

Whose Decision or Learning Does the Work Serve?

Separate the purchaser's responsibility from the provider's need to learn

FOR

foundations, commissioning agencies, grantees, providers, evaluators, boards, and partnership leads

USE WHEN

one institution pays for evidence about another institution's work, or several parties expect the same study to serve different decisions

INCLUDES

a roles map, power check, shared-purpose framework, worked example, and a 15-minute team exercise

A funder pays for an evaluation of a grantee's program. The funder wants to decide whether to renew. The grantee wants to improve delivery. Participants want their experience represented fairly. The evaluator is asked to produce one report for all three.

The purchaser has legitimate questions. So do the people operating and experiencing the program. Trouble begins when the purchasing relationship quietly makes one purpose appear universal.

The short answer

Map each party's decision, learning need, authority, burden, and access to findings. Decide which purpose is primary for each product. When funder and provider purposes differ, separate them rather than forcing one question or report to do both jobs.

Who pays for evidence and whose decision it should serve are related facts, not the same fact.

Map the roles

Purchaser or commissioner

Controls resources and usually defines contractual requirements. May need evidence for selection, renewal, portfolio oversight, public responsibility, or policy.

Provider or grantee

Delivers the work and carries much of the reporting burden. Needs information it can use to adapt operations, understand participants, and make its own institutional decisions.

People affected

Receive, decline, leave, or are excluded from the service. They may carry the consequences of funding and program decisions while having the least influence over the question.

Assessor

Designs, analyzes, or reviews the evidence. Needs enough methodological authority to report an unwelcome answer and enough operational access to understand the work.

Decision-maker

May be a board, public official, executive, grant committee, or shared governance body. This role is sometimes different from both requester and purchaser.

One organization can occupy several roles. Make each role explicit anyway, because conflicts often arise between responsibilities within the same institution.

Separate the decisions

Write one sentence for each party:

- The purchaser needs to decide...
- The provider needs to decide...
- People affected need to know or influence...
- The assessor must remain able to...
- The final authority-holder can...

Then ask whether one evidence product can reasonably serve all of them. A renewal memo may need a clear judgment about current support. An improvement workshop may need detailed operational learning. A participant-facing account may need accessible language and safeguards around sensitive information.

Creating different products from a shared evidence base is not duplication when the uses are genuinely different.

A worked example

A foundation funds six community health programs and requires a common evaluation. Its decision is whether to renew each grant. Providers want to understand why follow-up varies, while participants are concerned that health information may influence service eligibility.

The original scope proposes one ranked dashboard. The roles map reveals three different responsibilities.

The foundation receives a renewal brief that combines evidence, delivery context, need, and transition consequences without pretending raw outcomes are directly comparable. Each provider receives a learning session focused on its own follow-up pathway. Participants receive a plain account of what information is used, what is not used for eligibility, and how findings will be shared.

The evaluator retains authority over methods and reports limitations. Providers can correct factual descriptions but cannot remove unfavorable findings. The foundation's allocation question remains visible rather than being presented as neutral field learning.

Make power discussable

Formal consent to an evidence request does not always show genuine agreement. A grantee may accept burdensome reporting because funding depends on it. Staff may describe a measure as useful because challenging it feels unsafe. Participants may answer because they believe service depends on cooperation.

Use practical safeguards:

- Ask providers separately what they would measure for their own decisions.
- Show how the purchaser will use each requested item.
- Give providers access to their own data and findings.

- Distinguish factual correction from control over conclusions.
- Make refusal or disagreement visible without automatic penalty.
- Include transition responsibilities before attaching poor results to funding actions.

Naming power does not prevent the purchaser from deciding. It makes the evidence arrangement more honest.

Shared work needs separate purposes

“Both” is not enough. When work is intended to serve purchaser and provider, agree:

- The distinct question each party owns.
- The information and products each needs.
- Which decisions each can make.
- How participant interests enter the design.
- Who controls methods and conclusions.
- Who receives findings and when.
- How disagreement and dissent are recorded.
- Which costs are funded and who carries them.

Without this separation, the provider’s learning needs are often displaced by the purchaser’s reporting requirements.

What you can say

- “The foundation’s primary use is renewal; the provider’s primary use is delivery improvement.”
- “The two purposes use a shared source set but different products and decision dates.”
- “Providers can correct factual errors and will receive the full findings.”
- “Participants helped identify which outcomes and burdens matter.”

What you cannot say yet

- “The evaluation serves everyone,” without mapping distinct uses.

- “The grantee agreed to the measures,” when refusal could threaten funding.
- “The evaluator is independent,” when the commissioner controls methods or release.
- “The reporting burden is modest,” based only on the time the purchaser spends reading the form.

What to do next

Minimum useful step: Name the purchaser’s decision and the provider’s separate learning question.

Stronger step: Create the roles map, products, access rights, burden budget, correction process, and authority over conclusions.

Partnership step: Revisit the arrangement with participants and delivery staff before renewing it. Ask what the current system makes hard to say honestly.

A 15-minute team exercise

Put the purchaser, provider, people affected, assessor, and final decision-maker on separate cards.

1. Under each, write the decision or responsibility they carry.
2. Add the information they need and the burden they bear.
3. Draw who controls the question, data, method, report, and funding.
4. Circle any role with responsibility but little access or authority.
5. Identify one purpose currently treated as shared that should be separated.
6. Agree one change to products, access, or decision rights.
7. Record who will approve that change.

The exercise should expose structure, not assign motives. Good people can still operate inside an arrangement that suppresses useful learning.

A note on grantee-directed support

When a funder pays for evidence intended primarily to improve a grantee’s work, the grantee should have meaningful control over the question and use. Funding the work does not require owning every methodological or reporting choice.

Be clear about what must still be shared for accountability. Then protect a separate space for operational learning that is not automatically converted into a performance judgment.

When to bring in help

Neutral facilitation can help when power makes direct disagreement difficult. Independent review is useful when a consequential conclusion requires distance from both purchaser and provider. Legal or ethical support may be needed where access, confidentiality, or participant rights are contested.

The goal is not to eliminate different interests. It is to design the evidence arrangement so those interests are visible and the resulting claims remain trustworthy.

Questions to carry forward

- Who pays, who carries the burden, and who can act?
- Which decision belongs to the purchaser and which to the provider?
- Who has access to the full findings?
- Where does unequal power shape what people feel safe reporting?