



Investing in rural people

The background of the cover features a large, light blue graphic of a globe with several interlocking gears of various sizes overlaid on it. The gears are rendered in a darker blue color. The globe is shown in a perspective view, with latitude and longitude lines visible. The overall design is clean and modern, with a focus on mechanical and global themes.

# 2022 IFAD EVALUATION MANUAL

ANNEX FOR COMMUNICATING  
EVALUATION FINDINGS

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# Annexes

Annex  
for Communicating  
Evaluation Findings



# Annex for Communicating Evaluation Findings

## Background and significance

IFAD's mission is to transform rural economies and food systems by making them more inclusive, productive, resilient and sustainable.<sup>1</sup> IFAD catalyses public and private investments, helps strengthen policies, and promotes innovation to achieve sustainable benefits for the rural poor at scale and to support all countries to achieve lasting, systemic change. At the core of IFAD's mission are the people working on the ground to make this vision come alive. The Independent Office of Evaluation (IOE) works to ensure that the stated strategic objectives and milestones are successfully reached.

Dialogue among evaluators and evaluands is of paramount importance throughout the lifecycle of the evaluative process. Traditionally, a common-sense approach to interaction has guided this engagement. The literature suggests that limitations inherent to this approach may inhibit the potential value of the evaluative process. Integrating neuroscience-based principles into the modus operandi of evaluators may help illuminate or overcome these limitations. Drawing on these principles, this annex describes a series of practical actions geared toward increasing receptiveness to evaluation findings and uptake of evaluation recommendations, thus bolstering the transformative capacity of the evaluative process.

## Why brain science?

The value of brain science is that it can elucidate impactful variables in the communication of evaluation findings by highlighting how these variables affect the brain. While the goal of the evaluation is to effect change, it is widely known that 70 per cent of change initiatives fail.<sup>2</sup> "Common sense" is not enough. In fact, non-logical operations making up more than 99.9 per cent of the mind functioning are not accessible to consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Neuroscience research can help to provide additional insights.

Also, IOE is made up of people who, in turn, have brains. Understanding how brains are affected (consciously and unconsciously) can potentially improve individual thinking and team dynamics as well. Furthermore, by switching the focus of communication from observable actions to mindsets that are aligned in aspiration, it is possible to improve the leverage of evaluators by 4.4 times.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Vision. IFAD. <https://www.ifad.org/en/vision> (accessed 2023-04-25).

<sup>2</sup> Using change management strategies to increase the odds of success | McKinsey. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/how-to-double-the-odds-that-your-change-program-will-succeed> (accessed 2022-03-28).

<sup>3</sup> Perlovsky, L.; Ilin, R. Brain. Conscious and Unconscious Mechanisms of Cognition, Emotions, and Language. *Brain Sci* 2012, 2 (4), 790–834. <https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci2040790>.

<sup>4</sup> Keller, S.; Price, C. *Beyond Performance: How Great Organizations Build Ultimate Competitive Advantage*, 1st edition.; Wiley: Hoboken, N.J., 2011.

## The impact of performance appraisal and feedback on the brain

By its very nature, a performance appraisal can trigger anxiety in the evaluand due to its judgmental nature. Moreover, although evaluations focus on programmes, projects and organizational performance, not on individual performance, the evaluand may feel that the appraisal could undermine their work. These perceptions can trigger a series of conscious and unconscious mechanisms that have the potential to create a sense of resistance in the evaluand vis-à-vis the evaluator. As a result, the evaluand may not be able or willing to engage in the evaluative process in an open, constructive and genuine fashion. This, in turn, will likely decrease the legitimacy of the evaluation findings in the eyes of the evaluand, limiting the adoption of recommendations and inhibiting the learning dimension of the entire exercise.

For this reason, it is in the best interest of the evaluator to examine the evaluation process more closely.

## Stress inhibits change

When an evaluator delivers stressful news to the evaluand, the expected outcome is that the evaluand will change their behaviour. However, stress does exactly the opposite. It prompts habit behaviour in humans.<sup>5</sup> It makes people less likely to change. In fact, chronic stress can rewire the brain such that habit and addiction circuits are reinforced.<sup>6</sup> As a result, stress disrupts goal-directed performance. Even if an evaluand is well-intended in carrying out an action, stress will interrupt their efforts, thereby increasing the chances of failure.

**Action:** Ensure that the context and process of evaluation are as stress-free as possible. Create a relaxed atmosphere to deliver constructive criticism. And ensure that what you say and how you say it does not cause stress.

**How?** When you approach the evaluand, say how much you have been looking forward to discussing the things that have been working well, as well as tackling the challenges together. Also explain that the evaluation is a guide to a strategy moving forward, and not meant to be a personal attack. It's important to get to a point where you mean this, as any lack of authenticity will not serve you or the evaluand. During the evaluation, if you sense that the evaluand is becoming defensive, stop and ask the evaluand if your assessment sounds fair, and if not, what you might be missing.

<sup>5</sup> Schwabe, L.; Wolf, O. T. Stress Prompts Habit Behavior in Humans. *J. Neurosci.* 2009, 29 (22), 7191–7198. <https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.0979-09.2009>.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, S. B.; Anglin, J. M.; Paode, P. R.; Riggert, A. G.; Olive, M. F.; Conrad, C. D. Chronic Stress May Facilitate the Recruitment of Habit- and Addiction-Related Neurocircuitries through Neuronal Restructuring of the Striatum. *Neuroscience* 2014, 280, 231–242. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroscience.2014.09.029>.



## How can valid criticism not be stressful?

Delivering harsh feedback in a calm and deliberate manner is unlikely to be successful, even if it is goal-directed. Boyatzis and colleagues have demonstrated that goal-directed coaching is inferior to coaching with compassion.<sup>7</sup> In a sense, to be effective, the evaluator might also lead as a coach in working with the evaluand.

The positive emotional attractor (PEA) and negative emotional attractor (NEA) are distinct psychophysiological states with contrasting features. The NEA is associated with an activated fight-or-flight system in the brain, with suppression of the default mode network (DMN). The DMN is a critical brain network associated with a strong sense of self,<sup>8</sup> greater detail in thinking,<sup>9</sup> better predictive capacity,<sup>10</sup> and more complex thinking and abstract thought.<sup>11</sup> This capacity for detail-oriented, self-directed, future-oriented and highly intelligent execution is what the evaluator wants. However, goal-directed delivery of findings turns the PEA off and turns the NEA on, thereby decreasing the likelihood of success.

For valid criticism not to be stressful, the evaluator might see the evaluator–evaluand dyad as a team. Though the findings are meant to be objective, it helps to acknowledge the relationship too. By adopting a mindset of “we’re in this together”, there is likely to be less stress and more receptivity and clarity of thinking on the part of the evaluand.

**Action:** Do not overestimate the impact of goal-directedness of your evaluation. Integrate a compassionate stance wherever possible.

**How?** Tell the evaluand that you understand that there are goals, but that these goals operate in a complex system. Also let them know that in the short term, the goals may not have been reached, but you are also interested in the long term. Let them know that sometimes to reach one’s goals, engagement and a comfortable connection between the evaluator and evaluand is necessary at first. Then, ask them whether a different timeline makes sense, and explore why this might be the case.

- 7 Boyatzis, R.; Smith, M.; Beveridge, A. Coaching With Compassion. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 2013, 49, 153–178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886312462236>.
- 8 Davey, C. G.; Harrison, B. J. The Brain’s Center of Gravity: How the Default Mode Network Helps Us to Understand the Self. *World Psychiatry* 2018, 17 (3), 278–279. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20553>.
- 9 Sormaz, M.; Murphy, C.; Wang, H.; Hymers, M.; Karapanagiotidis, T.; Poerio, G.; Margulies, D. S.; Jefferies, E.; Smallwood, J. Default Mode Network Can Support the Level of Detail in Experience during Active Task States. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* 2018, 115 (37), 9318–9323. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1721259115>.
- 10 Sandrone, S. The Brain as a Crystal Ball: The Predictive Potential of Default Mode Network. *Front Hum Neurosci* 2012, 6, 261. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2012.00261>.
- 11 Smallwood, J.; Bernhardt, B. C.; Leech, R.; Bzdok, D.; Jefferies, E.; Margulies, D. S. The Default Mode Network in Cognition: A Topographical Perspective. *Nat Rev Neurosci* 2021, 22 (8), 503–513. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41583-021-00474-4>.

**TABLE 1**  
**Goal-directed and compassion-oriented evaluations**

Goal-directed evaluation	Compassion-oriented evaluation
According to the evaluation, we found gaps in...	I’d like to discuss the findings of the evaluation and think with you about how to overcome the obstacles blocking progress on this front.
Objectively speaking, you scored...	I’m sure that this evaluation is missing something that you in the field experience differently. What is that?
So, I hope that you will act on these gaps until next time...	The actions we suggest are not guaranteed to give us the results we want, but they do open possibilities for moving forward.

Source: The table above outlines the differences between goal-directed and compassion-oriented evaluations.

## What exactly does it mean to be compassionate from a “brain” perspective?

Delivering harsh criticism in a soft or condescending tone is not compassionate. What is compassionate, though, is having empathy.

There are two kinds of empathy: emotional and cognitive. They are each sub-served by different neural systems in the brain,<sup>12</sup> and they have very different results.

Emotional empathy activates brain regions that process emotions. These regions are also intimately connected to decision-making and logic-affirming parts of the brain.<sup>13</sup> As a result, they impact learning and memory as well.<sup>14</sup> So, emotional empathy can enhance thinking. Also, our brains are endowed with mirror neurons such that they reflect what others are feeling or intending, sometimes completely without our awareness. So, the evaluator and evaluand have unconscious mirrors of the other’s emotions.

Cognitive empathy activates the mentalizing region of the brain – a region involved in understanding others’ points of view.<sup>15</sup>

Compassion can be enhanced by being aware of both kinds of empathy. By being aware of emotional empathy, the evaluator can know that the evaluand has mirror neurons that will mirror the evaluator’s emotions and intentions. If the NEA is activated by harsh intentions or emotions, this may decrease the likelihood of success.

Also, if the interaction has more of a negotiation dynamic, cognitive empathy may be more helpful than emotional empathy.<sup>16</sup> It allows the evaluator to see things from the evaluand’s point of view. It pays to do this, as there will be a greater likelihood that the evaluand will shift from their inert or counterproductive position once they are truly heard.

Hence, approaching the interaction with compassion, emotional sensitivity, and an understanding of the evaluand’s point of view can go a long way toward increasing the chances of evaluation success.

**Action:** To gain buy-in, use both emotional and cognitive empathy.

**How?** To exercise emotional empathy, listen intently. The evaluation is as much about listening as it is about delivering an assessment. Allow your facial expressions to be more human, responding to the evaluand’s distress by mirroring this authentically. Also, to exercise cognitive empathy, after compassionately delivering the findings, ask, “I know this is my point of view. But I’m interested in hearing how this sounds from your point of view.” Then truly take the position of reflecting on why both your points of view may be different, attempting to close any gaps that you can.

12 Moore, R. C.; Dev, S. I.; Jeste, D. V.; Dziobek, I.; Eyer, L. T. Distinct Neural Correlates of Emotional and Cognitive Empathy in Older Adults. *Psychiatry Res* 2015, 232 (1), 42–50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2014.10.016>.

13 Pessoa, L. Neural Dynamics of Emotion and Cognition: From Trajectories to Underlying Neural Geometry. *Neural Netw* 2019, 120, 158–166. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neunet.2019.08.007>.

14 Tyng, C. M.; Amin, H. U.; Saad, M. N. M.; Malik, A. S. The Influences of Emotion on Learning and Memory. *Front Psychol* 2017, 8, 1454. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01454>.

15 Cerniglia, L.; Bartolomeo, L.; Capobianco, M.; Lo Russo, S. L. M.; Festucci, F.; Tambelli, R.; Adriani, W.; Cimino, S. Intersections and Divergences Between Empathizing and Mentalizing: Development, Recent Advancements by Neuroimaging and the Future of Animal Modeling. *Front Behav Neurosci* 2019, 13, 212. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2019.00212>.

16 Galinsky, A. D.; Maddux, W. W.; Gilin, D.; White, J. B. Why It Pays to Get Inside the Head of Your Opponent: The Differential Effects of Perspective Taking and Empathy in Negotiations. *Psychol Sci* 2008, 19 (4), 378–384. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02096.x>.

## Does intention matter?

In the context of an evaluation, the evaluator is leading the charge toward change. In this sense, it is important for the evaluand to see the evaluator as a leader, and not simply the delivery person.

One study examined what must happen to perceive a person as a leader.<sup>17</sup> In their experiment, Jing Jiang of the Max Planck Institute and her colleagues asked 11 groups of three people to conduct a leaderless discussion while their brain activity was monitored, and the conversations were recorded. Brain synchrony was determined for each two-person interaction within the three-person groups. The researchers found that one could predict leaders after 23 seconds by looking at the synchrony data alone, because leaders induced much greater coherence. Simply intending to synchronize with the evaluand could enhance their perception of the evaluator as a leader.

The brain region that synchronized in the Jiang study is also known for having a significant role in sharing emotional states and in reading the mental states of others, which are important for maintaining group cohesion<sup>18</sup> and cooperation. When the brain is cooperative, it is usually activated by shared social emotions.<sup>19</sup> The key message here is that in making decisions, it is your ability to synchronize and not your authority that matters. Synchrony between leaders and followers leads to mutual understanding,<sup>20</sup> cooperation,<sup>21</sup> coordinated execution of tasks<sup>22</sup> and collective creativity.<sup>23</sup>

When there is interpersonal synchrony, brain regions involved in social cognition, embodied cognition, self-other expansion, and action observation are activated.<sup>24</sup> As a result, the sense of connection is enhanced.

**Action:** How you show up matters. Show up with an explicit intention to synchronize with the evaluand.

**How?** Prior to the meeting, do something that helps you settle your own mind down. Mindfulness meditation, a walk, a great YouTube clip, or your favorite music, will all put you in the position to bring a positive state of mind to the evaluation. Then, using self-talk, say, “I want to synchronize with the evaluand.” Bring this intention into the meeting, and whenever you feel you are out of sync, course correct.

17 Jiang, J.; Chen, C.; Dai, B.; Shi, G.; Ding, G.; Liu, L.; Lu, C. Leader Emergence through Interpersonal Neural Synchronization. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* 2015, 112 (14), 4274–4279. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1422930112>.

18 van Vugt, M. On Faces, Gazes, Votes, and Followers: Evolutionary Psychological and Social Neuroscience Approaches to Leadership. In *New Frontiers in Social Neuroscience*; Decety, J., Christen, Y., Eds.; Research and Perspectives in Neurosciences; Springer International Publishing: Cham, 2014; pp 93–110. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02904-7\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02904-7_6).

19 Stallen, M.; Sanfey, A. G. The Cooperative Brain. *Neuroscientist* 2013, 19 (3), 292–303. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1073858412469728>.

20 Llobera, J.; Charbonnier, C.; Chagué, S.; Preissmann, D.; Antonietti, J.-P.; Ansermet, F.; Magistretti, P. J. The Subjective Sensation of Synchrony: An Experimental Study. *PLOS ONE* 2016, 11 (2), e0147008. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0147008>.

21 Fairhurst, M. T.; Janata, P.; Keller, P. E. Leading the Follower: An fMRI Investigation of Dynamic Cooperativity and Leader-Follower Strategies in Synchronization with an Adaptive Virtual Partner. *Neuroimage* 2014, 84, 688–697. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2013.09.027>.

22 Vesper, C.; Richardson, M. J. Strategic Communication and Behavioral Coupling in Asymmetric Joint Action. *Exp Brain Res* 2014, 232 (9), 2945–2956. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00221-014-3982-1>.

23 Mohammed, M.; Thomas, K. Enabling Community and Trust: Shared Leadership for Collective Creativity. *The Foundation Review* 2014, 6 (4). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1228>.

24 Cacioppo, S.; Zhou, H.; Monteleone, G.; Majka, E. A.; Quinn, K. A.; Ball, A. B.; Norman, G. J.; Semin, G. R.; Cacioppo, J. T. You Are in Sync with Me: Neural Correlates of Interpersonal Synchrony with a Partner. *Neuroscience* 2014, 277, 842–858. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroscience.2014.07.051>.

## The many ways of delivering bad news

Negative feedback can be helpful when one is trying to change. It can lead to course correction and help evaluands rectify their chosen paths. However, not all negative feedback is the same.

Thoughtless negative feedback can lead to frustration and anxiety in the evaluand, thereby decreasing their intrinsic motivation and exacerbating the failure already experienced. The emotional distress competes with the cognitive resources needed to internalize and apply the feedback that is received.<sup>25</sup>

There are two types of negative feedback that have contrasting impacts on the brain. When offering confirmatory feedback, people are informed that they had failed a task, whereas when offering informative feedback, people are given task-relevant information along with the notification of their failure. For instance, they are told why a score is low and what they can do about this.

One study found that confirmatory negative feedback activates brain regions associated with processing negative emotions after failure, whereas informative feedback activates a region associated with emotional control, enabling the person receiving the feedback to listen more intently and process the information more clearly.<sup>26</sup>

You must balance when and how you space out your comments too. While this will likely vary for each person, addressing all positive things upfront and then spending the rest of the time being critical will likely not serve you or the evaluand.<sup>27</sup> When people receive mixed or negative feedback, they trust the accuracy of the feedback less, and mistrust the qualifications of the person giving it.

Also, disagreement regarding past performance was greater following the feedback discussion than before, due to increased self-protective and self-enhancing attributions. And people were more motivated to improve to the extent that they perceived the feedback conversation to be focused on future actions rather than on past performance.

Positive feedback activates brain regions implicated in emotional regulation and reward processing.<sup>28</sup> And the motivation of the evaluand will likely increase.

Clearly, you cannot avoid negative feedback altogether, and in certain situations it has an upside. For example, negative feedback is more effective than positive feedback for Information–Integration (II) category problems.<sup>29</sup> These are cognitive tasks that require individuals to integrate different sources of information to arrive at a solution. They often require multiple rules, concepts or categories to generate a correct response.

For example, to arrive at a conclusion, you may need to integrate information from multiple sources such as data on agricultural productivity, income, and food security. Critiquing the relevant dimensions can help the evaluand make changes.

Try not to segue from positive to negative feedback with “however” because it will create an anticipatory fear. Recent neuroscience research has indicated that the brain is constantly anticipating what is to come and makes predictions based on available data. Your evaluand’s brain will be in this state, so avoid exacerbating negative predictions because that will make it difficult for the evaluand to hear you.

**Action:** Aim to strike a balance between positive and negative comments. Use negative appraisals especially where category II problems are involved. Deliver the negative appraisals later in the conversation to build trust and better listening in the evaluand.

**How?** When delivering findings, emphasize (without being condescending) that struggles and failure are normal and surmountable.<sup>30</sup> Since this is in fact undeniable, deliver such perspectives as facts. Remember, when you believe that a problem can be solved, this makes response to failure with course-correction faster.<sup>31</sup> Called the growth mindset, this can be instrumental to fostering change.

<sup>25</sup> Ortner, C. N. M.; Zelazo, P. D.; Anderson, A. K. Effects of Emotion Regulation on Concurrent Attentional Performance. *Motivation and Emotion* 2013, 37, 346–354. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-012-9310-9>.

<sup>26</sup> Woo, Y.; Song, J.; Jiang, Y.; Cho, C.; Bong, M.; Kim, S. Effects of Informative and Confirmatory Feedback on Brain Activation during Negative Feedback Processing. *Front Hum Neurosci* 2015, 9, 378. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2015.00378>.

<sup>27</sup> Gnepp, J.; Klayman, J.; Williamson, I. O.; Barlas, S. The Future of Feedback: Motivating Performance Improvement through Future-Focused Feedback. *PLoS One* 2020, 15 (6), e0234444. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0234444>.

<sup>28</sup> Druke, B.; Weichert, L.; Forkmann, T.; Mainz, V.; Gauggel, S.; Boecker, M. Neural Correlates of Positive and Negative Performance Feedback in Younger and Older Adults. *Behav Brain Funct* 2015, 11, 17. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12993-015-0062-z>.

<sup>29</sup> Freedberg, M.; Glass, B.; Filoteo, J. V.; Hazeltine, E.; Maddox, W. T. Comparing the Effects of Positive and Negative Feedback in Information-Integration Category Learning. *Mem Cognit* 2017, 45 (1), 12–25. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13421-016-0638-3>.

<sup>30</sup> Burnette, J. L.; Billingsley, J.; Banks, G. C.; Knouse, L. E.; Hoyt, C. L.; Pollack, J. M.; Simon, S. A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Growth Mindset Interventions: For Whom, How, and Why Might Such Interventions Work? *Psychological Bulletin* 2022, No Pagination Specified–No Pagination Specified. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000368>.

<sup>31</sup> Burnette, J.; O’Boyle, E.; VanEpps, E.; Pollack, J.; Finkel, E. Mind-Sets Matter: A Meta-Analytic Review of Implicit Theories and Self-Regulation. *Psychological bulletin* 2012, 139. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029531>.

Start with positive feedback to build trust, and when giving negative feedback, deliver this in the context of complex variables impacting the outcomes, such as the category II example given above.

## Acknowledge goal complexity

For any given evaluation, the goal complexity is considerable. At a high level, you may be evaluating the effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of an intervention in a country with a view to promoting inclusive and sustainable rural development. While an evaluand might have improved the livelihoods of smallholder farmers through sustainable agriculture and the strengthening of value chains, they may not have facilitated coordination among stakeholders, or addressed gender inequality. These are not separate or independent goals. They need to be looked at as an interactive matrix.

In the brain, goals are not simply stated intentions that stay online until you complete them. Each goal operates autonomously and seeks to “win” the competition among other goals. This is called selfish goal theory.<sup>32</sup> Imitative tendencies from social perception, approach and withdrawal tendencies from evaluation, and motivations put into motion by specific environmental settings – all operate independently of conscious purposes.

This implies that sometimes people copy what others do without realizing it. The evaluand may be copying the behaviour of a predecessor, not realizing that it did not work. They may also be avoiding a challenge because they do not truly realize how aversive it is. Seek to unearth this. Oftentimes, the context in which the intervention is occurring does not set the evaluand up for success. Examine these factors when delivering the evaluation.

**Action:** Acknowledge goal complexity. Look at how the different goals interact.

Goals may be conscious or unconscious. For example, an evaluand might believe that they want coordination among stakeholders but may be avoiding engaging with them, unconsciously.<sup>33</sup> The evaluation can help unearth this unconscious bias.

**How?** Draw a diagram of the network of positive and negative findings. After delivering the literal findings, keep some time aside for looking at how these factors interact. Talk through how these interactions impact the outcome, and how the evaluand may approach this complexity. Examine and discuss unconscious copying, aversions, or environmental constraints.

<sup>32</sup> Bargh, J. A.; Green, M.; Fitzsimons, G. The Selfish Goal. *Soc Cogn* 2008, 26 (5), 534–554. <https://doi.org/10.1521/soco.2008.26.5.534>.

<sup>33</sup> Huang, J. Y.; Bargh, J. A. The Selfish Goal: Autonomously Operating Motivational Structures as the Proximate Cause of Human Judgment and Behavior. *Behav Brain Sci* 2014, 37 (2), 121–135. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X13000290>.

## Avoid telling the evaluand what not to do

Try this out: Close your eyes. Let your mind wander. But do not think about a white bear. As strong as your mind may be, it is extremely difficult to “not” do something, especially if instructed not to. Called ironic process theory, a phenomenon investigated extensively by Harvard psychologist Daniel Wegner, this phenomenon can have a huge impact when delivering the evaluation.<sup>34</sup>

According to Wegner, when we attempt to exert control under mental load (stress, time pressure, or distraction), we increase the likelihood of making errors. Ironic errors in attention and memory occur with identifiable brain activity and prompt recurrent unwanted thoughts, attraction to forbidden desires, expression of objectionable social prejudices, production of movement errors, and rebounds of negative experiences such as anxiety, pain and depression.

When a person tries not to think about something, the brain’s monitoring mechanism (prefrontal cortex) paradoxically looks out for this unwanted thought, making it more likely that the thought will recur.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the brain’s conflict detector increases its vigilance for this unwanted thought.

In the context of an evaluation, this is profound. Tell an evaluand what not to do, and their brains are likely to bring this up more often and, without any conscious sensibility, they are likely to be drawn toward performing this forbidden act. There is a rebound effect in the brain after periods of attempted suppression.<sup>36</sup> This is why people who attempt to suppress eating behaviours often cannot sustain this,<sup>37</sup> and it is why soccer players, when penalty shooting, should avoid focusing on where “not” to kick the ball, because they will kick it exactly there.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Wegner, D. M. How to Think, Say, or Do Precisely the Worst Thing for Any Occasion. *Science* 2009, 325 (5936), 48–50. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1167346>.

<sup>35</sup> Depue, B. E. A Neuroanatomical Model of Prefrontal Inhibitory Modulation of Memory Retrieval. *Neurosci Biobehav Rev* 2012, 36 (5), 1382–1399. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2012.02.012>.

<sup>36</sup> Giuliano, R. J.; Wicha, N. Y. Y. Why the White Bear Is Still There: Electrophysiological Evidence for Ironic Semantic Activation during Thought Suppression. *Brain Res* 2010, 1316C, 62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brainres.2009.12.041>.

<sup>37</sup> Soetens, B.; Braet, C.; Dejonckheere, P.; Roets, A. “When Suppression Backfires”: The Ironic Effects of Suppressing Eating-Related Thoughts. *J Health Psychol* 2006, 11 (5), 655–668. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105306066615>.

<sup>38</sup> Binsch, O.; Oudejans, R. R. D.; Bakker, F. C.; Savelsbergh, G. J. P. Ironic Effects and Final Target Fixation in a Penalty Shooting Task. *Hum Mov Sci* 2010, 29 (2), 277–288. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.humov.2009.12.002>.

This also applies to the evaluators themselves. For instance, when trying not to deliver negative appraisals or cause stress, they may do exactly that too.

**Action:** Thought suppression will increase the likelihood of that thought’s appearance under stress. Avoid that.

**How?** When framing goals for yourself or the evaluand, frame them as “to do” rather than “what not to do”. If the evaluand is falling into this trap, point it out to them to help them achieve their goals more successfully. You will hear this when they say. “I try not to...” or “I explicitly avoided this, but...”. When you hear this, it should raise a red flag.

## How to motivate the evaluand to act on findings

To feel intrinsically motivated to change things, the evaluand must be in a mindset that facilitates this. The leading theory of how people can feel more intrinsically motivated is called “self-determination theory” (SDT). There are three key factors involved in SDT: autonomy; competence; and social relatedness. When all three factors are satisfied, intrinsic motivation is greatest. In the brain, the collection of brain regions that serves this function is sometimes known as the seeking system.<sup>39</sup> And dopamine is a key substrate involved in this system in the brain.

To stimulate intrinsic motivation to solve problems that have been identified for the evaluand, it is important to ask yourself and the evaluand: Do they have enough autonomy in their current position? Do they need help to boost their competence? Are they socially supported? These are factors that you can consider in the evaluation conversation to boost the engagement and intrinsic motivation of the evaluand.<sup>39</sup>

**Action:** Explore the autonomy, competence and social relations of the evaluand.

**How?** Ask open-ended questions about how the goal can be achieved. Encourage originality. Ask what help is needed. And ask what social supports would help. When you do this, the evaluand will be more motivated to act on your suggestions.

<sup>39</sup> Di Domenico, S. I.; Ryan, R. M. The Emerging Neuroscience of Intrinsic Motivation: A New Frontier in Self-Determination Research. *Front Hum Neurosci* 2017, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2017.00145>.

## How to help the evaluand manage their sense of being overwhelmed

When evaluands are overwhelmed, they will find it difficult to internalize your recommendations. In the brain, anxiety disrupts decision-making and thinking, and it is important to be armed with a brain-based strategy to help the evaluand decrease their sense of being overwhelmed.

One way to do this is to utilize the mnemonic CIRCA: Chunking, Ignore mental chatter, Reality check, Control check, and Attention shift.<sup>40</sup>

“Chunking” is a form of data compression and encourages evaluands to break down their massive challenges into parts, to ruthlessly prioritize, or to delegate so as to deal with large amount of information or tasks.<sup>41</sup> In the brain, regions involved in time management are activated.<sup>42</sup> “Ignore mental chatter” relates to how mindfulness (focusing on the breath and keeping attention there) can improve equanimity and thought control.<sup>43</sup> Not only does this increase regional gray matter density,<sup>44</sup> but it also improves connectivity of the brain’s emotional processing regions.<sup>45</sup> “Reality check” refers to self-talk as a reminder that whatever difficult situation is at bay will pass. It is a form of acceptance.<sup>46</sup> In the brain, this shows up as decreased activation in regions responsible for self-reflection, and emotional and thought control.<sup>47</sup> The tense interconnections between these regions is relaxed. “Control check” is much like the serenity prayer, where the evaluand identifies what can be controlled,

what cannot be controlled, and how to recognize the difference, thereby consciously releasing the things they cannot control. In the brain, the processing of unnecessary threats occurs because the brain does not selectively attend to threats within the evaluand’s control.<sup>48</sup> Deliberately focusing on threats that are within the evaluand’s control can help. The evaluator can help the evaluand do this. And “attention shift” relates to shifting attention from the problem to the solution. This engages the brain regions responsible for cognitive flexibility and problem-solving.<sup>49,50</sup>

The fact that we know that the brain is actively changed due to these interventions can give us the confidence that when interacting with an evaluand, an evaluator can help various constructive mechanisms kick in. In summary, the result is less “overwhelm”, greater equanimity, less obsessing about where things have gone wrong, releasing things that one cannot control, and being more solution-oriented. This is exactly what an evaluator would hope the evaluand would be able to do, but this can be challenging, especially when the fear networks are activated due to the critiques.

**Action:** Use CIRCA when discussing any critique or challenge.

**How?** If you concluded that a project was improperly designed to meet a specific developmental objective, you might help the evaluand think through what is anxiety-provoking or challenging. In sketching out the problem on a piece of paper, you might walk the evaluand through an ideal time sequence to address this (chunking), to take in the whole macro picture that you spend some time looking at (ignore mental chatter), to feel reassured that they can put some past obstacles behind them (reality check), that they can focus on what they can control in that picture (control check) and, rather than obsessing about the problems or red flags, that they can think creatively about how they could effect a solution (attention shift). In this way, you can be assured that you are likely helping them to rewire their brains for change.

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## How to enhance your own leadership as an evaluator

As an evaluator, you have a leadership position, and that position is to lead the charge toward improvement in the delivery of IFAD's goals. While there are many definitions of leadership, one prominent one is offered by the pioneer of leadership studies, Warren Bennis. According to Bennis, "Becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It's precisely that simple, and it's also that difficult."<sup>51</sup>

Despite all these brain-based guidelines, you still need to offer them your suggestions and recommendations within the framework of you and your intelligence. Simply adopting a technique in a way that makes you feel inauthentic will reflect poorly in the interaction. When you are authentic, this is more likely to activate the evaluand's theory-of-mind network in the brain.<sup>52</sup> This network is responsible for seeing things from your point of view. And the evaluand will be more likely to remember the discussion as well. The brain is wired to easily distinguish real and fake actions.<sup>53</sup>

You also want the evaluand to show up as themselves, so creating an environment where they can do this is important. They are also leading a charge in another context, and the more their goals fit within their own impressions of themselves, the more likely they are to respond to them.<sup>54</sup>

This requires more than a momentary self-visit. Self-connection requires awareness, acceptance, and alignment with the self.<sup>55</sup> At first glance, this may seem perfunctory. Yet, when you consider Heidegger's perspective that the self is not a substance or entity but fundamentally tied to the world around it, you will begin to see how the evaluand is in fact not a separate self.<sup>56</sup>

This is not pure philosophical speculation. The evaluand you are speaking to literally lives as an image and voice, at the very least, in your brain.<sup>57,58</sup> Also, in the conversation, there is brain-to-brain coupling, where each of your responses is impacting the neural signaling in the other's brain.<sup>59</sup> The anger and fear that you may create in the evaluand will also be inadvertently mirrored in your brain, because your brain possesses mirror neurons that can reflect others' emotions.<sup>60</sup> The evaluator and evaluand are inextricably linked at a neural level, such that "becoming yourself" requires you to deeply understand that this "self" is not independent of the evaluand or the environment in which you both work. In this sense, you might guide your own behaviour by treating the evaluand as you would yourself. The problem with this is that you are likely also self-critical, and this may spill over into treating the evaluand similarly. For this reason, it's important to consider self-compassion so that you can share this with the evaluand.

In the brain, there is a circuit that is critical for registering the "self": the DMN, which is sometimes also referred to as the brain's center of gravity.<sup>8</sup> In general, this network is turned off when you are focusing, and only comes on when you are unfocused. Hence, to truly become yourself, your own daily practices should involve periods of unfocus, and in the interaction with the evaluand, even though you are delivering objective findings, it would help if there were room for reverie.

Reverie is a quality of thought in which the mind wanders through distraction, self-absorption or wistful meanderings. On the surface, this may seem to miss the point of the evaluation, yet the scientific and clinical literature supports many positive functions of reverie and reverie-like states.<sup>61</sup> Scrutinizing your own reverie states can reveal hidden or unconscious factors that bear upon a given situation,<sup>62</sup> and reverie-like states such as doodling may improve memory by up to 29 per cent.<sup>63</sup> The brain is like a sponge, and is more absorbent, thereby allowing a person (e.g. the evaluand) to take in more of what the evaluator is saying.

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63 What does doodling do? - Andrade - 2010 - Applied Cognitive Psychology - Wiley Online Library. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/acp.1561> (accessed 2023-04-27).



**Action:** Reflect on who you truly are, and who the evaluand is. See yourself outside of your role. Create moments of unfocus in your life, and in the conversation with the evaluand as well.

**How?** There are many ways in which you can productively unfocus.<sup>64</sup> Booster breaks<sup>65</sup> (15 minutes of physical activity) and doodling are two of the things that you can do to activate the self-circuit in the brain. Also, when your own mind wanders, pay attention to where it is going, and see if it is revealing something to you. If you notice the evaluand's mind wandering, rather than being offended by them not listening to you, ask them to share where their mind is taking them. In so doing, you are likely to enrich the conversation with greater authenticity as well as uncover unconscious factors that are impacting the success of the project you are evaluating.

## Summary and conclusion

Despite all of these recommendations having scientific backing, there are also contradictory findings in the literature. The idea in this reflection is not to apply any principle without deep consideration of how to incorporate it within the framework of your uniqueness. Also, if a suggestion feels uncomfortable to you, think more about this. It may be something you are not willing to do, or it may also signify an unwillingness to change.

The table below summarizes the contrasts in communicating evaluation findings, as well as the key actions that you can implement to bring these insights to life.

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TABLE 1

Brain-based recommendations for communicating evaluation findings

	Default position/myths	Brain-based insight/suggestion	Summary of action
1	Approach the evaluation with an overwhelming sense of objectivity.	Recognize that the objectivity is relative, and that an overly rigid approach will cause stress which will activate old habits.	Create a congenial, relaxing and respectful atmosphere.
2	Quickly go through the positives and then focus on what needs to be corrected.	Discuss the positives until you feel like you have built trust. Do not be overly goal-focused in your approach (i.e. without compassion).	When delivering negative findings, also mention what could correct this and be future-focused and compassionate.
3	Take a neutral stance.	Neutrality is a pose. Use emotional and cognitive empathy.	Ask questions about the evaluand's perspective and listen with a capacity to reflect emotion.
4	Arrive at the evaluation and see what happens.	Intend to synchronize with the evaluand.	Do something positive prior to the evaluation (e.g. don't schedule it after an argument with your spouse).
5	Be real about the fact that this is about improvement, and focus on that only.	The evaluation is about creating a context for the evaluand to change, and not just the delivery of information.	Provide informative rather than confirmatory feedback. Balance out positives and negatives. Emphasize that struggles and failure are normal and surmountable.
6	Treat each goal as separate.	Acknowledge goal complexity.	Draw a diagram of the network of goals and acknowledge how they may be interacting.
7	Tell the evaluand what not to do.	Remember ironic process theory.	Attempt to frame suggestions as proactive actions.
8	It's up to the evaluand to act.	Remember self-determination theory.	Probe around autonomy, competence, and social relations.
9	Ignore the evaluand's sense of being overwhelmed.	Use CIRCA to decrease the sense of being overwhelmed.	Incorporate CIRCA while discussing solutions.
10	Forget that you and the evaluand are leaders.	Become yourself.	Reflect on the biological connection between you and the evaluand, and create unfocused times for yourself, and in the discussion.

To apply this productively, check off the principles you would like to try first. Then, build them into your planned discussion concretely. Following this, rehearse in your mind how you will make these changes, and then implement them. By taking a systematic approach, you can measure and discern which of these brain-based solutions make a difference to you.

**Your brain can be your greatest ally if you allow it to guide you in your work and in your life.**





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