

Description

Frequently asked questions and responses about issues of familiarity during Team Evaluations. Includes example scenarios.

Content

What does the Team Evaluator Policies and Procedures manual say about familiarity issues between the evaluator and team in an evaluation setting?

Team evaluators must not evaluate their own animal (even with a different handler) or any handler with whom they have a personal relationship (e.g., spouse, partner, child, close friend). Evaluators must be able to remain fully impartial and, if warranted, assign a Not Ready or Not Appropriate score, even when potentially hurt feelings may occur. Additionally, prior knowledge of the team outside the evaluation must not influence scoring.

I am both a handler and an evaluator and sometimes I visit/volunteer alongside handlers who I eventually evaluate. We are friendly and spend time together - is that an issue?

Evaluators may find it difficult to remain fully unbiased when assessing people they volunteer with. Prior positive experiences - such as knowing a handler to be professional and kind, or their animal to be calm and friendly - can unintentionally influence judgment during an evaluation. While some evaluators can separate this effectively, others may need to take extra care. Use your best judgment and decline to evaluate in situations where you might struggle - or mark the familiarity box YES if you must evaluate them. Regardless of how you assess your familiarity with the team, it can help to set a clear boundary at the outset by stating, "I am only evaluating what I observe during this evaluation" so they understand any prior knowledge is not included in your scoring.

Tell me more about experienced assistants as it relates to familiarity.

Evaluators who are concerned with familiarity may wish to solicit an experienced evaluation assistant to help with certain exercises to ascertain animal behavior with a more unfamiliar person.

How do I address issues of familiarity on the scoresheet?

If you determine that your familiarity with the team does not impact your impartiality - mark NO. If you believe there are some potential issues and are unable to arrange for another

evaluator to evaluate the team - mark YES. If YES is marked, the team can only receive a predictable rating.

Is environmental familiarity an issue?

Environmental familiarity should be considered if the evaluation location might create specific challenges for the team. For example, evaluations at a doggie daycare might cause an animal to be more exuberant and playful than usual. If you suspect such a situation, discuss it with the handler via email or phone prior to the evaluation to ensure they want to continue.

Can you provide some examples of familiarity issues?

Scenario 1

Ellen is listed as a prospective handler on your roster. The name doesn't ring a bell for you, the evaluator. However, upon arrival, you realize Ellen works at your company. You don't have much interaction with each other, which explains why the name wasn't familiar. Should you evaluate Ellen and her rabbit?

While you may be only acquaintances (or even less), you must consider if you will be able to give disappointing news to someone you will later see in a professional setting. Will a Not Ready rating impact your work life? If not, and you feel confident to score, proceed with the evaluation.

Scenario 2

Chris, a member of your local group of therapy animal handlers, needs a renewal evaluation. He asks if he can sign up for your evaluation event next month. Can you evaluate Chris and his dog Jasmine?

Being a member of such a group does not constitute familiarity. There are no issues of familiarity here unless you and Chris are close personal friends or in rare situations such as you provide frequent dog sitting for Jasmine.

Scenario 3

Your adult daughter wants to evaluate with her new dog. She lives over an hour away and you have only met the dog a few times. Should you evaluate your daughter?

No. While you may not be habitually familiar with the dog, immediate family members (and usually extended family as well) are considered too familiar. Have her evaluate with someone else.

Scenario 4

A handler states that she adopted her cat from the humane society, a place at which you hold evaluations. While the handler has only been there once, the cat lived there for several months. The cat was adopted nearly three years ago, and this is a re-evaluation. Can this handler and her cat evaluate at the humane society?

Technically, yes. However, it is worth a conversation with the handler. Living in a shelter can be incredibly stressful for an animal, even if that space is a distant memory. It is the handler's decision.