Integrating communications in evaluation

Owl RE
Wise research & evaluation

Definition of communications and its importance

Communications

"The process through which people share thoughts, ideas and feelings with each other in commonly understood ways"
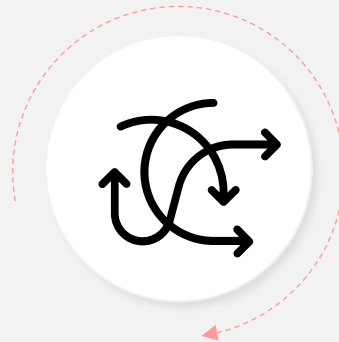
"Evaluations without communications would not be possible"

For an evaluation to *be* an evaluation, its findings must be communicated, heard and generate learning and eventual change

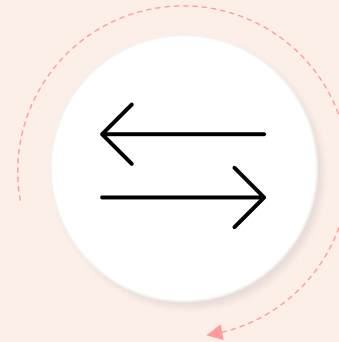Sources: Hamilton, 2013, p. 4; Alkin et al., 2006, p. 384

Evolution of communications
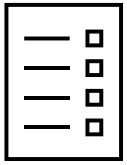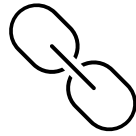

Magic bullet theory

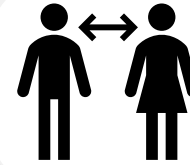Minimal effects theory

Two-way theory

Communications as an asset for evaluations

1. Planning of communications should occur early in the evaluation process

2. Ongoing collaborative communications is successful

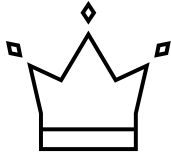**3. Communications as a dialogue is successful**

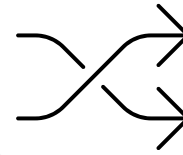**4. A combination of communications formats is required**

Communications as an asset for evaluations (cont.)

5. Communications needs to be tailored to stakeholders and audiences

6."Who" communicates is important

7. Stakeholders and audiences will understand communications differently

8. Audiences' interests will differ widely

9. Communications cannot overcome all obstacles for evaluation

To what extent can communications support an evaluation?

Preparing to communicate:

- *What is the motivation for the evaluation?*

- *Is this a midterm, final, or other type of evaluation?*

- *Are staff at different levels in the organization familiar with evaluation?*

- *What aspects of the organizational culture could potentially impact an evaluation?*

- *What aspects of the external environment could potentially impact an evaluation?*

- *What is the anticipated involvement of internal and external stakeholders?*

- *What evaluation policies and practices of the organization exist to support communications?*

- *What is the level of willingness to discuss and share results?*

Communications throughout the evaluation process

Before → **During** → **After**
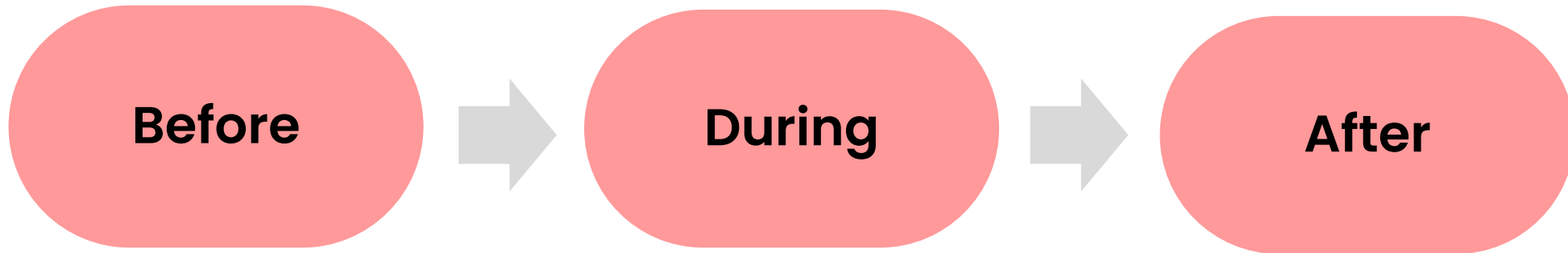
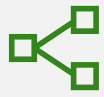# Communicating **before** an evaluation

Input into evaluation design

Signal evaluation approach

Create awareness

Develop ownership

Build relationships

Manage expectations

Communicating **during** an evaluation

Communicate progress

Maintain relationships

Present initial findings

Test findings

Gather feedback from stakeholders

Communicating negative findings

- Involving stakeholders and staff throughout the evaluation

- Keeping stakeholders' perspectives in mind

- Communicating early with staff on negative findings

- Presenting positive findings first

- Using the voice of the beneficiaries

- Placing the emphasis on the future

- Being careful in the use of negative language

- The poor reception of findings can be an indication of broader issues at play

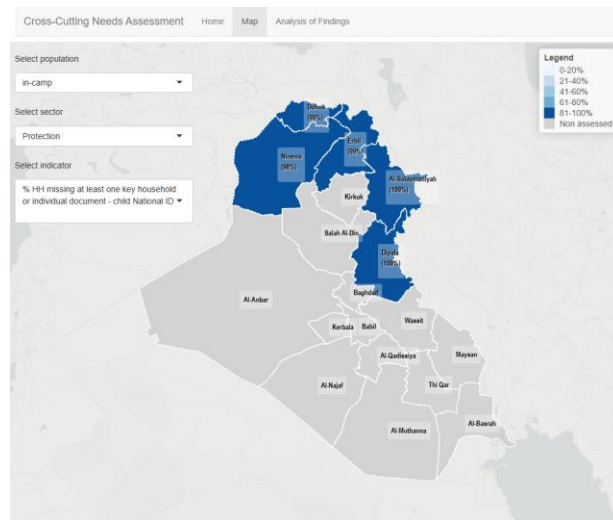# Communicating **after** an evaluation

Present findings

Dialogue on findings

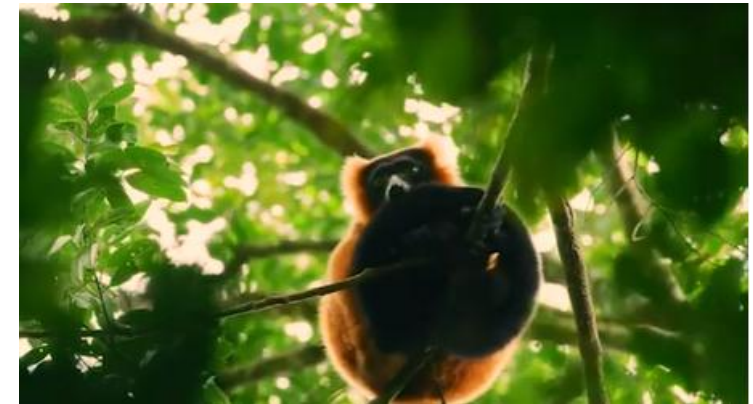Promote uptake of findings

Presenting findings
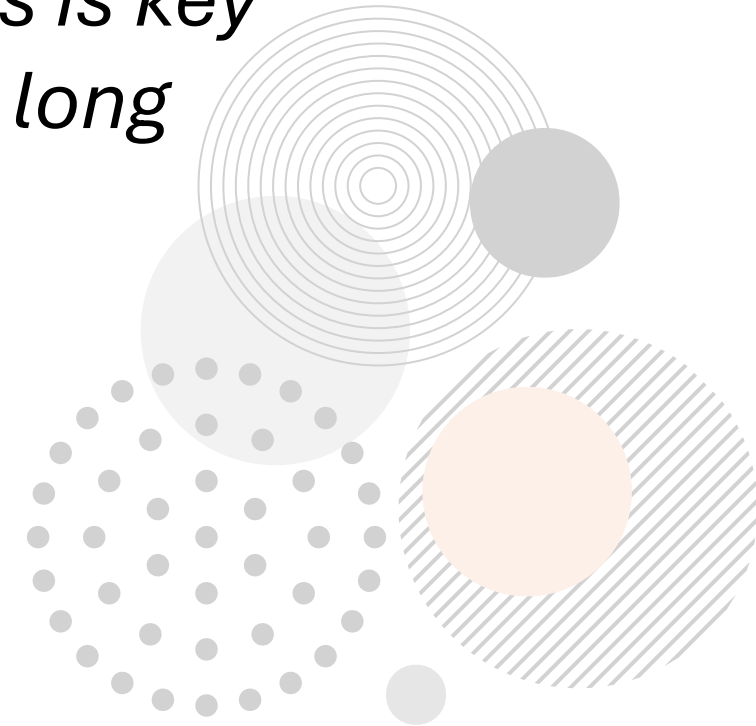
Dashboards

Video testimonies

Video reports

Promoting uptake of findings

"Engagement, interaction and communication between evaluation clients and evaluators is key to maximizing the use of evaluation in the long run"

Source: Johnson et al, 2009, p. 337

Challenges to integrating communications in evaluation

Seen as a "nice to have": Communications is often undervalued and considered non-essential in the evaluation process

Lack of time, resources, and capacity: Many evaluations suffer from limited planning or budgeting for communication activities

Limited role: Communications is considered only for a limited role, such as promoting evaluation findings

Resistance to change: There may be organizational or cultural reluctance to adopt newer communication tools or practices

Fear of losing control: Gathering feedback, sharing findings broadly and engaging stakeholders can be seen as risky or difficult to manage

References

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- Hamilton, C. (2013). *Communicating for results: A guide for business and the professions*. Cengage Learning.

- Johnson, K., Greenseid, L. O., Toal, S. A., King, J. A., Lawrenz, F., & Volkov, B. (2009). Research on Evaluation Use: A Review of the Empirical literature From 1986 to 2005. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 30(3), 377-–410.

- O'Neil, G. (2025). Communicating with Interest Holders. In Bickman, L. & Rog, D. (Eds.) *The Evaluation Handbook: An Evaluator's Companion.* New York, NY: Guilford Press.

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A GUIDE: INTEGRATING
COMMUNICATION IN EVALUATION

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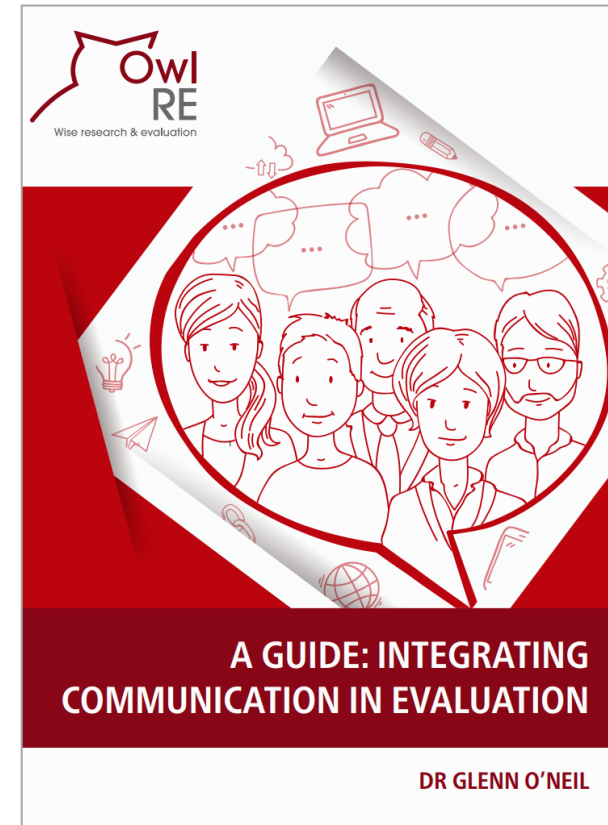
Thank you!

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