

So what is DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION?

(And how do
we **DO IT?**)

Developmental evaluation is about *inquiry and learning for the purpose of supporting adaptation in complexity.*



We live in **complex realities**. We often have to figure out how to respond effectively in situations where there are no obvious answers or clear experts, whether it's working with a diverse group of people around a challenging issue, raising a child, or pulling together a decent meal with whatever's in the cupboard.

Responding adaptively means going through a cycle of assessing your context, taking stock of what you know and don't know, making judgements about what to try, observing what happens, interpreting what that means, and using that to inform the next cycle of action.¹

When we do this process **unconsciously**, we may not realize why we've made certain decisions. We can lose the history of what we're doing and fall into habitual responses instead of adaptive ones, latching onto strategies that seem to work well enough and closing off unseen opportunities.

Developmental evaluation is about **creating space** in our adaptive practice for intentional and deep reflection and learning. It doesn't extinguish the intuitive; it allows our conscious and unconscious processes to inform and energize each other. DE isn't a path or a map, it's a compass.

Becoming aware of the ways in which we're already doing developmental evaluation as an **everyday practice** in our lives and work means we can be more intentional about it and support it with our other skill sets.



¹ If that sounds like Adaptive Action to you ('what, so what, now what'), it is! You can read more about that [here](#).

The *how* of developmental evaluation happens across multiple layers.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT PRACTICE - the work of ensuring DE is carried out in a given context (e.g., planning and coordinating activities, managing time and budget, working with stakeholders). These are not DE-specific skills, though DE might make particular demands on them (e.g., managing an emergent evaluation design).

TECHNICAL PRACTICE - the work of applying specific methods and techniques to support the different phases of the core practice in service of the purpose of adapting in complexity. There are no required or exclusive DE methods. The standard we apply is 'appropriateness' (to the context, people, values, needs, questions, constraints, etc.). Appropriate methods can run from online surveys to World Cafés to design research methods and everything between.

The **CORE PRACTICE** of developmental evaluation is the **adaptive learning cycle**, with an emphasis on surfacing theories, reality-testing, and building up a collective sensibility of what's happening and why.

There are different **phases** to this process where our attention will shift to different kinds of tasks and questions. How quickly and how many times we move through this cycle depends on the demands of the context. In DE, the evaluation itself is an emergent process, but the phases often look like this:

1. ORIENTING TO CONTEXT

- What's our situation?
- What's our wider context?
- What do we think we know?
- Who's involved and how do we relate to each other?
- What are we doing and how are we doing it?
- What do we want to do?

2. SURFACING AND EXPLORING QUESTIONS

- What are our burning questions?
- What do we think is important to pay attention to?
- What do we want to know to help us figure out what to do next?
- What do these questions tell us about our theories and assumptions about what is going on?

4. REFLECTING AND SENSE-MAKING

- What are we seeing?
- What does this mean to us?
- What are the different ways of looking at it?
- How does this inform our theories?
- How does this change our understanding of our context?

3. CREATING AND GATHERING DATA

- What data would speak to our questions and be appropriate for our context?
- What data are already available?
- What opportunities are there to generate new data?
- How can we harvest the data in a way that supports a timely and useful sense-making process?

