

Causal Pathways Evaluation: Building Understanding, Getting Ready

Causal Pathways Initiative Training

Today's trainers: Heather Britt & Kimberlin Butler

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

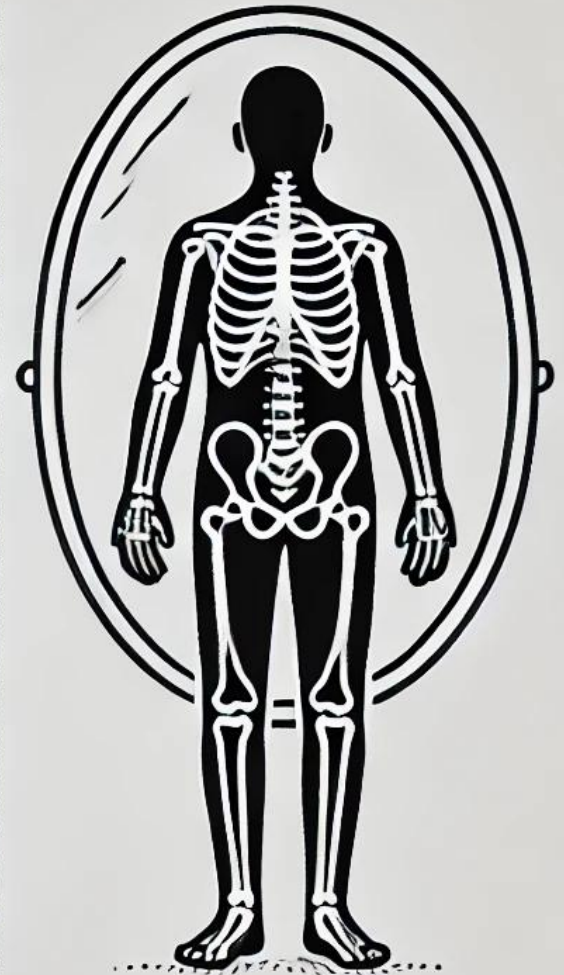
	Descriptive Evaluation	Causal Pathways Evaluation
Ask	What changes are happening?	How and why are changes happening?
Design	Use a theory of change to decide what to measure	Look beyond the theory of change – expect intervention to evolve and contribute to emergent outcomes
Measure	<ul style="list-style-type: 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● <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.

See [Causal Pathways page](#) on BetterEvaluation for more details.

How does a
descriptive
evaluation
differ from a
causal
evaluation?



Descriptive



Causal


The Case: An introduction

Introducing the case

Project Element	Details
Intervention Focus	National foundation investing in early childhood, job readiness, and workforce equity through community-based programs
Strategic Objective	Shift hiring policies and influence discourse around equity in workforce systems
Key Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Technical Assistance• Storytelling and Narrative Change• Cross-sector Collaboration• Employer convenings
Theory of Change in Practice	Advocacy, relationships, policy engagement, and narrative change working together to shift systems
Evaluation Users	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Program staff and strategy teams• Foundation Board


The Central Hypothesis of the Case: Key Evaluation Questions

 **How did change happen** across these workforce systems?

 **Why did it happen** — what conditions or strategies enabled progress?

 **Who benefited, and who was left out?**

 **What role did the foundation's investments play?**

 **And what else may have contributed** — including external or contextual factors?

Evaluating Causal Pathways: Methods Used

Ripple Effect Mapping (REM)

- Visualizes intended and emergent outcomes
- Highlights community-defined changes and contribution
- Participatory group sessions with grantees, employers, and partners

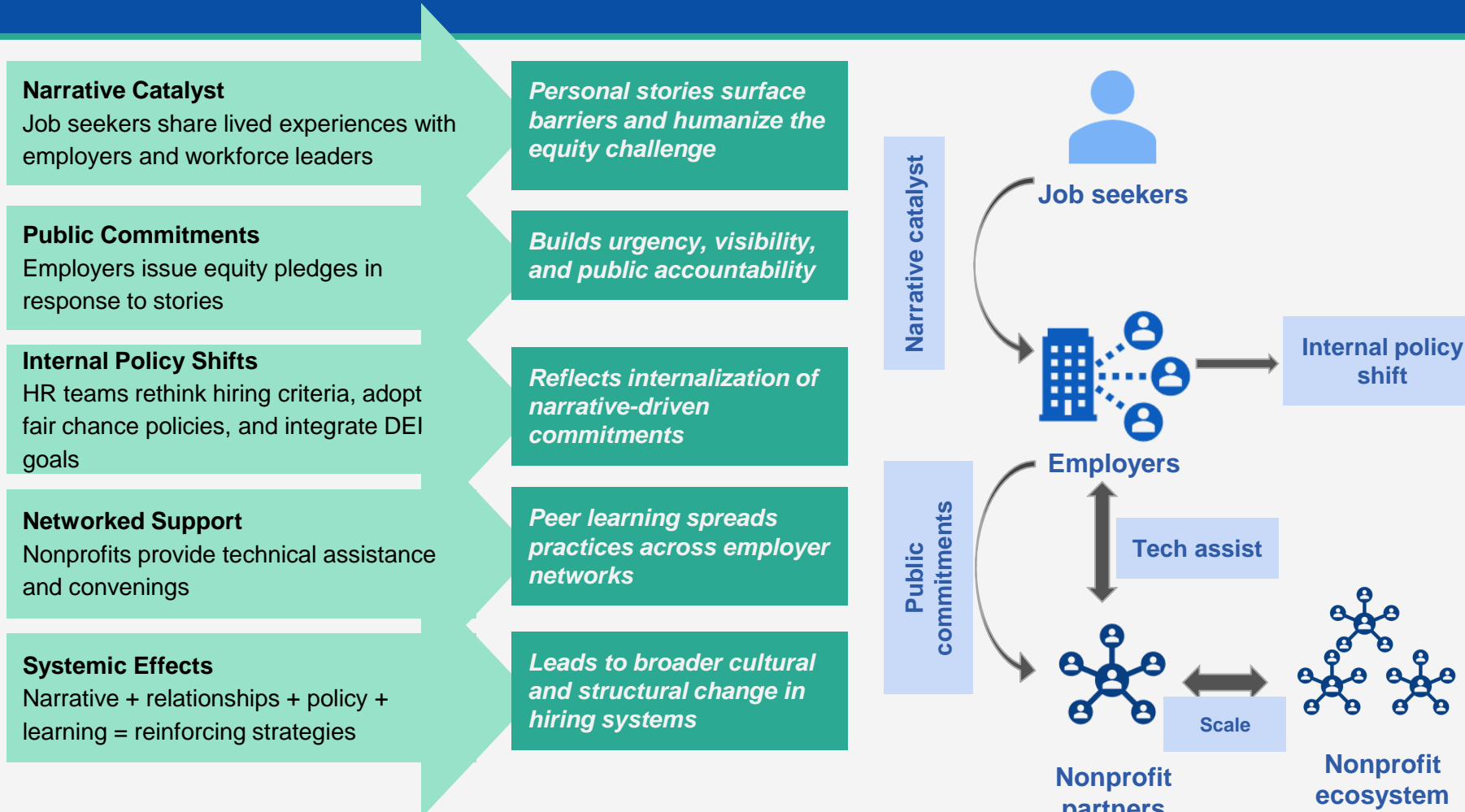
Contribution Analysis

- Tests the plausibility of causal links
- Maps strategies to observed change and considers alternative explanations
- Supports causal inference in complex, non-linear systems

Together, these methods supported rigor, participation, and systems learning.



A Causal Pathway in Action: Changing Hiring Systems Through Narrative and Networked Action



This pathway shows how change is co-produced through layered, interdependent strategies—not single interventions. Causal pathways evaluation helped trace and make meaning of that complexity.

From learning to action

What changed because of the evaluation?

- Strategy was no longer built on assumptions—it was built *with partners at the table*
- Evaluation findings guided critical Board decisions on where—and how—to focus investments
- Focus shifted from **program delivery** to **long-term systems change**
- The foundation became more comfortable with **complexity, emergence, and non-traditional methods**

Key takeaways from this case:

- ★ Causal pathways evaluations don't require randomized trials to be credible
- ★ Participation enhances rigor—it doesn't dilute it
- ★ Sometimes the better question isn't "*Did it work?*" but "*What contributed to change—and how do we know?*"

Reflections from the evaluator's seat:

Causal pathways work isn't just about tools—it's about **trust, truth-telling**, and creating space for **shared meaning-making**. It calls us to show up differently—more open, more relational, and more willing to learn in real time.

Reflections & Transition

Key Takeaways from the Case

- Look beyond the theory of change to understand contribution
- Design to describe strategy evolution, surface context, and capture emergent outcomes
- Collect evidence of how change happened

What It Takes

- Motivated to improve impact through learning
- Commit to start where you are and grow in practice
- Strong evidence + many perspectives
- Space for complexity, curiosity, and co-interpretation

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**

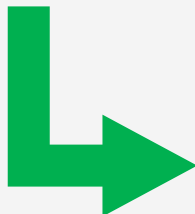
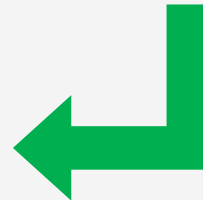
The Myths: Causal designs aren't accessible.

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:**

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

Counterfactual

Generative

**How, why, and 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 and impact.
- 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.**



Small Group Discussion (Breakout 1)

Poll

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

1. Myths about who can participate and who benefits
2. Myths about whether causal designs are useful
3. Myths about whether we're already using it
4. Myths about the methods
5. Other (Please describe)

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

What myths (or assumptions) do we currently hold in our organization about whether and how we should explore causality?

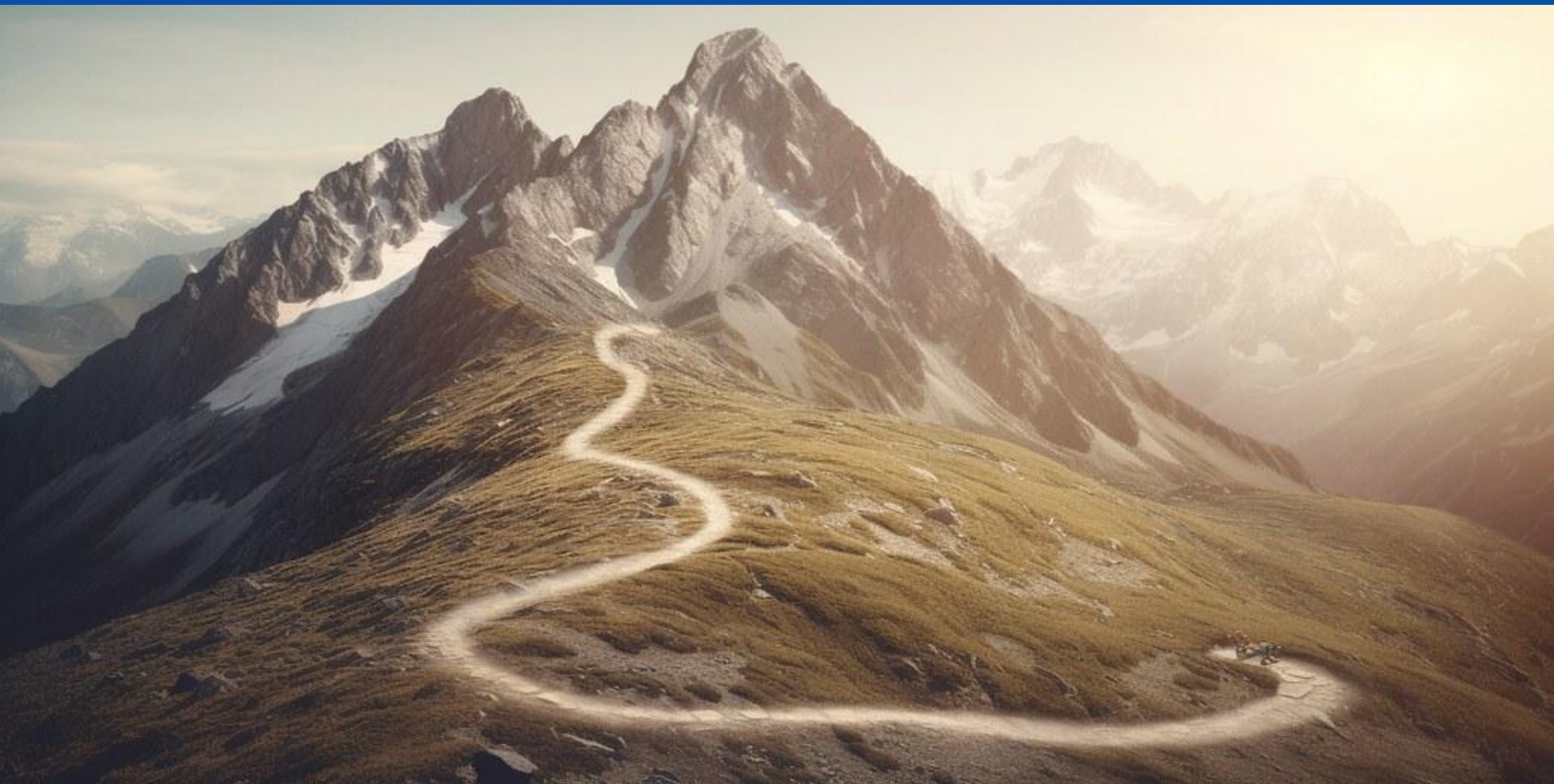
- Myths about who can participate and who benefits
- Myths about whether causal designs are useful
- Myths about whether we're already using it
- Myths about the methods



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?

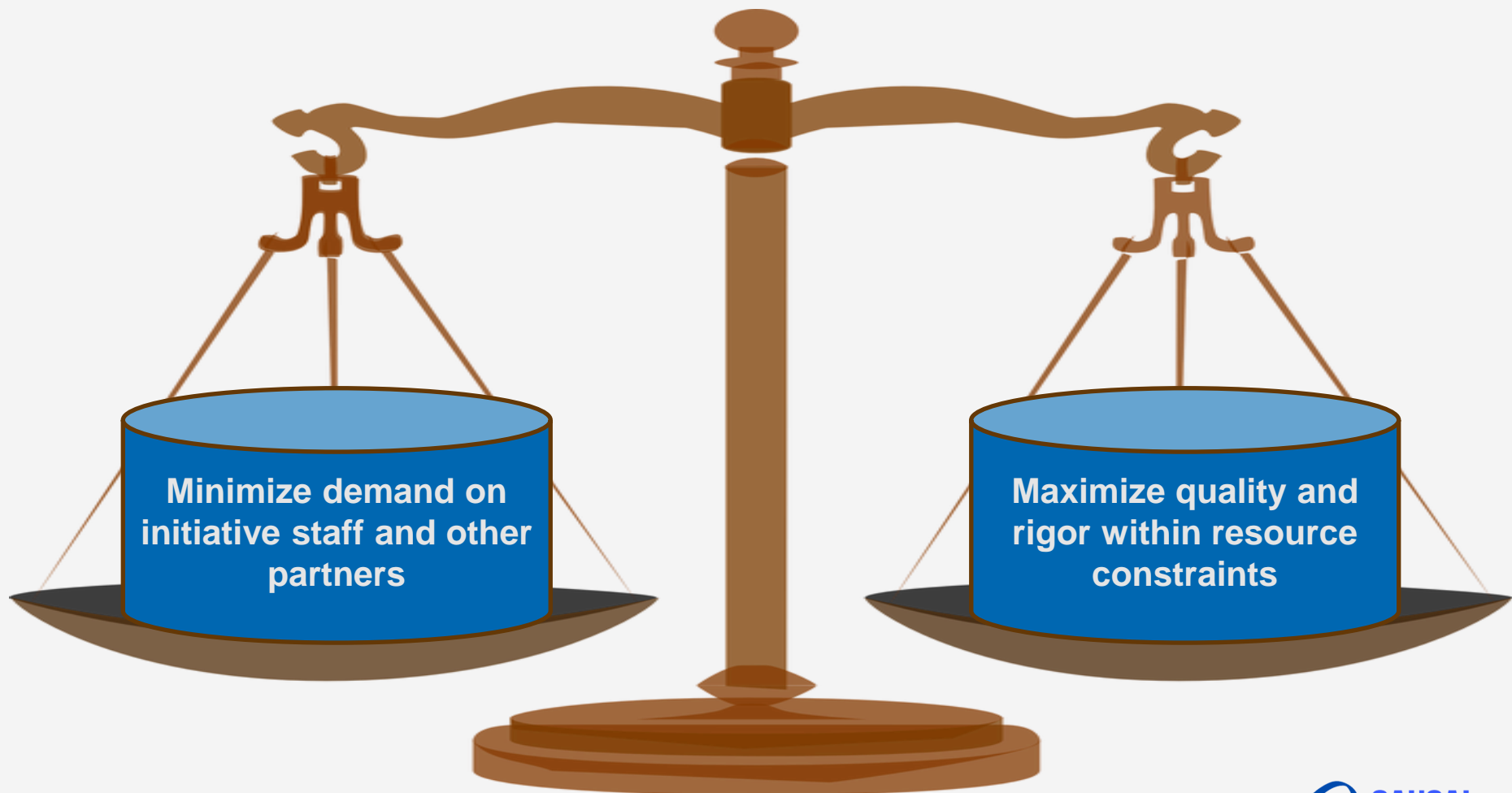
How do we know?

Strategy meetings

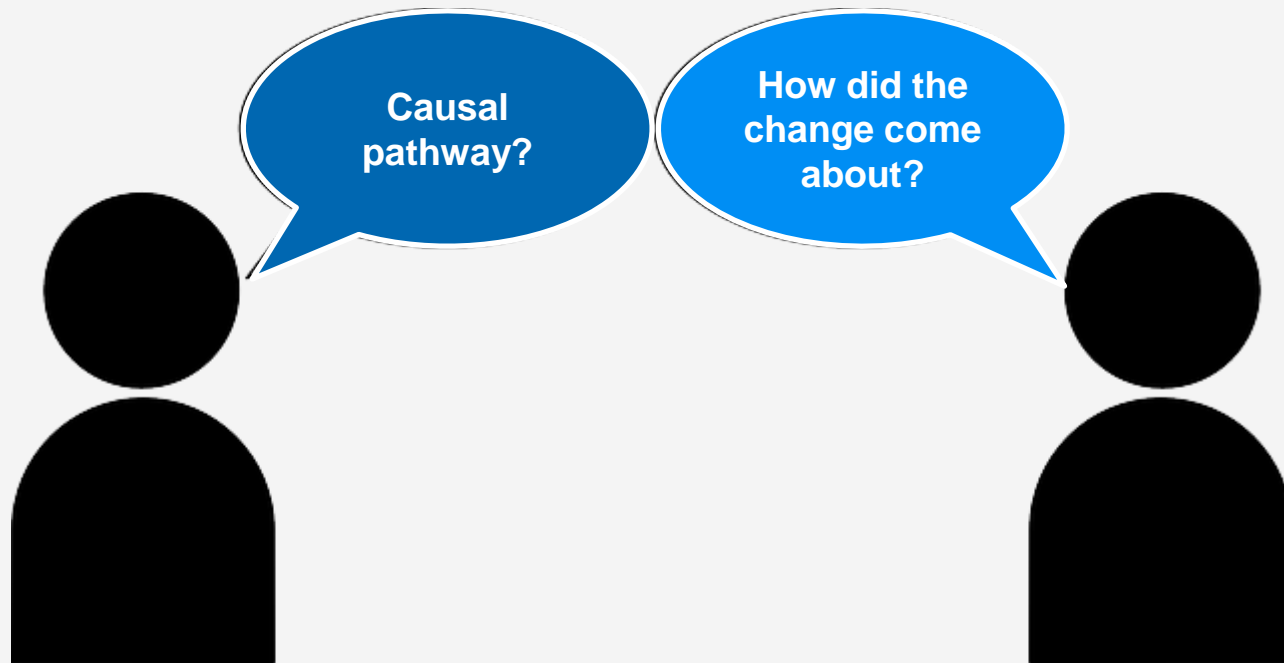
Grantee check-ins

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?**

What does readiness look like?

We are ready when...

- There is buy-in, clear use
- There is a learning infrastructure to support use of causal pathways learnings
- We are asking **how, why, for whom, in what context** change is happening.
- We are **questioning our assumptions**
- We capture **emergent outcomes**.
- We use **evidence** rather than theory of change to explain how contribution happens

What is your challenge? Buy-in or readiness?

Poll

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

1. **Building buy-in** with decision makers, or
2. **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

Your questions...

Taking Learning into Action

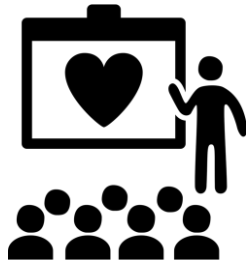
As you reflect on today's content, what is **one myth you want to challenge or action you want to take?**

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

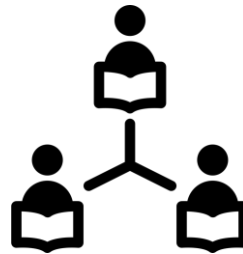


Presentations & trainings to build understanding and will

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

