Criteria for Success for the Action Evaluation Consultant: Lessons Learned the Hard Way

A Work in Progress

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Introduction

This report, a work in progress, documents the experiences of two action evaluation consultants, Deborah Bing and Rachael Cobb, engaged in two different projects both designed to test the utility of the action evaluation methodology in its developmental stages. We were among the earliest group to have pilot projects and thus had both the challenge and opportunity of improvising and inventing throughout our work with the action evaluation process. At the same time, our experiences helped shape and refine the methodology. By working reflexively with the methodology at its early stages of development, we were able to highlight challenges for the action evaluator and partnering project, develop new strategies to implementation and most importantly, discover some key criteria for success.

Unlike traditional evaluation models that attempt to assess a conflict resolution initiative at its conclusion by measuring early-articulated promises against final results, action evaluation is designed to develop meaningful evaluation criteria throughout the stages of a conflict resolution initiative. The "pure-type" action evaluation model suggests that an action-evaluator begin collecting data from all stakeholders at the beginning of an initiative. Through questionnaires and/or interviews, the action-evaluator should ask stakeholders to explicitly articulate "what" they hope to accomplish (their goals), "why" their goals are important, and "how" they can best meet their goals. The action-evaluator then contrasts and compares this data and uses this initial analysis as a "baseline" a set of goals shared by all stakeholders. This process of goal articulation is then repeated at each stage of the project, following it through its formative stages,

thus creating a formative assessment "explicit criteria" which can serve as the basis for evaluating the ultimate success of the initiative.

Our action evaluation projects were substantively different from each other. Bing worked with an initiative in Estonia, assessing the conveners' efforts to assist three communities to develop democratic institutions and forge healing where there had been historical ethnic tension. Cobb, on the other hand, worked with an organization seeking to begin a community-wide dialogue in a small racially divided city in the United States. While the differences between the projects are obvious and profound, there are striking similarities in Bing and Cobb's experiences using the action evaluation methodology. Both Bing and Cobb encountered convener resistance, which, in turn, led to related obstacles with regards to data collection, their relationship with conveners, and "success" with the action evaluation methodology.

This report offers three broad lessons to practitioners and researchers of action evaluation engaged with convening organizations: lesson one, ensure that conveners "buy-into" the action evaluation undertaking. Congruent with action evaluation methodology, this lesson serves as the organizing goal the "what" which the action evaluator hopes to accomplish as a new project commences. Lesson two: develop a close working relationship with conveners. This lesson illustrates "why" buy-in is critical. It allows the action evaluator to develop a close working relationship with conveners so that the action-evaluator is at once thoroughly integrated into the life of the project, while, at the same time, is viewed as a "consultant" to the project rather than as additional convener. The second lesson can be operationalized through the development and refinement lesson three, assist conveners to think reflexively and be reflexive yourself. This lesson illustrates "how" to achieve the fundamental goal of buy-in. Through reflexivity, conveners and action evaluators and develop a meaningful and inquisitive relationship that will shape the process and add significant depth to their work together.
In the first section of this paper, we define our lessons more broadly and with greater clarity. In the second section, we provide the context of our lessons by briefly outlining important background information of our respective projects. Finally, in the third section we illustrate our lessons using examples from our respective case studies that demonstrate the importance of our lessons.

Overview of the Three Lessons

***What* is the Starting Goal of the Action Evaluator?**

Lesson One: Establish Convener Buy-In to the Action Evaluation Process

"Buy-in" is the level of acceptance that project stakeholders have in action-evaluation as a viable and useful process for their work. If project stakeholders question the premise of the action evaluation methodology and consequently have little faith that the action evaluation process will be practical or even possible with their work, there will be no buy-in to the process. If stakeholders agree in theory that action evaluation is a good idea but doubt its ability to add value to their work, they have minimum, or partial buy-in. Ideally, the level of buy-in is high among stakeholders and it is signified by their acceptance and understanding of the methodology and their belief in action evaluation's ability to add value.

There are many reasons why any given stakeholder may not buy-in to the process. It may be that they simply do not understand the methodology, or perhaps need more illustration of how it could be adapted to meet their needs. Conversely, they may understand the process thoroughly, but don’t agree with its propositions. It is also possible for some stakeholders to buy-in to the process while others do not. For example, perhaps the funders believe in the process and the conveners do not, or the conveners embrace action evaluation but cannot get the participants to buy-

in. Any of these combinations affects the ability of an action-evaluator to use the process. When the action evaluator begins his or her work, the primary first goal should be to establish buy-in.

Why is the Establishment of Buy-In the Goal?

Lesson Two: Because it Allows the Action Evaluator to Develop a Trusting and Positive Relationship with the Convening Group

Conventional models of evaluation employ the use of a third party evaluator to retrospectively assess the success or failure of initiatives. This third party remains fully "outside" of the initiative's proceedings, performing work largely independently of the initiative's organizers, participants, and directors. In contrast, the action-evaluator comes to an initiative ideally in its earliest stages, and, from the outset, works closely with the conveners. The relationship that the action-evaluator develops with conveners is, inevitably, different from the relationship that a traditional evaluator might have. Rather than remaining separate and detached from the work and soul of the project, the action-evaluator is, in many ways, a full and complete participant--integral to the project, informed about the planning, preparation, and development. This depth of involvement necessarily requires that the action-evaluator form relationships with those involved with the initiative, particularly with the conveners. The action-evaluator must be respected and trusted by all involved parties.

At the same time, the relationship between an action-evaluator and those involved with the initiative is a delicate balance. On the one hand the relationship must be marked by profound trust; on the other hand the relationship must allow the action-evaluator a certain amount of autonomy from the more bureaucratic and potentially complicated entanglements that can arise in the life of any project. The action-evaluator should not be so intimate with the project's conveners so as to be inappropriately invested in the personal politics of the groups involved. Rather, the action-evaluator should maintain the status of "consultant," permitting the action-evaluator to focus on the process and its evolution, not the substantive decisions and work of the project. Ultimately and ideally the action-evaluator is a facilitator of dialogue, a developer of analyses, and viewed as an asset to all involved. If viewed as such, the action-evaluator's legitimacy is ensured and he or she is able to engage in truly collaborative work. The action-evaluator has the latitude necessary to guide project decisions, and directions and has developed the trust necessary to gain the confidence of conveners and the authority necessary to make informed suggestions. Finding the right balance of an insider/outsider role is challenging, but crucial to the success of the process.

Developing relationships with conveners, funders, and participants takes time. If the action-evaluator is not well known by the convening organization, then time taken for thorough introductions to the goals and processes of action evaluation can also serve as time to begin to build constructive interpersonal relationships. The more opportunity conveners in particular have to understand the action evaluation methodology and to probe the action-evaluator with questions, the more they will feel safe with and in support of the process.

How Can the Goal of Establishing Buy-In be Operationalized?

Lesson Three: By Developing Reflexive Thinking Skills Among Conveners

Reflexivity allows us actively and explicitly to explore the relationship between our thoughts and beliefs and the decisions that we make. Reflexivity encourages us to observe ourselves in action, understand the reasons and motivations behind our choices (by considering interaction between self, other and context) and use that insight to inform future decisions. In his recent book Rothman elaborates: There are two forms of reflexivity. The first and most common is the automatic response, characterized by the physiological response to the doctor's mallet. Such a "knee-

jerk" reflex to conflict is a kind of single feedback loop between actions and reactions. It can be closely tied to adversarial framing, when reactions are automatic and aggressive. Such reflexive reaction to conflict usually results in the classic fight or flight response.

> Paradoxically, reflexivity can also mean the exact opposite, whereby we slow down our immediate and unexamined reactions and think first about what has happened, analyze it, and mull over our response before we make it. [1]

This is a slowed down and self-conscious analysis of the interactive nature of reactions. It allows us to be active agents, making decisions about our responses, learning to encounter an action contemplatively, questioning our own assumptions and cognitively observing our own reactions prior to enacting them, finally choosing how to proceed. [2]

Reflexivity is crucial to the success of action evaluation, because the process demands that conveners explore the interaction between their goals, their beliefs, their motivations, and the context of their project. If conveners are reflexive, action evaluation can provide a deeper understanding of goals and enable stakeholders to use new understandings to shape their initiative.

The necessity of convener reflexivity can be demonstrated through some process examples. The first stage of data gathering asks conveners to list their goals, their motivations for their goals and how they plan to meet them. When the action-evaluator uses the data to suggest areas of similarity and difference among conveners in order to negotiate a working agenda, reflexivity on the part of the conveners will encourage a meaningful dialogue about how to proceed. If one convener in a given project articulates a goal of having impact and another articulates a goal of feeling fulfilled, these goals might initially seem contradictory--the first is concerned with affecting others while the second is concerned about the effect on the convener him/herself. Through reflexive discussion, however, the convener who wanted to have impact might explain that the positive effect on others is important because it will illustrate to him, or perhaps to his supervisors or another concerned party, that he was successful with this project. If the second convener thinks reflexively about what feeling fulfilled means in this context, she might realize that affecting others positively would provide fulfillment. Through reflexive thought, two seemingly different goals might emerge as a shared goal.

Similarly, reflexivity can illustrate hidden differences. If two conveners state that their goal is to "be successful," an initial review might place success on a list of shared goals. If each one thinks reflexively about what success explicitly means to them in the context of the project, however, they might realize that their visions of success are very different, and in fact constitute different goals. Reflexive thinking about success requires someone not only to think explicitly about what success means, but also to examine what internal theories, external conditions or contextual implications motivate that vision of success. A reflexive discussion about a seemingly shared goal might illustrate distinct differences of domain assumptions and beliefs and subsequently help conveners identify areas they need to discuss in more depth as they develop a working agenda for the project.

Through discussions, however, a third source of goal creation and definition emerges. Reflexive interaction between conveners often generates the inception of "new goals"--goals that either incorporate or run parallel to their separate, original goals. Individual conveners may develop these, or the group as a whole may. In this way goals evolve, crystallize, become more defined, rendered more precise and complete. Differences between convener goals may not be eliminated—they may even be more exposed. But through controversies, debates, and dynamic discussions that are engaged rather than suppressed, resulting in important and meaningful dialogue arises.

It is equally important that an action evaluator be reflexive him/herself. Finding the right role for you within a working group and maintaining a rigorous and deep approach to the goals analysis process demands reflexive consideration of

your thought process, decisions and personal goals. Reflexivity on the part of an action evaluator may also help conveners be reflexive by demonstrating the value and meaning of reflexive thought in this collaborative process.

The identification of these similarities and differences early on in an initiative helps conveners express well defined shared goals, identify and understand areas of disagreement and use this information to plan realistically for the future of the initiative before it is launched.

Brief Histories of the Projects

Westmore Project [3]

Background of the Resolution Associates Initiative: Cobb's Experience

In 1996, Resolution Associates, a non-profit dedicated to assisting communities work through and manage conflict, was asked to intervene in a community-wide conflict that was bubbling over in Westmore, a small northeastern city. Deep-rooted conflicts over race and class had once again been ignited by a string of incidents--the spewing of racial epitaphs by public officials, incidents of police brutality against African-Americans, some of which were caught on videotape, and the subsequent acquittal of white police officers.
Resolution Associates began the intervention by performing a diagnostic process to gain a deeper understanding of the community, the issues, and the sources of tension. Members of the Resolution Associates team interviewed a representative segment of the community's residents including members of the police force, local civil rights organizations, members of the business community, elected officials, teachers, students, principals, members of the board of education, members of the religious community, and representatives from both print and television media. Over one hundred interviews were completed in all, performed in a variety of ways--from one-on-one interviews to small group discussions, to community meetings. Based on these interviews Resolution Associates concluded that a community retreat should be planned.

At the same time, Resolution Associates was interested in using action evaluation methodology developed by Dr. Jay Rothman. Resolution Associates decided that the project was the "right fit" because the funder had expressed a desire in having the project evaluated and because the project was in its early stages when the action evaluation commenced.

Cobb, the action evaluator, entered the project after the diagnostic process had been completed but prior to the retreat by one month. Because the diagnostic process was complete, Resolution Associates felt it would not be appropriate for Cobb to interview participants prior to the retreat. Residents of the community were already skeptical about the retreat and Resolution Associates did not want to spur greater levels of apprehension and anxiety. Wanting to maintain a high level of professionalism, Resolution Associates suggested that Cobb collect baseline data at the retreat itself, using a questionnaire. Cobb did, however, have the opportunity to interview the Resolution Associates conveners preceding the retreat.

Estonia Project

Background of the Estonia Project: Bing's Experience

The Center for the Study of Human Mind and Interaction (CSHMI), located at the University of Virginia, and directed by Dr. Vamik Volkan, had been working to address ethnic conflict in the Baltics since just before the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1990. With the support of several U.S. trusts and organizations, CSHMI offered a series of conferences and workshops in Eastern Europe focused on addressing the challenges of a transition to democracy at end

of the Cold War. Although CSHMI had worked for several years in all three Baltic states, they decided to focus their work in Estonia both because the ethnic tension (primarily between Russian speakers and Estonians) seemed more threatening there and because focusing on a specific region provided the opportunity to implement CSHMI's methodology in depth.

The CSHMI team worked collaboratively to design a long-term plan to help build democratic institutions and transform ethnic conflict barriers so that Russians and Estonians could develop and implement shared visions for the future of their communities.

In 1995, the Pew Charitable Trusts gave CSHMI a grant for "From Dialogue to Action in Estonia: A Model for Societal Change in Multi-Ethnic Democracies," a project designed to institutionalize their efforts to build democracy. This project focused on implementing collaborative projects with the Russian and Estonian ethnic communities through dialogue in three Estonian localities: Klooga, Mustamae and Mustvee.

Although the project had initially started in July of 1995, Bing did not become the action evaluator for the Estonia Initiative until January of 1997. By the time Bing came on board in 1997, the CSHMI team had fully launched their activities in Estonia. Given the significant progress of the Estonia project before Bing's arrival, Bing decided to look at two stages of project goals retrospectively: starting goals (as articulated in the initial proposal for the Estonia initiative) and goals gathered between July, 1995 and December 1996. For each of these stages, she used the model that the action evaluation methodology suggests of categorizing goals in terms of "what" the initiative hopes to accomplish, "how", in concrete terms, they plan to implement the goals and "why" these goals are important. In this way, Bing hoped to use the action evaluation process to produce an analytic framework to focus future efforts to articulate evolved goals for the project. In July 1997 Bing traveled to Estonia with the CSHMI team. During this trip she focused on using the action evaluation model to articulate the most current goals of the project, and then contrast these goals with earlier goals in order to articulate "criteria for success" that CSHMI could use to evaluate their work at the end of their initiative.

During the first six months, Bing worked to develop a tool to launch the action evaluation process with the Estonia initiative. Since she began the work so long after the initiative had started, she did not attempt to use this analysis to guide the initiative, but rather used her analysis to build a framework for the next step. Bing framed the data and background information in terms of "what", "why" and "how," to allow her to continue with the process during her trip to Estonia. In doing so, she looked at the initiative in terms of the evolution of goals rather than in terms of the specific plans. This allowed her the ability to utilize the process that she had tested during the first six months to understand and articulate the most evolved goals of the initiative based on her trip, and then translate those goals into standards for success that accurately reflected internal project expectations.

Reviewing the Lessons Using Examples

Lesson One: Establish Convener Buy-In to the Action Evaluation Process

Bing's and Cobb's experiences demonstrated that the level of buy-in by a project's stakeholders directly influences the level of success of action evaluation in any given project. Specifically, their work suggests three important lessons:

1. Conveners should understand action evaluation conceptually and practically;
2. Conveners should actively engage the process; and
3. Feedback on the process is critical.

Buy-In: Estonia Case Study

Ideally, a group of people involved in an initiative chooses to use action evaluation because they believe that the process will add value to their work. Similarly, the action evaluation sponsor (in this case, ARIA Associates) believes that the initiative is well suited to the action evaluation process. In this "ideal" scenario, mutual buy-in sets the tone for a good working relationship with each partner invested in making the process work. In the Estonia case study, both CSHMI and ARIA Associates were asked by a third party, their common funder, to work together. Inevitably, the fact that neither partner proactively selected what the other had to offer created problems for buy-in.

When the Estonia project was officially launched, the action evaluation team (ARIA Associates) met with the entire convening team to explain the methodology and process. At the time, action evaluation was still being developed and refined and the Estonia project was just being launched. While CSHMI agreed in concept to engage in the process, they saw the process as something that their funders required, rather than as an added benefit to their work. Also, the nascent stage of the action evaluation model meant that there were still open questions about the process to work out. As a result, the mandate and direction for the process were unclear, and both partners struggled somewhat to understand the best way to move forward together. As a result, each partner worked somewhat independently and developed directions of its own. In essence, the Estonia initiative "bought-in" to action evaluation in concept (and out of necessity because of their funders' mandate), but they did not entirely buy-into the idea that the process could add something valuable to their work.

By the time Bing joined the team as the action-evaluator, the Estonia initiative was well underway. The action evaluation process had only interacted with the work in limited ways (conveners had completed several questionnaires and met once with the action evaluation team), and the lack of clear direction of the partnership left CSHMI even more skeptical about the utility of action evaluation to their work. Bing spent a great deal of effort trying to re-integrate action evaluation into the initiative, and while the CSHMI team was very willing to work with her and share information and project reports, Bing was never able to secure total buy-in to the process, making it difficult to use action evaluation to its highest potential.
Bing's trip to Estonia and the resulting action evaluation report succeeded in getting CSHMI to buy-in to the process more significantly. The increased buy-in may have been a result of the final report finally illustrating the process in its full context. Alternatively, the trip allowed Bing to develop a relationship with conveners that may have engendered their trust in her and the process. Nonetheless, this buy-in came too late in the game. The partial buy-in that characterized the majority of the partnership made it *possible* for Bing to use action evaluation with the Estonia case but *improbable* that the process would work to its highest potential.

Buy-In: Westmore Case Study

The Resolution Associates "team" took many forms in the months leading up to the retreat. Roles were fluid. Project managers came in and out of the process; interns worked on collection of data and retreat logistics; members of the team had difficulty connecting at times due to heavy workloads and travel obligations. Cobb, as action-evaluator, did not formally begin her interview process with conveners until one month prior to the retreat, leaving little time to form the buy-in necessary to the action evaluation methodology. The Resolution Associates initiative illustrated that without convener understanding conveners do not buy-in to the process and without their buy-in the entire process can be challenging and frustrating.

Initially, Cobb negotiated the process of action evaluation with a senior manager at Resolution Associates, a person whose role was advisory. The senior manager, in turn, spoke with the lead project manager about action evaluation and Cobb's work on the project. Following the upper-management conversation, Cobb began the baseline interview process.

At no point did Cobb talk with the whole team of conveners about action evaluation. Rather Cobb met with each

member individually, using the meeting time to explain action evaluation methodology, to give each convener a copy of Dr. Rothman's article, "Action Evaluation and Conflict Resolution: Methodology," and to interview the conveners

[4] asking the primary three baseline questions: what are your goals, why are these your goals, and how do you expect to accomplish your goals.

In retrospect, the omission of an information session with the entire group--an opportunity to explain action evaluation and its use to the project--seems glaring. Introductory meetings allow conveners time to ask questions, raise concerns, assess the viability of action evaluation to their work. At the time, this meeting seemed logistically impossible. It was, however, essential. It is critical that practitioners wishing to engage in the action evaluation process take time to understand the methodology for themselves. They must develop an understanding of how action evaluation applies to their project. They must understand action evaluation conceptually and practically. Conveners later said that they had not read the paper and had operated on the brief fifteen-minute explanation that Cobb had provided during her initial interviews to understand action evaluation.

Having an initial brainstorming session where the action-evaluator and the practitioners develop one or more action plans with target dates and goals could have streamlined the process, engaged the team, and helped to establish buy-in.

The most probable source of misunderstanding and error was the conveners impression that the action-evaluator him/herself would perform the majority of work; that the methodology was akin to other forms of third-party evaluation in which the "evaluated" remain passive actors who are studied and observed from afar. Action evaluation, however, is far different from conventional forms of evaluation and insists upon the active participation of conveners not only in engaging the process, but understanding it fully enough to alter it to the project's unique needs.

Because conveners did not feel wholly *part* of the action evaluation process they often overlooked keeping Cobb abreast of new developments, changes in plans, and new directions for the project. Cobb does not believe this was intentional--it was a symptom of differing expectations and views on how the process should proceed, which, in turn, was not rectified both because of the lack of lead time available and because the action evaluation process was never fully explained

Lesson Two: Develop a Trusting and Positive Relationship Between the Action-Evaluator and the Convening Group

The reason that buy-in is critical is because it opens the door for the action evaluator to become an integral part of the project and the team. The action evaluator becomes the helpful partner, the facilitator of discussions, and the person whose job it is to carefully observe internal dynamics and provide insight. Cobb entered the project as an insider, but struggled to build the confidence in her that she felt was necessary to become essential to the team. Bing, on the other hand, entered the project as an outsider, and found that some amount of distance allowed her to maintain the analytical perspective she wanted. In both cases, building close working relationships took more time than either action evaluator had fully anticipated.

Relationship: Westmore Case Study

While Cobb had worked with many members of the Resolution Associates team in training workshops and had developed acquaintances with many of them, Cobb had not formed close relationships with the team as a whole. Cobb had to build both their trust and their confidence in her and in the process. This was not an easy task given two critical factors: the lack of lead time Cobb had with each member of the team individually and as a group, and the youthfulness of Cobb, a recent college graduate whose experience as a consultant was limited.
Cobb performed the process of building relationships by meeting with each member of the team individually, explaining

action evaluation, and interviewing them. These individual meetings, while intended to strengthen faith in her and in the process, were rushed. Trying to cram an explanation of action evaluation, time for discussion around its implications, and an interview all into sixty minutes resulted in incomplete understanding of action evaluation interviews that did not allow Cobb the time to delve below the surface of the convener's answers.

Rather than being the first phase of the action evaluation effort, these one-on-one discussions should have been the second phase, completed after a whole-group discussion of action evaluation and its relevance to the project at hand. The limited time Cobb had to explain action evaluation and engender confidence in her gave Cobb a peripheral role. Cobb was viewed less as an integral part of the team--a member who was invited to and attended regular team meetings--and more as a peripheral "evaluator" in the conventional sense, solicited for planning discussions only. Cobb's peripheral and secondary role in the project resulted in the process of action evaluation not being a priority for Resolution Associates.

Ironically, based on Cobb's interviews with conveners, what seemed most important to them strategically and theoretically was that they build stronger and deeper relationships with each other. Strategically, conveners felt that if they could communicate the shared relationships and experiences that they had with each other, they could more easily connect to the people of Westmore. They also felt that regular opportunities to process their own feelings would enhance their shared goals of wanting to "make a difference," reduce tensions, and create an atmosphere of collaborative problem solving. Ideally the action-evaluator can serve as the facilitator of those discussions.

Relationship: Estonia Case Study

Bing came to the Estonia projects as an outsider: she was in a different geographic location than the convening groups, she was not organizationally tied to the convening group, and the conveners did not have any role in selecting her to work with them.

Many evaluation processes would benefit from such a removed evaluator, and there are certainly advantages to an outside perspective. Action evaluation, however, especially in its formative stage, requires the evaluator to be more directly involved. Given the need to constantly evaluate changes in goals and directions of an initiative, the extent to which the action-evaluator can monitor these changes closely affects the success of the goal tracking process. Action evaluation also relies on the trust of stakeholders. If conveners don't trust the insight and ability of an action-evaluator they may not be as forthcoming about their goals and motivations, and consequently the process is less likely to produce useful guidance for an initiative.
Bing's distance from the convening teams of the Estonia project made her job difficult. It was her responsibility to actively and persistently stay in contact with conveners, request updates and reports about the progress of the projects and changes in plans, stay abreast of any change in participants and explicitly ask for responses to questions that could provide insight into goals at every juncture. In addition, since the action evaluation process is different than conventional evaluation, she had to illustrate and convince conveners that her role was not to evaluate their work in the traditional sense, but rather, to help them identify good criteria for evaluating their own work. She had to work very hard to engender the trust and confidence of conveners, and struggled with getting them to see her as an aid, instead of as an outside evaluator. In fact, the most successful part of the process and Bing's most interesting data came from her trip to Estonia with the CSHMI--her first opportunity to immerse herself into the CSHMI team.

If action-evaluators are part of the partnering organization then they have automatic access to project progress and they are a step ahead in gaining the trust of stakeholders--the partner organization is invested in helping the action-evaluator be successful. The action evaluation process is so dependent on good insight to the evolution of beliefs and goals that it is more important to get access to this information than to maintain a total outside perspective. In the Estonia project, Bing's fairly distant relationship to project conveners impaired her ability to use the process well.

Despite the need for insider access to project conveners, there are certain risks to being a total insider that Bing's relationship with Estonia conveners precluded. As an outsider in the Estonia project, Bing was not invested in the outcome of the project and she was therefore able to maintain the analytical perspective necessary to compare and contrast project goals.

Bing's experience reflects the challenges to finding a balance between an outside and inside role with the convening team. Action evaluators must be totally aware of their dual role, and learn when to play each part. They must take advantage of the access they have to inside developments while learning when the group needs them to play outsiders.

Lesson Three: Develop Reflexive Thinking Skills Among Conveners

Reflexivity: Westmore Case Study

Theorists and practitioners of conflict management often discuss the importance of slowing--of going to the balcony, [5] of reframing a situation, of casting oneself in the conflict to better understand the varying and contrasting constructions of reality. The richness that flows from reflexive thinking provides conveners with fresh perspectives and deeper understandings of his or her own motivations, that of his or her colleagues, and those of the participants. Although each team member was able to take the time to sit with Cobb, be interviewed, and articulate his or her goals, the goals were somewhat cursory in their scope. With more lead time, Cobb could have done one or more follow-up interviews to ask conveners to explain their answers in greater detail or go into more depth. As action-evaluator, it was Cobb's responsibility to assist the conveners in reflexive thinking, asking probing questions which would help to inspire deeper thought on the part of the convener. Without adequate buy-in, however, Cobb did not have the support necessary to stimulate a reflexive process.

The absence of reflexive thinking combined with the lack of time in general led to fast-paced meetings in which important issues were raised and brought to light, but left unresolved. A case-in-point was when, during a planning meeting, an African-American member of the Resolution Associates team announced that he was not sure there should be an evaluation at all, that black people were tired of being "guinea pigs" for white people. He suggested that words such as "evaluation" and "experiment" further augment and magnify the gap between consultant and participant--they even go so far as to trivialize the very important, deep-seated, and painful issues which people would bring to the table. Who, in the end, he asked, would benefit from this research? The participants or the researcher getting published? Members of the Resolution Associates team listened attentively to his concerns. They engaged in problem solving, suggesting alternative words instead of "evaluation." It seemed to Cobb, however, that this team-member was raising more than a question of semantics. Did other team members agree with him? Did they too have concerns? Did they think his issues were themselves trivial? The deeper issues he had raised were not explored. He had provided a rich opportunity for reflexive inquiry and discussion but other members of the team had a planning agenda that, logistically, had to take precedence. His immediate concerns were dealt with, but the full text of his issues was pushed aside and evaded.

Reflexivity: Estonia Case Study

Reflexivity is a fundamental tool for the action-evaluator during the goal analysis process. Ideally, when the action-evaluator works with conveners to construct a baseline of shared goals, he/she should encourage conveners to be reflexive in considering and reframing their goals and negotiating with each other on which goals are important to consider in creating the work plan for their initiative. In the early stages of the Estonia case, Bing relied largely on retrospective goal analysis to construct a framework for action evaluation, and was therefore not able to encourage

conveners to be reflexive at the time of the initial goal articulation. Bing's trip to Estonia enabled a more timely assessment of project goals, but conveners were set in their methods by that point in the project and her role was more of an active observer than a guide to the project. Despite these challenges, however, reflexivity played a crucial role in the action evaluation process, because CSHMI conveners were naturally reflexive about their work. As a result, Bing had a plethora of rich and important data from conveners at every stage of the project. Reflexivity in this case enabled meaningful engagement in the action evaluation process despite the challenges inherent in the relationship with the partnering project.

During her early work with the Estonia initiative, Bing was able to use the proposal and initial questionnaires that had been generated at the beginning of the initiative to create an analytical framework for action evaluation because the data was rich, comprehensive and thoughtful. The conveners' interest in psychological dimensions of conflict and their academic orientation provided the depth necessary to re-frame their responses into meaningful whats, whys and hows. If the project proposal had been more cursory or technical rather than rich and reflexive, or if conveners had not responded to the questionnaires thoughtfully, there would not have had as much to work with, and Bing's re-framing process would have been much more contrived.

Convener reflexivity was also crucial during Bing's trip to Estonia. While her relationship with the convening team did not allow her to play the "consulting" role that the model suggests for the action-evaluator, her active observation and participation in convener preparation and debriefing sessions and in workshops in the Estonian towns generated rich and reflexive data that could easily be framed in action evaluation terms. Conveners were inquisitive about their motivations and understandings, and re-visited goals with each other throughout the trip. As a result, Bing was able to produce meaningful criteria for evaluation for the project team that accurately reflected the internal developments in the project.

Bing's tenuous partnership with the Estonia initiative presented many challenges to the action evaluation process. Nonetheless, CSHMI's naturally reflexive approach to their work compensated for many of the limitations and allowed Bing to access rich and thoughtful exploration of goals and motivations throughout the initiative. The conveners' capacity to be reflexive about their work was crucial to Bing's ability to use the action evaluation model at all in this case.

Conclusion

The limits of action evaluation are also its assets. The limits are that it is a process--a process with a beginning, middle, and an end, a process that demands from the conveners particularly high levels of buy-in, which, in turn, facilitate reflexive thinking and productive relationships with the action-evaluator. Problems arise when action evaluation is not fully understood, when conveners do not develop their ability for reflexive goal articulation, and when the relationship between the action-evaluator and the convening team is not sufficiently constructed so as to facilitate better discussions, data collection, and planning.

Evaluation is hindered when the data an action-evaluator collects is incomplete or inconsistent. Communication difficulties develop when the key discussions, which the process calls for, do not happen. Problems arise when only some of the stakeholders have bought-in and are not willing to participate in the process fully, with both their time and their thoughts.

Action evaluation is not an ex-post-facto commentary on the "success" or "failure" of a conflict resolution intervention. This gives both practitioners and participants an opportunity to comment on the process as it moves, refining it, tweaking it, and infusing into their own sets of needs, understandings, and content.

We encountered many of the limitations of action evaluation in our work--stop and start efforts with incomplete buy-

in from the elite levels, tenuous relationships between action-evaluators and project conveners, varying levels of reflexivity throughout the process and unclear mandates for collaboration. This is an important lesson, particularly for action-evaluators and for practitioners wishing to use the methodology. Buy-in is essential. Without it, the process falls apart. But buy-in is also something that, like trust, is won. It must be nurtured, developed, and allowed time to evolve.

Ideally, throughout the planning stages of a project, conveners should take time to reflexively share their goals with each other, even if those goals are not fully formed. This "promotes a constructive scrutiny of these ideas leading, potentially, to external inputs and improvements." [6]

Action evaluation makes demands on the way practitioners practice their craft, stipulating that they not barrel ahead with a given action plan, not use a set of tools employed many times hence, not rely on the standard curriculum and skill set. As each set of circumstances differs, so must each approach be made individually. Practitioners, this theory argues, must improvise as part of their trade, creating a dynamic whereby they collaborate with all stakeholders, listening to their ideas and concerns and facilitating thorough analysis and discussion around important issues that arise.

[1] Rothman, Jay. *Resolving Identity Based Conflict in Nations, Organizations, and Communities.* 1997. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Page 36-37.

[2] Ibid.

[3] The names of the convening organization and the community have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the process.

[4] Rothman, Jay, "Action Evaluation and Conflict Resolution: Methodology."

[5] Ury, William. *Getting Past No: Negotiating with Difficult People.* 1991. New York: Bantam.

6 Rothman, Jay. "Action Evaluation and Conflict Resolution: In Theory and Practice," presented at the National Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution, Pittsburgh. Pennsylvania, May 27, 1997.