

Professional learning through reflective, deliberate evaluation practice

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As the evaluation field grows and diversifies, providing a variety of ongoing evaluation-specific learning opportunities that build competencies in purposeful ways will continue to be important.

Effective professional learning doesn't just happen – it takes time, reflection and self-awareness, organizational support, and resources to draw from.

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Introduction

To meet the increasing demand for evaluation and efforts to diversify their internal evaluation capacity, some organizations are hiring or partnering with evaluators who are newer to the evaluation field or bring varied lived experiences. As organizations seek to support the professional development of emerging evaluators, questions arise about how to provide on-going evaluation-specific learning opportunities in the practice setting that meet evaluators where they are and build competencies in purposeful ways.

Professional Development Strategies

There are many strategies and tools to support the professional development of emerging evaluators. Below are five examples used within teams at a mid-sized evaluation firm, along with resources and considerations.

Self-assessment tools

Reflect on strengths and identify areas for growth

Evaluator self-assessment information can be used to engage in reflective conversations between evaluators and their supervisors or project managers to:

- Identify an evaluator's perceived strengths and potentially underutilized abilities
- Identify areas for development and inform actionable steps to grow professionally
- Connect areas of needed skill development with specific project work opportunities

Resource: Evaluator Self-Assessment developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Reflective Practices

Critically reflect to identify and assess assumptions

Evaluators bring their own set of assumptions, knowledge, and experience to their practice. Structured critical reflection can be a tool for challenging our own assumptions and gaining greater awareness of knowledge gaps. It can help evaluators reflect on how our identities and lived experience informs our lenses for conducting evaluations, often called reflexivity. Reflective practices:

- Can be done individually, though reflection with others in small groups or teams can be especially valuable
- Requires continual practice and learning to develop as a skill
- Can be useful at the end of an activity to consider what aspects worked well, to what extent team members felt their contributions were useful, and what could be changed

Evaluation Origin Stories

Sharing our stories that influence us as evaluators

A guided activity where evaluators describe their evaluation origin stories can help to learn about the influences, values, and perspectives that contribute to evaluators' sense of professional self. Sample guiding questions:

- How did you come to learn about the profession of evaluation?
- Was it planned or accidental?
- What were the important contextual details that led up to your becoming an evaluator?

Tip: Sharing these stories of our developing evaluation practice can build connection among colleagues and reveal opportunities for learning. Ensuring that stories are shared in spaces where individuals feel accepted and not judged will ensure this strategy is successful.

Communities of Practice

Collective learning experiences to expand knowledge & confidence

Communities of practice within an evaluation organization can help focus particular on areas of professional development. Communities of practice:

- Offer opportunities to learn from other evaluators with different areas of expertise and lived experience
- Build working relationships and collegiality
- Provide regular space to workshop materials, receive feedback, and share examples
- Can be centered around cross-cutting topics

Examples of community of practice topics: Data visualization, evaluation methods, health equity, certain content areas

Guiding Evaluation Practice Documents

Guiding documents offer grounding for the profession

Evaluation practice documents offer a structured way to identify individual and group strengths and limitations. They ground individuals in what it means to be an evaluator. A few guiding documents include the:

- AEA Evaluator Competencies
- AEA Guiding Principles
- Program Evaluation Standards
- AEA Statement on Cultural Competence

Tip: Regularly refer back to guiding documents to inform professional development plans and other practice improvements. Integrate aspects into evaluation practice (e.g., plans, reports, conversations with clients) to keep them at the forefront.

