

The Foundation Review

Volume 5
Issue 3 *Open Access*

2013

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Recommended Citation

Tran, R., & Shah, S. (2013). Designing for Learning: One Foundation's Efforts to Institutionalize Organizational Learning. *The Foundation Review*, 5(3). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1168>

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Designing for Learning: One Foundation's Efforts to Institutionalize Organizational Learning

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Keywords: Organizational learning, design thinking

Key Points

- This article explores the California HealthCare Foundation's internal efforts, inspired in part by the process of design thinking, to institutionalize organizational learning.
- One outcome of this process has been a "grant-making toolbox," which represents an attempt to document new, effective, and innovative grant-making tactics.
- While creating this toolbox, the foundation realized that the process of learning holds as much – if not more – value as the products of learning. Moreover, we gained three valuable insights that may be relevant for other foundations interested in advancing their learning efforts: effective learning is a collaborative, rather than an individual, process; a willingness to experiment is an important aspect of a learning culture; and both experienced and new staff members have significant roles in organizational learning efforts.
- Though the grantmaking toolbox may not be relevant for all foundations, we believe that the lessons from our experience are. Through sharing the process that we implemented, we hope to encourage other foundations to experiment with new approaches to learning and innovative methods to identify the learning needs of staff members – and perhaps even grantees.

Introduction

Think of yourself as a community organizer. You're going to come up with organizational learning goals. Then you're going to mobilize us and get us excited about achieving them. – Sam Karp, vice president of programs, California HealthCare Foundation

This was the guidance given to the evaluation officer at the California HealthCare Foundation (CHCF) charged with leading the foundation to institutionalize its organizational learning efforts. While seemingly unconventional advice for a foundation staff member, it pushed CHCF to think about and approach learning in a vastly different way. This article describes a portion of CHCF's journey of organizational learning, inspired in part by the process of design thinking, including preliminary results and valuable lessons learned. One outcome of this process has been a "grantmaking toolbox," which represents an attempt to document new, effective, and innovative grantmaking tactics. On the path to creating this toolbox, however, CHCF has also realized that the process of learning holds as much – if not more – value as the products of learning.

The California HealthCare Foundation is a nonprofit grantmaking philanthropy based in Oakland, California. The foundation works as a catalyst to fulfill the promise of better health care for all Californians by supporting ideas and innovations that improve quality, increase efficiency, and lower the costs of health care in California. Founded in 1996, the foundation employs 50 staff

and issues approximately \$40 million in grants each year from four programs: Better Chronic Disease Care, Innovations for the Underserved, Market and Policy Monitor, and Health Reform and Public Programs.

The Learning Challenge at CHCF

Since 2007, CHCF has developed a number of ways to capture lessons from its grantmaking. The Organizational Learning and Evaluation (OLÉ) group, an internal advisory group comprising representatives from each CHCF program, guides these efforts:

- **Closeout forms:** After each grant is closed, program officers complete a brief survey that captures grant processes and lessons learned from individual grants. The data from these forms are summarized and presented to program staff for discussion twice a year.
- **Results Reports:** A practice borrowed and adapted from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Results Reports are written for an internal audience and summarize accomplishments, impact, challenges, and lessons from CHCF's larger initiatives. Results Reports are discussed at regular staff meetings and summaries are provided to the board each quarter.¹
- **Learning sessions:** These focused sessions allow program staff to drill down on topics that cut across CHCF grants and programs. Sessions are held as needed to cover topics of emerging interest to program staff or recurring themes in Results Reports and closeout forms. The most recent session explored how CHCF could more effectively engage with consumer advocacy organizations to improve health care in California.
- **Grantmaking 101 series:** To orient eight program staff members who were hired in 2011 and 2012, a formal process was created, the centerpiece of which is a series of interactive "Grantmaking 101" discussions that promote exchanges across programs and between newer and more experienced staff. Between November 2011 and June 2013, eleven sessions were held; early topics included an overview of phi-

¹ See Yegian (2010) for further detail about CHCF's Results Reports, including an example.

In early 2012 the vice president of programs asked the evaluation officer to identify ways to institutionalize the lessons accumulated over the past five years. In this way, the foundation hoped to both increase its effectiveness as an organization and improve the grantmaking skills of individual staff members.

lanthropy and foundation strategy and CHCF's place in the health foundation landscape. The most recent session explored effective approaches to developing and implementing various types of large initiatives.

While CHCF staff had documented many lessons using these approaches, it was not always clear how the foundation could change its practices based on what was learned. Thus, in early 2012 the vice president of programs asked the evaluation officer to identify ways to institutionalize the lessons accumulated over the past five years. In this way, the foundation hoped to both increase its effectiveness as an organization and improve the grantmaking skills of individual staff members.

Building a Learning Process

To inform CHCF's efforts to institutionalize its learning, the evaluation officer first reached out to other foundations to identify best practices. In the process, she encountered a number of foundation colleagues who were faced with a similar challenge of fostering a "learning culture" in their organizations, as well as several foundations that served as models for organizational learning. For example, the William and Flora Hewlett

Foundation holds an annual “worst grant” contest that encourages staff to embrace and learn from failure (Stannard-Stockton, 2011); the International Development Research Centre’s rolling project completion report allowed staff to gather lessons throughout a project’s life cycle through interviews; other foundations were employing the emergent learning model to identify insights and test hypotheses to improve impact (Darling, 2012). Initial feedback from OLE, however, indicated that these practices did not seem to be a good fit for CHCF’s culture and workflow. Furthermore, the comments indicated that focusing on learning was challenging for a number of reasons, including constraints on time and lack of clarity on what “effective learning” looked like.

In a discussion with the evaluation officer about institutionalizing learning, the vice president of programs offered this suggestion: “Think of yourself as a community organizer. You’re going to come up with organizational learning goals. Then you’re going to mobilize us and get us excited about achieving them.” Though the value of his advice was unclear at first, it influenced the direction of organizational learning at CHCF in a crucial way. It signaled the importance of engaging staff as experts in the learning process, and encouraged the evaluation officer to design a process that would build her colleagues’ interest in organizational learning.

At the same time, several program officers at CHCF had expressed interest in incorporating concepts from design thinking – a methodology used to develop solutions to abstract, ill-defined, or complex problems (Brown, 2009) – into the foundation’s work as a way to foster creativity and innovation.² Drawing upon the innovation process that a member of OLE learned from his previous job at the Inovo Group,³ the evaluation officer initiated steps to define a problem statement for organizational learning: brainstorming and developing key learning opportunities, discussion and voting to prioritize learning opportu-

nities, and making a recommendation on which learning opportunity to pursue.

In designing the brainstorming process, the evaluation officer realized that the question must be framed properly. “More effective learning” was not an end in itself, but simply a means for CHCF to increase its effectiveness as a grantmaker. Thus, the question presented to staff was, “How can we maximize CHCF’s impact?” A “brainstorming wall” was created with sheets of flip chart paper and program staff members were invited to add their ideas using sticky notes. The end result was impressive: Within a month more than 100 ideas were generated, including increasing cross-program brainstorming, leveraging alumni from CHCF’s clinical leadership program, and reaching out more to grantees and other stakeholders.

The evaluation officer then worked with OLE to consolidate the more than 100 discrete ideas from the brainstorming process into five key organizational learning opportunities: improving cross-program exchanges of ideas, increasing engagement with external stakeholders, widening the pool of potential grantees, expanding the grantmaking toolbox, and discerning when to double down and when to cut our losses. The evaluation officer presented these opportunities for discussion and asked program staff to vote to help prioritize them. Based on the vote and from a number of follow-up discussions with individuals, the OLE group made a recommendation to expand the foundation’s grantmaking toolbox.

Results of Learning Efforts

Grantmaking Toolbox

The most tangible result of this learning process has been the creation of a grantmaking toolbox for CHCF, which documents approaches the foundation uses in its grantmaking to increase its impact. Recognizing that a foundation can employ grant funds in many different ways, it is organized into 11 domains that describe common grantmaking challenges at CHCF. The toolbox is meant to encourage staff to consider strategies and tactics that might not come up at first blush. For example, when looking for a way to find new grantees, a program officer might explore the

² Brown (2009) provides a useful overview of design thinking.

³ Inovo Group is a consulting firm focusing on strategic innovation. More information about the company can be found at <http://theinovogroup.com/about/>.

TABLE 1 Selected Examples of Completed Tools

Tools	Showcase	Challenges and Prizes	Demonstration
Domains	Intelligence, expert assistance, spread ideas, test ideas	Intelligence, spread ideas, test ideas, who else?	Spread ideas, test ideas
Description (5-10 words)	An invitation-only, in-person event to highlight and vet activities around a specific domain	Define a contest, with parameters for entry and a prize for the winning entry.	A project to establish or demonstrate the feasibility of a new product, service, or process
When or why to use	To bring a specific audience and exhibitors together in an interactive environment; to learn about new opportunities and provide critical feedback		Test the waters before a larger initiative.
Internal experts	Sanjay & Margaret	Maribeth	Margaret, Sophia, Giovanna
Resources (external experts, how-to guides, Results Reports)		http://www.health2con.com/devchallenge/challenges	
Use examples (include link if available)	Innovations Showcase – brought provider and plan leadership together to review behavioral health solutions (Margaret & Sanjay)	Diabetes Mine Challenge (Veenu), CHCF Data Design Challenge (Glen), Advance Directives (Kate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialty Care Safety Net Initiative – telehealth in community health centers (CHCs) (Margaret) • Tools for Quality – disease registries in CHCs • UTI kiosk – computer-based triage system in urgent/emergent settings (Margaret) • Frequent Users of Health Services (Sophia & Margaret) • CMMI innovation models

A number of OLE members have commented that they have learned much more from the process of working with each other to create the toolbox. The process of documenting a tool has allowed staff members from different programs to work together on a specific task in a more substantive way than has typically occurred at the foundation.

domain, “Who else is out there to fund?” The category includes typical tools such as requests for proposals and information, but also lists challenges and prizes, as well as a suggestion to look to other states and industries. (For several examples of completed tools, see Table 1.) The domains are:

- How can I effectively communicate and disseminate my ideas?
- How can I engage policymakers?
- How can I gain intelligence on the field?
- How can I get expert assistance?
- How can I optimize project and grantee management?
- How can I spread ideas?
- How can I support my grantee?
- How can I survey stakeholders or grantees?
- How can I test ideas?
- How can I turn data into useful info?
- Who else is out there to fund?

In developing the toolbox, cross-program collaboration has come to the forefront as an important benefit of the process. A number of OLE members have commented that they have learned much more from the process of working with each other to create the toolbox than from the actual product of the toolbox. As one program

officer shared, CHCF is not structured to provide many opportunities for formal collaboration across programs: “While all the program officers work towards a common mission and a shared vision, we operate independently within our respective programs and are inherently disconnected.” The process of documenting a tool has allowed staff members from different programs to work together on a specific task in a more substantive way than has typically occurred at the foundation. For example, an OLE member from CHCF’s state policy office said she had believed that showcases (see Table 1) were useful only for sharing technological innovations, but discovered in working with a fellow program officer that showcases could also be used to share health policy information. Moreover, each tool in the toolbox lists “internal experts,” in the hopes that the toolbox will encourage staff members to reach out to colleagues to learn more.

Lessons

Perhaps more important than the grantmaking toolbox are the valuable insights about organizational learning that CHCF has realized through the process of developing it, which we believe are relevant to other foundations interested in advancing their learning efforts.

Effective learning is a collaborative, rather than an individual, process. While it seemed strange at first to compare organizational learning with community organizing, it underscored the importance of fostering collaboration and engagement. Design thinking, which has typically been employed by foundations in their grantmaking efforts, proved to be an effective framework for identifying learning needs and expanding ownership of organizational learning from the evaluation officer to the rest of program staff. This was particularly important given that the evaluation officer represented a department of one, which is a common situation for many foundations; the median number of evaluation staff members surveyed by the Evaluation Roundtable (2012) was 2.3.

Moreover, the ground-up approach provided program staff with an opportunity to work together

to generate ideas, prioritize them, and make a decision to focus on the grantmaking toolbox as a collective organizational learning effort. The exercise underscored that the role of the evaluation officer in learning is not to singlehandedly “teach” program colleagues, but to design the right process and ask the right questions in order to draw out the collective knowledge of the organization.

A willingness to experiment is an important aspect of a learning culture. In launching these new organizational learning efforts, CHCF staff had to be open to piloting new processes and adapting them to work for its culture. For example, while program staff eventually generated more than 100 ideas to maximize CHCF’s impact, the process took some time and experimentation before it was successful. Initially, the evaluation officer invited colleagues to come by as individuals to contribute to the “brainstorming wall,” resulting in fewer than 25 ideas in two weeks. To accelerate the process, an OLE member encouraged the evaluation officer to organize 30-minute “brainstorming sessions” with groups of three to four staff representing different programs. The synergy of the group discussions sparked more ideas than individuals could think of on their own. Most importantly, staff members’ willingness to participate in different approaches to brainstorming contributed to the success of this endeavor.

Another example of experimentation was the process of prototyping that was employed to develop the grantmaking toolbox. Prototyping, another process drawn from design thinking, is an iterative approach to quickly developing a draft product in order to get user feedback, which is then incorporated into the next version (Brown, 2009). The evaluation officer worked with the OLE advisory group to generate four toolbox prototypes. This prototyping process did not require any funding or a significant amount of time, but was invaluable in communicating potentially abstract concepts and soliciting input on draft products at multiple points. Most of all, the continuous loop of feedback and willingness to update the prototypes in real-time based on staff comments – in contrast to investing a large amount of resources at the beginning in an attempt to create a perfect

product – has also created engagement and buy-in, reinforced a culture of learning, and acknowledged the expertise of staff members.

Both experienced and new staff members have significant roles in organizational learning efforts. Experienced staff members at CHCF are important contributors to the toolbox, particularly because they do not always realize that what they consider common knowledge may not be obvious to others. For example, assuming that others were already well aware of her experience, one senior staff member questioned the value of listing herself as an internal expert on demonstration projects. The evaluation officer tested this assumption with several colleagues and learned that it was incorrect, underscoring the value of the toolbox as a way to capture valuable information that may be taken for granted and recognize the significant contributions that experienced staff provide to the foundation.

On the other hand, while new staff members clearly can benefit from the toolbox as an orientation to the various approaches that CHCF uses in its grantmaking, they also played an important role in creating it. Specifically, one factor that may have facilitated a culture of experimentation at CHCF was the infusion of new staff. In 2011 and 2012, CHCF hired a “cohort” of eleven staff, eight of whom were program staff. For an organization of 50 employees, this represented a significant influx. These individuals brought expertise from a variety of backgrounds – such as design thinking and data visualization – and seemed to be more open to new experiences and different processes. Several of the new staff members were recruited onto OLE and have become champions of organizational learning. As described earlier, one concrete example of the benefit of hiring staff from diverse fields was the guidance that a new staff member provided to the evaluation officer on how to apply innovation and design concepts to organizational learning.

Conclusion

While there are no plans to formally evaluate the toolbox, the ultimate test will be whether it is sustained and integrated into the organiza-

tion. This is by no means a sure thing. It has been a continuing challenge to engage staff beyond OLE members to use the toolbox, as there are no formal incentives. At the same time, there is also recognition that regardless of the toolbox's ultimate fate, the process of creating it has proven to be as valuable as the product itself. Though few of the tools in the toolbox are breakthrough innovations for the foundation, the toolbox represents a tangible product through which CHCF has attempted to achieve the somewhat intangible goal of institutionalizing organizational learning. Through bringing the program staff at CHCF together to work on a common challenge, CHCF has fostered cross-program collaboration, encouraged innovation and creativity, and realized significant insights about organizational learning.

Though the grantmaking toolbox may not be relevant for all foundations, we believe that the lessons from our experience are. Through sharing the process that we implemented, we hope to encourage other foundations to experiment with new approaches to learning and innovative methods to identify the learning needs of staff members – and perhaps grantees. We would be interested in hearing how other foundations are approaching their organizational learning efforts.

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