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# Frequently Asked Questions About Principles-Focused Evaluation

Michael Quinn Patton with Mark Cabaj  
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## INTRODUCTION (by Mark Cabaj)

In September 2017, Michael Quinn Patton released his latest book, *Principles-Focused Evaluation*, which explores how people, organizations and networks can design and evaluate their efforts to tackle tough social, economic and environmental challenges using principles rather than elaborate plans or strategies.

In January 2018, the Tamarack Institute held a webinar attended by nearly 500 registrants, the largest-ever audience among several hundred similar events held over the Institute's 16-year history. In response to this overwhelming demand, the Tamarack Institute organized a series of one-day Master Classes with social innovators, evaluators and philanthropists in Toronto, Regina, Calgary and Vancouver (March 12-16, 2018) to dig deeper into the topic.

I had the pleasure to host these events with Michael. We were impressed by the number, variety and quality of the questions which the participants in each city raised.

This Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document explores 15 questions that either came up again and again in each workshop or that the book does not directly address. For the sake of convenience, we've organized them in five sections.

- The Niche for Principles-Focused Evaluation
- Crafting Principles
- Evaluating Principles
- Communicating Results
- Getting Started

It is worth re-emphasizing that the FAQ is not meant to be an exhaustive resource for people who are drawn to the idea of principles-focused evaluation. It is an appetizer for those who have not yet had an opportunity to dine on the book or an aperitif for those that have.

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS (by Michael Quinn Patton)

### *The Niche*

#### **Question 1. What problem is principles-focused evaluation solving?**

It does not solve a problem; it addresses a challenge. While traditional evaluation has a long history of evaluating specific programs, services and projects, social innovators are increasingly relying on principles to inform and guide their work. This is particularly true when navigating complex issues and situations, which involve dealing with uncertainty, turbulence, non-linearity, emergence and unpredictability, to name a few of the challenges. Principles – rather than rigid plans or fulsome strategies – provide guidance for navigating such complexity. Principles-focused evaluation provides feedback about how well that navigational process is working.

#### **Question 2. Can you give an example of how a principle would provide guidance to an organization?**

Many organizations, especially nonprofits, face the challenge of fulfilling their mission (i.e., the principle of being mission-focused), or observing the alternative principle of *follow the money*. Doing what funders will pay for is the big issue for a lot of organizations. (Many of you know this from your own experiences.) I can tell you that following the money quickly becomes an addiction, one that's hard to recover from. For once you start following the money, the money follows you, and mission fulfillment succumbs to dollars. This powerful drug – money – can make you lose track of mission as you start turning and twisting to make what funders are willing to fund the focus of your work.

Now there are good reasons to do what funders want, for example, to keep staff and keep your organization afloat. But it's a principled decision about whether to stay true to mission and say to the funder, "Can we have a conversation about how to bring your needs and our mission into alignment?" while being prepared to say, "No, that doesn't fit our mission so we take a pass on the funding."

But I can also tell you that I've known programs and organizations that so shocked the foundation when they did that, when they said "no" for mission reasons, that the funder came back to them and said, "We need to understand better why what we've done on our own isn't fitting what's going on the community." In the end, the funder offered funds aligned with the organization's mission. But there's also that risk that you won't get funding.

#### **Question 3. How do principles compare to or relate to vision and strategy?**

Principles may be the connection between vision and strategy. Vision is where you want to go. Strategy is how you intend to get there. Effectiveness principles provide guidance about how to implement strategy in a way that is true to the vision. Martin Luther King, Jr., had a vision, a dream, of a just society. His strategy was to organize and lead. His principle was nonviolence.

But, in a larger sense, I think that how you see the relationship between strategy and vision, and the role of principles, depends on your own world and organizational framework. It thus is a matter of context. I don't want to suggest a kind of rigid hierarchy. I would suggest that you attempt to locate principles in relation to the other forms of concepts you

employ in a way that's meaningful to you, that helps take your work to another level.

So it's not a mechanical choice. There's no rule about where to place principles in relation to other concepts like vision and strategy. When you look at the other things going on in your work, how you talk about your work, and what's going on in evaluation, where do principles provide additional guidance? Where do you locate principles to make them as meaningful as possible to you?

#### **Question 4. How do you see principles in relation to collective impact?**

Collective impact is an umbrella for a lot of different ways of working together. So in some ways, the nature and role of principles depend on the precise collective impact approach being taken. Some collective impact efforts are very focused on measurable outcomes and aligning the outcomes of various stakeholders. Some use outcome mapping as guidance for how partners work together. In some cases, people are doing collective impact where the players know each other; a statement of principles helps make explicit already-existing understandings. In other cases, people are coming together who haven't worked together before. Principles then can become a basis for shared understandings. Principles like those developed by Vibrant Community participants could be viewed, in retrospect, as a form of collective impact: they articulated principles about how they were going to approach anti-poverty initiatives in different communities.

There can be principles about what a group of people are going to take on together, what kind of work they're going to do, and principles about the evaluation of collective impact initiatives. So, I think that principles

can provide a way for people to frame issues together and support them in building trust and figuring out what they're going to do that has some endurance beyond a particular initiative.

I would view the youth homelessness case we discussed as a collective impact approach at the level of shared principles, even though they did not frame it that way at the time. But one could take the language of collective impact and apply it to what they did when collaborating toward some shared outcomes.

#### ***Crafting Principles***

#### **Question 5. What does a good principle look like?**

It is important to take developing good principles seriously. Here is an example of a principle that is not all that helpful.

One of the most common principles that I found, widely adopted by philanthropic foundations, nonprofits and NGOs, comes from the medical world: "First do no harm." This principle is widely adopted and, from my perspective, relatively meaningless. It is very hard to know whether you did, or did not, do harm in the long run. But more critically, most of living and working involves trade-offs, even in medicine. You take a leg to save a life. You go on meds that take away libido in order to alleviate depression. Trade-offs are side effects, or plus-and-minus decisions, and so the notion of "no harm" doesn't provide much guidance. Even doing nothing may do harm, so it doesn't provide much direction about what to do or not do. The principle is taken from the Hippocratic Oath. But seen in the context of the full oath, it admonishes doctors not to make up treatments and try out cures without having any idea what they're doing.

Consider community systems change initiatives. It isn't that you don't inflict harm. One mantra is "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Most of you are working on changing systems. If you're trying to disrupt systems, it's because the way the system operates favors a few and oppresses others. If you succeed in bringing about change, it is going to mean some suffering among those who are currently benefiting from the system. Indeed, one way you'll know you're successful, is if you're afflicting the comfortable. They're pushing back. That means that something is happening that's harmful from their point of view.

So while "first, do no harm" has a lot of cachet and can be found displayed as a guiding principle on all kinds of organizational walls, I don't think it provides much guidance.

Developing good principles takes time and effort and I devote a whole section of the book to describing a framework to assist that effort. The GUIDE framework is organized around five criteria: Guiding, Useful, Inspiring, Developmental and Evaluable.

#### **Question 6. Do principles sometimes conflict with each other?**

Yes. I did an article on theory of philanthropy for *Foundation Review* (reference below). It included attention to the extent to which different elements of a foundation operate in alignment. Two of the most common principles in philanthropy are in conflict: one emphasizes building relationships, that is, being relationship-based when grant-making; another principle is being "lean and mean."

How do you suppose these two principles play out together? Which one do you think ends up being primary? Building relationships takes time and resources. Being "lean and mean"

means minimizing how much work goes into moving grant funds out the door. In a "lean and mean" culture, staff can do administrative work but can't do relationships. So there can be conflicts among principles. Part of looking at the principle of alignment is to see how different principles play out together. Are they mutually reinforcing?

Reference: A Foundation's Theory of Philanthropy: What It Is, What It Provides, How to Do It. *The Foundation Review*.

<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.bing.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1263&context=tfr>

#### **Question 7. How can we align goals, principles, strategies and all the other ways in which we describe our work?**

As I mentioned in an earlier question, we know that there are often some tensions and conflicts among goals, strategies and principles. These can be difficult to align so we shouldn't expect perfect alignment. My background and training is in organizational sociology which pays a lot of attention to degrees of alignment within organizations. Working with Frances Wesley, getting into the adaptive cycle, and with Brenda Zimmerman, getting into complexity, and writing the *Getting to Maybe* book with them, I became convinced that much of life and work is about continually adapting and finding the interconnections among things that seem disconnected. Moreover, there is no perfect alignment, no right place to be. There is no perfect sweet spot for organizational effectiveness where everything is ideally aligned. Indeed, even in those moments where you may find alignment, it evaporates very quickly. Alignment seems to attract its own forces of destruction, so part of evaluating

effectiveness is finding the range within which things are all right – good enough (“satisficing”). When you start getting outside of that range, you know that you need to be able to do something different. So there isn’t perfection in alignment, which means that part of principles-focused evaluation, as a learning agenda, can be looking at the interrelationships among effectiveness elements, including effectiveness principles, identifying tensions, acknowledging them, and monitoring their effects and consequences.

Every organization has tensions. In bigger organizations (like international organizations working in local communities, with layers of hierarchy), there will be classic tensions between headquarters and the field, and classic communication challenges across the organization and across levels of the organization. So there is value in examining alignment and communications among and across parts of the organization. Certain kinds of tensions are predictable. They come with the territory of complexity, so you acknowledge them, monitor their consequences, and learn how to manage conflicts, applying the alignment principle or other effectiveness principles.

**Question 8. What advice do you have about how to facilitate the development of principles?**

It’s not easy to develop principles that are meaningful and useful. As a result, I recommend the groups seek the assistance of skilled facilitators. Just as evaluators are often involved in helping people craft logic models, theories of change and strategies with social innovators, they are – and will be – asked to develop principles as well. In my new book on *Facilitating Evaluation: Principles in Practice* (Sage, 2018), I describe the kind of facilitation

skills and processes that can help groups work together.

**Evaluation**

**Question 9. A lot of examples in the workshops seem to involve qualitative data. Is there a role for quantitative data in principles-focused evaluation?**

Absolutely. You can weave together qualitative and quantitative data. The example of the Paris Declaration Principles involved actually quantifying the distance, direction and speed of progress on each of the five principles on five-point scales. The numerical ratings were based on judging and rating varieties of data for each principle.

At the community level, if the principle is to *build social capital*, you could use Robert Putnam’s instrument for measuring social capital. Mixed methods can be used. Principles-focused evaluation is methodologically agnostic and does not favor either quantitative or qualitative data inherently.

**Question 10. We are a small nonprofit. How can we gather stories and analyze principles as in the example of the youth homelessness initiative you share in your book and the workshop?**

Regarding principles-focused evaluation in the circumstances you describe, I would say the same thing I have said about developmental evaluation: Follow the principle of embedding the evaluation work in the programming. Do not make it separate, do not make it external, and do not make it an add-on. Embed evaluation and integrate it so that it is part of your engagement with the population, part of empowerment, part of relationship-building,

all of which involves hearing participants' stories. You probably do that already, that is, hear participants' stories. But you probably aren't capturing them, systematically documenting them, and looking for patterns at the level of principles.

Make sharing stories part of the work, capture them as part of the work. Then analysis is the only extra work – and make that part of ongoing staff development.

## **Engagement**

### **Question 11. How do you get buy-in for principles-focused evaluation?**

Whatever you're working on, figuring out how to get buy-in is part of the work. Regardless of what arena of issues or sector you're engaged in, I'm going to speculate that you're dealing with buy-in of some kind at some level. Getting buy-in for principles-focused evaluation is no different. You know your situation, apply what you know. There is no generic solution or magic answer that I can offer about how to get buy-in in your situation.

The key thing to recognize with this question is that buy-in is an issue. In fact, getting buy-in is a principle for most of the work that involves multiple stakeholders and diverse people. As a principle, it has implications for how you go about what you do and is something to worry about. Who has to buy-in at what level, what it means, is highly situational. But I can tell you this: do not move forward too fast without buy-in. Figure out what buy-in looks like in your situation and how to facilitate it, and then bring that knowledge to bear when implementing principles-focused evaluation. Use your own knowledge about buy-in and apply it to P-FE.

So, think about what you know about buy-in and apply it to getting buy-in for principles-focused evaluation.

### **Question 12. How you deal with principles being imposed by funders or government authorities in a top-down fashion?**

Buy-in is important for any evaluation process. This is equally true in principles-focused work, which requires authenticity, genuine collaboration, and meaningful shared values in order to work.

When well-meaning funders or government initiatives try to force people to work together, impose principles on them, or mandate that they develop shared principles, it often leads to compliance behavior and resistance.

So when principles are imposed or mandated, the place to begin is to inquire into their meaningfulness as an authentic, respected and credible source of guidance. Examine what the difficulties are with imposed principles as an empirical inquiry, not just objecting to the fact that they are imposed, but the consequences of that imposition.

## **Communication & Reporting**

### **Question 13. What example of a principles-focused evaluation report do you recommend?**

For local nonprofits, I would recommend youth homelessness collaboration evaluation because I worked with them most directly and their report focuses directly on principles: 9 *Effectiveness Principles to Help Youth Overcome Homelessness*. The example is more fully explored in the book *Principles-Focused Evaluation*, but it is also available online.

[www.terralunacollaborative.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/9-Evidence-Based-Principles-to-Help-Youth-Overcome-Homelessness-Webpublish.pdf](http://www.terralunacollaborative.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/9-Evidence-Based-Principles-to-Help-Youth-Overcome-Homelessness-Webpublish.pdf)

For an evaluation of a large-scale, complex, and multidimensional initiative, I recommend the *Evaluation of the Implementation of the Paris Declaration Principles for International Development Aid*. This evaluation won the American Evaluation Association award for Outstanding Evaluation of the Year in 2012.

<http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/evaluationoftheimplementationoftheparisdeclaration.htm>

## **Getting Started**

### **Question 14. When should an organization start with principles?**

At the beginning, middle or end of any effort when the urge to use principles to navigate the uncertainties and turmoil of complex systems and issues is strong.

For example, the Global Alliance for the Future of Food, headquartered in Toronto, used formulation of principles to align the separate missions of more than 20 philanthropic foundations committed to collaboration globally. They began with principles.

<https://futureoffood.org/>

On the other hand, The McKnight Foundation headquartered in Minneapolis, identified principles for the Collaborative Crop Research Program after 30 years of operation as a way of taking the work to a new level and informing new challenges in the face of increased complexity.

Both of these examples, and others, are featured in the book on *Principles-Focused Evaluation: The Guide*.

<https://www.guilford.com/books/Principles-Focused-Evaluation/Michael-Quinn-Patton/9781462531820>

### **Question 15. How can we get started in doing principles-focused evaluation?**

I recommend against trying to change an entire system to principles-focused evaluation all at once. Look for opportunities, early adopters, places where there is a good fit. Look for what Leonard Cohen calls “the cracks where the light comes through.” Look for the places where there is possibility for and openness to learning, and that often means beginning small.

I think a mistake that folks make is trying to do too much too soon. Principles-focused evaluation has a learning curve, like any new approach. You don’t start out skiing on Black Diamond runs. You start down on the Bunny Hills. Find an opening where even a couple of principles can be applied and evaluated. Get some experience with formulating principles, beginning to use them for guidance and evaluation.

And I recommend that you don’t start out by announcing principles-focused evaluation is this great new thing, making it a big deal with high stakes. That will surely lead to skepticism and pushback, and probably appropriately so. Rather, be opportunistic and seek early adopters and learn by doing. Learn and let it grow, and it will grow if it has legs, if people respond to it. It will build its own momentum, as developmental evaluation has, as utilization-focused evaluation has.