

# Would Knowing Change the Decision?

*How to decide whether more evidence has a real route to use*

## FOR

funders, commissioners, boards, executive teams, program leaders, and anyone considering a new evaluation or evidence request

## USE WHEN

a study sounds useful but the decision, authority, timing, or possible response has not been made explicit

## INCLUDES

a decision-use test, finding-to-action exercise, timing check, scope ladder, and a 15-minute team exercise

An organization is preparing to commission an evaluation. The question sounds important, the proposal sounds credible, and the budget is available. Yet nobody has written down what a favorable, mixed, or concerning result would change.

That omission is easy to miss. Evidence work is often scoped around a topic or method: evaluate the initiative, measure impact, analyze the portfolio. But a study earns its decision value through the actions it can inform. Without a route from answer to action, excellent work can arrive on time and still sit unused.

## The short answer

Before commissioning more evidence, identify the decision, the person or body able to make it, the date the answer is needed, and the feasible actions attached to different findings. If every plausible answer leads to the same action, either the work serves another purpose or it is not decision work for this choice.

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The question is not only whether the answer would be interesting. It is whether a materially different answer could lead to a materially different action.

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## Four conditions for decision use

Evidence has a plausible route to use when four conditions hold.

### **A choice is genuinely open**

The relevant commitment can still be continued, changed, staged, reduced, or stopped. “We will consider the evidence” is not enough if the practical decision has already been made.

### **Someone has authority**

The person asking for the analysis may not be the person able to act. A program officer can request a report while a board controls renewal. A program team can learn what should change while a contract prevents it from changing delivery.

### **The answer can arrive in time**

Research delivered after a budget, grant, or procurement closes may improve the next cycle but cannot inform the current one. Timing is part of the evidence design, not an administrative detail.

### **Different findings map to feasible actions**

A strong result, an uncertain result, and a concerning result should not automatically produce the same response. The actions must also be possible. It is not useful to say “we would stop” when contracts, staffing, or statutory duties make stopping impossible.

## The finding-to-action test

Write the pending decision as a verb: renew, expand, redesign, select, reduce, or stop. Then complete these sentences with the actual authority-holder:

- If the result is clearly favorable, we would...
- If the result is mixed or uncertain, we would...
- If the result is clearly concerning, we would...

Do not require perfect rules. The purpose is to reveal whether the result has a path into action.

If all three lines say “continue as planned,” ask whether the work serves accountability, improvement, public communication, or wider learning instead. Those can be legitimate purposes. They deserve their own questions and should not be presented as if a funding decision depends on them.

## A worked example

A foundation is considering a two-year renewal for a workforce program. The current grant ends in four months. Staff propose a new participant survey and six-month employment follow-up.

The foundation writes three possible responses:

- Favorable: renew for two years and consider adding a site.
- Mixed: renew for one year with a focused delivery change and another review point.
- Concerning: fund a six-month transition while reducing or ending the commitment.

That creates a real decision path. But the proposed six-month follow-up cannot arrive before the grant ends. The useful current work may therefore be a focused synthesis of existing records, participant feedback, and delivery changes. The new follow-up may still be valuable, but it belongs to the next decision.

The study question did not become less important. Its timing changed which decision it could serve.

## Separate the purposes

A single evidence request may carry several jobs. Name them rather than forcing them into one scope.

**Decision:** Should the commitment continue, change, or end?

**Improvement:** What should the program team change in delivery?

**Accountability:** What fair account is owed for the resources and work?

**Learning:** What could others learn that extends beyond this immediate choice?

**Communication:** What can be responsibly explained to a board, funder, partner, or public audience?

These jobs can overlap, but they are not interchangeable. The person who controls the funding decision may not own the operating decision. A public account may be needed even when no decision is open.

## The timing check

Place four dates on one line:

1. The last date the decision can still change.
2. The earliest date the needed data can exist.
3. The earliest date a credible analysis can be completed.
4. The date the authority-holder will actually consider it.

If the analysis date falls after the decision date, choose explicitly among three options: use existing information now, stage the commitment to preserve learning, or redesign the work for the next decision.

## What you can say

- “This analysis is intended to inform the renewal decision on 15 March.”
- “A mixed result would change the length and conditions of the commitment.”
- “The current decision is settled; the work instead serves program improvement.”
- “The new outcome data will arrive after this cycle and will be used at the next review point.”

## What you cannot say yet

- “The evaluation will inform strategy,” without identifying an owner, decision, and date.
- “We need more evidence before deciding,” when nobody has stated what evidence would be enough.
- “The board will act on the findings,” when the board has not agreed what actions remain open.
- “The study is urgent,” when its results cannot arrive before the relevant choice closes.

## What to do next

**Minimum useful step:** Name one pending choice, one authority-holder, and one date. Write what a strong, mixed, and poor result could change.

**Stronger step:** Put the available information beside the uncertainty that separates those actions. Remove data collection that cannot affect the choice in time.

**If the decision is nearly closed:** Consider a smaller reversible commitment, a current evidence synthesis, or a prospective plan for the next cycle. Do not make late research pretend to inform a choice it cannot reach.

## A 15-minute team exercise

Choose one proposed study, dashboard, evaluation, or reporting request.

1. Write the decision in one sentence.
2. Name who can authorize it.
3. Name the last date the action can change.
4. Give each person three cards labeled favorable, mixed, and concerning.
5. Ask everyone to write the action they expect for each finding.
6. Compare the cards. Where actions differ, identify whether the disagreement is about evidence, values, authority, or feasibility.
7. Ask whether the proposed work can distinguish the findings that actually lead to different actions.

If the group cannot name a different response to a different answer, pause the scope. Clarifying purpose may be the useful work.

## A note on power

The buyer of evidence can define a question that another organization must answer. That does not mean the question serves the operating team's decisions or the people affected by the program.

When a funder or commissioner owns the decision, say so plainly. Then ask what separate learning the provider needs, what burden the request creates, and what access the provider will have to the findings. Who pays for the work and whose decision it serves may be different facts.

## When to bring in help

Outside support can help when authority is distributed, the decision carries serious consequences, stakeholders disagree about what remains open, or the proposed evidence cannot arrive in time. A useful adviser should help make the route to use explicit before recommending a method.

The first deliverable may be a decision map rather than an evaluation plan. That is often the work that prevents a larger, more expensive answer from arriving with nowhere to go.

## Questions to carry forward

- What would a materially different answer change?
- Who can make that change in practice?
- When does the decision stop being open?
- If no action changes, what other legitimate purpose should define the work?