicators arise from deliberately observing certain things – group discussions about project purpose, for example – and making connections between these other things happening around the process. It's often useful to scan the environment to discern whether things are taking place on which we may have had an influence. It may be helpful to distinguish between leading indicators – those that signal movement in an intended direction – and lagging indicators, which refers to the ripple effects of what's taking place.

*One highly complex and dynamic community development initiative sought the services of a program evaluation group. The evaluators applied traditional program evaluation techniques to shape the process. There was a heavy emphasis on getting full clarity on desired outcomes (through the use of logic models), and a comprehensive set of research activities was established to generate data on these outcomes. The process quickly became very cumbersome. The problem was that desired outcomes were still taking shape as diverse stakeholders joined the project. Overall progress was stalling and collaborators were frustrated by the evaluator's demands. The initiative shifted the approach of the evaluation to have different stakeholders articulate how they saw change happening in the community with the understanding that these theories would constantly be in flux. Evaluation now supported the framing and reframing of their approaches and improved planning capacity. There was an acknowledgment that the nature of how people were approaching the effort was evolving. On the ground, much was being “made up” as people went along. This initiative became an early experimenter with the notion of developmental evaluation and has since made several contributions to learning about Developmental Evaluation.*

**Adapted from J W McConnell Foundation:** <https://mccconnellfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/A-Developmental-Evaluation-Primer-EN.pdf>

