

The Foundation Review

Volume 3
Issue 1 *Open Access*

2011

Lessons (Not Yet) Learned

Marilyn J. Darling
Signet Research & Consulting LLC

Jillaine S. Smith
Signet Research & Consulting LLC

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr>



Part of the [Nonprofit Administration and Management Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Darling, M. J., & Smith, J. S. (2011). Lessons (Not Yet) Learned. *The Foundation Review*, 3(1).
<https://doi.org/10.4087/FOUNDATIONREVIEW-D-10-00037>

This Free Access is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Foundation Review by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Lessons (Not Yet) Learned

Marilyn J. Darling, M.A., and Jillaine S. Smith, B.A., Signet Research & Consulting LLC

Introduction

Despite a significant influx of charitable dollars over the last 10 to 20 years, solutions to complex social problems remain elusive (Anheier & Leat, 2006; Damon & Verducci, 2006; Eisenberg, 2004). Philanthropy has been facing growing pressure to account for its tax-free dollars; to demonstrate, replicate and scale success; and to be transparent about failed social investments (Tierney, 2007). Learning from failures to improve future performance has become a priority not only for the learning and evaluation community, but increasingly for programs and executive teams as well.

“Failure” is a loaded term. Some foundations prefer to talk about “mistakes” or “disappointments” to make them safer to surface and discuss internally, and to protect their reputation and that of their nonprofit partners. Michael Schrage (2010) observed that “our failure to define failure can undermine our ability to learn from it.” It is far easier to learn from partial failures or “underachievers” than from total disasters because the causes are easier to discover and learn from. For purposes of this article, we will use the word “failure” to mean instances when results fall short of expectations. A failure can be large and catastrophic, causing an unfortunate but inevitable end to a large investment. More often it is small and recoverable, especially when a foundation and its nonprofit partners are good at learning their lessons quickly and well – before small, recoverable failures turn into catastrophic ones.

Key Points

- Despite a significant influx of charitable dollars over the last 10 to 20 years, solutions to complex social problems remain elusive, while philanthropy has been facing growing pressure to account for its tax-free dollars; to demonstrate, replicate, and scale success; and to be transparent about failed social investments.
- When foundations and their nonprofit partners ignore a failure and move on, whether it is to protect their own reputation or the reputations of valued partners or simply because of the pressure to keep going, it is too easy to toss out the baby with the bathwater – to toss aside a good idea and start over. This is a sign of failing to learn.
- Learning from failure requires the difficult task of changing deeply rooted habits of thinking, decision-making, and interacting. This is especially true in the social sector, where there are many competing and equally important priorities – from providing needed community services and building organizational capacity to achieving systemic change.
- What does it take to actually learn those lessons and improve future performance? Reflecting on failures and publishing “lessons learned” reports are good first steps, but do not guarantee that those lessons will translate into improved results.
- In this article, the authors explore in detail what it looks like for a lesson to be truly learned, and offer concrete recommendations about steps to take to make sure that an important lesson, once identified, actually turns into a lesson learned.

Sidebar 1: The True Cost of Failure

In an era of high demand and stretched resources, examining the true cost – both direct and indirect – of not learning from failures becomes critical.

During our research into learning through grantmaking (Darling, 2010), we heard the following not uncommon failure story: A foundation relied heavily on a handful of intermediaries for an important and innovative community-change initiative. Several things went wrong, but perhaps the most critical was that the CEO of one of the intermediaries became ill and had to step down.

With no bench strength, the intermediary's work stalled and tensions rose between it and the foundation's other partners. After two years of disappointing results, the foundation pulled the plug on the entire initiative and shifted resources to "safer," more traditional programs.

What was the direct cost of this failed initiative? At the very least, the communities served lost access to a service which, even though less than successful in the eyes of the grantmaker, provided public good to people who needed it. The foundation experienced an opportunity cost – money and staff resources that could have been devoted to an initiative that was producing greater impact.

Now consider potential indirect costs of this failed initiative:

Without understanding the causes of the failure, other potential investors assume the innovative theory was flawed and withdraw support from an otherwise promising approach.

- By starting from scratch with another intermediary, the foundation and its nonprofit partners forfeit the opportunity to grow a stronger partnership by actually learning from the failure.
- The reputations of other grantees are damaged, even though they performed well.
- The foundation's reputation is damaged as community stakeholders become distrustful of its – or even worse, any foundation's – stated commitment to follow-through.
- Social-sector culture and practices shift in nonproductive ways: The foundation's board tightens up its oversight, becoming a micromanager of program decisions. Wanting to put the past behind them and move on, foundation and nonprofit staffs become less transparent and open about talking about emerging problems and disappointing results.

To be sure, not all of these costs are likely to materialize as the result of a single failed program. Fortunately, what foundations and nonprofits mostly experience are "less than optimal" outcomes, not abject failures. Unfortunately, too many organizations fail to grasp the partial success and therefore lose the opportunity to build upon it.

Now consider the potential positive impact had the foundation and its nonprofit partners learned how to learn from failures. If foundation staff had used lessons garnered from past programs to recognize the problem early, help the floundering intermediary pull through, and help repair strained relationships, the program might have been saved. The direct benefits might be that more members of the community would have received an innovative service from a collaboration of committed, aligned partners, and the foundation would have achieved at least a portion of the impact promised by the investment. But beyond that, the indirect benefits could include making future investments easier to leverage through innovative grants, stronger partnerships with more capable grantees, better decision-making, a board that understands the landscape and has confidence in the foundation staff to navigate it, and boatloads of goodwill in the community (Table 1).

In *The Foundation*, Fleishman (2007) cites as a counter-example the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's End of Life initiative, which was a completely "failed" initiative from the 1990s. As described in Isaacs and Colby (2009), the foundation learned from the experience and conceived a much more holistic strategy to replace it. Ultimately, Bill Moyers created a television documentary that led to a citizen-led network of end-of-life groups in 20 cities and recognition of the issue as a health care discipline.

It is the authors' opinion that the process of learning from failure is not just the responsibility of philanthropy. Given the complexity of working with a network of partners to achieve an outcome, the lessons to be learned don't fit neatly within organizational boundaries. The analysis and recommendations that follow can be viewed through the lens of an individual organization – either a grantmaker or a nonprofit, and used within those organizations. But they will be of most value if viewed through the lens of the larger social sector – the entire network of foundation and nonprofit partners that have committed to work together toward a shared outcome.

When foundations and their nonprofit partners ignore a failure and move on, whether to protect their own reputation or the reputations of valued partners or simply because of the pressure to keep going, it is too easy to toss out the baby with the bathwater – to toss aside a good idea and start over. This is a sign of failing to learn. And it is a waste of an investment. The ultimate result of going from solution to solution without gaining insight about what works when is that the same lessons get learned over and over again. (See Sidebar 1: The True Cost of Failure.)

In their book, *Money Well Spent*, Paul Brest and Hal Harvey (2008) name acknowledging and learning from failure as one of the core tenets of strategic philanthropy. Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) convened a group of grantmakers to do peer learning around the topic, facilitated by one of the authors. Joel Fleishman devotes a whole chapter to failure in *The Foundation*, observing that:

It's understandable that foundations should prefer to trumpet their successes and ignore their failures. ... Yet acknowledging, analyzing, and understanding foundation failures could go a long way toward strengthening foundation practices, improving their success rates, and enabling the entire social sector to learn what didn't work so that flawed approaches are not unwittingly repeated by others. Moreover, owning up to failures would be a sign of foundation maturity and self-confidence, both of which are undermined by covering up failures. (2007)

TABLE 1 Potential Costs/Benefits Related to Failure and Learning To Learn From It

	Potential costs of failure	Benefits of learning to learn from failure
Direct	Community: Lost access to services Social sector: Opportunity cost	Community: Greater access to innovative services Social sector: Demonstrated results
Indirect	Damage to potential innovative solution Loss of valued partners Community distrust Greater board oversight Reduced staff risk-taking and disclosure	Better decision-making Stronger partnerships with more capable grantees Board confidence Staff confidence and transparency Community goodwill

Easier said than done. Learning from failure requires the difficult task of changing deeply rooted habits of thinking, decision-making, and ways of interacting (Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2007). This is especially true in the social sector, where there are many competing priorities (Unwin, 2005) and where engaging in learning activities might not be seen as mission-critical by overcommitted foundation and nonprofit staff members. Such staff face the conundrum of feeling pressure to produce impact while not having time to hone their skills. James and Wooten assert in their research that an essential capacity for leading under pressure is the ability for an organization to learn (James & Wooten, 2009).

What does it take to actually learn those lessons and improve future performance? Reflecting on failures and publishing “lessons learned” reports are good first steps, but alone do not guarantee that those lessons will translate into improved results. In this article, the authors explore in detail what it looks like for a lesson to be truly learned, and offer concrete recommendations about steps to take to make sure that an important lesson, once identified, actually turns into a lesson learned.

Publishing Lessons Learned Reports About Failures

Historically, the social sector has proven itself to be weak at looking honestly at failure and learning from it. In *Mistakes to Success*, Bob Giloth of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Colin Austin of the nonprofit MDC Inc., make the case that, while much can be learned from failures, the social sector must first break through “the propensity for ignoring and hiding, rather than disclosing and reflecting on, failed approaches”

and reflect on them honestly (2010, p. 2). And once that barrier is breached, the sector’s skill at actually learning from those insights is in need of development. “The learning crisis we face in the nonprofit sector impedes our ability to be more effective in reaching better outcomes for families and communities” (Giloth & Austin, 2010, p. 2).

To begin to turn the tide, some foundations have taken the courageous step of publishing “lessons learned” reports about failed programs. Leaders in this effort include some of the largest grant-making organizations, all of which have published “lessons learned” reports or articles about important failures:

- The Annie E. Casey Foundation was an early pioneer in sharing painful lessons. *The Path of Most Resistance* addressed the disappointing results of their New Futures initiative (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995). More recently, the foundation published “Philanthropy and Mistakes: An Untapped Resource,” in which it used the publication of three failures to make the case for examining failures as a means to improve results (Giloth & Gerwitz, 2009).
- In a 2003 reflection about the demise of SeaChange, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation admitted that the vision, intention, and conviction behind its \$735,000 underwriting was not matched with an equal measure of rigor, action, and evidence (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2003).
- The James Irvine Foundation reported on its attempts to correct its course and salvage a \$60 million investment in after-school programs gone wrong (Walker, 2007).
- The Carnegie Corp. admitted that a \$200 million grant to Zimbabwe was “long on hope and short on strategy” (Carnegie, 2007).

Sidebar 2: Peeling the Onion

One “lessons learned” report from a foundation participant in a collaborative cited partnerships with the public sector as both valuable and challenging. Bureaucratic delays drained the budget and set back the schedule. The collaborative remained committed to its work with the public sector, but the collaborative’s director concluded that working with a public partner requires “flexibility.”

For a “lessons learned” report to be useful, its authors have a responsibility to fully articulate their lessons. “Flexibility” is a concept that warrants a more careful definition. How will being flexible minimize the impact on the budget and schedule? If the staff keeps this question in mind, the resulting hypotheses may help them hone in and test (and retest) their best thinking. Peeling back the onion in this way will lead to better understanding of the sources and early indicators of delay, which may then lead to such solutions as:

- developing healthy relationships with key public partners so that potential delays can be discovered early and mitigated;
- ensuring a shared understanding of respective goals – sources of alignment as well as where goals diverge, and how to manage that;
- planning to deal with the likely transition of key individuals in the collaboration; and
- breaking through assumptions about what steps are essential and where efficiencies might be found.

Continuing to ask, “What will it take to do that?” helps a community to continue to flesh out its thinking until a more complete solution to a vexing challenge is unveiled.

- In his courageous and much-publicized admission, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation President Paul Brest bared the grantmaker’s inability to see much change from its 10-year, \$20 million investment in improving the lives of residents (Brown & Feister, 2007).
- The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation dedicated an entire issue of its *To Improve Health and Healthcare* series to its own lessons learned from “programs that did not work out as expected” (Isaacs & Colby, 2010, p. 5).
- Bill Gates has been remarkably candid in several interviews about his foundation’s frustration with missteps in its quest to eradicate polio and malaria through wide availability of vaccines (Guth, 2010).

Being deliberate about publishing “lessons learned” reports helps communicate a foundation’s intention to be transparent and to not hold itself up as the infallible expert. It also serves as a potential source of wisdom to others in the sector. By publishing reports of failures and the insights they have gained, the hope is that other foundations and nonprofits will not make the same mis-

takes and benefit from the insights shared about what caused those mistakes.

Why ‘Lessons Learned’ Aren’t

Unfortunately, merely publishing a “lessons learned” report – regardless of how thorough the analysis behind it – is no guarantee of future success. This unrealistic expectation risks undermining the effort to build the learning habit. It is especially frustrating to people who worked hard on creating a “lessons learned” report about a painful failure to review a grant report a year or two later and feel a sense of déjà vu settle over the room as familiar failures from familiar causes present themselves.

Three factors contribute to the gap between a lesson learned and improved results:

1. In a complex environment, the first lesson is usually incomplete, so simply implementing it does not produce consistently better results.
2. The causes of failure often involve dilemmas or systemic tensions that are not easily resolved by “do this” recommendations.
3. “Fixing” the identified causes of failure may cause even greater failures in the future.

The First Lesson Is Usually Incomplete

Even the deepest of retrospective analyses of a complex series of events is prone to a number of errors. The people most able to understand causality may not have participated in the analysis. A key piece of data or critical perspective may be missing. The analysis may not dig deep enough back into the chain of causes and, as a result, participants may land on “fixing” something that was actually caused by a deeper and more pernicious dynamic. The resulting solutions may be incomplete or not translatable to a slightly different situation in the future (Darling, Parry, & Moore, 2005). For example:

- The failure of a health clinic to provide needed services to homeless women might be caused by offices that are too well appointed for and

intimidating to their intended clients.

- An early-education program might succeed in providing new computers to an antiquated school infrastructure, but children cannot gain access because the school cannot afford the staff to help them.

The process of truly learning a lesson is one of peeling the onion until a more complete understanding and set of solutions is developed. (See Sidebar 2: Peeling the Onion.)

Dilemmas and Systemic Tensions Are Not Easily Resolved

“Lessons learned” reports often reveal inherent tensions that don’t lend themselves to facile solutions. The choice is often not between right and wrong, but between things that are right for different reasons. A common tension faced by programs that are aiming to scale a solution to a larger population is between instituting common metrics and respecting local variations. Common metrics make it easier for the funding entity to learn across geographies, but may ultimately increase the failure rate when local communities find their needs conflicting with the larger initiative. This tension is at the heart of a dialogue about the Promise Neighborhoods initiative hosted by the Bridgespan Group and published on its website. Commenters talk about the trade-off between “political concerns” and “community-driven planning”; between a “franchise model of the world” and “the importance of local differences and the opportunities to harness creativity, self-organizing, and relationship building” (Howard & Stone, 2009).

Solutions that succeed in the short term may fail in the long term. In “Leveraging Grantmaking: Understanding the Dynamics of Complex Social Systems,” David Peter Stroh observes that “good intentions are not sufficient to produce positive outcomes. ... Nonobvious system dynamics often seduce us into doing what is expedient but ultimately ineffective” (2009, p. 121).

For example, a “lessons learned” report cites the need to anticipate delays and cost overruns and

proposes developing a budget with a cushion to absorb them. But that conflicts with limited resources and the pressure to be efficient. Because extra time and budget always get used up, rather than padding every project that might run over budget, such a scenario begs the more complex question: What will it take to be as efficient as possible, in the face of anticipated delays and cost overruns?

Even the deepest of retrospective analyses of a complex series of events is prone to a number of errors. The process of truly learning a lesson is one of peeling the onion until a more complete understanding and set of solutions is developed.

‘Fixing’ Failures Is Not the Same as Learning From Them

A much too common approach to correcting failures is to build institutional solutions to problems.¹ Generally, building institutional solutions to “lessons learned” is about creating safeguards to mitigate the mistakes people have made in the past (which assumes, by the way, that human error was the true cause of failure). Saying “let’s never do that again,” foundations are prone to creating large, process-heavy decision-making and annual planning processes. The resulting procedures and checklists might reduce the opportunity to fail, but they also can reduce the opportunity to learn – both for foundations and their grantees. They can reduce opportunities for grantees to innovate and to respond to external realities. And they take people away from their real work. These often labor-intensive planning and decision-making processes become so burdensome that staff members have less time to attend to what

¹ We are referring here only to institutional solutions, not to making course corrections in the middle of a program or initiative, which we advocate.

TABLE 2 A Logic Model for Lessons (Truly) Learned

What does it take to use 'lessons learned' to improve future performance?				
Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcome	Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership understanding of and commitment to learning from failure; modeling and rewarding new behaviors Tools for articulating thinking (logic models, etc.) Time preserved for reflection, especially during planning Collaboration platforms and community learning across organizational boundaries Real-time evaluation tools and effective evaluation metrics 	<p><i>Foundation and nonprofit partners:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify high-priority challenges and commit to learning about them Learn to build alignment by articulating thinking (actions and expected results) Study situations and learn what works when Develop the tools and skills needed to correct course: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn to recognize familiar patterns (early indicators) that indicate potential pitfalls or leverage points Work together to create a culture in which problems can be raised early and talked about openly Develop skill at reflecting on results and take time to draw on past lessons from similar programs and situations to inform planning 	<p><i>Foundation and nonprofit partners:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are focused on learning about high-priority challenges in order to improve performance Are aligned around shared goals and metrics <p>See different situations clearly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Choose the right (and realistic) goals and implement plans for that situation Predict and plan to avoid or mitigate likely pitfalls Recognize leverage points where innovation can expand impact and have the confidence and authority to try new ideas Recognize positive or negative changes and can correct course quickly and effectively Track results, reflect on them, and adjust thinking and action 	<p>A network of partners working together consistently stays on course to achieve or exceed expected outcomes, even in challenging and unpredictable situations</p>	<p>Direct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community access to promised services Demonstrated results <p>Indirect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better decision-making Stronger partnerships with more capable partners Board confidence Staff confidence and transparency Community goodwill

Two important notes:

- This describes an ideal state. It would be impossible to consistently achieve this outcome 100 percent of the time, but it is not an all-or-nothing outcome. Incremental improvement produces incremental value.
- Like all logic models, it attempts to describe a very complex set of relationships and is probably inherently incomplete. The authors' aspiration is to engage readers in taking a fresh look and to encourage a dialogue about the question.

happens after a grant decision is made, which, we believe, ironically sets up a vicious cycle of failures that result in more institutionalization on the front end.²

Lessons (Not Yet) Learned

For these reasons, it is better to think of “lessons learned” as “lessons (not yet) learned.” In its report, *Evaluation in Philanthropy: Perspectives*

² This dynamic is an example of the “fixes that fail” arche-

type described in *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 2006).

From the Field, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (2009) described learning as “a continuous process, a culture, and a commitment to support the capacity of people to reflect on their work in ways that help them see the paths that can lead to ever-improving performance” (p. 5).

The ultimate goal of learning from experience, either from failure or success, is to improve the ability of an organization or a network to achieve or exceed expected outcomes – even in challenging and unpredictable situations (James & Wooten, 2010). To accomplish this, foundation and nonprofit partners need to:

- build their ability to scan and understand a situation;
- construct sound, realistic goals and strategies and effective implementation plans that fit that situation;
- predict challenges and have access to the right tool kit to address them; and
- know when to adjust and know when to stop something that has no chance of succeeding.

This is no small feat and is even more complex in the social sector, where impact is possible only through the coordinated actions of a number of independent (and often independent-minded) entities. Table 2 proposes a logic model for “Lessons (Truly) Learned” that recognizes the complex environment in which foundations and nonprofit partners seek to create outcomes.

An example from Isaacs and Colby’s anthology beautifully illustrates the reality of learning in complex environments. Community Programs for Affordable Health Care was a 1980s program that started with “an idealistic, sunny notion ... that community representatives holding very different vested interests would voluntarily put aside their own needs and aspirations to find a solution to a problem for the greater good.” In hindsight, “probably the main lesson is that foundations entering the rough-and-tumble world of local politics should do so with their eyes wide open” (2010, p. 2).

This is a good insight. It doesn’t overly prescribe a solution, nor does it suggest that foundations

can’t succeed. Instead, it suggests that the real lesson is not yet learned. By recognizing that there are challenges to be anticipated and prepared for, a community of actors can stay attuned to changes in the situation and opportunities to try out new ideas. Together, they can ask, “What will it take to achieve our shared goal with community representatives who hold very different vested interests?”

The essence of building islands of mastery is to identify a handful of common sources of failure – such as – unclear grantor-grantee expectations, executive transitions in intermediaries, truth-telling to funding sources and/or senior leaders, etc. – and then create an extended campaign to transform “lessons (not yet) learned” into dependable building blocks of the craft.

Using Lessons Learned to Improve Future Performance

Much attention has been paid by thoughtful practitioners to the inputs listed in Table 2 (Hubbard, 2005; York, 2005; Connolly & Lukas, 2002), but not enough, in the authors’ opinions, to the concrete activities and outputs that translate lessons into lessons learned. By not attending to the middle steps of this path to learning, organizations can fall into the trap of measuring their skill at learning based on the presence of these inputs. Is the presence of these leadership actions, evaluation tools, collaboration platforms, etc., in fact resulting in foundation and nonprofit partners who can actually recognize pitfalls and leverage points and adjust?

TABLE 3 Before- and After-Action Reviews Help Articulate Thinking and Structure Learning During Implementation

Before-Action Review (BAR) Questions	ACTION	After-Action Review (AAR) Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are our intended outcomes and measures? • What challenges can we anticipate? • What have we and others learned from similar situations? • What will make us successful this time? 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were our intended outcomes? • What were our actual results? • What caused our results? • What did we learn? (How will we adjust our thinking and actions for next time?)

Therefore, while the inputs listed in Table 2 are important and valid contributions, we will focus our discussion on five important activities:

1. identifying high-priority challenges and committing to learning about them,
2. building alignment by articulating thinking (actions and expected results),
3. studying situations and learning what works when,
4. developing the tools and skills needed to correct course, and
5. developing skill at reflecting on results and using those insights to inform future planning.

Identify High-Priority Challenges and Commit to Learning About Them

Foundations and nonprofits often make the mistake of thinking that they need to harvest every possible lesson from a failed program and address everything at once. In complex work, there are simply too much data and too much to learn. As with success, it is important to focus strategy on a few essential elements in order to learn. Mary Williams of Lumina Foundation observes:

One of the challenges is that there’s too much to learn. If you try to learn everything, you’re going to drown. We want to learn from every grant, every program, every event. It’s too much. The biggest challenge is to figure out what the most strategic things to be learned are and letting go of the rest of it (Darling, 2010).

Honing in on a priority challenge helps foundation and nonprofit partners learn the craft of

learning by making visible progress in one area and then seeing how it may be applied to other challenges and opportunities. We refer to this as building “islands of mastery.”

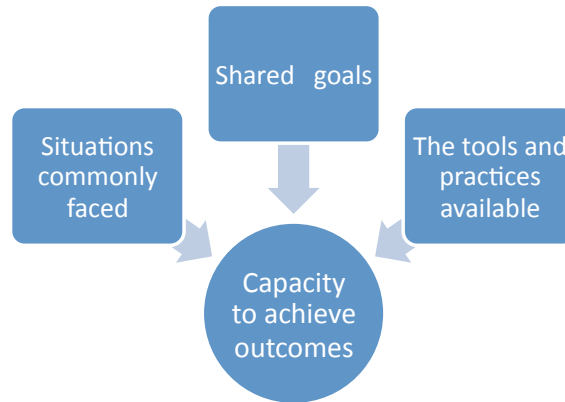
The essence of building islands of mastery is to identify a handful of common sources of failure – such as – unclear grantor-grantee expectations, executive transitions in intermediaries, truth-telling to funding sources and/or senior leaders, etc. – and then create an extended campaign to transform “lessons (not yet) learned” into dependable building blocks of the craft.

For example, the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation recognized that the lack of organizational skills among its key grantees was the weak link in their collective effort to make progress toward their goals. By concentrating on strengthening the foundation’s skill at providing organizational development assistance to its grantees, the foundation developed a level of mastery over a few years that allowed it to focus on the next hurdle, confident that it could get grantees up to a level of organizational skill that would make it possible for them to succeed (Darling, 2010).

Build Alignment by Articulating Thinking (Actions and Expected Results)

In its report, “Essentials of Foundation Strategy,” the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) makes the case that “foundation leaders’ conceptions of strategy overvalue the *presence* of a strategic plan and undervalue the *logical connections* necessary to have a strategy” (Buteau, Buchanan, & Brock, 2009, p. 5). CEP argues that leaders who are strategic “continually test the logic underlying existing strategies for achieving their goals” (Buteau et al., 2009, p 10). This insight is not only relevant to strategic planning. In order to learn, it is essential to become good at articulating thinking,

FIGURE 1 A Formula for Growing a Network's Capacity to Achieve Outcomes



especially when working across organizational boundaries, in order to build true alignment and to test and refine theory in practice.

Logic models, theory of change and evaluation frameworks are powerful tools to surface thinking. But as one of the authors reported in a recent research report, if it becomes a “once-every-five-years-whether-we-like-it-or-not process,” it can become overly burdensome. It risks becoming an artifact, not often or easily revised (Darling, 2010).

Every decision and action is implicitly or explicitly a hypothesis: If we make (this) decision or take (this) action, then we expect (that) result. For example: If we ask women in the community to help design health clinics that will be comfortable, safe, and unthreatening, then we will increase clinic use by the population we aim to serve.

The process of articulating thinking should not be the province of initiative planning only, but should also be used throughout implementation (Woodwell, 2005). When assumptions behind decisions and planned actions are made explicit, the community of partners can better test their thinking and even extend it in innovative ways. The second (“then”) half of the hypothesis also proposes, at least directionally, how to measure effectiveness (e.g., an increase in clinic use by the targeted population). (See Table 3, Before- and

After-Action Reviews, for a tool that helps groups articulate their thinking during implementation.)

Study Situations and Learn What Works When

So many of the lessons reported in “lessons learned” reports are about the environmental factors that caused failure:

- different levels of resource availability, community engagement, local leadership, etc. in different regions;
- changing market forces that affect replication success over time and geography;
- the role of politics and special interests in program outcomes;
- perceptions by Third World countries of solutions proffered by Western foundations and nonprofits.

For example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation convened a conference of grantees working with the foundation on polio vaccines. One insight from the conference, as reported in *The New York Times*, was that “poor countries lacking regulatory authorities and highly educated political and scientific elites may be nervous about being misused by Western scientists and careful about accepting new technologies” (McNeil, 2010). The question this raises going forward: What will it take to raise the level of confidence among local political and community leaders in poor countries?

Certainly some initiatives fail for reasons that the partners involved could neither predict nor control. But to write off a failure due to “variables outside of our control” potentially misses a powerful lesson about predicting and managing the environment in which social change happens.

In the authors’ research on learning through grantmaking, we looked at the strength of the link among planning, action, data gathering, reflection, and back to planning. We consistently found that the link between reflection and planning was weak if not broken.

Bob Hughes, former chief learning officer for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, highlights the need to go beyond assessing and learning about program work to assessing and learning about the environment in which that work is carried out:

Environmental assessment begins with the environment in which a foundation operates; it starts with the context from which the goals and strategies are developed and within which they are carried out. It is at heart an external orientation, looking outside the boundaries of a foundation and its programs. (Hughes, 2010, p. 6)

The authors propose that “lessons (truly) learned” require a combination of understanding the “tools of the trade” and how those tools work to achieve desired outcomes in a variety of situations (Holland, 1995). This has important implications for scaling initiatives and replicating best practices. Situation must be a deliberate part of the learning formula. (See Figure 1.) For example, a foundation that aims to improve economic conditions in rural communities plans a series of community meetings. The goal is to identify and enlist local partners to lead the effort in their communities. The foundation will succeed in measure based on

how well it understands the politics, natural resources, sources of economic stability and stress, and sense of cohesion in each of the communities they aim to support.

Develop the Tools and Skills Needed to Correct Course

Failures can be big and fatal – destroying programs, promising ideas, and critical relationships – or they can be small and recoverable. In their insightful article, “Failing to Learn and Learning to Fail (Intelligently),” Mark Cannon and Amy Edmonson (2006) make the case that:

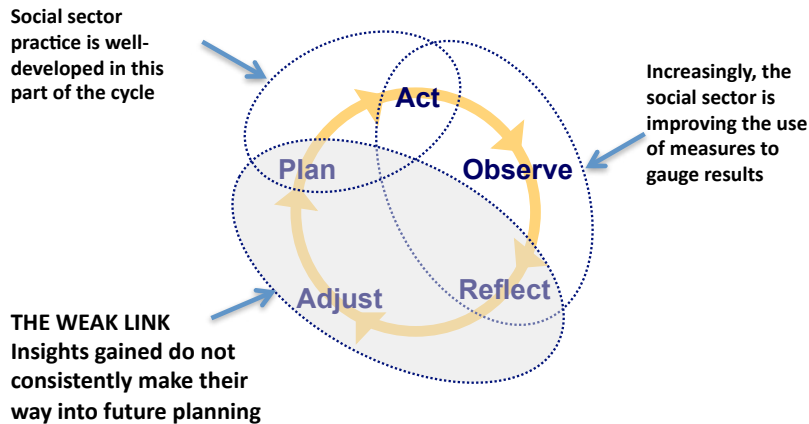
An intelligent process of organizational learning from failure requires proactively identifying and learning from small failures. Small failures are often overlooked because at the time they occur they appear to be insignificant minor mistakes or isolated anomalies, and thus organizations fail to make timely use of these important learning opportunities. We find that when small failures are not widely identified, discussed, and analyzed, it is very difficult for larger failures to be prevented.

The ability to recognize familiar patterns – early indicators – that might seem mundane but that indicate potential pitfalls or leverage points, is an essential part of learning to improve performance, as is working together to create a culture in which problems can be raised early and talked about openly.

The evaluation field has been experimenting with new data-collection methods that give foundations and their partners feedback in faster cycles during the course of a grant program, rather than depending on very slow-cycle post-mortem evaluation reports. Michael Quinn Patton’s writings on utilization-focused evaluation have done much to lead the field in this direction by insisting that relevant evaluation data should be available in time to inform decisions, both for grantmakers and for grantees (2008).

Some foundations have shifted from periodic grantee check-ins at prescribed times to the creation of inflection points designed to fit in a meaningful way into the grantee’s actual work. These include just-in-time oral interviews or

FIGURE 2 The Weak Link in "Lessons Learned"



snapshot surveys conducted at multiple points over a program by evaluators who work more closely with grantees to create data that will be of value to the grantees in their own learning as well as to the foundation.³ Before- and After-Action Reviews are simple tools that can help foundation staff and their partners to train their attention in order to reflect and adjust as they go (Table 3). This set of tools can be designed to be very thorough and rigorous, or used very quickly and on the fly to remind partners about their thinking before they walk into an event and check results just as quickly afterward. This makes Before- and After-Action Reviews very practical tools for busy foundation and nonprofit staff members (Darling et al., 2005).

Develop Skill at Reflecting on Results and Use Those Insights to Inform Future Planning

For purposes of improving future results, reflection needs to:

1. produce the best quality of insight possible from the experience,
2. help participants develop information that will enable them to predict and prepare for similar situations; and
3. link consciously to current and future work

³ American Evaluation Association, November 2009 national conference session, "Evaluation to Inform Learning and Adaptation in Grantmaking Initiatives."

within organizations and across the network of committed partners.

In the authors' research on learning through grantmaking, we looked at the strength of the link among planning, action, data gathering, reflection, and back to planning. We consistently found that the link between reflection and planning was weak if not broken (Darling, 2010). (See Figure 2.)

Foundation and nonprofit partners can strengthen this link consciously by looking forward during reflection to identify the next opportunity to test out insights in action, and by building into the planning process a "look back" at lessons from experience.

The most useful lessons to take away from either a failed or successful initiative are the ability to make stronger decisions on the front end and predict pitfalls or potential leverage points during implementation in comparable situations. It is important, therefore, to resist the temptation to jump too quickly to talking about solutions.

The focus in reflection should be first on using the experience to gain a better understanding of the situation, and second on what lessons to take away that would improve future decisions and predictions:

- How did decisions made and actions taken interact with that situation to affect the result?

- If we could turn the clock back, what different decisions would we have made and why?
- If we could turn the clock back, what early indicators might have been visible and what would it have taken to actually see and use them to improve the outcome?

Conclusion

In the largest sense, foundations take the bold step of publishing “lessons learned” from failures because of their aspiration to raise the quality of thinking and practice across the whole social sector. We suggest that the insights thus shared be thought of as “lessons (not yet) learned.” To improve the quality of learning and practice across the sector, we must go beyond avoiding past mistakes and replicating solutions to a deeper inquiry into what it will take to achieve the social change we seek, in the wide variety of complex situations we work in.

In *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, Jim Collins advocates that leaders “determine your ‘questions-to-statements’ ratio and try to double it. Ask more questions and make fewer statements” (Collins, 2005).

We must improve our ability to ask the important questions and engage the whole community in exploring new ideas, testing them out, sharing their experiences with their peers, then formulating new hypotheses, over and over, until the most pernicious sources of failure are transformed into building blocks of the craft that can become a platform to solve other social problems.

References

ANHEIER, H. K., & LEAT, D. (2006). *Creative philanthropy*. New York: Routledge.

ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION. (1995). *The path of most resistance*. Baltimore: Author. Retrieved November 15, 2010, from www.aecf.org/upload/publicationfiles/the%20path%20of%20most%20resistance.pdf.

BREST, P., & HARVEY, H. (2008). *Money well spent: A strategic plan for smart philanthropy*. New York: Bloomberg Press.

BROWN, P., & FIESTER, L. (2007). *Hard lessons about philanthropy & community change from the Neighborhood Improvement Initiative*. Menlo Park, CA:

William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Retrieved November 15, 2010, from hewlett_prod.acesfconsulting.com/uploads/files/HewlettNIIReport.pdf.

BUTEAU, E., BUCHANAN, P., & BROCK, A. (2009). *Essentials of foundation strategy*. Cambridge, MA: Center for Effective Philanthropy.

CANNON, M., & EDMONSON, A. (2006). Failing to learn and learning to fail (intelligently). *Working Knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School. Retrieved October 1, 2010, from hbswk.hbs.edu/item/5434.html.

CARNEGIE CORP. (2007). Looking back at Zimbabwe. *Carnegie Results*, Winter 2007. New York: Author. Retrieved November 15, 2010, from www.carnegie.org/fileadmin/Media/Publications/PDF/carn.results_winter_07.pdf.

COLLINS, J. (2005). *Good to great and the social sectors*. www.jimcollins.com.

CONNOLLY, P., & LUKAS, C. A. (2002). *Strengthening nonprofit performance: A funders guide to capacity building*. St. Paul, MN: Fieldstone Alliance.

DAMON, W., & VERDUCCI, S. (Eds.). (2006). *Taking philanthropy seriously: Beyond noble intentions to responsible giving*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

DARLING, M. (2010). *A compass in the woods: Learning through grantmaking to improve impact*. Boston: Signet Research & Consulting. Retrieved October 1, 2010, from www.emergentlearning.com.

DARLING, M., PARRY, C., & MOORE, J. (2005). Learning in the thick of it. *Harvard Business Review*, 83(7), 84-92.

EISENBERG, P. (2004). *Challenges for nonprofits and philanthropy: The courage to change*. Boston: Tufts University Press.

FLEISHMAN, J. (2007). *The foundation*. New York: Public Affairs.

GILOTH, R., & AUSTIN, C. (2010). *Mistakes to success: Learning and adapting when things go wrong*. Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.com.

GILOTH, R., & GEWIRTZ, S. (2009). Philanthropy and mistakes: An untapped resource. *The Foundation Review*, 1(1), 115-124.

GRANTMAKERS FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS. (2009). *Evaluation in philanthropy: Perspectives from the field*. Washington, DC: Author.

GRANTMAKERS FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS. (2007). *Learning for results*. Washington, DC: Author.

GUTH, R. A. (2010, April 23). Gates rethinks his war on polio. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved February 28,

- 2011, from online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303348504575184093239615022.html.
- HOLLAND, J. (1995). *Hidden order: How adaptation builds complexity*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.
- HOWARD, D., & STONE, N. (2009). *Realizing the promise of promise neighborhoods*. Boston: Bridgestone Group. Retrieved February 28, 2011, from www.bridgespan.org/realizing-the-promise-of-promise-neighborhoods.aspx.
- HUBBARD, B. (2005). *Investing in leadership volume I: A grantmaker's framework for understanding nonprofit leadership development*. Washington, DC: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations.
- HUGHES, R. G. (2010). The role of failure in philanthropic learning: A commentary on Chapters 1-3. *To Improve Health and Healthcare*, 13, 93-106. Retrieved October 1, 2010, from www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=51031.
- ISAACS, S. L., & COLBY, D. (2010). Good ideas at the time: Learning from programs that did not work out as expected. *To Improve Health and Healthcare*, 13, 5-34. Retrieved October 1, 2010 from www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=50915.
- JAMES, E. H., & WOOTEN, L. P. (2010). *Leading under pressure: From surviving to thriving before, during and after a crisis*. New York: Routledge Academic.
- MCNEIL, D. G., JR. (2010, December 20). Five years in, gauging impact of Gates grants. *The New York Times*. Retrieved February 15, 2011, from www.nytimes.com/2010/12/21/health/21gates.html.
- PATTON, M. Q. (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- SCHRAGE, M. (2010, March 31). The failure of failure [Web log post]. Retrieved from blogs.hbr.org/schrage/2010/03/failure-should-hold-a-special.html
- SENGE, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art & practice of the learning organization*. New York: Currency Doubleday.
- STROH, D. P. (2009). Leveraging grantmaking: Understanding the dynamics of complex social Systems. *The Foundation Review*, 1(3), 109-122.
- TIERNEY, T. J. (2007, February 14). Higher-impact philanthropy: Applying business principles to philanthropic strategies. *Philanthropy*, 15(2), Retrieved October 1, 2010 from www.philanthropyroundtable.org/article.asp?article=1453&cat=147.
- UNWIN, J. (2004). *The grantmaking tango: Issues for funders*. London: Baring Foundation.
- W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION. (2003). *Building an organization to last: Reflections and lessons learned from SeaChange*. Battle Creek, MI: Author.
- WALKER, G. (2007). *Midcourse corrections to a major initiative*. San Francisco: James Irvine Foundation. Retrieved October 1, 2010, from www.irvine.org/assets/pdf/pubs/evaluation/Midcourse_Corrections.pdf.
- WOODWELL, B. (2005). *Evaluation as a pathway to learning*. Washington, DC: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations.
- YORK, P. (2005). *Funder's guide to evaluation: Leveraging evaluation to improve nonprofit effectiveness*. St. Paul, MN: Fieldstone Alliance.
- Marilyn J. Darling, M.A.*, is founding partner of Signet Research & Consulting LLC in Boston. She focuses on helping organizations working in complex, fast-changing environments to develop learning practices that match the complexity and pace of their work. Darling's articles on her research results have appeared in *Harvard Business Review* and other publications. She is a founding member of the Society for Organizational Learning. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Marilyn J. Darling, Signet Research & Consulting LLC, Four Monument Square, Boston, MA 02129 (email: mdarling@signetconsulting.com).
- Jillaine S. Smith, B.A.*, is a senior associate with Signet Research and Consulting LLC, where she helps grantmakers and nonprofits strengthen their learning practices. She has more than 20 years of experience building the capacity of social-sector organizations in communications, organizational development and peer learning. She is a speaker, trainer, facilitator and published author on grantmaker practices.