Across the aisle: building practical skills for navigating ethical pressures in evaluation commissioning

Su-Ann Drew, Emma Williams, Jo van Twest Farmer, Martina Donkers

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians on whose lands we meet today, the Larrakia people.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present,

and share our gratitude for their continuing

custodianship of these lands, waters and sky.



Ground rules!

- ‘Chatham House’ rules
- No naming clients or colleagues
- Where possible, take a charitable interpretation of how others share
- Please take home, share and use the resources

Why this topic?

Experience as commissioners and as evaluators

Felt the tension and pressure on both sides!

Challenges arise from misunderstanding – not ill-will

Provide a space and tools for reflective discussion – help evaluators and commissioners work together

Do you ever find yourself asking…

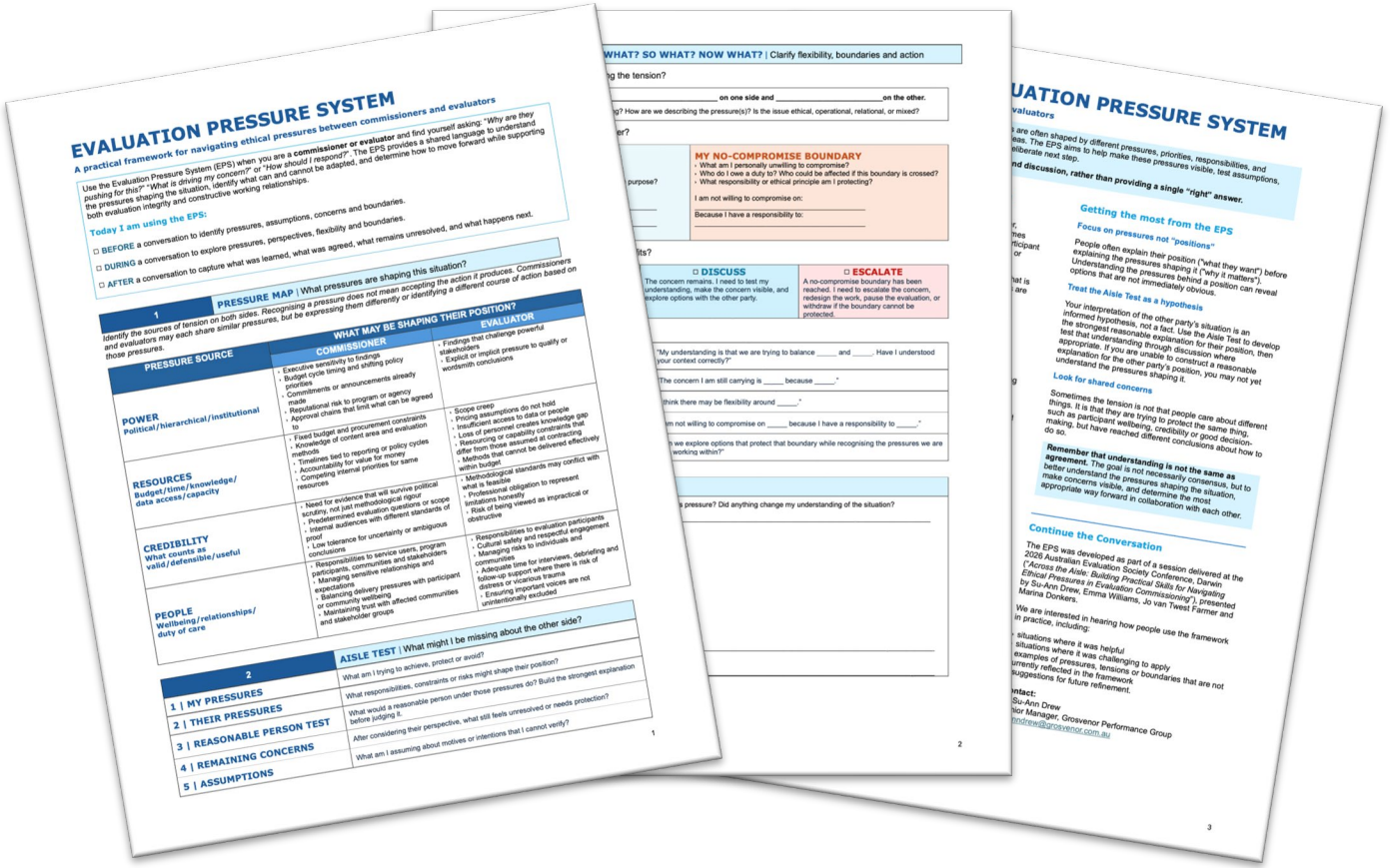
"Why are they pushing for this?"

"What is driving my concern?"

"How should I respond?"

The Evaluation Pressure System Framework

A practical framework for navigating ethical pressures between commissioners and evaluators



Access the framework here

When to use the Evaluation Pressure System Framework

- **BEFORE** a conversation to identify pressures, assumptions, concerns and boundaries.
- **DURING** a conversation to explore pressures, perspectives, flexibility and boundaries.
- **AFTER** a conversation to capture what was learned, what was agreed, what remains unresolved, and what happens next.

The Evaluation Pressure System Framework

1. Pressure Map

What pressures are shaping this situation?

2. Aisle Test

What might I be missing about the other side?

3. What? So what? Now what?

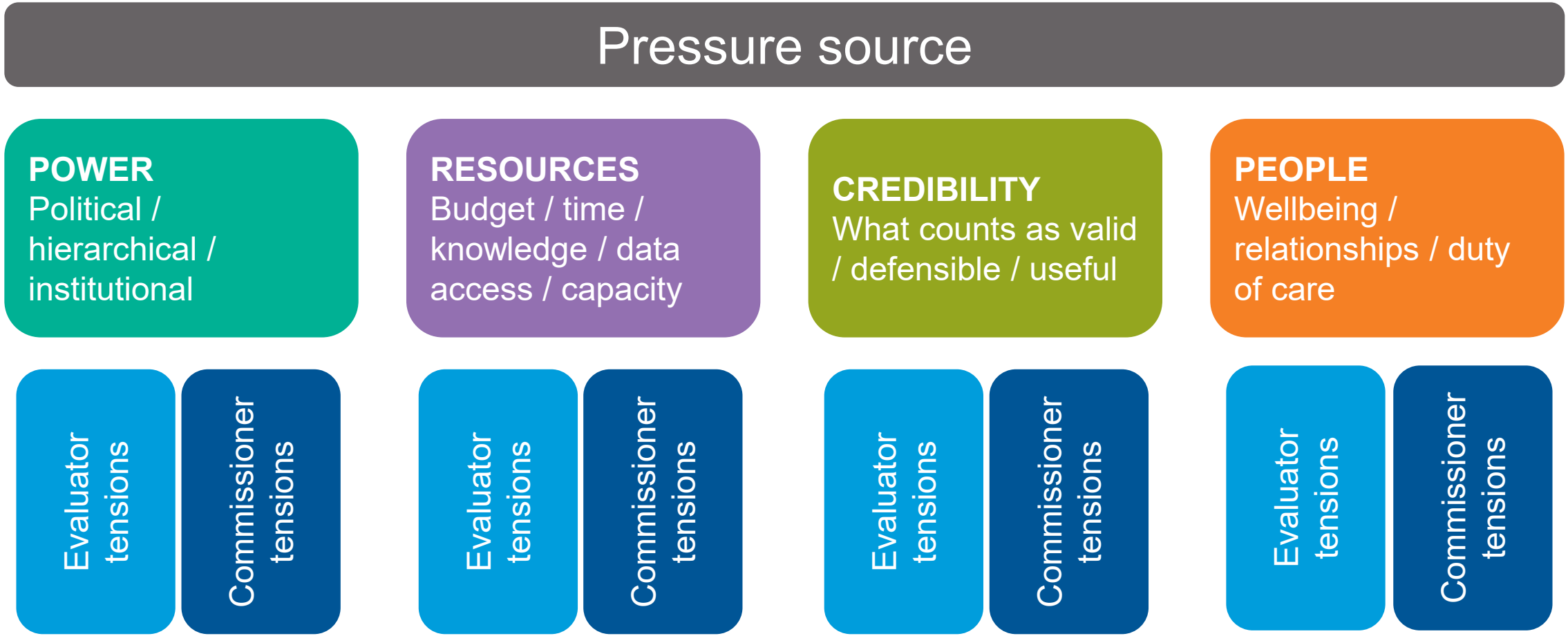
Clarify flexibility, boundaries and action

4. Next steps

What actions are needed?

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1. The Pressure Map



2. The Aisle Test

What might I be missing about the other side?

1 | MY PRESSURES	What am I trying to achieve, protect or avoid?
2 | THEIR PRESSURES	What responsibilities, constraints or risks might shape their position?
3 | REASONABLE PERSON TEST	What would a reasonable person under those pressures do? Build the strongest explanation before judging it.
4 | REMAINING CONCERNS	After considering their perspective, what still feels unresolved or needs protection?
5 | ASSUMPTIONS	What am I assuming about motives or intentions that I cannot verify?

3. What? So what? Now what?

Clarify flexibility, boundaries and action

- What is actually driving the tension?
- Why does this matter?
- Where can I adapt?
- My no-compromise boundaries?



Now what?
Adapt | Discuss | Escalate

4. Next steps

What have I learned? What did I learn about the other party's pressure? Did anything change my understanding of the situation?

What actions are needed?

- ☐ Document the decision, risk or rationale
- ☐ Clarify expectations or trade-offs
- ☐ Test assumptions further
- ☐ Make a concern more visible
- ☐ Explore alternative options
- ☐ Escalate or seek advice
- ☐ Redesign, pause or withdraw

What has been agreed, and what remains unresolved?

Agreed way forward:

Remaining concern or boundary:

If you didn’t get a copy of the framework…

Access the framework here



Applying the Evaluation Pressure System Framework

An evaluation has commenced using multiple methods, including qualitative and participatory methods to engage marginalised community members. The department that commissioned the evaluation has been restructured. Now the evaluation is overseen by a team that usually uses large surveys to gather evidence. The team holds the view that the ethics of investing public money in programs requires decision making to be based on 'rigorous' evidence.

Evaluators

You are conducting the evaluation. You believe that marginalised community members are likely to be strongly affected by upcoming decisions, and so ethics requires the evaluation to include the qualitative and participatory methods that enable them to engage. You are asked to prioritise 'rigour' in the evaluation. How will you address this issue?

Commissioners

You have acquired this in-progress evaluation. You know that the participatory, qualitative elements will not provide the information your decision makers are looking for. You understand that the contract was signed by a different team, with a different mandate — but in your team, decisions are almost always based on rigorous quantitative studies. You are not sure it's ethical to continue to burden participants and raise their expectations of what can be achieved with the qualitative, participatory strand of the evaluation. How will you address this issue?

Share back

- Any reflections?
- Did your role shape your reflections?
- What worked well?
- What's missing?



Thank you

Connect with us:

- Su-Ann Drew - suanndrew@Grosvenor.com.au
- Emma Williams - emmac.williams@icloud.com
- Jo van Twest Farmer - jo@rooftopsocial.com
- Martina Donkers - hello@martinadonkers.com

- Or add us on LinkedIn

The Ethics in Evaluation SIG is meeting immediately after this session – grab a plate and join us.