Using partnering principles to navigate power and ethics in evaluation

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PUBLIC SECTOR ADVISORY

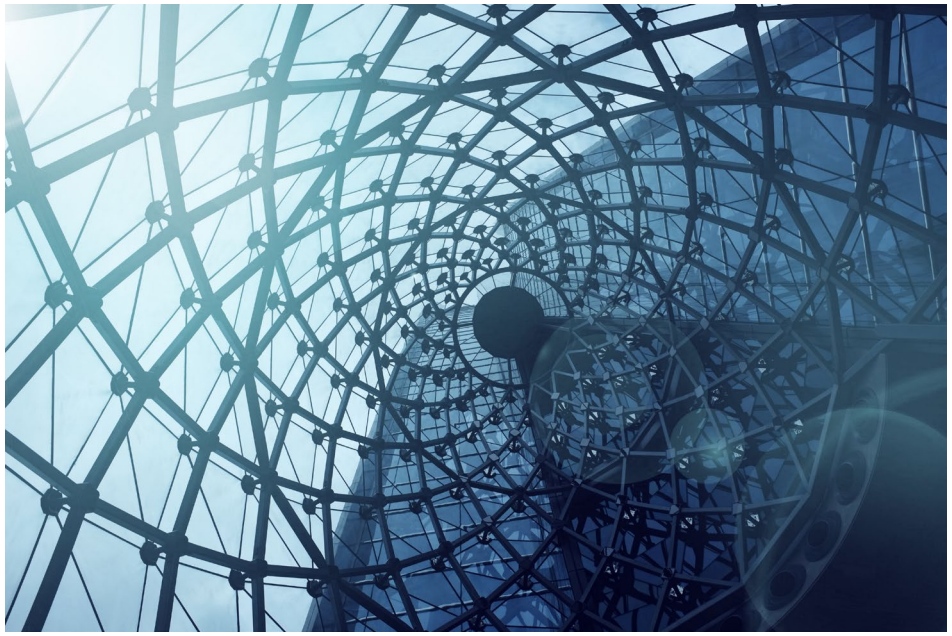
Why partnership is needed more than goodwill

Good intent matters. It does not, on its own, resolve differences in power, values, authority or accountability.

1. **Power imbalances**
   Whose voice carries weight?

2. **Ethical drift**
   What happens when pressure rises?

3. **Unspoken assumptions**
   What does “partnership” mean here?



Shared principles make expectations discussable before they become problems.

What principles-based partnering means

The deliberate use of a small, shared set of agreed principles to guide:

ROLES and responsibilities

BEHAVIOURS and relationships

DECISIONS and trade-offs

A living reference point

Used when choices, tensions or conditions change

Small enough to remember. Specific enough to influence action.

Three skills we will practice today

01

DECIDE

Recognise when partnering principles are helpful, unnecessary or risky.

02

ESTABLISH

Co-create a small set of principles with the right people and revisit them over time.

03

APPLY

Use principles to work through tension, power dynamics and ethical dilemmas.

Skill-building journey

A rhythm of short inputs, small-group practice and whole-group reflection.



NOTICE	DECIDE	ESTABLISH	APPLY	REFLECT
5 min	10 min	15 min	15 min	5 min

Work in small groups • test short scenarios • share what changes your judgement

First, decide whether principles will add value

ADD VAULE

Difference

Are values, authority or accountabilities meaningfully different?

Interdependence

Do parties need one another to make or implement consequential choices?

Uncertainty

Will the partnership encounter judgement calls that rules cannot settle?

Stakes

Are the consequences of misunderstanding, conflict or misuse of power significant?

The stronger the “yes” across these questions, the stronger the case for shared principles.

BE MEANINGFUL

Agency

Can participants actually influence decisions and behaviours through the principles?

Readiness

Can people discuss power and expectations with sufficient safety and honesty?

Agency and readiness indicate whether principles can be meaningfully established and used.

When principles may be unnecessary or create risk

LOW ADDED VALUE

- The work is tightly bounded and transactional, short-term or otherwise low stakes
- Existing governance already provides clear decision rules
- Parties have little discretion or interdependence
- Decisions are largely predetermined or constrained
- The process would duplicate established agreements
- Parties are well known to one another and have an existing high-quality relationship

RISK OF SYMBOLISM

- Principles signal equality that does not exist
- Participation is invited without meaningful influence
- Key decisions are already predetermined
- Breaches have no pathway for response
- “Shared values” suppress legitimate difference

CONDITIONS NOT READY

- Participation could expose or burden people
- Trust or psychological safety is too low for candid discussion
- Authority, constraints and non-negotiables have not been made explicit
- Critical stakeholders are absent
- Safeguards or relationship building are required first
- Existing risks or conflicts need to be addressed

SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY

5 MINUTES

Scenario: Helpful, unnecessary or risky?

A government department commissions an evaluation of a mature place-based initiative that has been operating for six years. The department, funded service providers and the external evaluator have worked together on several previous evaluations and generally have strong working relationships. The evaluation will examine future funding options. The contract gives the department final approval over reporting, but project staff have historically been open to challenge and feedback. Several community representatives will be consulted during the evaluation, but they will not be involved in decision-making. The timeframe is relatively short and governance arrangements are already well established.

1 Use the screening questions to assess the scenario

The stronger the "yes" across these questions, the stronger the case for shared principles.

- Are values, authority or accountabilities meaningfully different?
- Do parties need one another to make or implement consequential choices?
- Will the partnership encounter judgement calls that rules cannot settle?
- Are the consequences of misunderstanding, conflict or misuse of power significant?

Agency and readiness indicate whether principles can be meaningfully established and used.

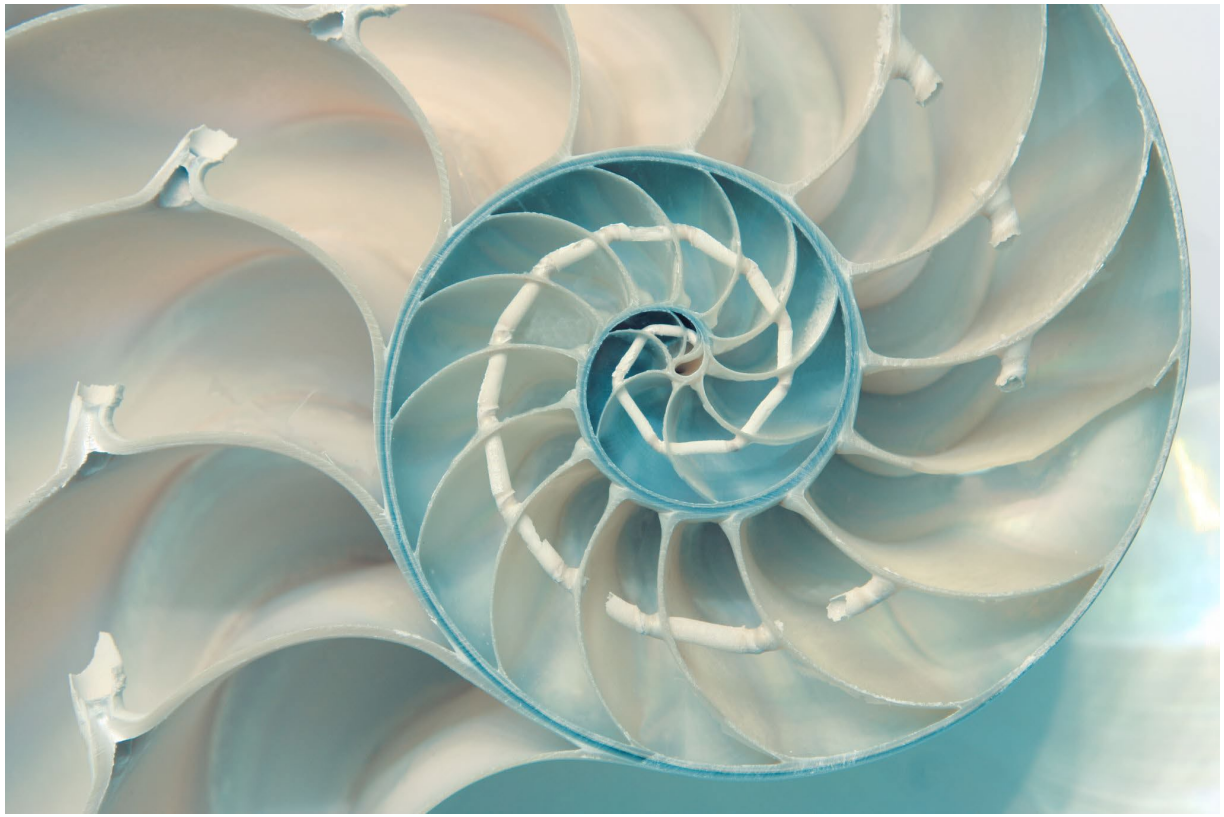
- Can participants actually influence decisions and behaviours through the principles?
- Can people discuss power and expectations with sufficient safety and honesty?

2 Choose: helpful, unnecessary or risky

3 Name the primary condition that shaped your decision

A practical process for establishing principles

1. Clarify the purpose
2. Map participation and authority
3. Surface what matters
4. Draft for action
5. Test and agree
6. Embed and revisit



Write principles that work

WEAK DRAFT

“We value respect.”

STRONGER DRAFT

“We make consequential choices transparent by naming who decides, whose knowledge informed the choice and how disagreement was considered.”

WEAK DRAFT

“We will be culturally safe.”

STRONGER DRAFT

“When working with First Nations communities, we will discuss and agree cultural protocols, decision-making expectations and data use arrangements before evaluation activities commence.”

Action | **Decision context** | **Observable practice** | **Limits**

A useful principle guides behaviour and makes accountability possible.

SMALL- GROUP ACTIVITY

10 MINUTES

Co-create two principles for the scenario

SURFACE

What matters when…

Knowledge conflicts
Time pressure rises
Authority is uneven

DRAFT

Complete the sentence

“When _____, we will _____, so that _____.” We will know we are doing this when _____."

TEST

Stress-test each principle

Who benefits?
Who carries the burden?
What choice could this change?
What happens if it is breached?

Aim for two memorable principles, not a comprehensive code.

Keep principles alive across the evaluation lifecycle

Plan

Set roles, participation and non-negotiables.

Design

Test methods, governance and data arrangements.

Collect

Guide consent, burden, safety and responsiveness.

Interpret

Make knowledge, authority and disagreement visible.

Report

Navigate transparency, approval and potential harm.

Learn

Review breaches, trade-offs and what should change.

Build review points into existing governance rather than creating a parallel process.

PAIR OR SMALL-GROUP ACTIVITY

5 MINUTES

Dilemma scenario: using partnering principles

The project experienced delays and the department requests an early findings brief to support a Treasury budget submission for the program's continuation. Early evidence suggests a mix of results both strong and otherwise, while the reasons remain unclear as analysis and data collection are incomplete. Service providers strongly believe the program needs increased funding. The deadline for the brief is only two weeks away, and the contract gives the department final approval over reporting.

Choose two principles from your table and use the five-step conversation tool.

1. **What is the real tension?**
2. **What does each principle illuminate?**
3. **Where do the principles pull apart?**
4. **What action is proportionate and accountable?**
5. **What must be recorded, communicated or escalated?**

TAKEAWAY

Your adaptable approach

01

DECIDE

Will principles add value here?

02

ESTABLISH

Who needs to shape them, and how?

03

APPLY

How will they influence real choices?

04

REVISIT

What are we learning and changing?

Principles are most useful when they are deliberate, shared, contextual and used.

For further information
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