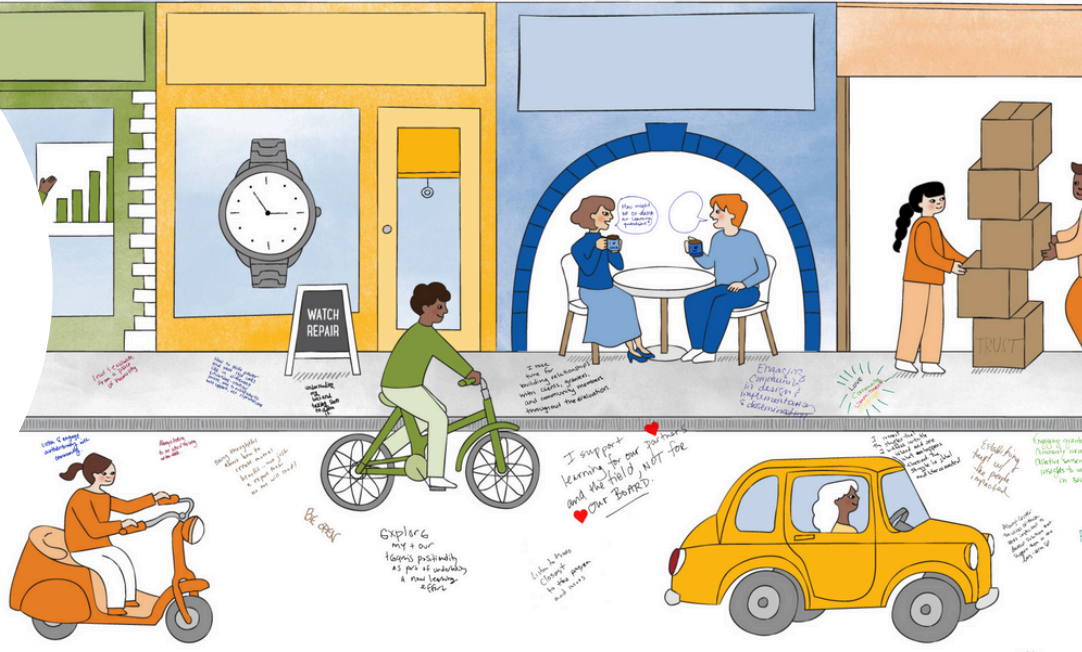


# Holding Relationships at the Center of Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation



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As we step into the new year, many of us have been reflecting on the importance of the relationships in our lives. We've been looking back on the connections we've made, the relationships we've nurtured, and resolving to strengthen these bonds in the new year. Professionally, we had a chance to come together with many of you last fall at the [American Evaluation Association \(AEA\)](#) Conference in Portland, Oregon for the annual celebration of [Expanding the Bench®](#), an initiative dedicated to diversifying the field of evaluation and promoting [culturally responsive and equitable evaluation \(CREE\)](#) approaches. The tone was joyful, and it was such a pleasure to see so many new and familiar faces in the room.

For the first time, the event was held in partnership with [Engage R+D](#) and [Informing Change](#), with support from the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#), to reflect with evaluators and funders on what CREE means and looks like in practice. Throughout the night, attendees had the opportunity to add to our interactive prompt wall to share notes, reactions, and drawings. In reflection of these responses, the theme is clear: the relationships cultivated in this field are not just collegial but key to supporting equitable approaches to evaluation and learning. Below, we share three insights from the activity that demonstrate why relationships and collaboration are at the heart of equitable approaches to evaluation and learning, and how we can continue working together to strengthen our field.

## Notes on Building Relationships that Center Equity in Evaluation

- **Build Trust:** Trust is the foundation for participation, collaboration, and authentic engagement. On the activity wall, one attendee noted that they engaged in CREE by focusing on “establishing trust with the people impacted [by the work].” Another conference goer promoted “authenticity, not accuracy,” which led our team to reflect on how authenticity offers engagement in learning that can more accurately reflect the world’s complexities. In practice, participants described how this may look like:
  - “asking questions”
  - “practicing co-creation”
  - and expressing “radical love”.
- **Listen with Humility and Respect:** Valuing lived expertise is a cornerstone of CREE. Evaluators must listen deeply and center the voices of those most impacted to co-create meaningful solutions. Attendees emphasized the need to “always listen to see who’s missing at the table” and to “listen deeply and respect lived expertise”.
- **Address Power Dynamics:** Several noted the importance of addressing power dynamics to shift power and foster mutual value and equity. This requires a reflective approach to understanding who benefits from the work and who is excluded, with attendees writing: “Pay attention to whom benefits/whom gains value from the work” and “[consider] how to shift power and what that looks like in different situations—starting points, where to push, how to best support, set expectations.”

These notes are just the start of our conversation and should be further unpacked with examples of what this looks like in practice, especially in the context of evaluation and learning.

## Living Our Equity Values

The event itself was a demonstration of how CREE principles can be brought to life through intentional action. Expanding the Bench®, Engage R+D, Informing Change, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation worked together with humility and curiosity, ensuring that every aspect of the planning reflected our shared commitment to equity.

This intentionality showed up in tangible ways: prioritizing local Indigenous and racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, incorporating intergenerational perspectives into the event’s design, and honoring the land and labor that made the gathering possible through acknowledgments and a call to action to support a local community-based organization. The openness shown by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation as a funder was also key to ensuring that the event was accessible and free for all conference attendees.



By focusing on these thoughtful and practical actions, we aimed to act as a catalyst—helping to spark meaningful connections and amplify the existing strengths of the communities and individuals we engage with throughout the year. These choices reflected how collaboration rooted in CREE can activate change and create spaces where equity and joy are central. As we reflect on this experience, we recognize that building purposeful relationships and trust takes time and sustained effort. The connections made in Portland at AEA were just the beginning, and we remain committed to fostering deeper relationships and continuing to center equity in all aspects of our work.

## What's Next

Looking ahead, we'd like to continue building these relationships in the field. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in particular is committed to being a facilitator and weaver of this work as they seek to advance CREE practice in the field. In times of rising attacks on equity work, investing in the strength of networks and relationships is a strategic way to reduce isolation and provide space for co-thinking, coordination, and collective action.

For those interested in joining, please [sign up today](#) to stay connected as we look for more opportunities to bring people together around this work.

