

Coffee Breaks in Focus: Key Takeaways and Ideas for Strengthening the Approach

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EXPANDING
the Bench

An initiative led by CHANGEMATRIX

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Coffee Breaks in Focus: Key Takeaways and Ideas for Strengthening the Approach

Introduction

Expanding the Bench[®] (ETB) is a Change Matrix initiative that envisions the evaluation field in the United States as a dynamic, non-hierarchical, and interdependent ecosystem of actors such as evaluators, funders, nonprofits, academic institutions, local, state, and federal government agencies, and individuals with lived experience. ETB works to disrupt entrenched norms and elevate perspectives that have long been silenced. ETB's North Star is to center and prioritize the unique histories, strengths, needs, leadership, and expertise of Indigenous, racially, and ethnically diverse evaluators and communities, challenging systems that have historically marginalized them and continue to do so today. In this evolving evaluation ecosystem, ETB serves as a catalyst for sparking systemic disruption, redistributing resources, and creating sustainable conditions for justice and equity.

In 2020, as in-person gatherings paused due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, Coffee Breaks were envisioned as a *real-time, rapid-response intervention* in support of ETB's North Star. They were developed in collaboration with ETB's evaluation ecosystem, including evaluators, funders, and other partners, to address the need for intentional and authentic opportunities to connect in a world shifting rapidly to virtual, remote spaces. Coffee Breaks are offered exclusively to partners within the ETB evaluation ecosystem, particularly evaluators from the Advancing Culturally Responsive and Equitable (ACE) Evaluation Network, alumni from the Leaders in Equitable Evaluation and Diversity (LEEAD) Program, and funders who support the ETB Initiative. The goals of Coffee Breaks align with and support our North Star. They are as follows:

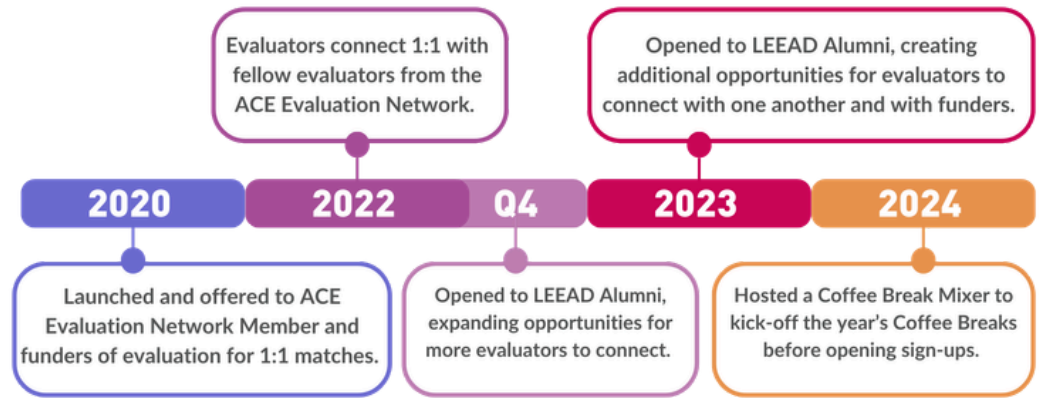
- **To create and/or enhance relationships among partners within the ETB evaluation ecosystem, i.e., evaluators from the ACE Evaluation Network, LEEAD, and funders of evaluation.**
- **To continue building mutual understanding of how CREE is sought and practiced.**
- **To improve and/or increase solicitation of ACE Evaluation Network Evaluators and LEEAD Alumni**



Since its inception in 2020, Coffee Breaks has evolved in response to feedback from community members and reflects ETB’s ongoing commitment to strengthening relationships between evaluators and funders. To support connections within the ETB community, ACE Evaluation Network Members and LEEAD Alumni were invited to indicate interest in meeting with fellow evaluators and/or funders of evaluation. Funders were matched exclusively with evaluators from the ACE Evaluation Network or the LEEAD Program.

Coffee Breaks Timeline

Figure 1. A timeline of Coffee Breaks activities from 2020 to 2024.



Coffee Breaks were offered year-round, with designated Coffee Break months available for evaluators and funders to sign up. Participants completed an inquiry form that helped ETB match funders and evaluators based on focus areas and other preferences. Participants could request up to three matches during a Coffee Break month, and matches were made according to alignment and availability. Once matched, participants were introduced by email to one another during the designated month. The coordination of meetings whether virtual or in-person (primarily virtual) was left to the participants. For funder and evaluator connections, ETB guidance requested that funders initiate coordination with evaluators. Following each meeting, a brief survey was emailed to participants to gather feedback and insights about their experience.

The social sector employs multiple approaches to achieve large-scale change, each shaped by different values, resources, and perspectives. In its social change vision to cultivate a robust national evaluation ecosystem with thriving local evaluation microsystems where Indigenous and racially and ethnically diverse evaluators, and their partners, are fully resourced, deeply connected, and leading work that transforms inequitable structures and advances equity in their communities, ETB employs strategies such as **field building, network development and support, and the uptake and spread of organizational practices** (i.e. CREE) to catalyze broad social impact. By integrating these strategies, ETB leverages the strengths of each approach to drive more coherent, powerful, and equity-centered social change.

Within ETB’s network development strategy, Coffee Breaks emerged and served as a unique core mechanism for strengthening and expanding connections across the community, particularly as mentioned above during COVID-19. ETB’s Coffee Breaks draw from the key characteristics of network development outlined by **Stachowiak, Gienapp, and Kalra (2020)** and contribute to it by:



- **Establishing the means and motivation for individuals and organizations to connect** through an accessible, low-barrier space that encourages authentic relationship building.
- **Illuminating shared or complementary interests, activities, and agendas** as participants discover common priorities and challenges through open conversation.
- **Creating a recurring mechanism for managing relationships and information exchange**, offering structured yet informal opportunities for ongoing communication and learning.
- **Building the capacity of network members to interact effectively and spread ideas beyond the network**, as participants strengthen their communication skills and bring new insights back to their organizations and communities.
- **Expanding the infrastructure needed to sustain and grow communication and connection**, with Coffee Breaks serving as a consistent, scalable touchpoint that reinforces norms of engagement across the network.

Through these contributions, Coffee Breaks were established as a sub-strategy not only to strengthen relationships but also bolster ETB's broader efforts to cultivate a connected, resourced, and equity-driven evaluation ecosystem.

Purpose of the Document

In an effort to assess the program's effectiveness, ongoing relevance, and opportunities for program evolution, ETB conducted a comprehensive analysis of qualitative and quantitative measures, including participation data and feedback surveys, collected throughout the duration of the Coffee Breaks program. We also engaged the voices and feedback of both participants and nonparticipants in a series of Listen and Learn sessions to deepen our understanding of the program's relevance and impact.

With the feedback we've collected over the years from participants, ETB plans to refine the Coffee Breaks approach to better align with the needs of evaluators and funders and to ensure the program remains relevant to the evaluation community. This will also consider updates to specific strategies that advance ETB's mission to center Indigenous, racially, and ethnically diverse evaluators and working with funders to financially invest in CREE.

Understanding the Context

Relationship-building is a core value of the ETB Initiative and is central to building a mutual understanding of CREE and transforming traditional evaluation practices. Because the evaluation



field has not included the perspectives and voices of diverse communities who have been historically excluded and oppressed, ETB works to strengthen, diversify, and increase access to racially and ethnically diverse evaluators who have been and/or are presently, underrepresented or marginalized in the U.S. We need spaces where CREE-practicing evaluators and funders can connect and build relationships first to do this work, which is why Coffee Breaks were developed. Coffee Breaks are intended to serve as a “get-to-know-you” opportunity, focused on networking and relationship-building. While these meetings may lead to conversation about work, proposals, or contracts, this is not an expected part of the conversation between evaluators and funders.

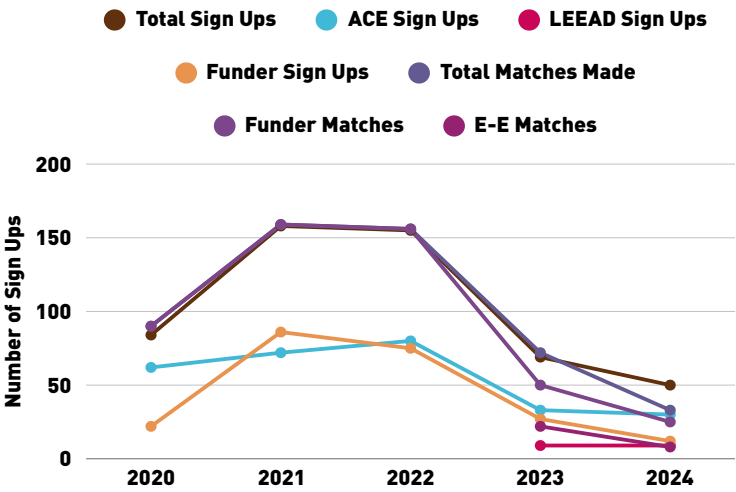
Coffee Breaks were initially offered only to evaluators from the ACE Evaluation Network to connect one-on-one with funders. When the ETB Initiative was led by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, evaluators from the ACE Evaluation Network were part of an Evaluator Database only accessible to funders to find evaluators of color for potential partnerships. At the time, this process was primarily one-sided with funders reaching out to evaluators upon request.

In centering racially and ethnically diverse evaluators, ETB heard a desire from evaluators to connect with their peers within the ETB community. The evaluation field can often feel both large and small at the same time, and seeking community, particularly among evaluators of color working in a predominately white field, is incredibly important. In 2022, ETB began offering the option for evaluators to be matched with one another to connect and build relationships. To further support connections within the ETB evaluator community, Coffee Breaks were opened to LEEAD Program alumni in late 2022.

Since 2020, 71 evaluators and 78 funders have participated in Coffee Breaks. Over the duration of the program from 2020 to 2024, 510 matches were made, including both evaluator-evaluator (E-E) and evaluator-funder matches (Figure 2).

Coffee Break Engagement by Year

Figure 2. A graph of all Coffee Breaks sign-ups and number of matches made from 2020 to 2024.

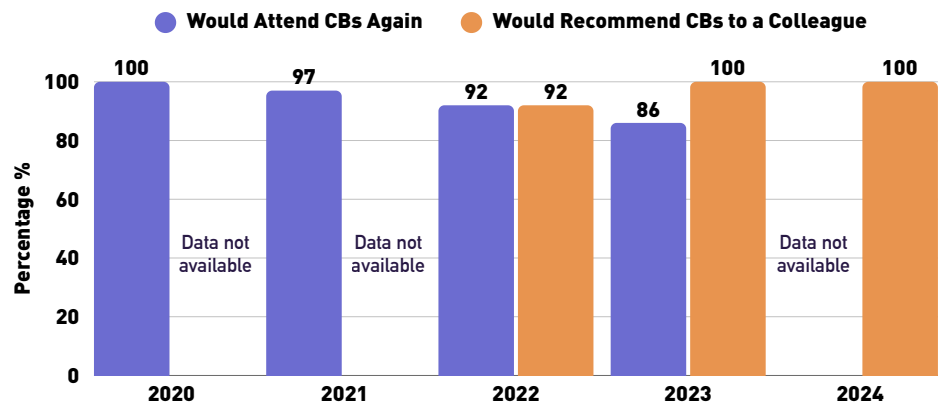


Summary of Coffee Breaks Survey Feedback (2020–2024)

Evaluator Satisfaction Survey

Figure 3. A bar chart of all of evaluator satisfaction with Coffee breaks from 2020 to 2024.

It is important to note that blank columns in the chart indicate years when a particular question was not asked. Overall, these results reflect a strong endorsement of Coffee Breaks, both in terms of repeat attendance and willingness to recommend the sessions to others.



ETB collects data from both evaluators and funders who participate through an annual satisfaction survey. Overall, satisfaction has remained consistently high, among both funders and evaluators. Feedback from participants over the past five years shows consistently high satisfaction. From 2020 to 2023, between 86% (2023) and 100% (2020) of participants reported that they would attend Coffee Breaks again, demonstrating strong ongoing interest in the sessions. Beginning in 2022, participants were also asked whether they would recommend Coffee Breaks to a colleague, with 92% to 100% responding positively through 2024.

It is important to note that blank columns in the chart indicate years when a particular question was not asked. Overall, these results reflect a strong endorsement of Coffee Breaks, both in terms of repeat attendance and participants' willingness to recommend the sessions to others.

Open-ended responses to the satisfaction survey highlight the impact of Coffee Breaks. One evaluator stated,

I feel like these conversations have enhanced my perspective surrounding CREE. I definitely use these conversations to discuss how traditional approaches to evaluation can be enhanced and even transformed by focusing on engaging groups foundations are influencing and allowing those groups to speak to and participate in the evaluation. We also have had conversations on the challenges presented by clashes between traditional evaluation approaches and implementation of CREE principles.

~ Evaluator



Deep Dive into Experiences

As part of our assessment of the impact and future relevance of the Coffee Breaks program, we conducted three virtual Listen and Learn sessions, each designed for a specific audience: (1) evaluators with a history of participating, (2) evaluators without prior engagement, and (3) funders with a history of participating. Participant groups for each session were selected intentionally to include a range of perspectives. Hosting separate sessions for each group were provided to create space for participants to speak candidly and openly about their experiences, reflections, and feedback.

Invitations for the sessions with evaluators and funders with participation history were sent out via email using attendance data. For the session for evaluators with no prior engagement, invitations were extended to the broader ETB evaluator community, including ACE Evaluation Network members and LEEAD alumni. Registration was tracked periodically through Zoom.

Each one-hour Listen and Learn session was facilitated by a small team composed of two internal ETB team members and one evaluator from the broader Change Matrix team. The sessions included a brief overview of the history and evolution of Coffee Breaks, the purpose and intentions of the session, and a summary of relevant participation and matching data to frame the conversation. Following the introduction, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions that included a combination of consistent questions asked across all three groups and tailored questions specific to each group's role in the program (Table 1). Data were captured through automated transcription generated by Zoom in addition to real-time notetaking. One individual Listen and Learn session was also held for an evaluator who was unable to attend the group session but expressed interest in sharing their experience with the program.

Both the internal ETB team and the external evaluator who co-facilitated the Listen and Learn sessions conducted independent thematic analyses of the transcripts and notes. Participant responses were de-identified and remained anonymous throughout the analysis. Findings drawn from the review were categorized into patterns, themes, and areas of convergence and divergence.



QUESTION

GROUP

What is your experience with Coffee Breaks?	All
What would be the ideal coffee break for you?	All
What are ways in which you network with other funders and evaluators? Follow-up: How do Coffee Breaks compare?	All; Follow-up: Evaluators with CB history and Funders with CB history
Now that you've heard about the evolution of Coffee Breaks and shared your experiences, are Coffee Breaks still relevant for you?	All
What would encourage you to attend future Coffee Breaks?	Evaluators without CB history
Since you haven't participated in Coffee Breaks, how come?	Evaluators without CB history
What reasons motivated you to participate in Coffee Breaks?	Evaluators and Funders with CB history
What would be helpful for you to increase your participation in Coffee Breaks	Evaluators and Funders with CB history
How have attending CB impacted the way you approach your work?	Evaluators and Funders with CB history

Table 1. Questions Asked in the Listen and Learn Sessions

Findings

This section aims to describe the experience, impact, and future vision of Coffee Breaks from participants.

- 1 Program Design and Implementation
- 2 Motivation and Drivers
- 3 Power Dynamics and Equity Considerations
- 4 Reflections on Outcomes
- 5 Future Vision



Program Design and Implementation

Participants consistently valued Coffee Breaks as a rare space for authentic connection. The openness of the design allowed for genuine relationship-building, yet some evaluators shared that the lack of structure left them uncertain about how to engage with funders. For some matches, it was unclear whether the purpose was purely networking or exploring a potential work opportunity. This revealed tension in the model with informality serving as both strength and limitation.



Evaluators highlighted both the promise and pressure of Coffee Breaks. Some felt free to show up authentically, while others described discomfort as feeling they had to “sell themselves” to funders to be considered for future opportunities. Funders echoed this tension, noting that they sometimes entered conversations unsure whether their role was to listen, mentor, or assess potential partners. Together, these insights point to a design challenge: how to preserve informality while providing clear guidance that reduces inequities and confusion in how conversations unfold.

ETB's role as a catalyst is to bring together evaluators and funders, who are important agents in the evaluation ecosystem, to contribute to transforming the field. Participants expressed that opportunities like Coffee Breaks can be challenging to coordinate independently, especially with evaluators and funders they might not otherwise have access to.

The fact that ETB even organizes all of this is a huge help because I wouldn't be able to get myself to be or rather organize myself to seek it out. I just don't have the bandwidth for any of that; that service is huge. The fact that you're even organizing these coffee breaks is immensely helpful.
~ Funder of Evaluation

Motivation and Drivers

Across both evaluator and funder groups, motivations for participating were rooted in curiosity and relationship-building. Evaluators sought visibility and connection in a field that can often feel isolating, particularly for evaluators of color. Funders were motivated by a desire to learn more about CREE and broaden their networks. While motivations diverged in focus, both groups emphasized the value of authentic dialogue and relationship-building as the core drivers reflected in the following themes:

- Networking and Relationship-Building
- Visibility and Field Building

Evaluators and funders alike described Coffee Breaks as a meaningful entry point for new relationships. Some connections evolved into ongoing collaborations, though participants shared that the relational value outweighed transactional outcomes. Evaluators noted that participating enhanced their visibility and validated their expertise. Funders reflected that their participation signaled commitment to equity in evaluation, an important contribution to field-level change. Evaluators' engagement was influenced by alignment with their networking goals and the potential for new work or partnership opportunities. Funders' engagement was influenced by alignment with their networking interests and their evaluation and/or funding priorities.



I think that for me, and that's not unusual for CREE folks, is to make that individual personal connection. It's just a good thing to have.

~ Evaluator

Introducing us to new evaluators and evaluators of color and evaluators who are doing CREE, that is always something that we're looking for and to expand our network.

~ Funder of Evaluation

The drop in participation over time (Figure 2) was often attributed less to waning interest and more to competing demands on limited time or scheduling conflicts during Coffee Breaks cycles. Some evaluators mentioned that there were not enough new funders to meet with, which was not aligned with their goal of connecting with new people and discouraged them from engaging. This reflected an inequitable ratio of evaluators-to-funders in some cycles, where the number of evaluators seeking to meet with funders exceeded the number of funders available.

Power Dynamics and Equity Considerations

Conversations often mirrored the broader dynamics of philanthropy and evaluation. ETB's North Star is to center and prioritize Indigenous, racially, and ethnically diverse evaluators, and communities, challenging systems that have historically marginalized them and continue to do so today. This reinforces the need for Coffee Breaks as just one of many approaches to help disrupt the system.

While some evaluators described feeling seen and valued in Coffee Breaks more than in other professional spaces, others pointed to moments where systemic inequities were reinforced. Some evaluators described their conversations as resembling consultation sessions with funders, during which they had to educate funders on CREE. Others shared that they felt pressured to 'sell themselves' in hopes of gaining new work or funding opportunities through these connections.

Funders expressed a desire to engage equitably but acknowledged not always having the tools, guidance, or time to do so effectively. At times, evaluators perceived this as a lack of follow-through on email communications or initiating coordination for meeting time. This highlights the importance of explicit framing and intentional practices to help balance power within these spaces and the broader evaluation field.

Reflections on Outcomes

Overall, participants emphasized that there is still value in conversations and connections between evaluators and funders reaffirming the goals of Coffee breaks. Personal connections were seen as crucial—both for understanding funders' approaches and sharing one's own CREE practices. These relationships also reinforce that funders need to integrate a CREE approach into their work and



partner with CREE-evaluators. Funders reported gaining a deeper appreciation for the breadth of expertise within the ACE Evaluation Network and LEEAD community and acknowledged the need for change in their own practice to develop more partnerships with racially and ethnically diverse evaluators.

For some participants, Coffee Breaks were central to their entry into or continued practice in evaluation and/or philanthropy. These sessions reinforced their purpose and direction while expanding their connections within the field. Although the intentions of Coffee Breaks were not guaranteed to work for participants, meaningful connections sometimes resulted in work or funding opportunities. Even when conversations did not lead to direct outcomes, many participants found the conversations to be helpful, and thought-provoking, especially shaping how evaluators and funders approach CREE.

If Coffee Breaks are offered, I will continue to participate...Has the payoff been there? Not particularly, but I don't want to possibly miss an opportunity. The potential is worth the benefit.

~ Evaluator

Survey data confirmed high satisfaction, even as engagement decreased over time. Participants from both groups reported a strong chance of engaging again and recommending Coffee Breaks to colleagues and supporting ETB in continuing to offer these services.

Key takeaways from Coffee Breaks participants:

- Relationships are important in the evaluation ecosystem
- We need (more) spaces for authentic connection with evaluators and funders
- These conversations reinforce the importance of CREE
- Power dynamics and inequities still exist between funders and evaluators, and in the field
- Funders and evaluators need to work together to change the field
- Meaningful connections have the potential to transform into opportunities
- Refinement to the structure is needed to reengage and support community members to participate
- We need more funders to commit to investing in and practicing CREE in the evaluation ecosystem



Future Vision

Participants emphasized that Coffee Breaks remain both helpful and necessary as a space for bringing evaluators and funders together. Many shared a continued commitment to engaging in this opportunity to build relationships across the evaluation field. Participants expressed a desire to see Coffee Breaks evolve to better reflect community needs and the growing evaluation field.

Suggested recommendations included:

- Create small-group, topic-driven conversations alongside 1:1 matches that are focused on evaluation and funding challenges or solutions.
- Improve sign-up forms to capture evaluation skills, focus areas, identities, and intent, leading to stronger matches and outcomes.
- Offer pre-conversation prompts or light facilitation to support connections, share CREE experiences, address power dynamics, and set expectations.
- Build feedback loops, such as data parties or share-backs, to ensure the program remains responsive and adaptive.
- Develop more relationships between ETB and funders at the local and national level to participate in Coffee Breaks and commit to investing in and practicing CREE.

Recommendations and Next Steps

As a catalyst, ETB will continue to facilitate spaces for racially and ethnically evaluators and funders of evaluation to connect and be a part of a larger evaluation ecosystem where CREE is not the exception, but the standard—where equity, community wisdom, and shared power are embedded across practices, relationships, and decision-making. With the emergent themes from annual surveys and the Listen and Learn sessions, ETB will adjust the approach to Coffee Breaks to better reflect the needs of community members.

ETB will continue to offer 1:1 matches for evaluator-evaluator and evaluator-funder connections and will launch the option for participants to engage in small group matches that are topically focused to support CREE practice and strengthen connections between evaluators and funders. To support as many aligned matches as possible, the sign-up forms will be updated to better capture participants' skills, backgrounds, interests, and intent for participation. Participants expressed a strong desire to be matched based on a multitude of factors such as evaluation skills or methodology, specialization or knowledge working with specific communities or populations, CREE experience, and experience working in specific fields or industries. Participants also want to understand the intent of a potential



connection with an evaluator and/or funder so that they can prepare more effectively for meetings. As matches are made and meetings completed, ETB will strengthen internal communication mechanisms to support follow-up between evaluators and funders. This can include email summaries of matches and accompanying surveys to participants. ETB will continue to hold listening sessions with community members to capture experiences and feedback as we launch the next cycle of Coffee Breaks. ETB plans to share the data through a virtual event, such as a data party, inviting community members to attend and discuss the findings and recommendations. A summary of this report was presented as a poster at the 2025 American Evaluation Association Conference to share lessons with the broader evaluation field. The full report will also be available on ETB's website for ongoing public access.



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