



# Evaluative Thinking

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## Identifying Assumptions

ET WORKSHOP

ROUND 1 • GROUP 3

 **OCRS**  
CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES **faith.  
action.  
results.**

# Introductions

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# Why am I here?

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I believe that evaluative thinking can make more effective those who are deeply committed to and authentically engaged in making the world a better place. Through [these workshops] I aspire to make my own small contribution toward realizing the vision of an experimenting global community, one characterized by commitment to reality-testing, respect for different perspectives, and open dialogue about evidence – a world in which ongoing learning is valued and practiced, and knowledge is generated and used.

Michael Quinn Patton  
Program evaluation consultant

# Introductions

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Please share:

- Your name
- Your project(s)/area of work
- When you hear the word ???, what comes to mind?

# ET Workshop Series

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	Target audience	Round 1 Identifying Assumptions	Round 2 Seeking Evidence	Round 3 Taking Action
Group 1	Field-based staff			
Group 2	Senior program staff			
Group 3	Country leadership	X		

# ET Workshop Series

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**NINE WORKSHOPS IN ALL: 1 PER GROUP PER ROUND**

**GROUP 1  
FIELD-BASED STAFF**

**GROUP 2  
SENIOR PROGRAM  
STAFF**

**GROUP 3  
COUNTRY  
LEADERSHIP**

## ROUND 1

- Introduction to evaluative thinking
- Identifying assumptions
- Multiple perspectives
- Theory of Change (ToC) Pathway Models

## ROUND 2

- Using the ToC Pathway Models to determine learning plan scope
- Developing learning questions
- Components of a learning plan
- Learning plan alignment

## ROUND 3

- Making meaning from results
- Participatory analysis
- Making informed decisions (utilization)
- Communicating results

# Our Workshop Goals

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You will...

1. Understand what evaluative thinking is, why it is important and how to practice it
2. Introduce theory of change (ToC) Pathway Models and how to use them
3. Identify barriers to ET and ways to overcome them
4. Present strategies for supporting ET work
5. Demonstrate how to connect ToCs and ET work directly with formal evaluation planning and implementation.

# Your Workshop Goals

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What would YOU like to get out of this workshop?

**“For me, this workshop  
will be a success if...”**

1. Jot down your ideas on a piece of paper.
2. Share: As we go around the room, select one goal to share that has not been shared by someone else.



# A little housekeeping...

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- Shared norms for the workshop
- Consent form and pre-workshop survey,
- Learning-to-action plan
- Post-workshop survey

# Agenda

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Time	Task
8:30am	Introductions and goals, consent form, pre-workshop survey
9:00am	Defining and defending ET
9:30am	Theory of change Pathway Models
10:00am	Break
10:15am	Strategies for supporting ET work
11:30am	Reflect and debrief, post-workshop survey
12:00pm	Close

# What is Evaluative Thinking?

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The motorcycle is the project; the sidecar is MEAL, traditionally seen as slightly separate, an extra burden, though part of the project. Think of ET as the gasoline that runs the bike and sidecar.

# What is Evaluative Thinking?

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Overcoming our own prejudices  
and our avoidance of the truth.

If I say “**doctor**”, what image comes to mind?

What about “**hairstylist**?”

# What is Evaluative Thinking?

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“The human condition: insidious prejudice, stultifying fear of the unknown, contagious avoidance, beguiling distortion of reality, awesomely selective perception, stupefying self-deception, profane rationalization, massive avoidance of truth— all marvels of evolution’s selection of the fittest.

[Evaluative thinking] is our collective effort to outwit these human propensities— when we choose to use it.”

Halcolm  
(in Patton 2008)

# What is Evaluative Thinking?

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“Evaluative thinking is an activity. *Evaluative thinking is a way of doing business.* This distinction is critical. It derives from studies of evaluation use. Evaluation [or MEAL] is more useful—and actually used—when the program and organizational culture manifests evaluative thinking”

Michael Quinn Patton  
Preface to 2014 InterAction Report,  
Embracing Evaluative Thinking for Better Outcomes:  
Four NGO Case Studies

# Evaluative Thinking: Formal definition

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“Evaluative thinking involves **being results oriented, reflective, questioning, and using evidence to test assumptions.**” (Wind & Carden)

ET is “**questioning, reflecting, learning, and modifying ... conducted all the time. It is a constant state-of-mind within an organization’s culture and all its systems.**” (Bennett & Jessani)

ET is “a type of **reflective practice**” that integrates the same skills that characterize good evaluation—“asking questions of substance, determining what data are required to answer specific questions, collecting data using appropriate strategies, analyzing collected data and summarizing findings, and using the findings”—**throughout all of an organization’s work practices.** (Baker & Bruner)

ET is another way of talking about analysis and critical thinking, as per the MEAL Competency Model (Competency No. 6)



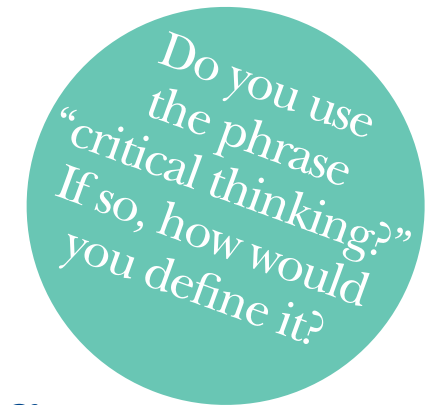


# Evaluative Thinking: Formal definition

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ET is critical thinking applied in the context of evaluation (or MEAL), motivated by an attitude of inquisitiveness and a belief in the value of evidence, that involves:

1. Identifying assumptions
2. Posing thoughtful [learning] questions
3. Pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and multiple perspective taking
4. Making informed decisions in preparation for action

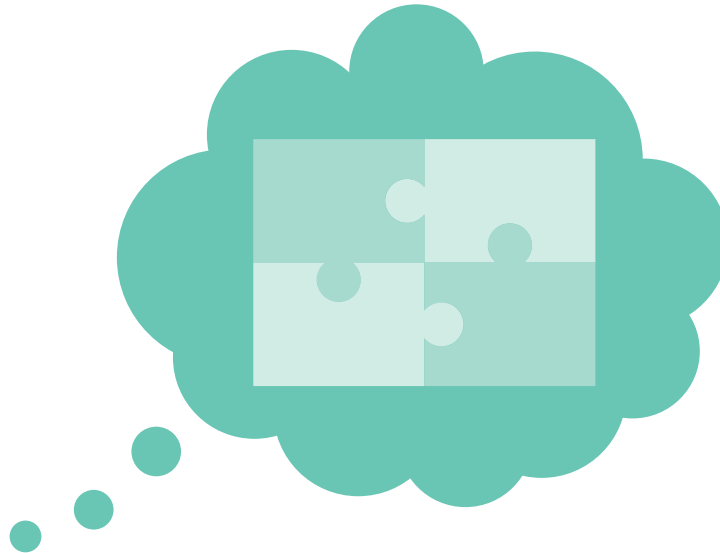


(BUCKLEY, ARCHIBALD, HARGRAVES & TROCHIM, 2015)

# Critical Thinking vs. Evaluative Thinking

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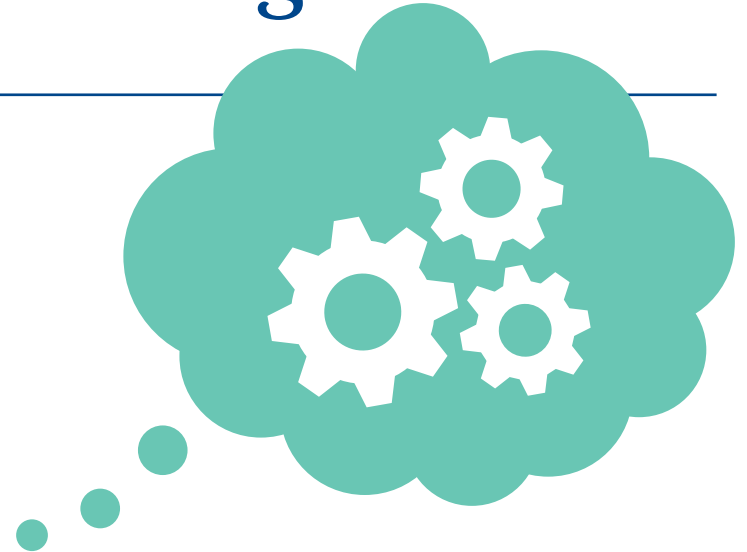
Critical thinking: Using careful analysis to form a judgement; not taking things at face value.



# Critical Thinking vs. Evaluative Thinking

Evaluative thinking is  
critical thinking plus ...  
proactive behaviors such as ...

- Posing questions
- Seeking evidence
- Deciding to act (or not act)  
based on evidence



# Evaluative Thinking:

## Where it fits in

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MEAL requires:

- Knowledge: understanding of the “how” and “why” of basic MEAL concepts, terms, methods and resources
- Working skills: observation, analysis, communication, etc.
- Thinking skills: reflection, questioning, strategizing, mental modeling, perspective taking, decision making, the ability to identify assumptions
- Attitudes: belief in the value of MEAL, an intrinsic motivation to pursue evidence



# What does Evaluative Thinking sound and look like?

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Photo by CRS staff

# Evaluative Thinking

What it sounds and looks like in a program work context

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## Things you may hear:

- Why are we assuming this?
- How do we know?
- What evidence do we have?
- What is the thinking behind the way we do this?
- How could we do this better?
- How does this connect to our intended outcomes?
- Our stakeholder's perspective on this might be...

## Things you may see:

- More evidence gathering
- More feedback (all directions)
- Reflective conversations among staff, beneficiaries, leadership, etc.
- More model making/illustrating thinking
- More motivation to do systematic MEAL work
- Program evolution
- More effective staff and programs
- Greater field staff influence over project decisions

**Why is  
Evaluative  
Thinking  
crucial?**

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**Continuous reflection  
and learning allows us to  
respond and adapt.**

**In other words...**

**We can improve our work  
more efficiently in order to  
make a larger impact.**

**We can minimize risks associated  
with relying on our assumptions.**



**Use!**

**Why is  
Evaluative  
Thinking  
crucial?**

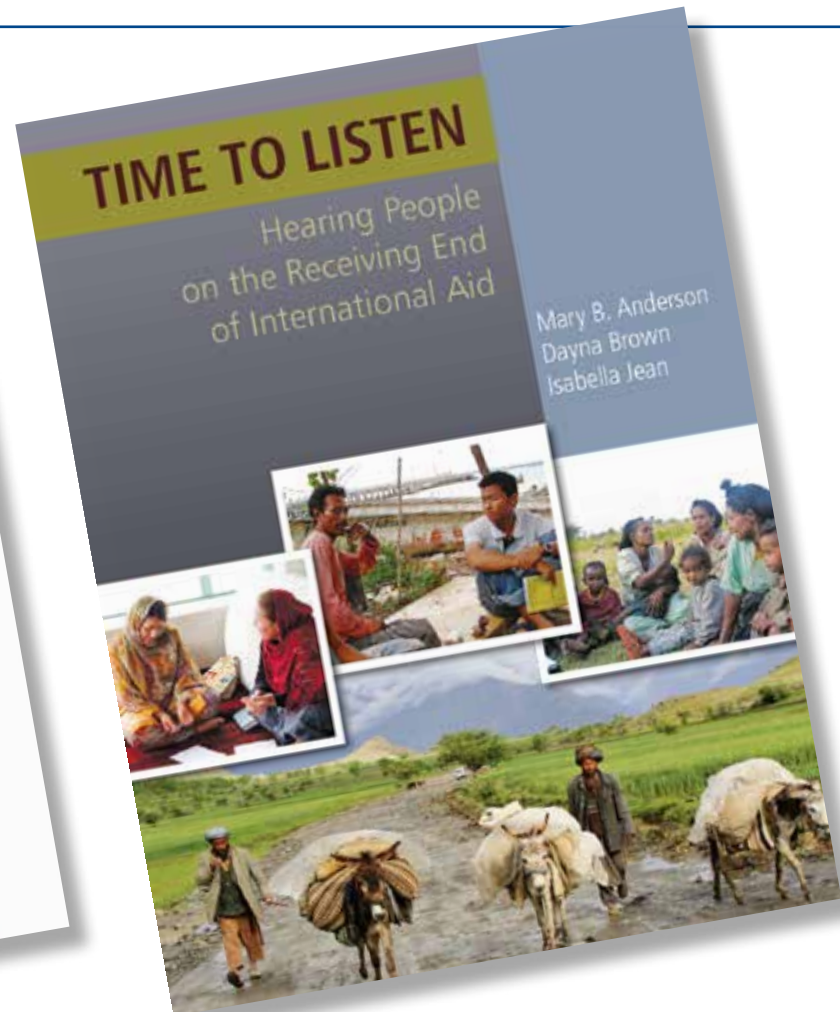
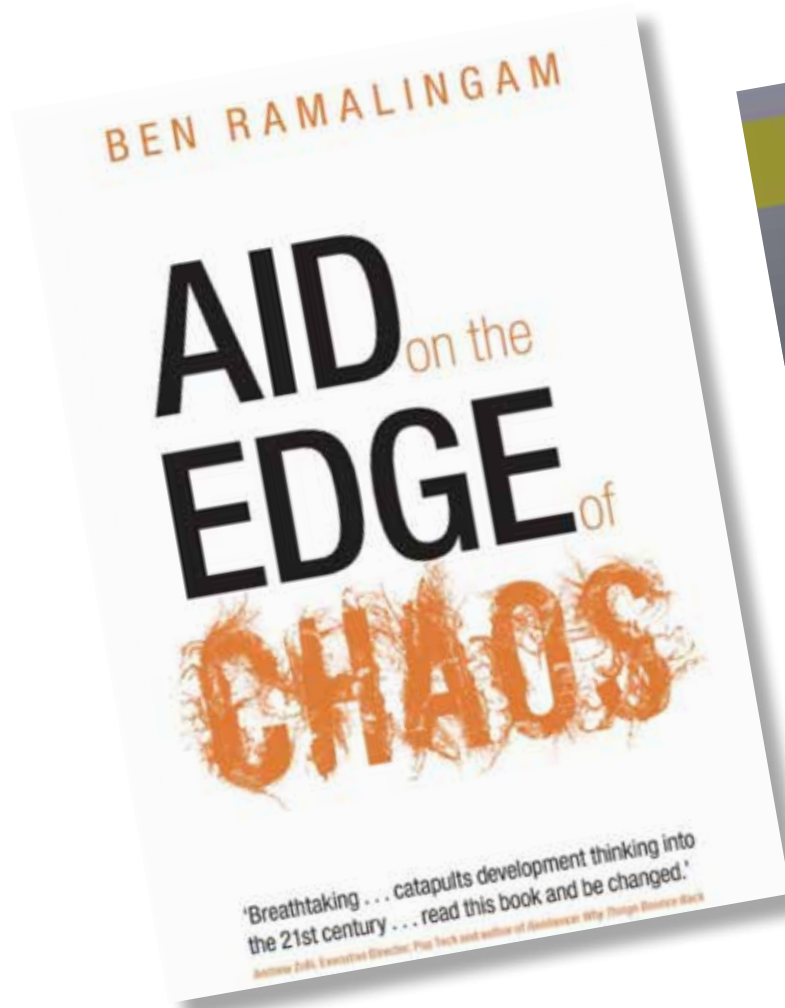
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How evaluations are used affects the spending of billions of dollars to fight problems of poverty, disease, ignorance, joblessness, mental anguish, crime, hunger and inequality.



# Calls for changes in how we work

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# Learning to think evaluatively

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Experience in thinking can  
be won, like all experience  
in doing something, only  
through practice.

HANNAH ARENDT  
PHILOSOPHER

# Principles for Promoting ET

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Maximize intrinsic motivation

(Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Brookfield, 2012; Piaget, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978).

Incorporate active learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Brookfield, 2012).

Learning should not depend on any particular educational  
background or prior knowledge; it should be intentionally practiced  
by all learners (Brookfield, 2012; Ericsson & Charness, 1994).

Everyone should be encouraged to believe in their ability to learn and  
improve (Brookfield, 2012; Lord et al., 1978).

In order to best learn to think evaluatively, the  
learning should occur in real-world contexts and alongside peers and colleagues (Brookfield, 1999; Halpern, 1998; Simon, 2000).

**Everyone  
should do it!**

**Anyone  
can do it!**

# Learning to think evaluatively

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- Anyone can do it, but it is not trivial and requires regular practice
- Requires a “safe space” for questioning, identifying assumptions, making suggestions
- Start with small changes and ramp up (one can’t change the culture of a program or organization over night)
- Must be applied in multiple contexts alongside peers and colleagues
- Learn from how others in CRS are doing it

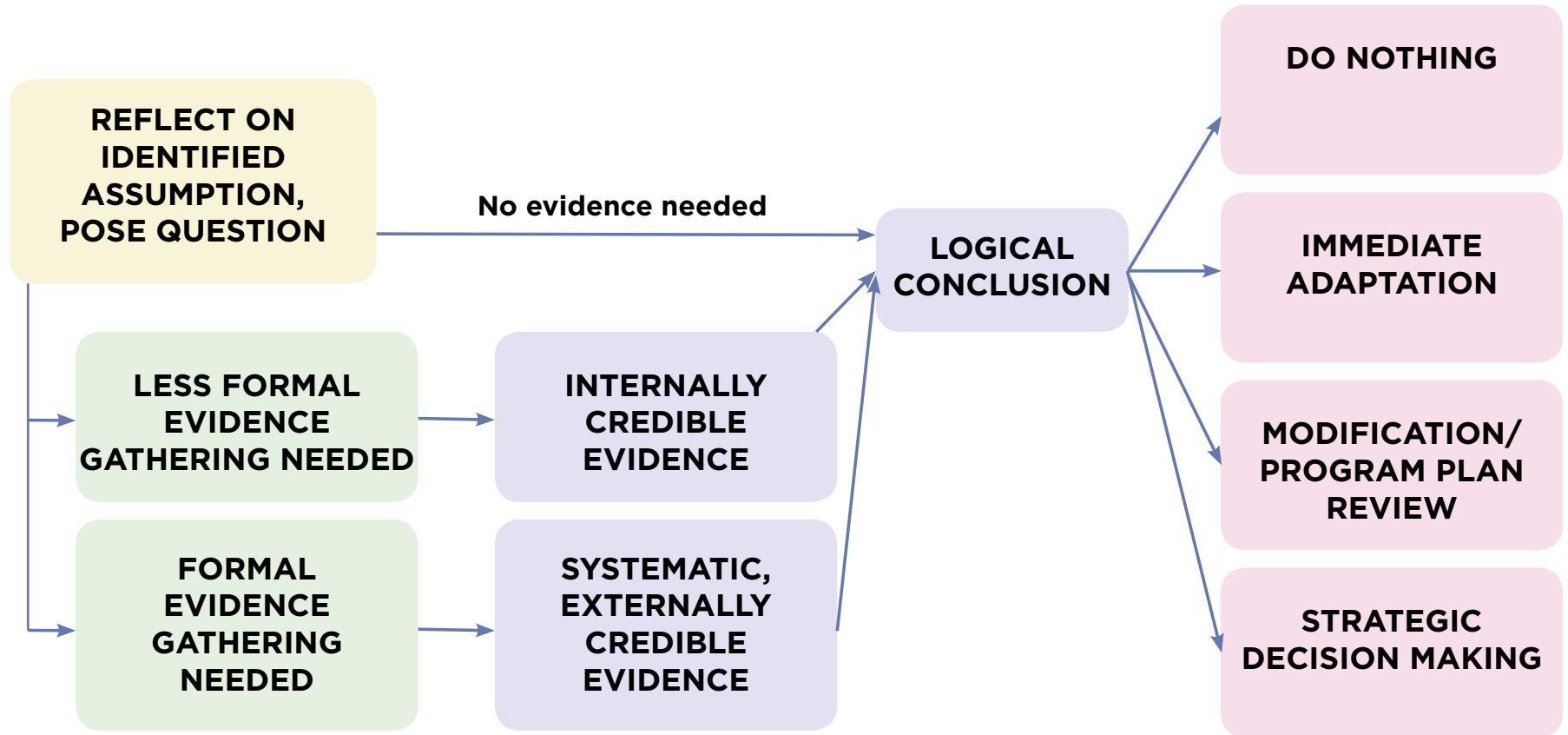
# Connecting ET to Evaluation

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- Harness the power of knowledge workers (those who know the most about the program and how to improve it, but have the least time to do more with that knowledge) through conversation
- Make sure that good ET is the basis for all evaluation (both formal and informal), then make informed decisions about which learning questions require formal evidence gathering

# Working with questions: Putting ET to use

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# Reflection

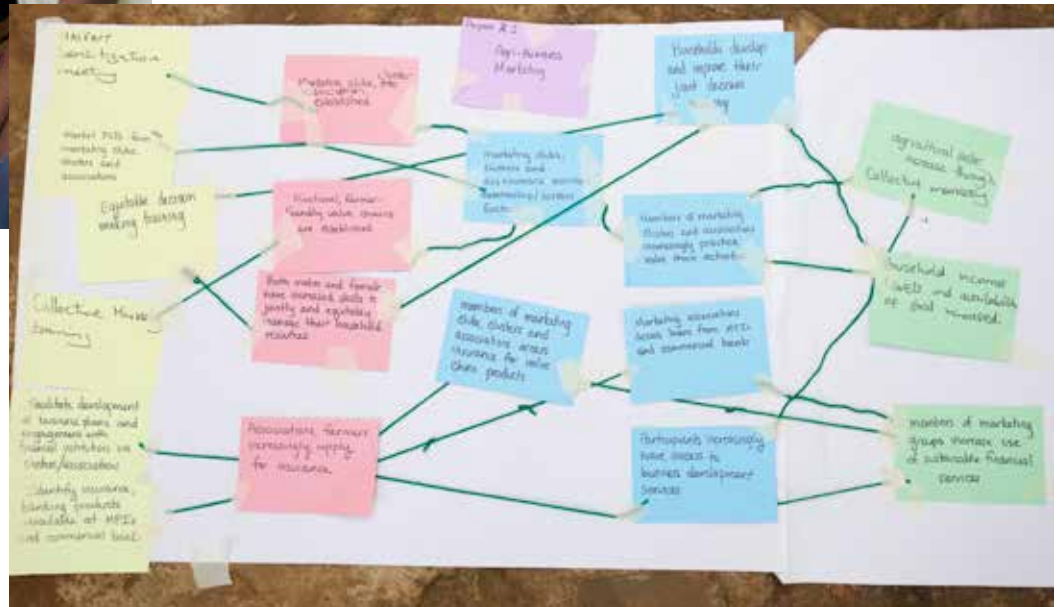
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Take the first 3 minutes to consider the following questions and jot down notes to yourself. Then, share your thoughts with your neighbor for the remaining 7 minutes.

- How would you explain evaluative thinking to someone you had just met? One of your stakeholders?
- How could a culture of evaluative thinking make a difference in your context?



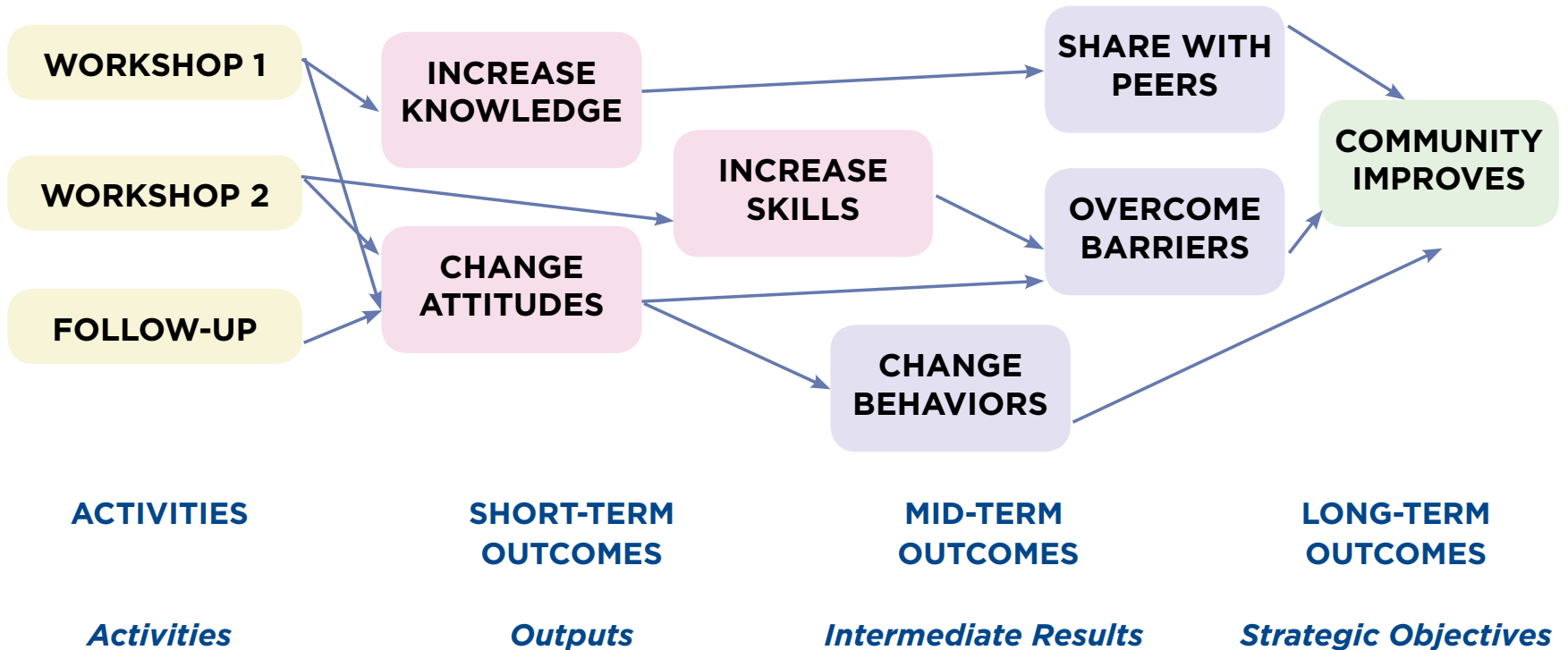






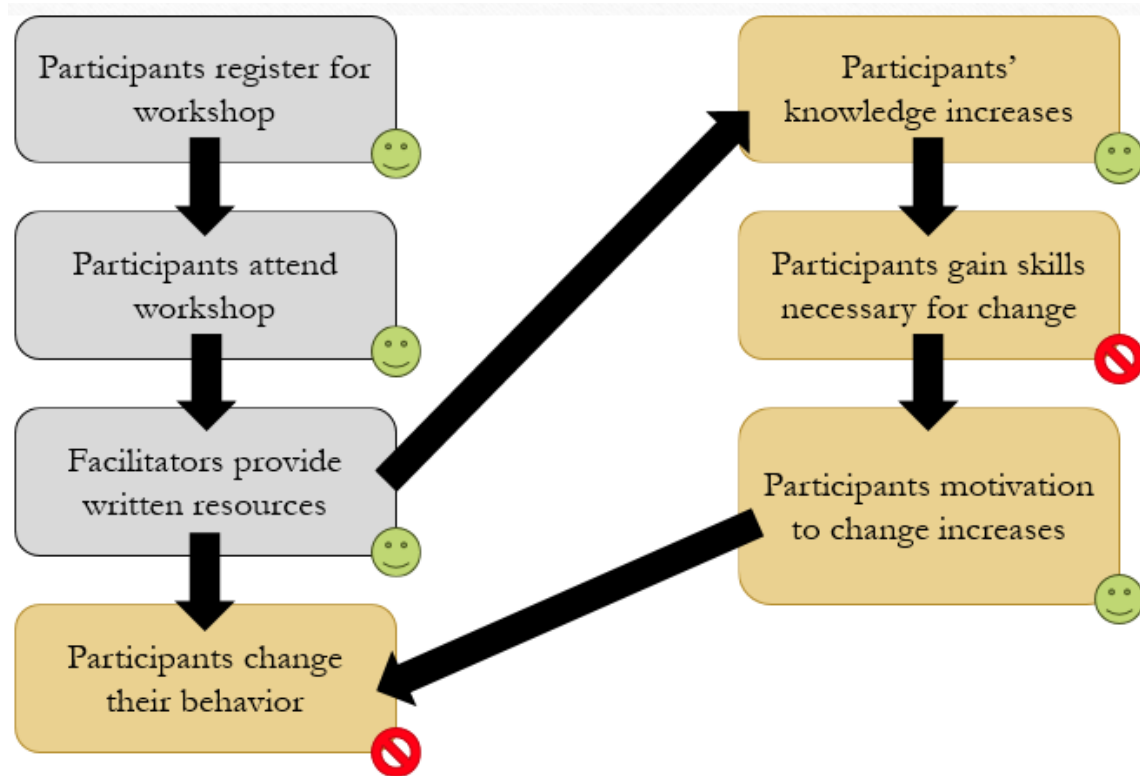
# Theory of Change Pathway Model

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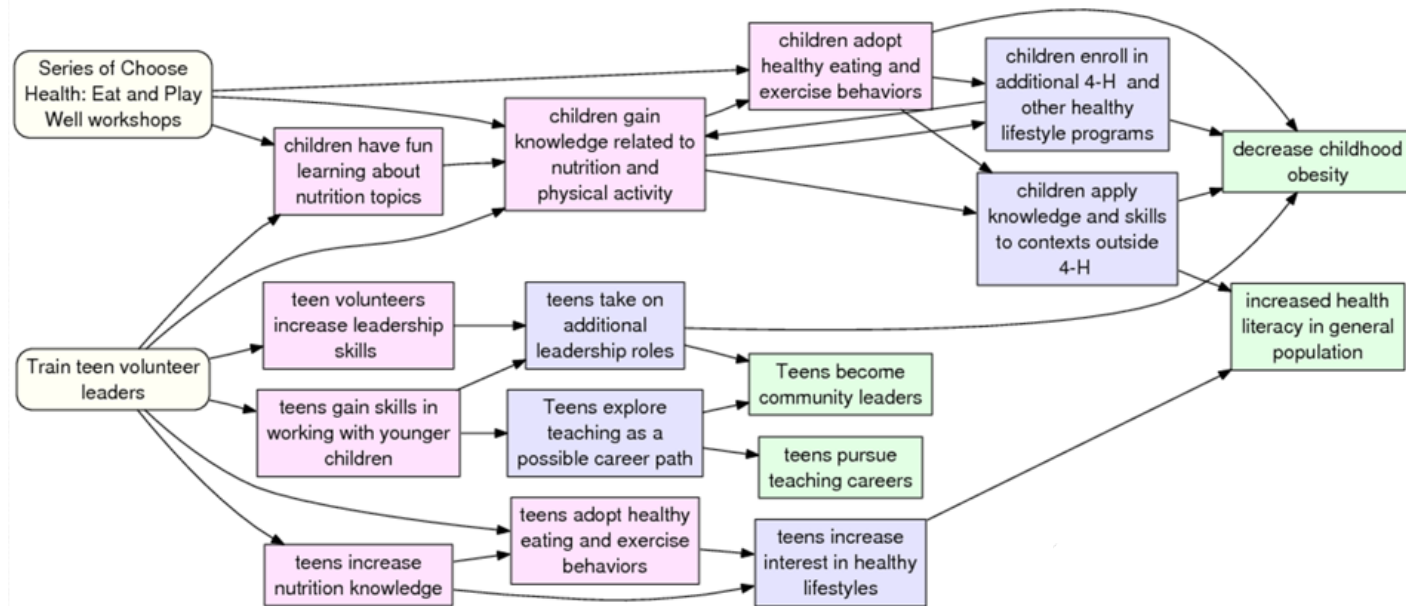
# Theory of Change Pathway Models

Understanding what is *really* going on!



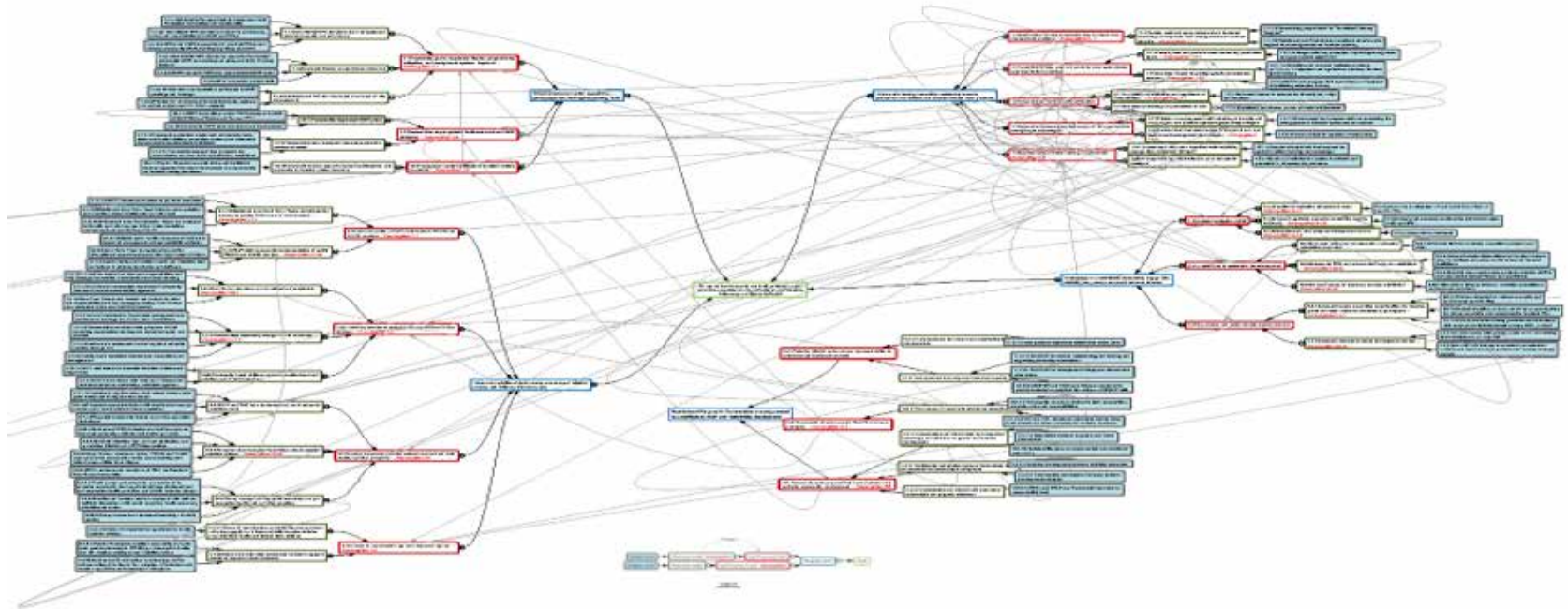
# Theory of Change Pathway Model

Some interventions are not especially complicated ...



# Theory of Change Pathway Model

... but some are more complicated!



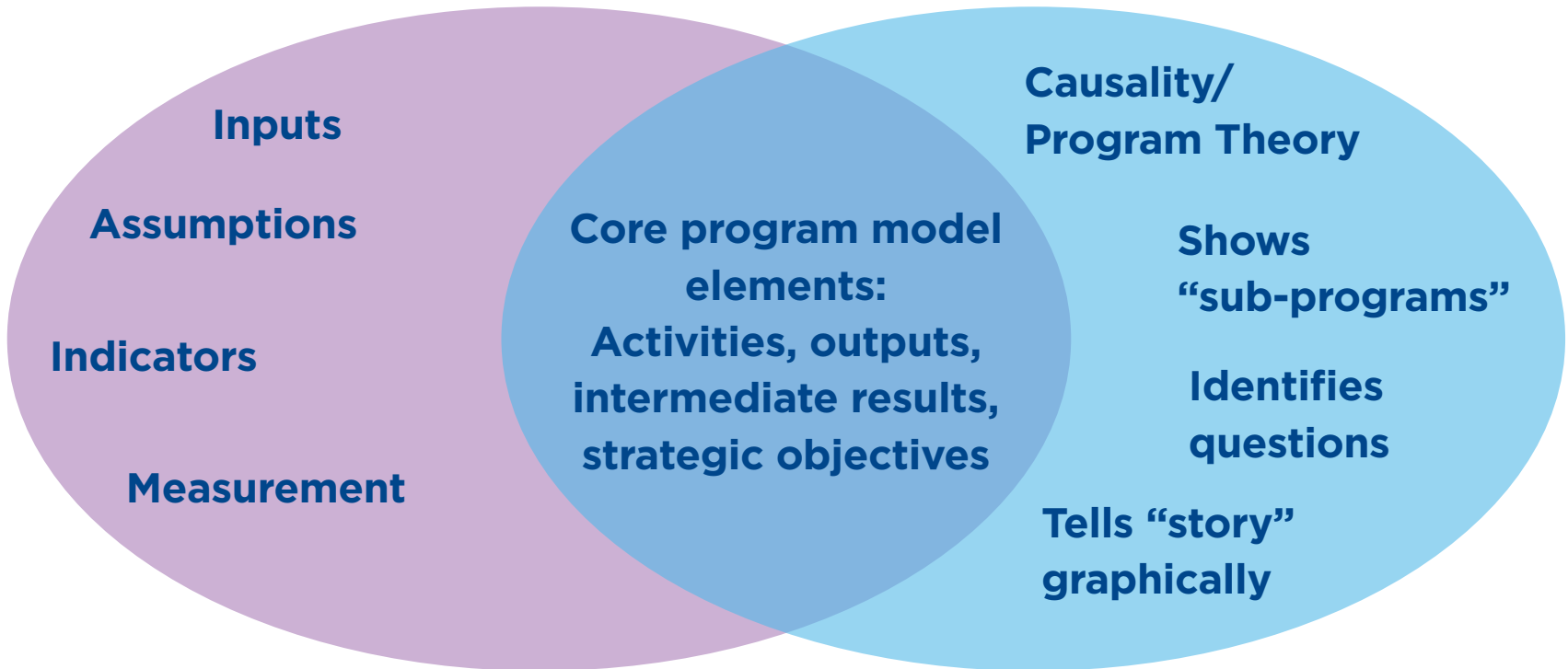
Theory of Change – UBALE Project, Malawi

# How ToC Pathway Model and Proframe relate

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## PROFRAME

## ToC PATHWAY MODEL

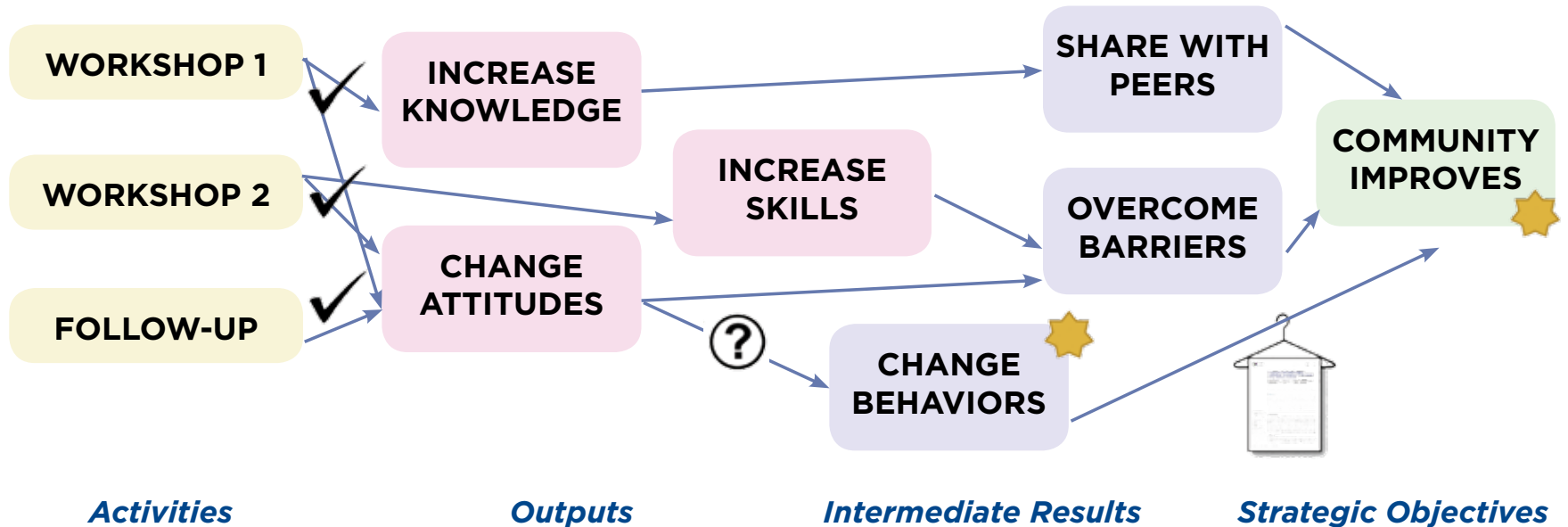


# Theory of Change Pathway Models

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- How do our activities (step-by-step) contribute to our intended outcomes ?
- What are our assumptions about how/why things connect?
- What's missing?
- What's unnecessary?

# Theory of Change Pathway Models



# ToC Pathway Model Review Guidance

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- Look over the provided model (“Reaching for their Potential”)
- Use the *ToC Pathway Model review guidance* handout provided to help you consider things like:
  - What assumptions are being made
  - Which pathways seem “key”?
  - Are the outcomes described/defined in the way you would describe/define them?
  - Which nodes and/or links have existing evidence (formal or informal)
  - Which nodes and/or links do you see as in need of evidence?



# Reflection

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Take the first 3 minutes to consider the following questions and jot down notes to yourself. Then, share your thoughts with your neighbor for the remaining 7 minutes.



- How do ToC Pathway Models contribute to MEAL?
- How might you support the development of ToC Pathway Models?
  - Practically
  - Culturally
- In your organization, when might you as leaders want to promote the use of ToC Pathway Models
  - During the project cycle?
  - Over the course of a year?

# Break

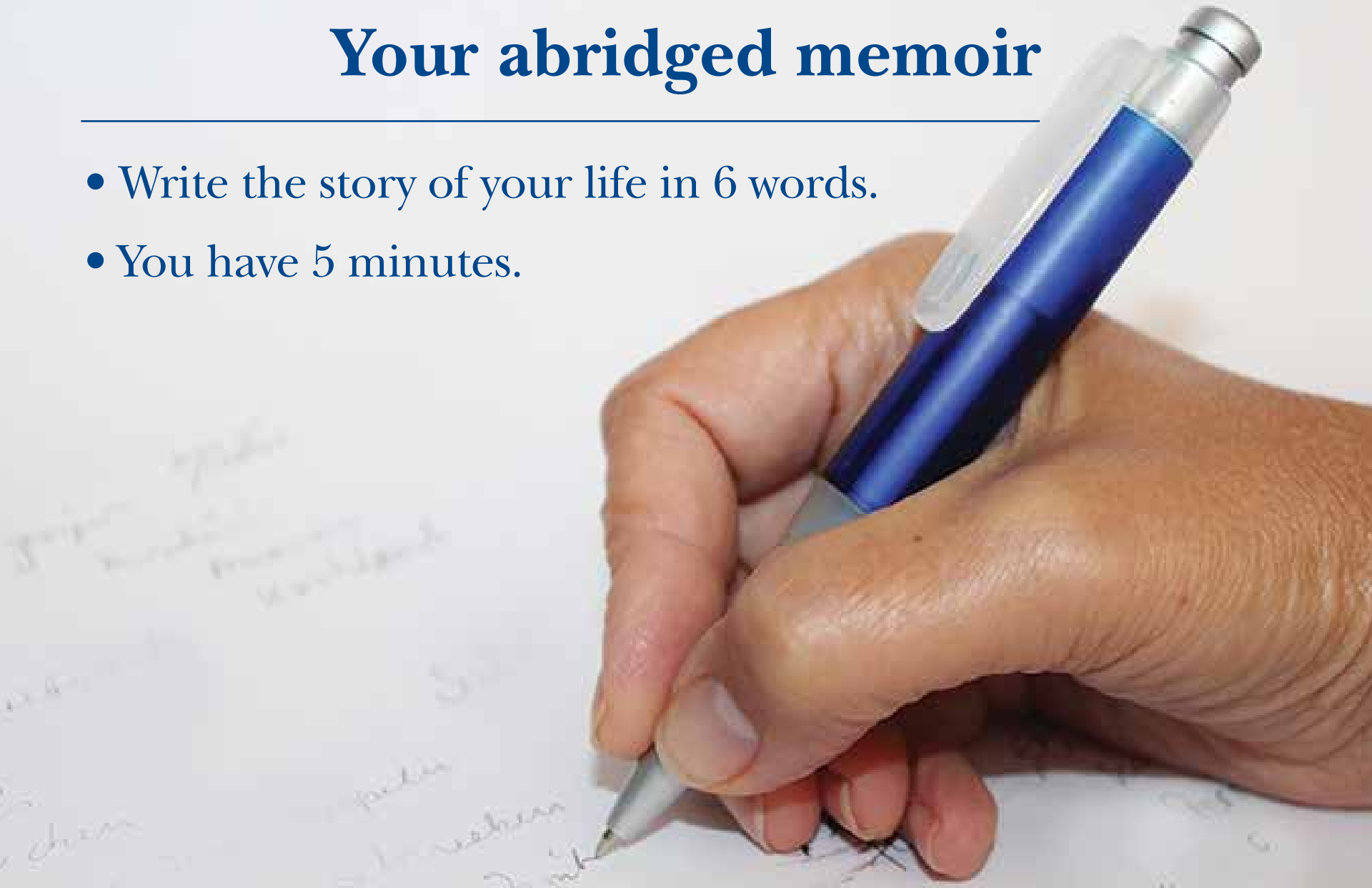
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# Your abridged memoir

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- Write the story of your life in 6 words.
- You have 5 minutes.



# Critical Conversation Role-Play

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# ET Strategies and Activities

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## 1. Create an intentional ET learning environment



# ET Strategies and Activities

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2. Establish a habit of scheduling meeting time focused on ET

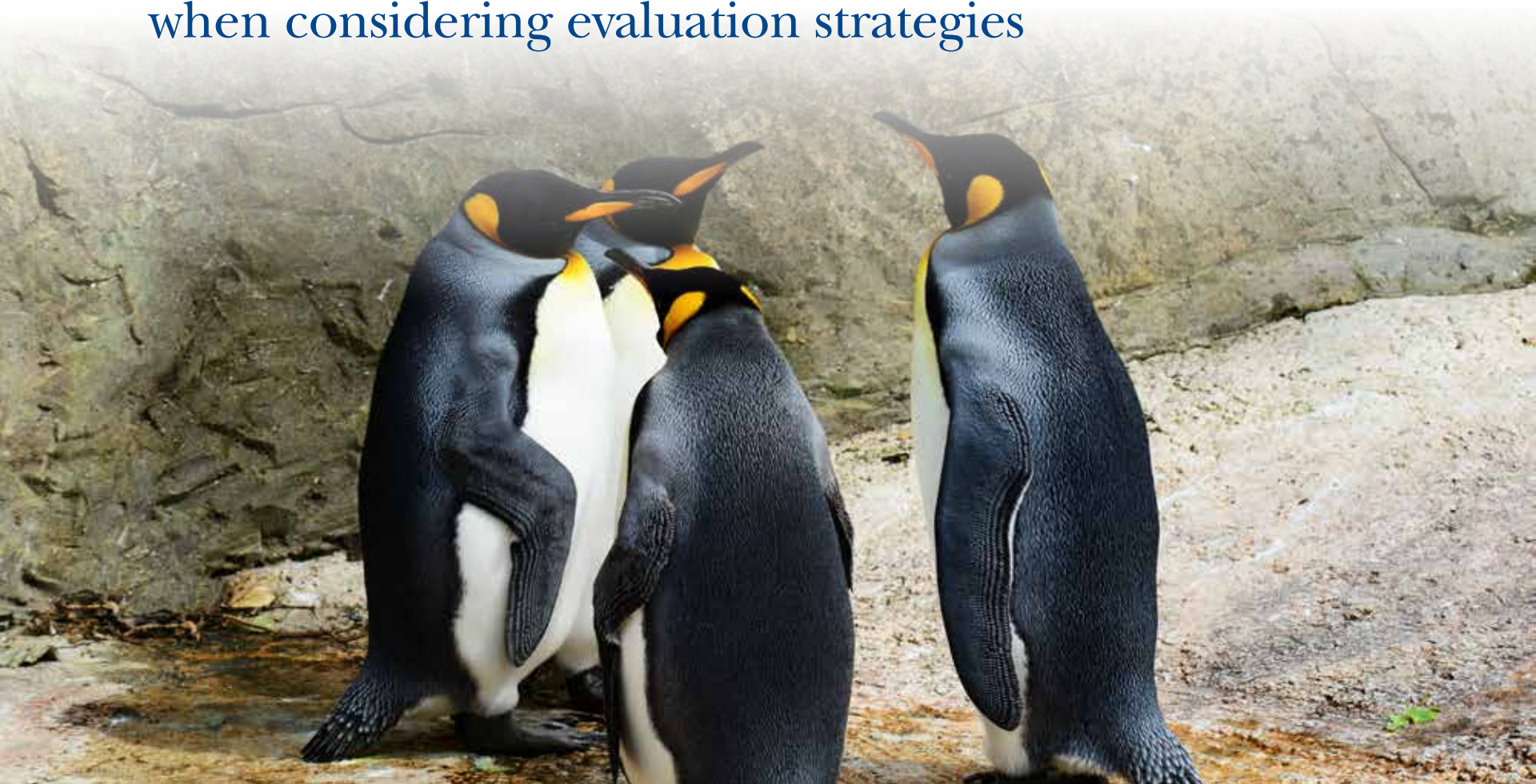




# ET Strategies and Activities

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3. Use role-play, simulation or an imaginary “walk-through” when considering evaluation strategies



# ET Strategies and Activities

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4. Use a diagram or illustration to explain thinking with colleagues





# ET Strategies and Activities

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## 5. Engage in supportive, critical peer review



# ET Strategies and Activities

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## 6. Engage in MEAL



# Supporting Evaluative Thinking

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- Be open to questioning, various perspectives and plausible alternatives
- Encourage trust-based, safe communication among all staff, beneficiaries, supervisors and other stakeholders
- Demonstrate reflection (My observations indicate I may have been more effective if ...)
- Identify ET champions and provide time and space for them to train/support others
- Build ET into everyday activities (planning meetings, regular communication, etc.)
- Reward evaluative thinking
- Other ideas?

# Learning-to-Action Plan

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# Summary

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- ET is a “habit of mind,” motivated by a desire to always do better, that is characterized by identifying assumptions, developing learning questions, seeking evidence and making informed decisions.
- Organizations and programs that want to maximize efficiency and impact should consciously adopt a culture of ET, where all members of the organization support ET and engage in ET conversations and habits together.
- Promoting ET is as simple as asking a colleague, “what assumptions to you think we are making in this situation?”



# Reflection

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- In your experience, when and where does ET take place in your organization (if at all)?
- What will your message be to the staff who will participate in the “Level 1” and “Level 2” workshops?
- How can MEAL advisors best support greater ET?



# Workshop Feedback

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Thinking about today's workshop:

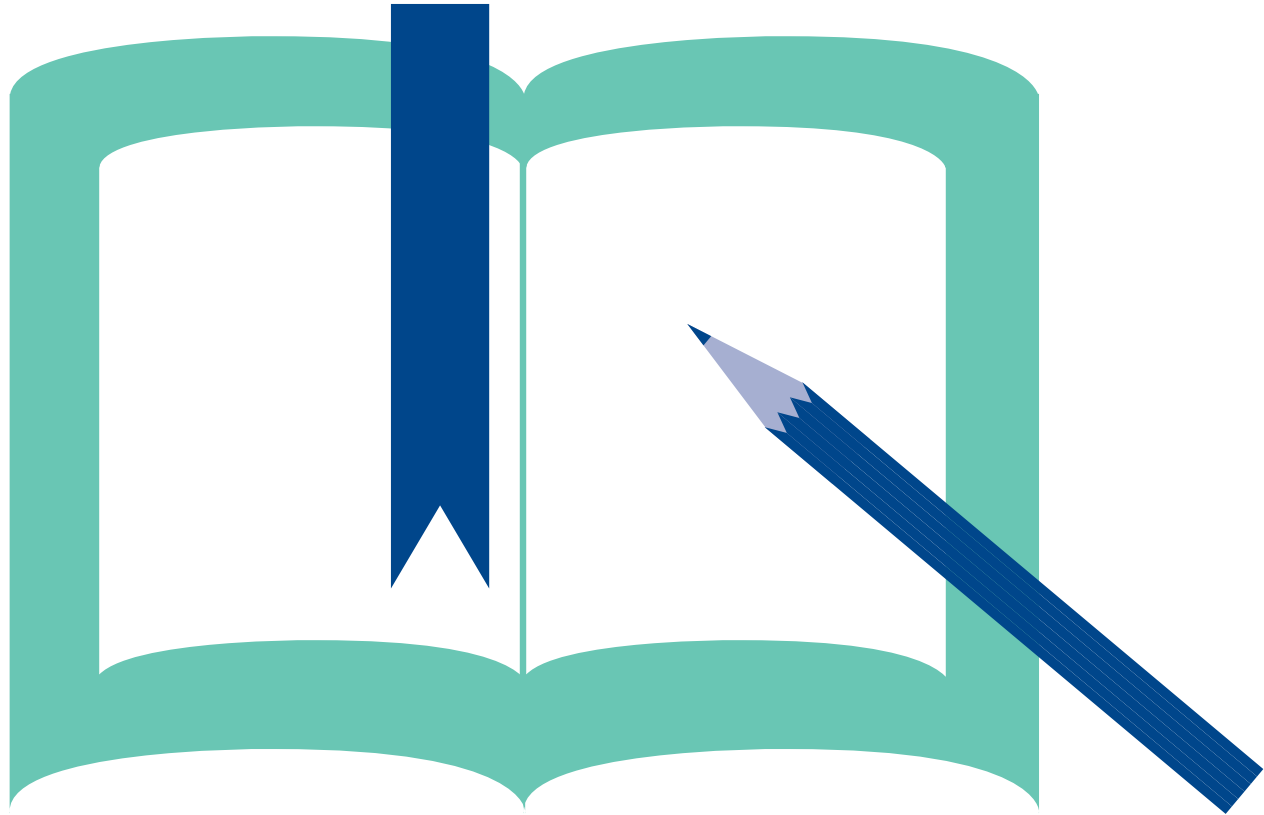
- What are some key “takeaways” for you?
- What are you still unsure about?
- How could today's activities better meet the goals set out in the morning?

*Use the sticky notes provided. Stick your responses to the corresponding chart paper.*



# Organizing your ET notebook

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# Organizing your ET notebook

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## Handouts

Consent form

Pre-workshop survey

What is evaluative thinking?

Principles for promoting ET

ToC Pathway Models

ToC Pathway Model review guidance

Example model: Reaching for their potential

Critical conversation role-play

ET strategies and activities

Learning-to-action plan

Post-workshop survey

# Post-Workshop Survey

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- Please fill out the Post-Workshop Survey





Thank you!

# References

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