

Causal Pathways Evaluation: Building Understanding, Getting Ready

Causal Pathways Initiative Training

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Today's trainers: Yulianto Dewata, Jeph Mathias

Content developed as a collaborative effort by initiative network members and staff including: Carlisle Levine, Jewlya Lynn, Marina Apgar, and Carolina De La Rosa Mateo with support and content from Tom Aston, Julia Coffman, Heather Britt, Yulianto Dewata, Abdoul Karim Coulibaly, Steve Powell, and Fiona Remnant.

The Causal Pathways Initiative

Making visible the "black box" of philanthropic and systems change strategies, helping us collectively see how systems are (or are not) changing

An international network of evaluators, methodologists, philanthropic leaders, and more.

Focused on supporting philanthropy, other funders and their evaluation partners by **building awareness, will, and skills to use evaluation approaches that can make sense of causal relationships** without depending on more traditional experimental and quasi-experimental approaches.

Our Trainers



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Who is in the room?

Poll

1. Your organization type
2. Your role
3. Your level of experience with causal pathways evaluations

Causal pathways evaluations make visible the "black box" of philanthropic and systems change strategies, helping us collectively see how systems are (or are not) changing.

Agenda

- Welcome
- Core concepts & case study
- Debunking the myths
- Getting ready
- Building buy-in
- Q&A and conclusion

Learning Objectives

- Understand what it means to explore causal pathways, as well as the benefits
- Be able to counter some of the common myths that hinder exploration of causal pathways.
- Explore what it takes to be ready and help others to be ready for causal pathways evaluations
- Know where to look for additional training and resources.

Keywords and Terms

We use these terms interchangeably:

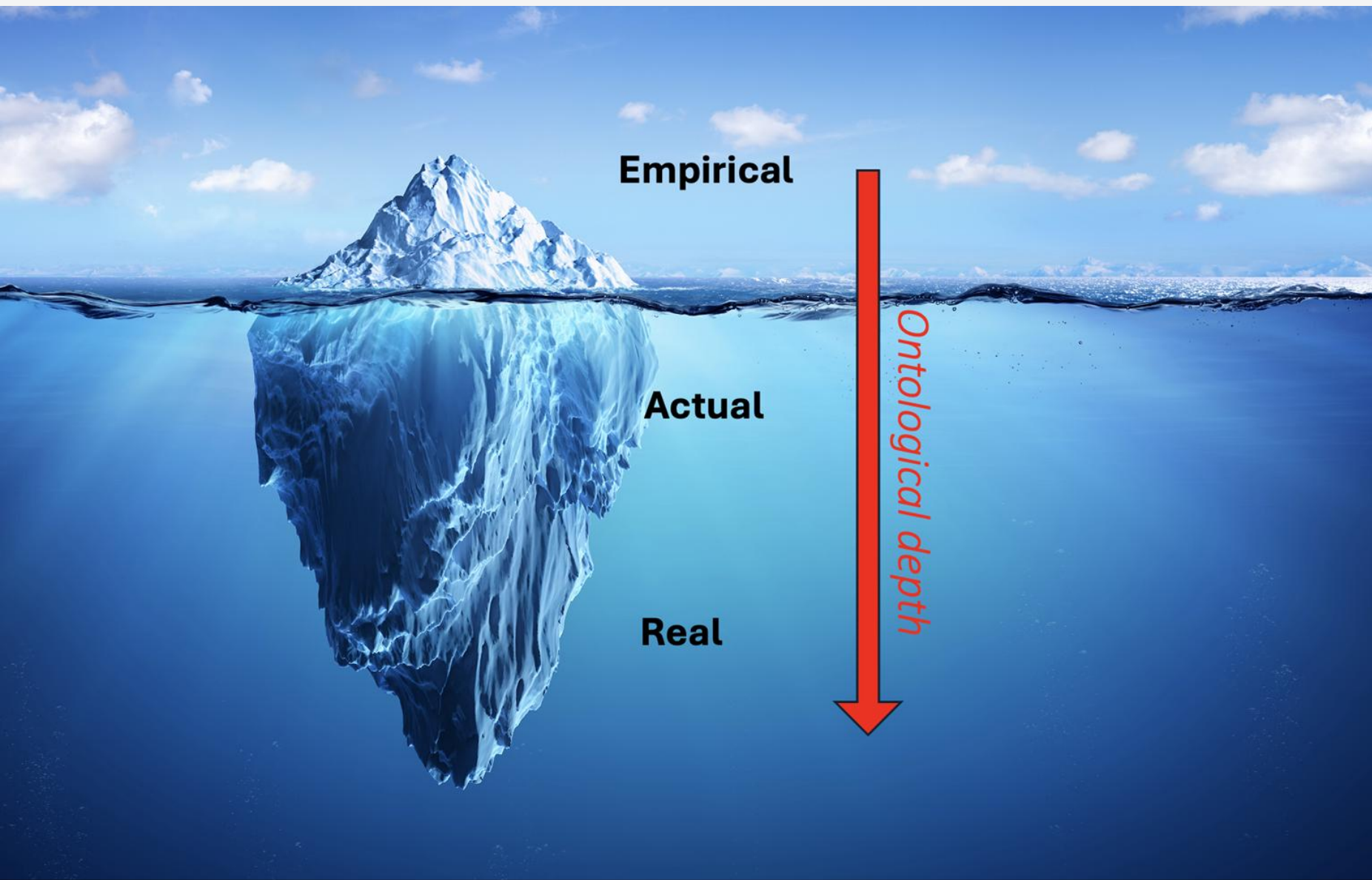
Strategy Project Initiative
Intervention
Program

How do we typically learn about change?

Causal pathway evaluation compared to descriptive evaluation

	Descriptive Evaluation	Causal Pathways Evaluation
Ask	What changes are happening?	How and why are changes happening?
Design	Use a theory of change to decide what to measure	Look beyond the theory of change – expect intervention to evolve and contribute to emergent outcomes. Look for drivers of change beyond the intervention.
Measure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Intervention progress and implementation quality● Outcomes● Context and assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Intervention progress and implementation quality● Outcomes (planned <u>and emergent</u>)● Context and assumptions (as potential drivers of change)● <u>Causal pathways</u> linking intervention and/or contextual factors to outcomes
Interpret	If findings align with TOC, conclude that theory of change is accurate and intervention is effective. TOC used to infer causal contribution.	Causal pathways evidence – rather than the TOC - is the primary source to infer whether, how and why the intervention (and context) contributed outcomes planned and emergent.





Empirical

Actual

Real

Ontological depth

A Mini-Case Study: Pathway



Introducing the case

An organic prison reintegration programme

- Unique intervention in a unique context
- Selected high security prisoners live in 4 flats inside the prison
- Semi-normalised life and social interaction
- No change to parole or sentence conditions
- Intensive support in “halfway houses” on release- house, bank account, job etc...
- Relationship with support worker for life.



To be more punitive and letting people out with no reintegration - to the people who think it's a risk – let them answer who they would rather live next to them?

Resource Unit tu ora 18.docx



I think its even more of a risk –to not do this.

Resource Unit tu ora 18.docx



All we can do is try it.

Resource Unit tu ora 18.docx



You want to turn your life around and make changes. This is how its done.

Resource Unit tu ora 18.docx



This environment has helped me prepare for what works in the real world.

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You need a place in prison where you can get rid of all that before you go out.

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The Central Hypothesis of the case (or key evaluation questions)

- No ToC - Treating people humanely and humanly is a good thing to do.
- [Activities, responsibility and social interaction make prisoners better adapted to life outside]
- “Suck it and see”- a good complexity response.
- Multiple evaluations by a top criminologist describe activities by Pathway, activities in the prison and rehabilitation phase and show **the best recidivism rates in New Zealand**
- **Recommendation “ This works very well. Carry on”**

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All we can do is try it.

Resource Unit tu ora 18.docx



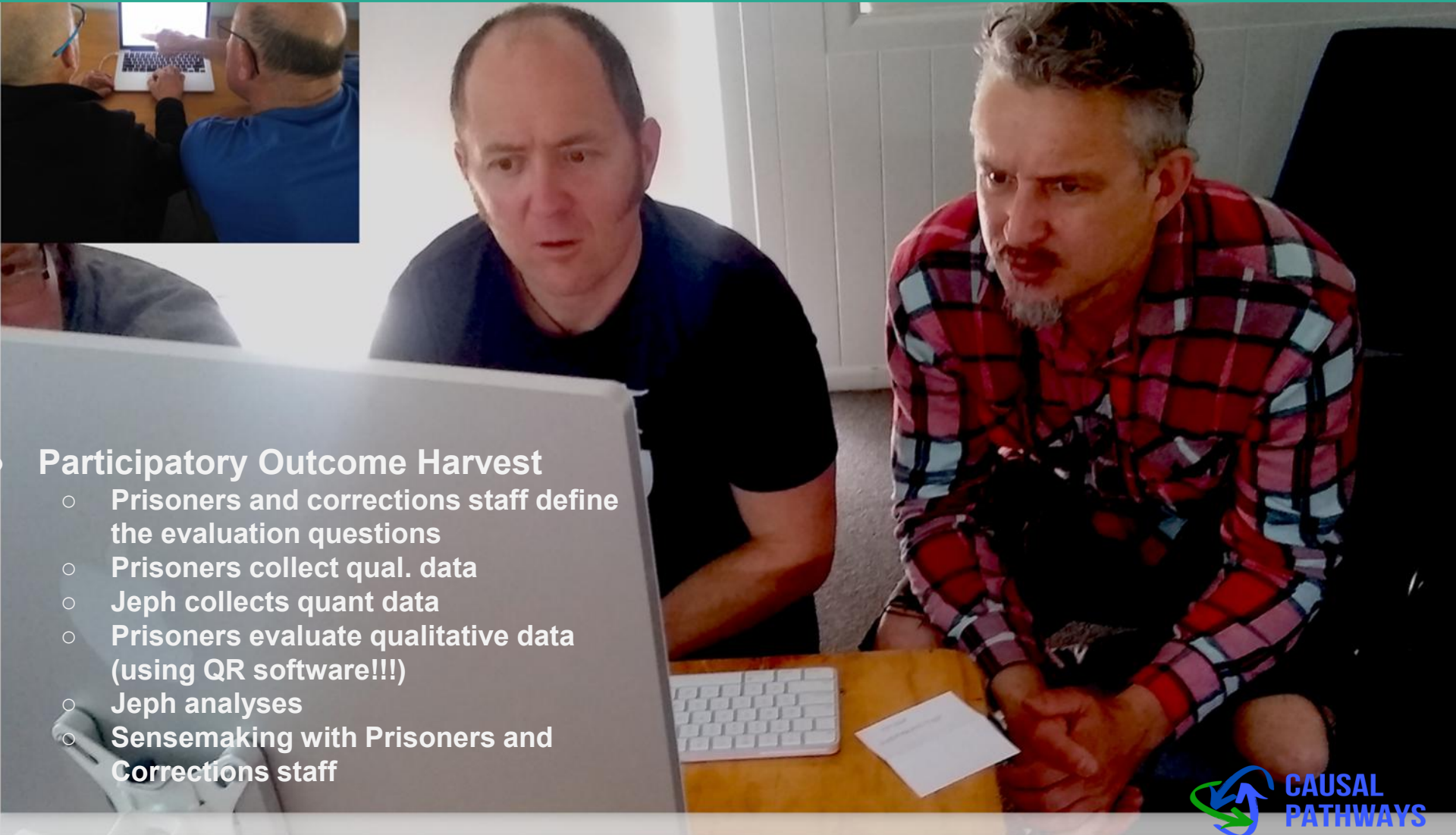
You want to turn your life around and make changes. This is how its done.

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I think its even more of a risk –to not do this.



Evaluating Causal Pathways: Methods Used



Participatory Outcome Harvest

- Prisoners and corrections staff define the evaluation questions
- Prisoners collect qual. data
- Jeph collects quant data
- Prisoners evaluate qualitative data (using QR software!!!)
- Jeph analyses
- Sensemaking with Prisoners and Corrections staff

A Causal Pathway in Action: [Example pathway]

- 
- A socio economic system (+ colonialism) means some New Zealanders grow up with strong messages that they are outsiders
 - As outsiders they do not feel included by society and do not feel they need to follow its rules
 - They commit crimes (i.e. break the prevailing rules that exclude them)
 - They are punished, imprisoned and punished in prison
 - They return to society feeling even less included, even less able or willing to follow societal rules
 - They commit crimes
- 

But if

- They experience acceptance, humanity and inclusion in prison; **then they**
- Grow a sense of inclusion and Mana (“I am worth something in this society”) **and so**
- They want to contribute, conform, be included in a society of which they now feel part of **and if**
- **They also** have an intensive community rehabilitation with humanity, skill building and support
- **Then** they can live in the community, get jobs establish, relationships in/with the “normal world”
- And thus the endless cycle of exclusion is broken- a causal chain to normality.

An Emergent Causal Pathway of parallel change in Corrections staff revealed itself. - Expectation and resources to humanise prisoners caused changes in the warders!

*“we’re all here for a fight- just we have uniforms and batons, they don’t” became
“ I come to work thinking of how I can express love for the men under my care”*

From learning to action



- Programme cannot be identically replicated
- Replicating its activities would not work
- Replicating its causal pathways is the key to reducing recidivism
- **To change a system you have to understand what drives it**

What typically stops us from doing deeper casual pathways exploration?

The Myths about Causal Pathways Analysis



- Myths about who can participate and who benefits
- Myths about whether causal designs are useful
- Myths about whether we're already using it
- Myths about the methods

Lynn, J., Stachowiak, S., & Coffman, J. (2021). Lost Causal: Debunking Myths About Causal Analysis in Philanthropy. *The Foundation Review*, 13(3). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1576>

The Myths: Causal designs aren't accessible.

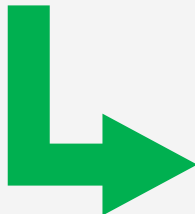


1. Causal designs are too burdensome for participants.
2. Causal designs cannot be implemented in ways appropriate for working with communities.
3. Causal designs are rooted in white supremacy.
4. Causal designs center philanthropy's ideas about change.

The Myths : Causal designs are too burdensome for participants.

Strong implementation of causal methods in complex settings does require stakeholder participation.

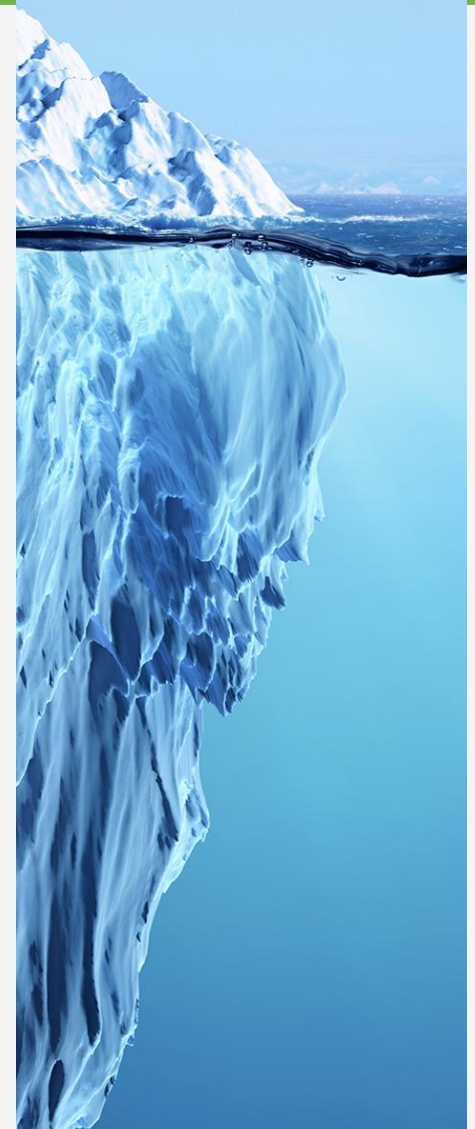
Burden should be assessed not just based on the time required for participation; it should also be judged on the value received from the output.



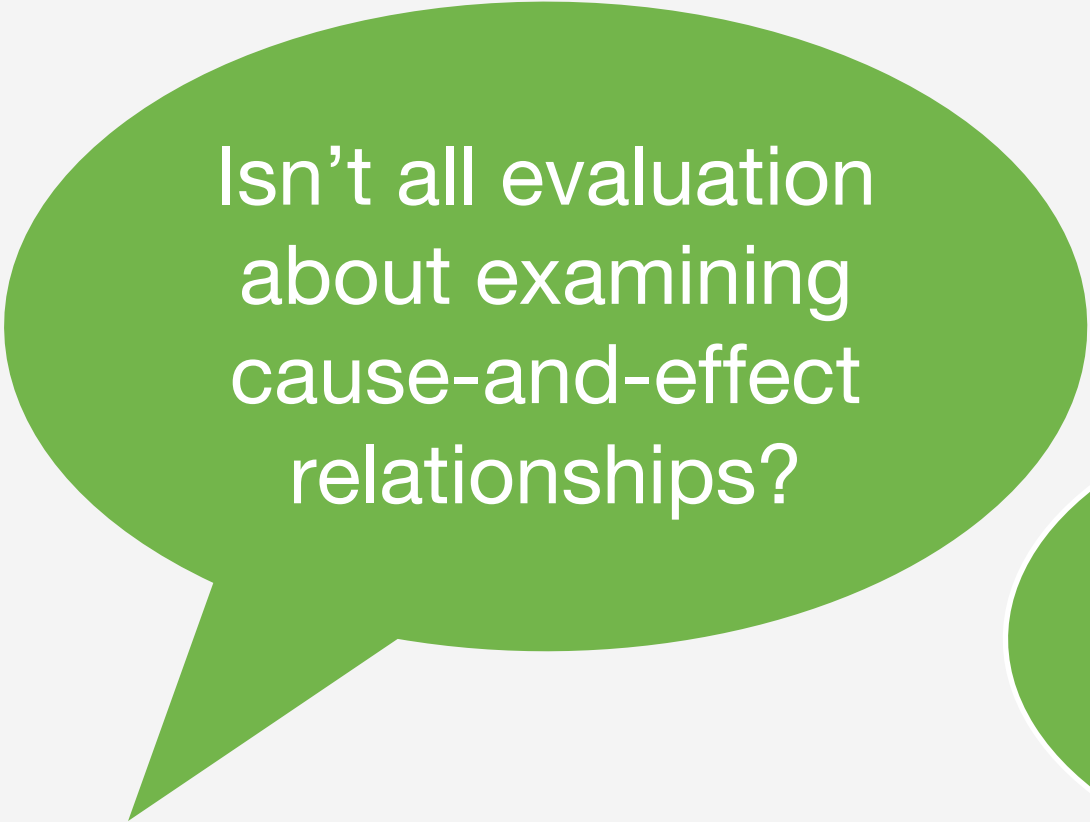
Work that merely describes what happened and which outcomes resulted may not lift up lessons that can inform future efforts. The cost of participation can outweigh the value returned for the effort participants put in.

The Myths: Causal designs aren't useful for strategy

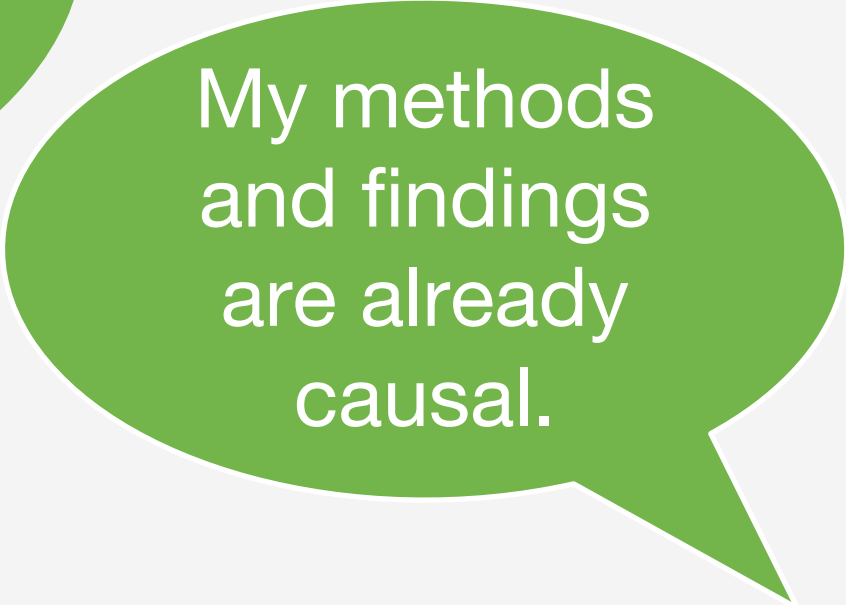
1. Causal designs focus on the past and do not help with **future decision-making**.
2. Causal designs are summative only and cannot be used for **real-time decision-making**.



The Myths: My evaluations are already causal; there is nothing I need to change



Isn't all evaluation
about examining
cause-and-effect
relationships?



My methods
and findings
are already
causal.

The Myths: There are no rigorous non-experimental designs for examining causality.

Frameworks for Inferring Causality

**Experimental/ Quasi-
Experimental Designs:**

Counterfactual

**Causal pathways evaluations
(which seek to explore
causality amid complexity)**

Generative

How, why, under what conditions

The Myths: There are no rigorous non-experimental designs for examining causality.

Theory-based

- Contribution analysis
- Process tracing
- Realist evaluation
- Innovation history

- Qualitative impact assessment protocol
- General elimination methodology

Participatory

- Collaborative yarning
- Most Significant Change
- Outcome Harvesting

- Rapid outcome assessment
- Collaborative outcomes reporting

Systems-based

- Causal link monitoring
- Causal loop diagramming

- Statistically-created counterfactuals

Key Takeaways

- 1 **Causal Learning:** We are good at *thinking causally* when we design strategies. Now, we need to get better at *learning about causal pathways* in order to strengthen our strategies, impact - and vision
- 2 **Methods that Work:** We are not limited to experimental and quasi-experimental designs. There are methods that help us learn about causality that are designed for complex, systemic change settings, including outcome harvesting, most significant change, collaborative yarning, process tracing, contribution analysis, and more.
- 3 **Rigor and Participation are Entangled:** The methods that help us understand causal pathways are the most rigorous in their analysis and most accurate in their findings when **those in the system, affected by and influencing the strategies, are actively part of the learning process.**

“then i played guitar in the whore”

Poll Question

In your situation, which myths are informing decisions about whether and how to explore causality?

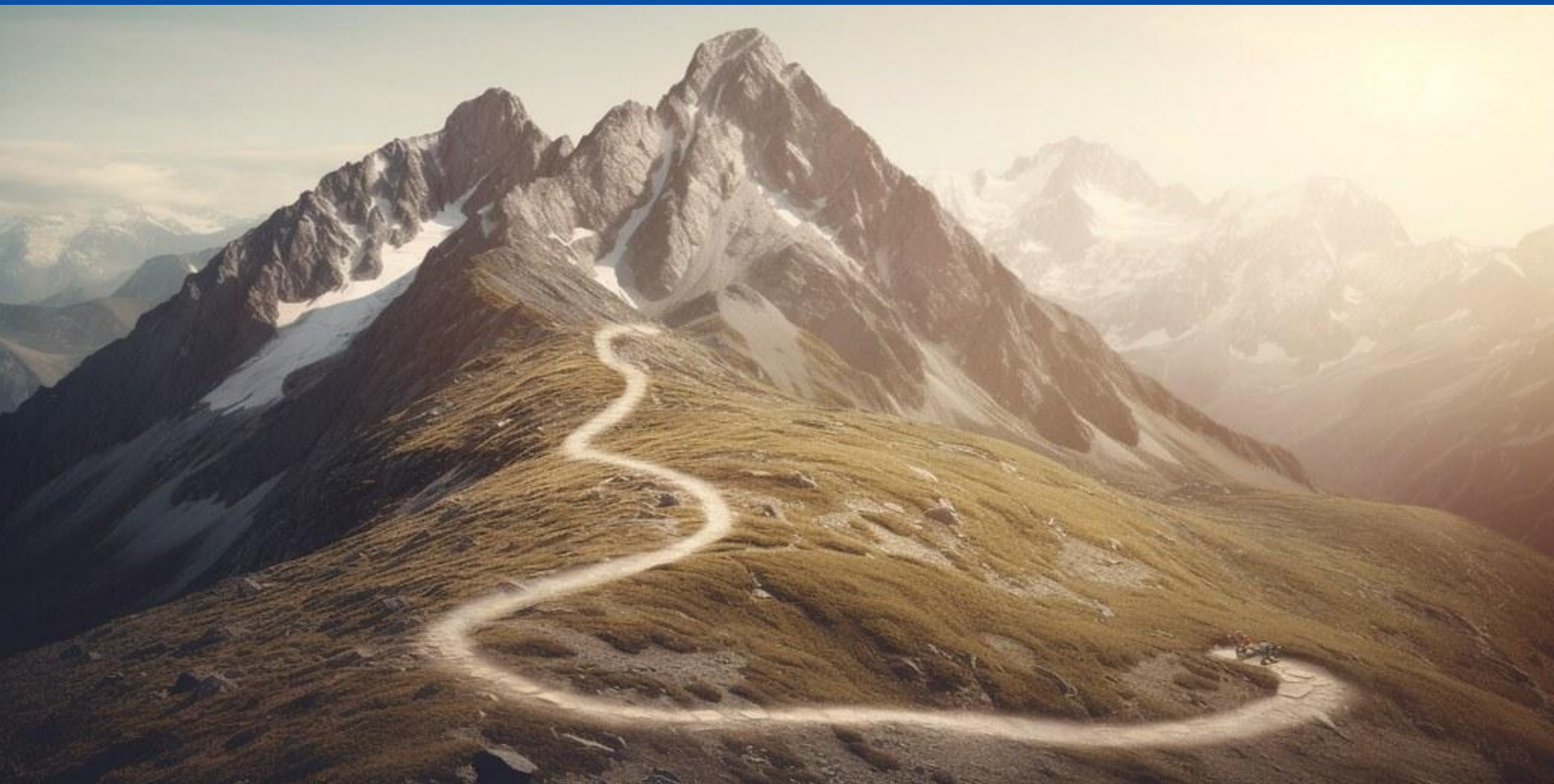
- Myths about the methods
- Myths about who can participate and who benefits
- Myths about whether causal designs are useful
- Myths about whether we're already using it



Break: 5 minutes

Building buy-in

Tapping into existing curiosity about change processes



Seeking opportunities to encourage causal pathways exploration

Strategy
meetings

Grantee
check-ins

Monitoring
activities

Seeking opportunities to encourage causal pathways exploration

What would it take to make progress toward a desired outcome?

How will we know if that is working?

How has a change come about?

What contributed to it?

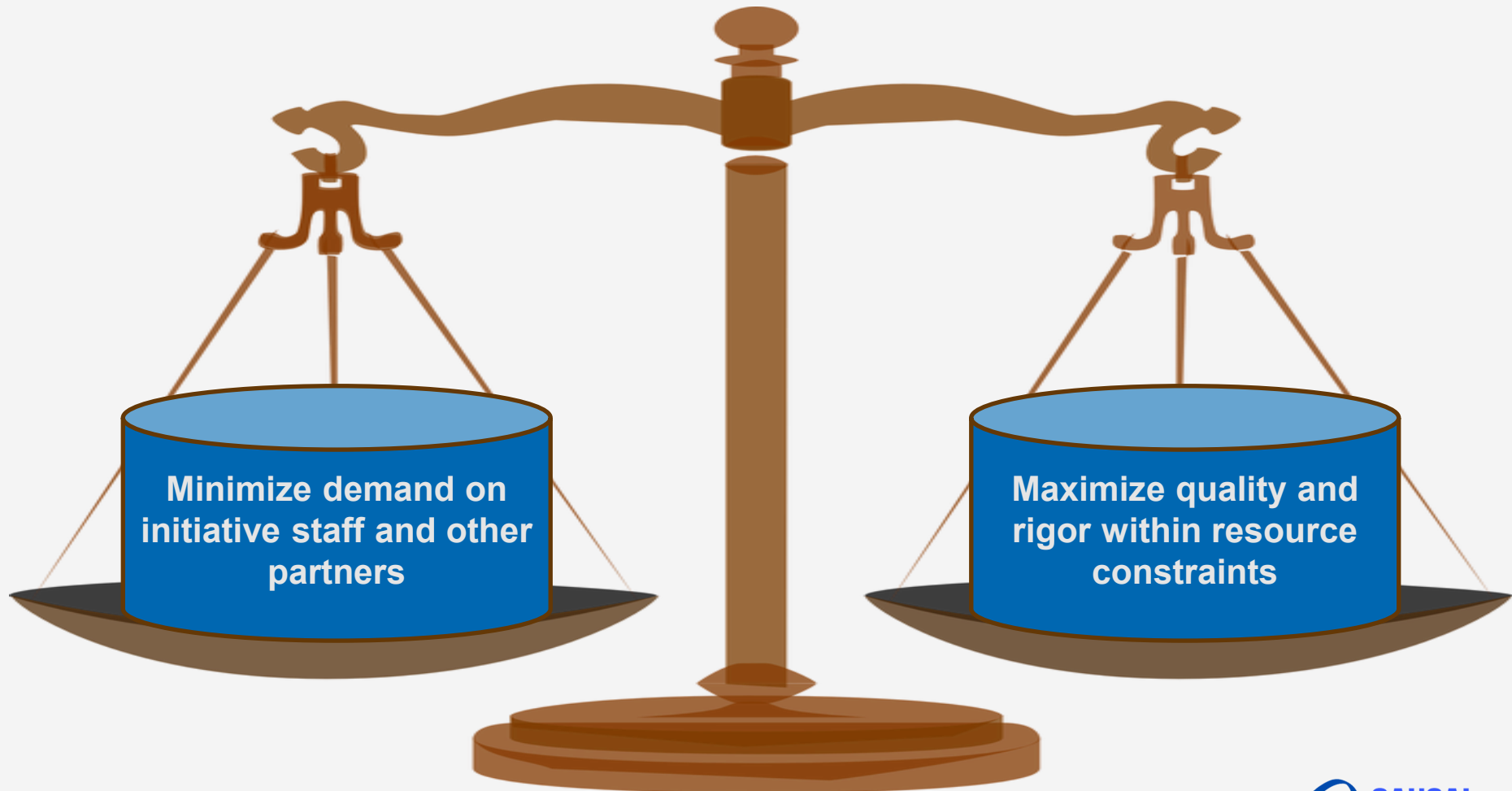
How do we know?

Strategy meetings

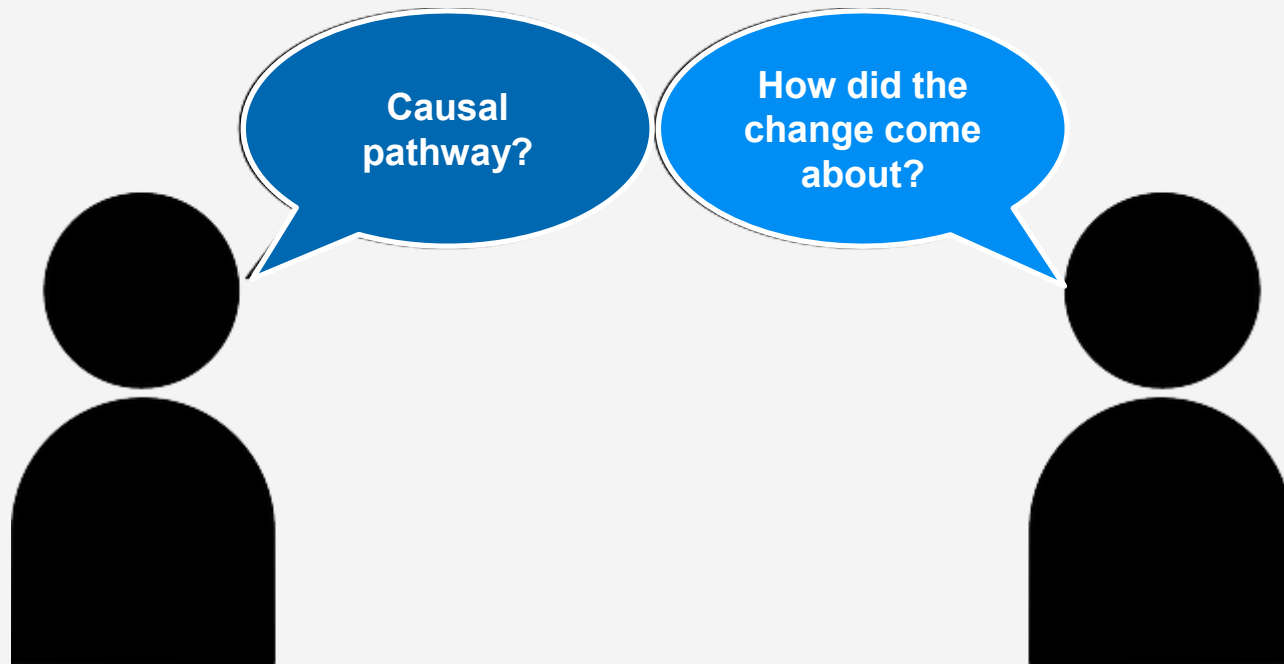
Grantee check-ins

Monitoring activities

Identifying lighter-touch ways to begin to answer causal questions



Other ways to encourage causal pathways exploration



Getting ready to explore causal pathways

We are ready to explore causal pathways when...

Clear use

Much to learn

**How? Why?
For whom?
In what context?**

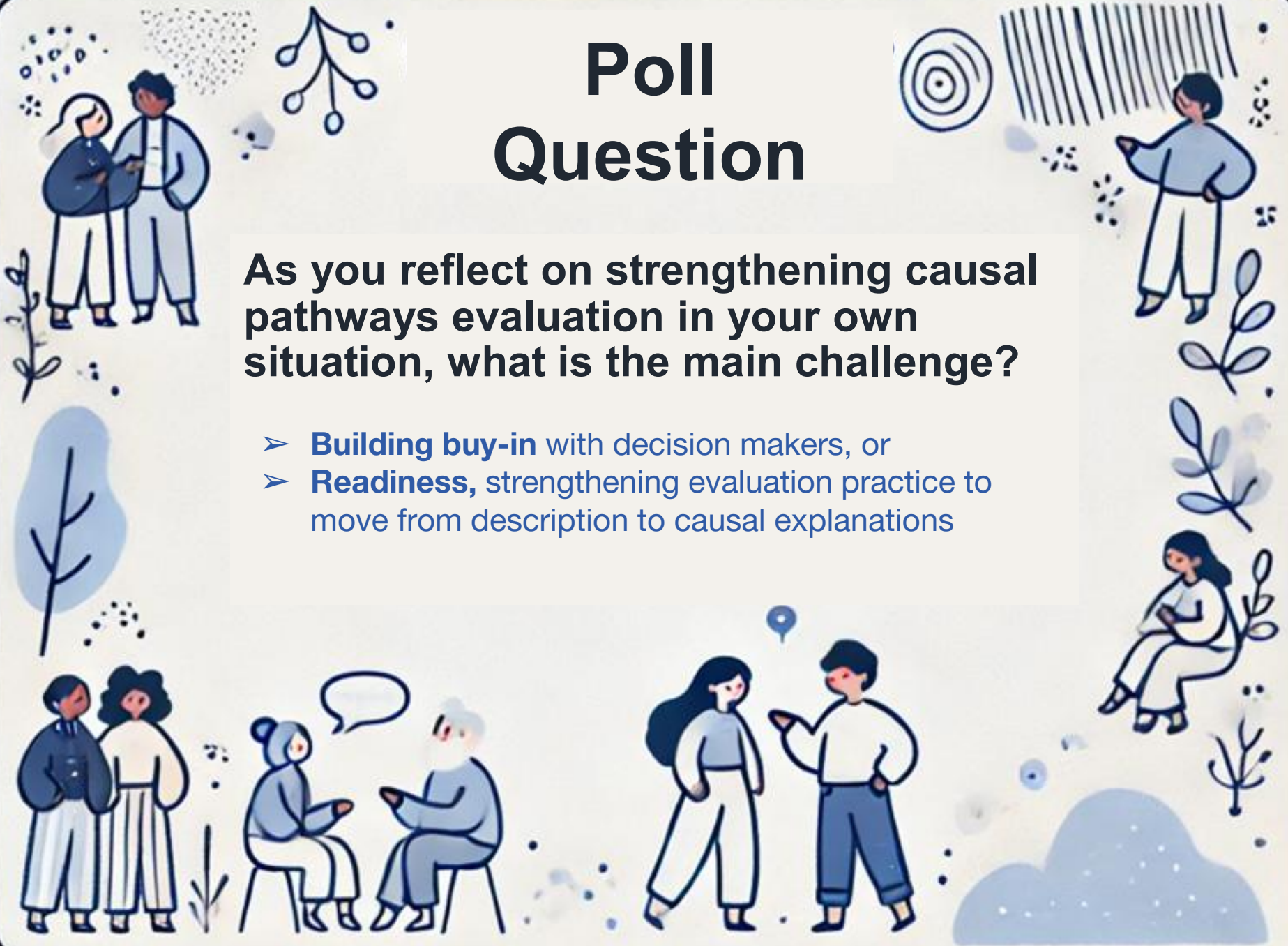
**Contextual factors?
Emergent outcomes?**

**Causal pathways
evidence?**

Poll Question

As you reflect on strengthening causal pathways evaluation in your own situation, what is the main challenge?

- **Building buy-in** with decision makers, or
- **Readiness**, strengthening evaluation practice to move from description to causal explanations



SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Buy-in:

- What approaches for building buy-in seem promising for your situation?
- Who might be an ally or influencer to promote buy-in?

OR

Readiness:

- How might you help an initiative team begin – or deepen – exploration of causal pathways?
- What causal questions might surface as they explore the ideas?



Questions and Commitments

This image shows a large collection of multi-colored sticky notes (yellow, orange, pink, blue, green) densely packed together. Each note contains handwritten text in various colors of ink. The messages are diverse, ranging from motivational quotes like "Live Young!", "Keep Calm & Be Happy!!", and "Enjoy your struggle" to personal expressions such as "I Love Myself", "I Love Mother", and "I Love my Mum". There are also humorous remarks like "Death is painful", "Be single be virgin be unhappy!", and "Tanu Nani lea padai Aisha". Some notes include small drawings or sketches, such as a mountain range, a person's face, and a simple house. The overall composition is vibrant and visually busy due to the overlapping colors and varied handwriting.

Taking Learning into Action

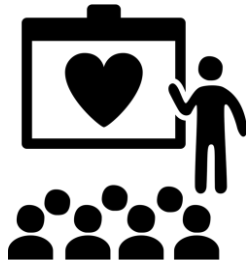
As you reflect on today's content, what is **one myth you want to challenge or action you want to take?**

You might consider:

- Picking a myth that is very present in your own organization or you have held yourself
- Picking an action to take such as:
 - Sharing something you learned with a colleague
 - Applying something you learned today in a current or new project
 - Continuing to learn, leveraging Causal Pathways Initiative case studies, Better Evaluation, and other resources

**Where to find more about
exploring causal pathways**

Resources from the Causal Pathways Initiative

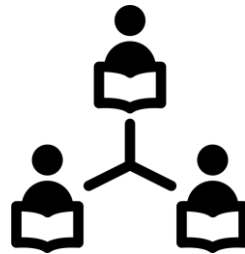


Presentations & trainings to build understanding and will

American Evaluation Association

Available to attend other events by request

Virtual 101 level training available on request



Resources to support understanding and action

BetterEvaluation.com resource hub on causal pathways evaluation

Case studies to provide stories and more detailed examples

Book chapter with step-by-step guidance on how to plan a causal pathways evaluation



Learning and acting together with support

Brain Trust to help funders work through tough questions with field experts

ABOUT THIS THEME**Theme type**[Cross-cutting themes](#)**Tags**[Causal Pathways](#)

Causal pathways

Contributing partner:



Causal Pathways Initiative

A causal pathways perspective on evaluation focuses on understanding how, why, and under what conditions change happens or has happened.

It is used to understand the interconnected chains of causal links that lead to a range of outcomes and impacts. These causal pathways are likely to involve multiple actors, contributing factors, events, and actions, not only the activities associated with the program, project, or policy being evaluated or its stated objectives.

Overview

Rather than being a specific approach, causal pathways evaluation might be best understood as a perspective on evaluation, which can draw on a combination of existing evaluation approaches, processes and methods. It uses a range of types of evidence, especially participant voices and narratives, and emphasises the use of participatory processes.

Causal pathways evaluation, as understood by the [Causal Pathways Initiative](#), can be distinguished by the following features:

THANK YOU

