

Special resource to supplement
Chapter 5 of
Utilization-Focused Evaluation, 5th ed

The Niche and Nature of Principles-Focused Evaluation:

Serving Diverse Purposes

“Expedients are for the hour, but principles are for the ages.”

Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887)

American Preacher, Orator, Writer

Utilization-focused evaluation is a comprehensive decision framework for designing and implementing an evaluation to fit a particular situation and, in that situation, meet the information needs of primary intended users to enhance their intended use of the evaluation.

Developmental Evaluation serves the purpose of innovation development. Developmental evaluation (DE) provides *evaluative* information and feedback to social innovators, and their funders and supporters, to inform adaptive *development* of change initiatives in complex dynamic environments. DE brings to innovation and adaptation the processes of asking evaluative questions, applying evaluation logic, and gathering and reporting evaluative data to inform and support the development of innovative projects, programs, initiatives, products, organizations, and/or systems change efforts with timely feedback. Social innovators, funders of social innovation, advocates and supporters of social innovation, and change agents are the primary intended users of DE -- and clearly identified as such in any specific developmental evaluation. The intended use (purpose) of DE is to support adaptation and development of the innovation. This is done through ongoing and timely evaluation. The developmental evaluation

feedback and findings are used by social innovators and change agents to illuminate and adapt innovative strategies and decisions. That's intended use by intended users. That's utilization-focused evaluation with a developmental purpose. Funders of social innovation use DE findings to inform funding decisions and meet accountability expectations and demands. That's also intended use by intended users. That's also utilization-focused evaluation. In short, DE is a particular kind of utilization-focused evaluation. All that has been learned about enhancing use over 40 years of utilization-focused evaluation practice and research undergirds developmental evaluation (Patton, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2016).

The DE niche focuses on evaluating innovations in complex dynamic environments because that's the arena in which *social-ecological innovators* are working. Social-ecological innovators integrate understandings of and actions on the human and natural worlds as interdependent and interactive complex dynamic systems. Social-ecological innovators deal with people and places, and interventions within contexts. Innovation is a broad framing that includes creating new approaches to intractable problems, adapting programs to changing conditions, applying effective principles to new contexts (scaling innovation), catalyzing systems change, and improvising rapid responses in crisis conditions. Social-ecological innovation unfolds in social systems that are inherently dynamic and complex, and often turbulent. The implication for social innovators is that they typically find themselves having to adapt their interventions in the face of complexity. Funders of social-ecological innovation also need to be flexible and adaptive in alignment with the dynamic and uncertain nature of social innovation in complex systems. Developmental evaluators track, document, and help interpret the nature and implications of innovations and adaptations as they unfold, both the processes and outcomes of innovation, and help extract lessons and insights to inform the ongoing adaptive innovation

process. At the same time, this provides accountability for funders and supporters of social innovations and helps them understand and refine their contributions to solutions as they evolve. Social-ecological innovators often find themselves dealing with problems, trying out strategies, and striving to achieve goals that emerge from their engagement in the change process, but which they could not have been identified before that engagement, and that continue to evolve as a result of what they learn. The developmental evaluator helps identify and make sense of these emergent problems, strategies, and goals as the social innovation *develops*. The emergent/creative/adaptive interventions generated by social innovators for complex problems are significant enough to constitute *developments* not just improvements, thus the need for *developmental* evaluation.

Principles-Focused Evaluation

Here are the distinctions so far. Utilization-focused evaluation is a comprehensive decision-making framework for determining what kind of evaluation is appropriate for a particular situation and specific primary intended users to serve their intended uses. Developmental evaluation is one particular purpose of evaluation: supporting development of social innovations introduced by social innovators into complex dynamic situations. Principles-focused evaluation calls attention to and focuses on one particular object of evaluation: principles as the *evaluand*. Outcomes are the evaluand of outcomes-focused evaluation. A project is the evaluand of project-focused evaluation. A theory of change is the evaluand of theory-of-change-focused evaluation. Program processes are the evaluand of process-focused evaluation. And, follow me closely here, principles are the evaluand of principles-focused evaluation.

Principles-Focused Developmental Evaluation

A principles-focused developmental evaluation would evaluate how principles are informing innovative developments in a complex dynamic situation. Because developmental evaluation often unfolds without predetermined or fixed processes and outcomes, the innovative process may be guided by adherence to principles. Adapting those principles to particular challenges and changing contexts is often a primary focus of developmental evaluation. For example, an innovative, community-based anti-poverty initiative may be committed to the principle of inclusion. A principles-focused developmental evaluation focused on inclusion would be appropriate for such an initiative because it combines the purpose of supporting and evaluating innovation development with a focus on principles as the rudder for navigating complexity in the process of developmental adaptation.

But not all developmental evaluations are principles-focused, and not all principles-focused evaluations are developmental in purpose. So let's consider some other purposes and applications of principles-focused evaluation beyond developmental evaluation.

Evaluating Principles

As this workshop illustrates, principles-focused evaluation can evaluate processes of implementing principles, outcomes associated with principles, longer-term and broader impacts that result from principles-driven programming, and innovative approaches to principles adaptation. Principles-focused evaluation can serve a variety of purposes: accountability, formative, summative, developmental, and knowledge-generating. In all these applications, principles-focused evaluation should be utilization-focused. Across all these applications, diverse purposes, and varying uses *the distinguishing characteristic of principles-focused evaluation is the focus on principles as the object of evaluation*, as the evaluand. Three core questions bring the focus to principles-focused evaluation: To what extent have meaningful and evaluable principles been articulated? If principles have been articulated, to what extent and in what ways

are principles being adhered to in practice? If adhered to, to what extent and in what ways are principles leading to desired results?

Developmental Evaluation Principles

1. ***Developmental purpose principle***: Illuminate, inform, and support what is being developed, identifying the nature and patterns of development (innovation, adaptation, systems change), and the implications and consequences of those patterns.
2. ***Evaluation rigor principle***: Ask probing evaluation questions, think and engage evaluatively, question assumptions, apply evaluation logic, use appropriate methods, and stay empirically grounded, that is, rigorously gather, interpret, and report data.
3. ***Utilization focus principle***: Focus on intended use by intended users from beginning to end, facilitating the evaluation process to ensure utility and actual use.
4. ***Innovation niche principle***. Elucidate how the change processes and results being evaluated involve innovation and adaptation, the niche of developmental evaluation.
5. ***Complexity perspective principle***: Understand and interpret development through the lens of complexity and conduct the evaluation accordingly. This means using complexity premises and dynamics to make sense of the problems being addressed, guide innovation, adaptation, and systems change strategies, interpret what is developed, adapt the evaluation design as needed, and analyze emergent findings.
6. ***Systems thinking principle***: Think systemically throughout, being attentive to interrelationships, perspectives, boundaries, and other the key aspects of the social system and context within which the innovation is being developed and the evaluation is being conducted.
7. ***Co-creation principle***: The innovation and evaluation develop together -- interwoven, interdependent, iterative, and co-created – such that the developmental evaluation becomes part of the change process.

8. ***Timely feedback principle***: Time feedback to inform ongoing adaptation as needs, findings, and insights emerge, rather than only at predetermined times (like quarterly, or mid-term and end-of project).

Source: Patton (2016)

Principles Guiding Principles-Focused Evaluation

1. ***Matching principle***: Conduct principles-focused evaluations on principles-driven initiatives with principles-committed people.
2. ***Distinctions matter principle***: Distinguish types of principles: natural, moral and effectiveness; distinguish principles from values, beliefs, lessons, rules, and proverbs.
3. ***Quality principle***: Support development of principles that meet the GUIDE criteria: They *Guide*; are *Useful*; *Inspire*; support *Developmental* adaptations; and are *Evaluable*.
4. ***Evaluation rigor principle***: Systematically inquire into and evaluate effectiveness principles for both implementation (Are they followed?) and results (What difference do they make?).
5. ***Utilization focus principle***: Focus on intended use by intended users from beginning to end, facilitating the evaluation process to ensure utility and actual use.
6. ***Beyond rhetoric principle***: Support using principles comprehensively; use them or lose them; don't let them become just a list; apply them across functions (staff development, working with clients, strategic planning, monitoring & evaluation)
7. ***Interconnections principle***: Examine how individual principles are aligned (or not) and interconnect (or not).

8. **Learning principle.** Reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the principles-focused evaluation process and results to learn and improve; engage in principles-focused reflective practice. Deepen learning about principles-driven programming and principles-focused evaluation; extract and apply lessons.

GUIDE: Criteria for Effectiveness Principles

Criteria are central to evaluation. Judging quality requires criteria. Evaluation reasoning is built around criteria. Determining how good something begins with criteria. Think about the criteria you apply to the things that matter to you. What are your criteria for music you prefer? What criteria have you used in buying car? A computer? Furniture? Clothes? What are your criteria for a fine dinner? For your favorite movies? For political candidates worthy of your vote?

Principles-focused evaluation evaluates the meaningfulness of principles, degree of adherence to avowed principles, and the results that follow from adherence. But, first, we have to address what constitutes a high-quality principle. *No principles, no principles-focused evaluation.* Principles-focused evaluators often have to help develop, fine-tune, reframe, or better articulate principles to enhance their guidance, utility, inspirational nature, developmental adaptability, and evaluability.

GUIDE for Effectiveness Principles

The Up-Front Clarifying Role of Evaluators

Traditionally, evaluation has been synonymous with measuring goal attainment. The classic evaluation question was: To what extent is the program attaining its goals?

In order to answer this question, clear, specific, and measurable goals were needed. And that's where the trouble began. As I noted in discussing goals in *Essentials of Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (Patton, 2012):

The evaluation literature is replete with complaints about goals that are fuzzy, vague, abstract, too general, impossible to find indicators for, and generally inadequate. An example: Improved quality of life. What are the dimensions of "quality of life"? What constitutes improvement? Thomas Jefferson's "pursuit of happiness" would not pass muster" (p. 204).

In addition to vague goals, programs often have multiple and conflicting goals, and different stakeholders may emphasize different goals for the same program. This has meant that evaluators are called on not only to evaluate goal attainment, but to facilitate goals clarification in order to evaluate whether intended goals are being achieved. Enter *evaluability assessment*.

Evaluability assessment involves determining if a program is ready for evaluation, which usually includes clarifying goals. Evaluators have become heavily involved in goals clarification because, when we are invited in, we seldom find a statement of clear, specific, prioritized and measurable goals. This can take novice evaluators by surprise if they think that their primary task will be formulating an evaluation design for already established goals. Even where goals exist, they are frequently unrealistic, having been exaggerated to secure funding -- what are called *BHAGs* (Big Hairy Audacious Goals). One reason evaluability assessment has become an important pre-evaluation process is that, by helping programs get ready for evaluation, it acknowledges the frequent need for a period of time to work with program staff, administrators, funders, and participants on clarifying goals—

making them realistic, focused, agreed on, and measurable. Evaluability assessment can include interviews to determine how much consensus there is among various stakeholders about goals and to identify where differences lie.

As evaluators became involved in working with program people to more clearly specify the program's model (or theory), it became increasingly clear that evaluation was an *up-front activity* not just a back-end activity. That is, traditional planning models laid out some series of steps in which planning comes first, then implementation of the program, and then evaluation, making evaluation a back-end, last-thing-done task. But to get a program plan or design that could actually be evaluated has meant evaluators taking on the upfront role of clarifying goals, logic models, and program theories of change. This has had huge implications for evaluators. It has meant that evaluators have to be astute and skilled at working with program people, policymakers, and funders to facilitate their articulation of goals in a way that can be evaluated. *The same upfront process of clarification is often needed in principles-focused evaluation to develop and clarify principles.*

SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) emerged as a framework for goals clarification. In this chapter I offer a GUIDE framework as a set of criteria for clarifying effectiveness principles, that is, a tool to help a principles-based program ensure readiness for principles-focused evaluation. Essentially, this is evaluability assessment applied to principles. After presenting the GUIDE framework, I'll return to further discussion of the difference between goals-based evaluation versus principles-focused evaluation, and the integration of the two.

GUIDE for Effectiveness Principles

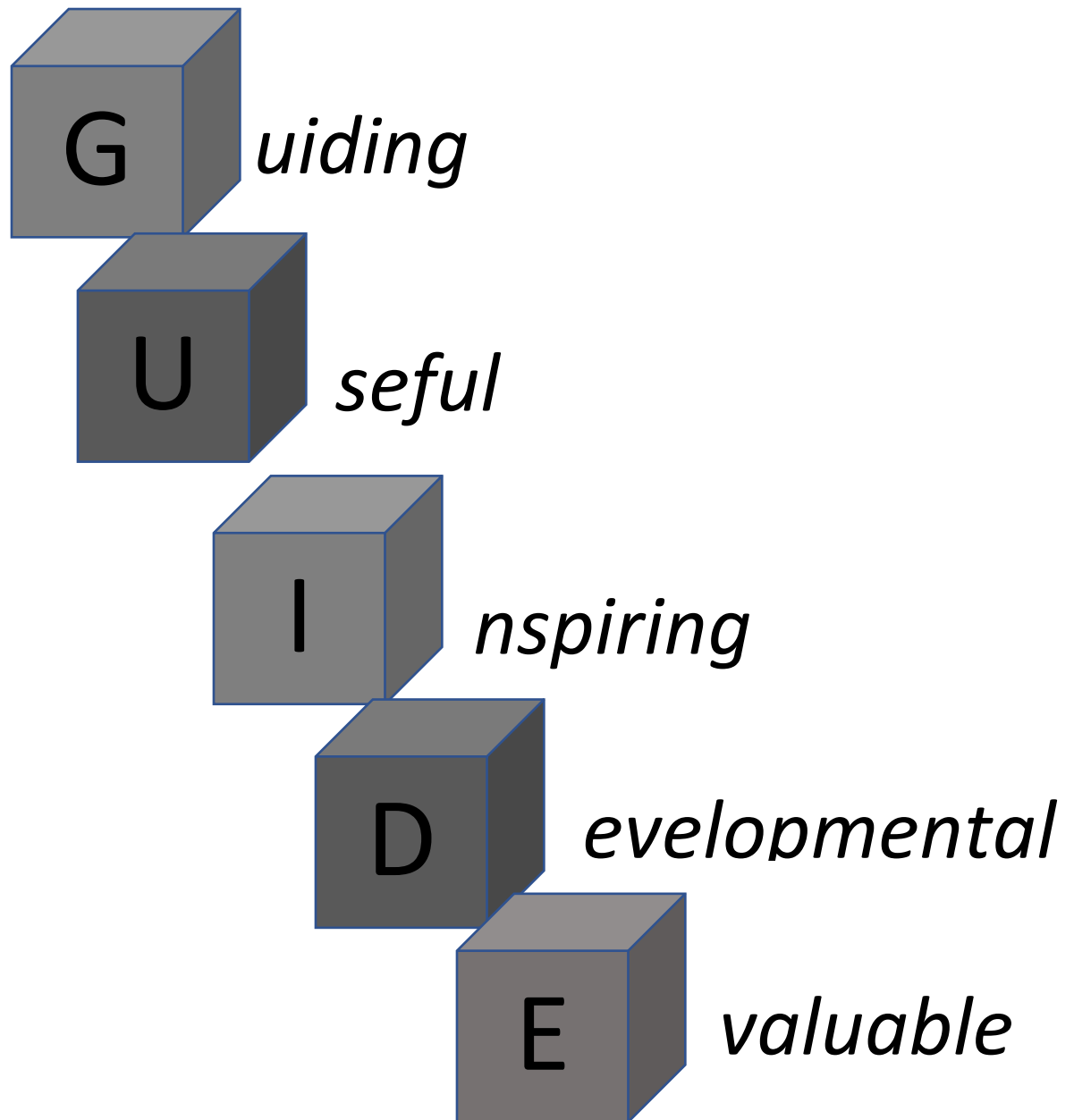
As just noted, SMART has become a widely used acronym and mnemonic specifying the criteria for a quality goal statement.



Note: R is sometimes *Relevant* rather than *Realistic*; T is sometimes *Time-bound*, not *Timely*.

In this workshop I offer **GUIDE** as an acronym and mnemonic specifying the criteria for a high quality principle statement. A high quality principle (1) provides guidance, (2) is useful, (3) inspires, (4) supports ongoing development and adaptation, and (5) is evaluable.

GUIDE Framework for Effectiveness Principles



Elucidating the GUIDE criteria and an example applying the GUIDE criteria

To illuminate the GUIDE criteria, let me present the fundamental principle that undergirds utilization-focused evaluation. Then we'll examine this principle using the five GUIDE criteria.

Utilization-focused evaluation principle:

*Focus on intended use, by and with intended users,
in every aspect of, and at every stage of, an evaluation.*

Now let's examine that principle against the five GUIDE criteria.

G

Guiding.

A principle is prescriptive. It provides advice and guidance on what to do, how to think, what to value, and how to act to be effective. It offers direction. The wording is imperative: *Do this*. The guidance is sufficiently distinct that it can be distinguished from contrary or alternative guidance.

The utilization-focused evaluation principle prescribes identifying intended users from the beginning and involving them in determining how an evaluation will be used, then designing the evaluation accordingly. Alternative and contrary principles are: Design an evaluation to be credible to scholars. Attend to use when you have findings to be used. Worry about accuracy not use. Identifying and articulating alternative possible principles clarifies a particular principle's guidance.

U

Useful

A high quality principle is useful in informing choices and decisions. Its utility resides in being actionable, interpretable, feasible, and pointing the way toward desired results for any relevant situation.

The purpose of the utilization-focused evaluation principle is to enhance actual use of an evaluation by those for whom and with whom it is being done. It can be applied to any evaluation situation. The principle advises focusing on use throughout the evaluation, from the beginning, not just at the end when findings are ready. That's useful advice; not easy, but doable, interpretable, and actionable.



Inspiring

Principles are values-based, incorporating and expressing ethical premises, which is what makes them meaningful. They articulate what matters, both in how to proceed and the desired result. That should be inspirational.

The utilization-focused evaluation principle values use. Valuing use is both an ethical and pragmatic stance. It implies that evaluations should not be done as a matter of compliance or window dressing, but should be conducted so as to be useful -- and actually used. This, the principle asserts, is the evaluator's calling. This is what makes evaluation worthwhile, meaningful, and a contribution to solving societal problems and improving lives. To behave otherwise is wasteful and unethical. The desired result is enhanced use of the evaluation by those for whom it is intended for social betterment. For evaluators who care about a better world, use is the vehicle for realizing that noble vision, so the principle is hopefully inspiring, both in the vision it offers and the implication that the desired result (greater evaluation use) is possible by following the principle.

D Developmental

The developmental nature of a high quality principle refers to its adaptability and applicability to diverse contexts and over time. A principle is thus both context sensitive and adaptable to real-world dynamics, providing a way to navigate the turbulence of complexity and uncertainty. In being applicable over time, it is enduring (not time-bound), in support of ongoing development and adaptation in an ever-changing world.

The utilization-focused evaluation principle applies to any context in which an evaluation is being conducted. It applies across levels from local, to regional, to state, national, and international. It applies as an intervention, change initiative, policy or program develops and on through its implementation. It provides guidance for any number of intended uses, and applies to different purposes for evaluation (accountability, program improvement, strategy analysis, overall summative judgments of merit and worth, monitoring, or knowledge-generation).

E Evaluable

A high quality principle must be evaluable. This means it is possible to document and judge whether it is actually being followed, and document and judge what results from following the principle. In essence, it is possible to determine if following the principle takes you where you want to go.

The utilization-focused evaluation principle can be evaluated by following up with intended users to find out if the evaluation was used in intended ways, and to get their feedback on the extent to which their involvement affected how they used the evaluation. There is a substantial literature reporting on evaluation of the utilization focused evaluation principle (Patton, 2008, 2012).

SMART Goals compared to GUIDE Principles

Because SMART goals and objectives are so extensively advocated, it is instructive to compare them with GUIDE principles. Exhibits 6.2 and 6.3 make this comparison. Exhibit 6.2 presents SMART goals for the worldwide campaign to eradicate polio. Exhibit 6.3 provides GUIDE effectiveness principles for the same campaign. Whereas SMART goals are specific and precise, GUIDE principles provide general guidance. Whereas SMART goals mandate quantitative indicators and statistical measures, GUIDE principles can be evaluated with multiple methods both quantitative and qualitative. For example, adherence to the utilization-focused evaluation principle that advises focusing on intended use by intended users could be evaluated by intended users' ratings of the utility of findings as well as case studies of how findings were used. Whereas SMART goals are calculated and articulated to state outcomes that are achievable, GUIDE principles aim to be inspiring by making explicit and articulating values that guide both how something is done and what the desired result is. Principles are not achievable in the sense that the task is completed and the outcome accomplished; rather principles guide ongoing engagement across many discrete projects and multiple change initiatives. Whereas SMART goals are written to express the outcomes of a specific project or program, GUIDE principles emphasize broader values-based, ethically grounded utility. Being useful incorporates and subsumes being relevant, because following principles must be meaningful. However, SMART goals focus only on outcomes and not on the process for attaining outcomes; in contrast, as just noted but worth reiterating, GUIDE principles apply to both process and outcomes, to both what is to be achieved and how it is to be achieved. Finally, whereas SMART goals are time-bound, GUIDE principles provide enduring and ongoing guidance. This is the difference between the project mindset of SMART goals versus the more general strategic thinking and action mindset of GUIDE principles.

Principles and Goals

This workshop has contrasted principles with goals, more specifically GUIDE principles with SMART goals. The two sets of criteria are not directly comparable; specific is not contrary to guiding; measurable is not in conflict with evaluable; achievable may be an element of inspiring; relevant and useful can be mutually reinforcing; and time-bound versus developmental is a matter of appropriate time perspective, each of which has value. Thus, principles and goals can, and typically do, coexist. Principles provide general guidance for how to understand and take action in the world. Goals frame the intended outcomes of specific actions (projects, programs, and policies) within some the limited time frame. *Principles and goals can be complementary, but the extent to which they are aligned and mutually reinforcing is an evaluation question.* Thus, both principles and goals can and should be evaluated, and the alignments (or conflicts) between them may be part of the effectiveness evaluation inquiry. That said, the key point in this workshop is that principles and goals constitute different evaluands and the ways in which they are evaluated will be different. Given their nature as clear, specific, measurable, relevant, achievable, and time-bound, SMART goals are evaluated by whether or not targeted indicators are met. In contrast, evaluating principles requires examining both processes and results, and may rely more heavily on qualitative data (interviews, field work, observations, and documents). Evaluating principles as if they are goals or projects is inappropriate and distorting.

Beyond evaluation as measuring goal attainment

One final comment about goals versus principles. Evaluation is still often defined as measuring goal attainment which is a quite narrow perspective both methodologically and conceptually. Because principles explicitly incorporate and express values, and evaluating

principles involves attention to both processes of following principles and the outcomes that result from doing so, principles-focused evaluation is more comprehensive than mere goal attainment evaluation. Pioneering evaluator and philosopher of science Michael Scriven has emphasized eloquently the limitations and distortions of equating and defining evaluation only or primarily as goal attainment. He attacks the American Psychological Association (APA) *Dictionary of Statistics and Research Methods* (2014) for incorrectly defining summative evaluation as “an attempt to assess the overall effectiveness of a program in meeting its objectives and goals after it is in operation.”

[That] definition...means the Nazi prison camps would score very well (at least for several years), or that stoning a woman to death for infidelity is good work (when locally sanctioned), or that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is wasting our time and tax money in checking drug side-effects when they are not included in a drug designer's goals. The basic idea that evaluation is determining the degree of goal achievement persists partly, one suspects, because of one of its flaws—it avoids the necessity for evaluating the goals and their supporting values, a process that was of course a capital offense in positivist philosophy of science.... But it also omits the rest of what evaluation does that cannot be omitted without disaster, for example, finding side effects and side impacts, doing cost analysis and risk analysis, identification of and comparison with alternatives, and evaluating the intervention's process—including the ethics of its procedures, its self-description, and its self-assessment (Scriven, 2016, p. 28).

Evaluation involves assessing the merit, worth, and significance of whatever is the focus of evaluation, be it goals or principles. The point of this chapter has been that evaluating

principles involves quite different criteria from evaluating goals. Evaluating principles, we shall see, is as much an ethical enterprise as a methodological one.