The Foundation Review

Volume 11
Issue 1 *Foundation Learning - Open Access*

3-2019

Full Issue #11.1

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

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

Recommended Citation

(2019). Full Issue #11.1. *The Foundation Review*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1461>

Copyright © 2019 Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University. The Foundation Review is reproduced electronically by ScholarWorks@GVSU. <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr>

THE
FoundationReview[®]
Since 2009

Foundation
Learning

Tools

Strategic Learning in Practice..... **7**

Building a Culture of Learning..... **22**

Reflective Practice for
Learning From Experience **35**

Knowledge Translation to
Enhance Evaluation Use..... **49**

Sector

Challenges and Opportunities
in Philanthropic
Organizational Learning..... **62**

Reflective Practice

Meaningful Accountability
Systems..... **81**

Evaluators as Conduits
and Supports **95**

Building Principle-Based
Strategic Learning **107**

Executive Summaries..... **119**

Call for Papers **123**

The Peer-Reviewed Journal of Philanthropy

Thanks to our sponsors

We are grateful to the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, the McKnight Foundation and the Kauffman Foundation for their sponsorship of this issue, which allows us to make the entire issue open access.

WALTON FAMILY
FOUNDATION

MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

THE FoundationReview®

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY

VOL. 11 ISSUE 1 | MARCH 2019

The Foundation Review is the first peer-reviewed journal of philanthropy, written by and for foundation staff and boards and those who work with them implementing programs. Each quarterly issue of *The Foundation Review* provides peer-reviewed reports about the field of philanthropy, including reports by foundations on their own work.

Our mission: To share evaluation results, tools, and knowledge about the philanthropic sector in order to improve the practice of grantmaking, yielding greater impact and innovation.

The Foundation Review is a proud product of the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University.

Front cover photo: Pilot and travellers preparing for flight in Croatia

Photographer:
Kristina Pepelko

Editor in Chief
Teresa R. Behrens

Associate Editor
Pat Robinson

Art Director
Karen Hoekstra

Editorial Advisory Board

Robert F. Ashcraft, Ph.D.
Lodestar Center for Philanthropy
and Nonprofit Innovation
Arizona State University

Kathy Palumbo, Ph.D.
The Community Foundation
for Greater Atlanta

Patricia Patrizi
Patrizi Associates

Michael Quinn Patton, Ph.D.
Utilization-Focused Evaluation

Hallie Preskill, Ph.D.
FSG Social Impact Consultants

Patrick Rooney, Ph.D.
Lilly Family School of Philanthropy
Indiana University

Statement of the Editorial Advisory Board

We believe that the forthright sharing of information among foundations and nonprofits builds a knowledge base that strengthens their ability to effectively address critical social issues. We encourage foundation donors, boards, and staff to honor this transparency in their own practices and to support others who do so.

Copyright © 2019 Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University. *The Foundation Review* is a registered trademark of Grand Valley State University.

Editorial

Dear readers,

In the philanthropic sector, learning is a frequent topic of conversation, but often it is not clear what we mean by “learning” and even less often is it clear how to do it. Foundation staff are admonished to evaluate, reflect, and learn about past efforts — but to also keep up-to-date on emerging issues and opportunities. What was learned about prior work that can be applied in a new setting, scaled up, or used with a different population? In a multi-year initiative, how does the foundation make mid-course corrections?

Teresa R. Behrens, Ph.D.

As we all know, the social problems that foundations address are complex, with many interacting parts. Poverty, homelessness, poor health — these inter-related outcomes have equally inter-related causes. Particularly in place-based change work, where understanding context is critical, learning IS the key strategy for creating change (Patrizi, Thompson, Coffman, and Beer, 2013).

While foundation staff need a theory to guide action, they must also be willing to deviate from the plan when there is evidence that it isn't working or when a better way emerges. (As science fiction writer Robert Heinlein said, “Belief gets in the way of learning.”)

Many in the philanthropic world are grappling with the challenges of learning by developing tools and frameworks to support it. Authors in this issue share their approaches to internal foundation learning. Our next issue will focus on collaborative learning — how foundations learn with communities, other funders, and networks.

Carr, Hembree, and Madden and **Clarke, Preskill, Stevenson, and Schwartz** describe how two foundations developed intentional learning strategies. **Carr et al.**, provide a case study of the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation's approach of cultivating staff “learning champions.” They also created simple tools and processes to capture lessons generated internally and externally, and provided training in facilitation techniques to ensure insights are connecting back into strategies to drive decision-making.

Clarke et al., describe the work of Kaiser Permanente Community Health to develop and implement a system called Measurement and Evaluation for Learning and Outcomes. The system includes starting with learning questions and developing learning plans.

One of the often-stated reasons for the lack of systematic learning in foundations is a lack of time. **Jaffe** argues that foundation leadership and staff can put their own experience and expertise into play as a learning strategy through reflective practice.

Rogers and Malla address how essential information about monitoring, evaluation, and lessons learned can be made available to foundations. The Fred Hollows Foundation introduced participatory, real-time monitoring, evaluation, and learning bulletins grounded in the principles of knowledge translation. They suggest that this approach may be particularly suitable for foundations that have limited resources.

Chubinski, Adcock, and Sprigg interviewed learning, evaluation, and research officers in philanthropy across the country to identify points of struggle and opportunities for improvement in organizational learning, as well as what can be learned from mistakes in the process.

Holley and Parkhurst explore what is often seen as a tension between learning and accountability. They identify perspectives that can hold foundations back from full engagement in internally driven accountability initiatives, and offer practical guidance on how to shift these mindsets to more productive practices.

Many foundations rely on external consultant to assess the impacts of their work. **Nolan, Long, and Pérez** argue that these evaluators play a critical role in supporting philanthropic learning, programming, and strategy. However, most philanthropic evaluation is focused on the needs of individual foundations. These authors argue that evaluators and funders can do more to build the collective capacity of evaluators working in philanthropy in order to enhance their contributions to community change.

Editorial (continued)

Price, Reid, and Kennedy Leahy offer three principles for strategic learning, informed by the field and insights from practice across three foundations. Each principle is explored in terms of what it means and why it is important, along with examples from how it could look in practice.

In an oft-cited quote, the philosopher Eric Hoffer said, “In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.” The articles in this issue have created and tested in their own work tools, frameworks and — perhaps most importantly — shifts in mindset that can promote learning. The shift from the foundation as expert to foundation staff as learners is the first step toward developing a deep learning practice that can foster deeper impact and relevancy.

We are grateful to the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, the McKnight Foundation and the Kauffman Foundation for their sponsorship of this issue, which allows us to make the entire issue open access.

Teresa R. Behrens, Ph.D.

Editor in Chief, *The Foundation Review*

Executive Director, Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy
at Grand Valley State University

References

PATRIZI, P., THOMPSON, E., COFFMAN, J. & BEER, T. (2013). Eyes wide open: Learning as strategy under conditions of complexity and uncertainty. *The Foundation Review*, 5(3), 50–65. <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1170>

Contents

VOL. 11 ISSUE 1

Tools

7

Strategic Learning in Practice: A Case Study of the Kauffman Foundation

*Matthew Carr, Ph.D., Brett Hembree, M.P.A.,
and Nathan Madden, Ph.D., Ewing Marion
Kauffman Foundation*

22

Building a Culture of Learning: Teaching a Complex Organization How to Fish

*Tiffany Clarke, M.P.P., M.P.H.,
Hallie Preskill, Ph.D., and
Abigail Stevenson, M.B.A., M.P.H., FSG; and
Pamela Schwartz, M.P.H., Kaiser Permanente*

35

Reflective Practice for Learning From Experience: Navigating the Back Roads at Work

Jan Jaffe, M.B.A., Philanthropy Northwest

49

Knowledge Translation to Enhance Evaluation Use: A Case Example

*Alison Rogers, M.P.H., M.Eval., and
Catherine Malla, M.I.P.H.,
The Fred Hollows Foundation*

Sector

62

Challenges and Opportunities in Philanthropic Organizational Learning: Reflections From Fellow Grantmakers

*Jennifer Chubinski, Ph.D.,
Kelley Adcock, M.P.H., and
Susan Sprigg, M.P.H., Interact for Health*

Reflective Practice

81

Shifting Mindsets: How Meaningful Accountability Systems Can Strengthen Foundation Learning and Improve Impact

*Marc J. Holley, Ph.D., and
Marcie Parkhurst, M.C.P.,
Walton Family Foundation*

95

Evaluators as Conduits and Supports for Foundation Learning

*Clare Nolan, M.P.P., Engage R+D;
Meg Long, M.P.A., Equal Measure; and
Debra Joy Pérez, Ph.D., Simmons University*

107

Building Principle-Based Strategic Learning: Insights From Practice

*Kelci M. Price, Ph.D.,
Colorado Health Foundation;
Chera Reid, Ph.D., Kresge Foundation; and
Suzanne Kennedy Leahy, Ph.D., Episcopal
Health Foundation*

Plus

119

Executive Summaries

123

Call for Papers

The Institute for Foundation and Donor Learning

Philanthropy is evolving quickly, presenting new opportunities and challenges for effective grantmaking. The Institute for Foundation and Donor Learning at the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy helps grantmakers adopt best practices and interact with other practitioners to strengthen their daily work.

Our programs are designed to meet the learning needs of grantmakers and donors: ***The Foundation Review***, **The Grantmaking School**, **LearnPhilanthropy.org**, **OurStateofGenerosity.org**, the **Frey Foundation Chair for Family Philanthropy**, and the **W.K. Kellogg Community Philanthropy Chair**.

Sponsorship and Sponsor Subscriptions

If you or your organization are interested in sponsoring an issue on a particular topic or in supporting the work of *The Foundation Review*, please contact Teri Behrens at behrenst@foundationreview.org.

Permissions

Abstracting is permitted with credit to the source. Sponsored articles and articles that have been in publication for two years or more are unlocked and published open access as a free download. Open access articles are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial No Derivative Works License. Permission may be requested to photocopy or reproduce materials published in articles that are locked for subscribers by contacting the Copyright Clearance Center at www.copyright.com, or by sending an email to info@copyright.com.

Contact Pat Robinson at pat.robinson@gvsu.edu for more information.

Partner Discounts

Discounted subscriptions are offered to members of partner organizations. If you are a member of the following organizations, please use the discount code below when subscribing at <http://johnsoncenter.org/subscribe>.

Contact Pat Robinson at pat.robinson@gvsu.edu for more information.

- ABFE (ABFE) www.abfe.org
- American Evaluation Association (AEA) www.eval.org
- The Communications Network (CN) www.comnetwork.org
- Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF) www.michiganfoundations.org
- Council on Foundations (COF) www.cof.org
- Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy (EPIP) www.epip.org
- Funders' Network (FN) www.fundersnetwork.org
- Grantmakers for Education (GFE) www.edfunders.org
- Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) www.geofunders.org
- Grant Managers Network (GMN) www.gmnnetwork.org
- LearnPhilanthropy (LP) www.learnphilanthropy.org
- National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers (NNCG) www.nncg.org
- United Philanthropy Forum (FORUM) www.unitedphilforum.org

This publication is printed with soy ink. Printed in USA

Strategic Learning in Practice: A Case Study of the Kauffman Foundation

Matthew Carr, Ph.D., Brett Hembree, M.P.A., and Nathan Madden, Ph.D., Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation

Keywords: Strategy, organizational learning, evaluation, foundations

Introduction

Albert Einstein is apocryphally credited with saying that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. It is an adage that continues to resonate, if only because we see it play out so often in the world around us. For foundations, institutions that some argue are particularly prone to this affliction (e.g., Webb, 2018; Wooster, 2006; Nielsen, 2002), a number of formal models of philanthropy have been developed in an attempt to avoid this destructive trap: strategic philanthropy (Brest & Harvey, 2008), social return on investment (Forti & Goldberg, 2015), effective altruism (MacAskill, 2015), human-centered design (Tantia, 2017), and, more recently, strategic learning (Patrizi, Thompson, Coffman, & Beer, 2013; Winkler & Fyffe, 2016). None of these models are mutually exclusive, and various foundations have begun combining them in new and powerful ways as they seek to tackle entrenched and complex social challenges, from environmental conservation and reducing poverty to fostering a more civil political discourse.

Among these new models, perhaps the most intuitive and appealing is strategic learning — also referred to as organizational or emergent learning (Darling, Guber, Smith, & Stiles, 2016), particularly when paired with a formal evaluation function (Hoole & Patterson, 2008). Rooted in seminal works such as Senge's (1990) *The Fifth Discipline* and others that further clarified and expanded on those key concepts (e.g., Easterby-Smith, 1997; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Torres & Preskill, 2001), strategic learning takes on a related but distinct role when applied to the foundation and nonprofit sectors.

Key Points

- Increasingly, foundations and nonprofits are seeking to engage their staff in learning and reflection activities that assess successes and challenges, and then generate insights that can improve programs and funding strategies. Yet, despite the intuitive benefits, there are common challenges that often stand in the way of promoting strategic learning for continuous improvement.
- For the past year, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation has been focused on creating more systematic and intentional strategic learning across our organization. As part of this work we cultivated a select cohort of staff to be “learning champions,” created simple tools and processes that can more easily capture lessons generated internally and externally, and provided training in facilitation techniques to ensure insights are connecting back into our strategies to drive decision-making. Through the cohort, we are also developing new approaches to building a culture of learning and trust that supports transparent reflection.
- This article provides guidance to help other foundations and nonprofits create stronger internal learning systems, including specific tools and practices, insights gained from our experiences, examples of programs and strategies utilizing evidence to improve, and critical lessons that we've learned along the way.

The Center for Evaluation Innovation (2018) defines the concept of strategic learning as

using evaluation to help organizations or groups learn quickly from their work so they can learn

FIGURE 1 Center for Effective Philanthropy Survey Data on Evaluation and Learning Challenges

The **top four challenges** highlighted by evaluation staff are related to the difficulty in translating evaluation to learning.

Percentage of evaluation staff who say the following practices have been at least somewhat challenging:

SOURCE: Center for Effective Philanthropy (2016)

from and adapt their strategies. It means integrating evaluation and evaluative thinking into strategic decision-making and bringing timely data to the table for reflection and use. It means making evaluation a part of the intervention — embedding it so that it influences the process. (para. 1)

In short, strategic learning is about using the best evidence available for intentional reflection to drive continuous improvement.

It is unlikely that there are many leaders who would be opposed to strategic learning (Lipshitz, Popper, & Friedman, 2002), but foundations and many other types of public organizations may struggle to develop functioning systems to cultivate, capture, and apply lessons derived from successes and, perhaps more importantly, from failures. For example, a survey of foundation evaluation staff conducted by the Center for Effective Philanthropy (Buteau & Coffman, 2016) provides some evidence that philanthropy, in particular, often struggles to build these systems.

The top three challenges identified by respondents were: 1) “having evaluations result in useful lessons for the field” (selected by 83 percent); 2) “having evaluations result in useful lessons for grantees” (82 percent); and 3) “having evaluations result in meaningful insights for the foundation” (76 percent). (See Figure 1.) Based on these findings, it would appear that an observation by Roth (1996) holds true today for foundations: “The concept of organizational learning is as elusive as it is popular” (p. 1).

There is a disconnect between the general consensus that reflection and learning are beneficial and the lack of such systems being used in practice. In particular, organizations may be impeded by the lack of available models that have been tested in foundation and nonprofit settings, limited access to practical tools and playbooks, and, potentially, a more general misunderstanding about when and where strategic learning can be most valuable. And these barriers could apply

across multiple dimensions of organizational learning: knowledge acquisition, distribution, interpretation, and memory (Huber, 1991).

In this article, we first explore some of the key challenges that organizations face when building strategic learning systems. From there, a case study of the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation (EMKF) experience is presented, with a focus on the overall learning and evaluation framework, a description of the key learning strategy (the Learning Champions Initiative), as well as the successes, challenges, and lessons that we've experienced. Along the way we also highlight specific tools used by the foundation and examples of the strategic learning process in action.

Common Obstacles to Strategic Learning

Through conversations with other foundations, anecdotes from available resources on the topic (e.g., Milway & Saxton, 2011), and our own experiences at EMKF, we have identified at least six common obstacles that may prevent an organization from successfully developing a functioning strategic learning system. A failure to assess and then explicitly plan for how to mitigate these risks, to the extent they exist in a particular setting, can leave even the most well-meaning organizations struggling to make progress.

1. *Adequate time for reflection:* One of the first and most commonly mentioned challenges incorporating learning practices is that staff lacks the time to make it a priority. As Julia Coffman (2017) notes: "Our benchmarking research shows that the biggest barrier to program staff learning in foundations is finding ... time" (para. 21). Staff often doesn't have enough hours in the day to get everything done, and setting aside time to reflect and capture learning may be seen as a low priority compared to delivering a program and serving constituents. One solution offered by Coffman (2018) is to ensure that learning practices are woven into existing processes, rather than layered on top of them. Building on the work of Daniel Kahneman (2013) and others, she argues
2. *It's too abstract:* Challenges also often arise because strategic learning, while it seems intuitive, can be overwhelming and abstract when put into practice. In particular, staff members often don't have mental models or tangible reference points upon which to structure their reflections. By analogy, one might imagine strategic learning as a sheer rock wall — it's difficult to know where to start or what path to take to reach the summit. But if the wall includes a series of anchors, the path becomes much clearer as you have something to hold onto. Such holds and anchors can be provided by developing a set of specific learning questions at the outset of a project: concrete questions

[W]e have identified at least six common obstacles that may prevent an organization from successfully developing a functioning strategic learning system. A failure to assess and then explicitly plan for how to mitigate these risks, to the extent they exist in a particular setting, can leave even the most well-meaning organizations struggling to make progress.

that for strategic learning to take hold we must "build a set of habits into our day-to-day work that we can remember and repeat automatically" (para. 14); these include calling out assumptions and hypotheses explicitly; asking better questions; having greater awareness of cognitive biases; exploring not only what happened, but why; and connecting learning to action.

In our view, an 80/20 emphasis on learning and accountability, respectively, strikes a proper balance to cultivate strategic learning without undermining the value of rigorous evaluation practice.

from staff about the strategy, its assumptions, and its hypotheses. They provide structure and focus that help to move from the ambiguous and difficult question — “What have you learned about your strategy?” — to the much more approachable question: “What have you learned about this specific hypothesis that we are testing in our strategy?” In addition, the time spent reflecting on these questions should involve a facilitation technique designed to ensure that reflection is concrete and grounded (e.g., Preskill, Gutiérrez, & Mack, 2017).

3. *Undefined cultural values around accountability and risk:* There is an inherent balance between the use of evaluation for accountability and its use for learning (Guijt, 2010). Both are important and necessary. Strong trust means that grantees feel comfortable admitting the reality of any given grant to a program officer, and, in turn, the program officer feels comfortable sharing that reality with senior leadership. Too much emphasis on accountability can stifle the trust and transparency needed to have meaningful conversations about what’s working and what isn’t. On the other hand, too much emphasis on learning without discussion of expected milestones may negatively alter performance incentives. Thus, it is critical to establish clear expectations around how

evaluation and evidence will be used and for what purpose. In our view, an 80/20 emphasis on learning and accountability, respectively, strikes a proper balance to cultivate strategic learning without undermining the value of rigorous evaluation practice.¹ In addition to organizational values around accountability, there also needs to be a strong culture of taking informed, calculated risks that are designed to inform specific learning questions, whether the project fails or succeeds. In particular, introducing and reinforcing the idea of “failing well” (McArdle, 2014) is an important part of strategic learning because staff need the psychological safety to admit when mistakes happen so they can then be examined and mined for lessons (Edmondson, 2008). Hosting events like a “Fail Fest” or a “Worst Grant Contest,” like the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, can help create that safe space for staff to talk about challenges (Wang, 2016).

4. *Seeing value for the effort:* If staff members are going to commit their limited time to reflection and learning work, those practices must return clear and direct value to them in exchange. In short, strategic learning cannot be a purely intellectual exercise, but instead must be closely connected to processes for refining or shifting how the organization operates or delivers a program. Ensuring that learning plans are sufficiently focused on questions that directly affect the day-to-day work of staff — as opposed to higher-level or more abstract questions — can help create better alignment between the time staff puts into strategic learning and the value it returns. Additionally, it’s important that time spent learning is right-sized for the intended purpose of the reflection. It may be possible to fit some learning conversations into the last five minutes of a meeting, where others will require a more significant time investment.

¹ In practice, the 80/20 rule is both a goal and a mnemonic device for framing an organization’s expectations about how performance — internally and externally — will be assessed. It’s also important to note that this rule refers to the achievement of deliverables and outcomes, not to budgetary or spending concerns.

FIGURE 2 The EMKF Model of Learning and Evaluation

5. *Building a knowledge management system:* Individual learning is important, but of limited value unless those lessons can be captured and then shared with others throughout the organization through an “intuitive knowledge process” (Milway & Saxton, 2011, p. 47). While there are a few successful examples, most organizations struggle with knowledge management for two primary reasons — one involving technology, and the other, human nature. There are few technology platforms that make it easy for staff to capture and share what they’re learning in a timely way; every click between opening the interface and logging an entry exponentially reduces the likelihood that the platform will be used. And adding another process or software solution to figure out is unlikely to be successful among time-pressed staff.
6. *Distinguishing among simple, complicated, and complex:* Finally, there may be some confusion about the types of circumstances where strategic learning can provide the most value or leverage for an organization.

Specifically, several articles have focused on learning as a tool best suited to programs that involve significant complexity or uncertainty (Patrizi et al., 2013; Coffman & Beer, 2011; Preskill, Gopal, Mack, & Cook, 2014). However, this focus on strategic learning as a component of evaluations involving complexity or emergence may have obscured the value of these practices for most programs, regardless of type or context. All strategies and programs, whether simple, complicated, or complex (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2007), can benefit from the application of basic strategic learning principles and tools because conditions change, staff departs, and there is always room for improvement.

The Learning and Evaluation Framework

The learning and evaluation model developed at EMKF has four parts: Define, Collect, Reflect, and Act. (See Figure 2). Evaluation is the primary focus on the top half of the model; strategic learning drives the bottom half:²

²The EMKF model was created in collaboration with Valerie Bockstette and Tracy Foster at FSG, and is based on several existing organizational learning frameworks. For example, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (2015) created a four-step process: “plan, collect, analyze, act and improve.” Garvin (1993) recommended a “meaning, management, and measurement” model. And Preskill and Mack (2013) suggest five learning processes: reflection, dialogue, asking questions, identifying and challenging assumptions, and seeking feedback.

Attempting to engage staff in reflection and learning without first defining the key parameters (assumptions and hypotheses) and then gathering relevant evidence is likely to run headlong into the abstraction challenge.

- **Define** – Make the theory of change explicit. At the most basic level, every program, project, or strategic initiative has its own theory of change, a description of how results are expected to occur as the work unfolds (Chen, 1990). Within those theories are a set of often implicit causal hypotheses about what changes will occur and how they will happen. To set the stage for learning, it is important that these theories of change and assumptions are explicitly stated through logic models or other similar tools. From there, learning questions can be derived to help create those ‘anchors’ for future reflection and learning. At the Kauffman Foundation, each program area — Education, Entrepreneurship, and Kansas City Civic — has an explicit theory of change that defines and connects the strategic pillars to top-line goals. There are also corresponding logic models that establish how each strategy will be implemented (inputs, activities, and outputs) and top-line goals will be met (short-, intermediate-, and long-term outcomes). The assumptions and hypotheses derived from these logic models then form the basis for learning questions and learning plans.
- **Collect** – Gather data from appropriate sources. Having identified key learning questions, it is important to make sure data are collected that can provide adequate evidence to reflect on these questions. These

data should come from the most rigorous methods that are feasible within the context of the project or program (Lester, 2016). Whether it’s a randomized control trial, a quasi-experimental design, case studies, or simply descriptive outcome data drawn from conversations with constituents or a performance management system, the key is to ground learning in evidence to the greatest extent possible. At EMKF, for example, our grantees establish specific output and outcome metrics as part of the grant application process (Carr, Hembree, & Madden, 2018). Throughout the course of the grant they have interim check-ins with a program officer, and conversations focus on progress toward meeting key benchmarks. Based on insights and lessons drawn from these performance measurement data, amendments and course corrections are made as needed. At the time of the final report, the program officer and grantee capture the most significant lessons that were learned from the project, which can then be incorporated into the foundation’s Annual Learning Report (e.g., Carr & Hembree, 2018).

At this point in the process it’s important to note that while it may be tempting to skip these first two stages, doing so is a critical mistake that may leave an organization spinning its wheels instead of drawing actionable lessons. Attempting to engage staff in reflection and learning without first defining the key parameters (assumptions and hypotheses) and then gathering relevant evidence is likely to run headlong into the abstraction challenge.

- **Reflect** – Analyze the data and draw insights. The exact form reflection takes can vary, from taking several minutes in a monthly staff meeting to setting aside a few hours at an annual retreat. But the key is to focus staff reflection on a small number of learning questions, derived in the Define stage and informed by the Collect stage, preferably in intentionally facilitated sessions. Without these hooks and guidance, learning is too diffuse and amorphous for staff to engage in it efficiently

or effectively. The development of our Learning Champions Initiative was heavily influenced by our direct experience with these challenges.

- Act – Make adjustments and course corrections as appropriate. Having drawn lessons, the final step is deciding to what extent they require action. Are there strengths to be built on or weaknesses to be mitigated? Has some shift in the contextual environment required a change in strategy? Course correction and emergent strategy are important parts of working to solve challenging problems (Kania, Kramer, & Russell, 2014). The scope and direction of those changes should be informed by evidence and lessons learned along the way.

The Learning Champions Model

The Learning Champions Initiative (LCI) is the third phase of a much longer project at the Kauffman Foundation, conducted in partnership with consulting firm FSG, around using strategic learning tools to strengthen our evaluation work and drive continuous improvement.³ In the first two phases, we laid much of the groundwork by introducing basic concepts of organizational learning; identifying barriers that were inhibiting staff reflection, cultivation, and sharing of lessons to get a sense of which common obstacles were most likely to arise;⁴ and developing early templates to capture data and insights as part of the regular quarterly board reporting process.

Based on that early progress we decided to take a decentralized, bottom-up approach as the primary mechanism for implementing a strategic learning function. The hypothesis behind this initial phase of the project was that if we could bring together a cohort of staff from across the foundation and equip it with the right knowledge and tools, then reflection and learning practices

would become more embedded in each of the departments throughout the entire organization. As the project progresses, this hypothesis has been and will continue to be tested.⁵

Launched in 2017, the LCI has two overarching goals:

- Create more learning moments within each department. Learning moments are specific and concrete actions taken by staff to generate or collect reflections and lessons with colleagues. This could include asking probing questions, facilitating a learning session, or maintaining a learning log.
- Strengthen and further embed a culture of reflection and learning at the foundation. A culture of learning refers to a shared set of social norms and attitudes that supports and facilitates staff reflection, such as transparency, trust, and collaboration.

The initiative has four key elements:

1. Identify “learning champions.” Each department head, from both the program areas and operational teams, was asked to nominate at least one associate to serve as a learning champion for their team. This person is responsible for embedding the culture of learning and reflection in team meetings and discussions. In addition to the nominations, we also announced the project internally with a request for additional volunteers. In total, we have 19 learning champions in our first cohort, with about half nominated and half volunteering, representing close to a fifth of all staff.
2. Develop learning plans. The learning champion works with peers in the cohort and in their department to develop an annual

³The “learning champions” concept is based on a model developed by the Kaiser Permanente Community Benefit Foundation in collaboration with FSG.

⁴The top three results were lack of time and prioritization for learning, silos between departments that limit communication and collaboration, and a perception of risk aversion and reluctance to discuss failure openly for fear of repercussions.

⁵ The Kauffman Foundation has roughly 100 FTE staff. It’s unclear whether this same hypothesis would hold in a smaller organization, where it may be easier to engage all staff from the start. As such, these experiences may not generalize to smaller foundations or nonprofits.

In the long term, the goal of this project is for reflection and learning to be completely embedded into the daily work of every staff member in the foundation, facilitated by a culture that emphasizes transparency, trust, and continuous learning through experience.

learning plan. These plans outline two to three specific learning questions⁶ (e.g., “What do we most hope to learn about our strategy in the next 12 months?”), as well as how and when the team anticipates getting answers to these questions. (See Figure 3.)

3. Provide training on facilitation techniques. The cohort participated in an all-day workshop, led by Hallie Preskill from FSG, on how to facilitate adult learning. The group has also met with several other experts in the field, including Julia Coffman (2017, 2018) and Dan Coyle (2018), to learn more about the structures and values necessary to build a learning culture.
4. Build a community of practice. The learning champions are convened at least once a month in unstructured or semistructured sessions where they can share their experiences and lessons with one another. In addition, feedback is continually sought on ways that the program can be improved to better achieve the two overarching goals set out for the cohort.

In the long term, the goal of this project is for reflection and learning to be completely

embedded into the daily work of every staff member in the foundation, facilitated by a culture that emphasizes transparency, trust, and continuous learning through experience.

Practical Tools

Throughout the development of the LCI we have created a number of tools, many of which are modifications of the emergent learning toolkit developed by Fourth Quadrant Partners (e.g. Darling & Parry, 2007; Darling et al., 2016).

Learning Plans

Each member of the cohort develops a learning plan for the year. These plans consist of an open-ended learning question that begins with, “To what extent and in what ways” (See Figure 3.) That question is then turned into a specific hypothesis, or if-then statement, that will be tested. To increase clarity around the second half of the hypothesis, the template also operationalizes what success will look like as a specific and concrete observation that can be empirically determined from a data source that is also identified. Finally, commitments are made around who will participate, the date of the next reflection session, and the facilitation technique likely to be used.

Before and After Action Review Prompts

To help learning champions facilitate informal learning moments within their own teams, we created a modified Before and After Action Review template. (See Figure 4.) These “questions to prompt reflection” cards are simple, nonintrusive, intuitive, and can show clear and immediate value when used during meetings and conversations with peers.

Year in Review

The Year in Review is an annual report presented to the foundation’s board. (See Figure 5.) The report is based on the first half of an emergent learning table (Darling & Parry, 2007). Specifically, this report highlights and summarizes the key data points that have been collected

⁶To guide the process of selecting specific learning questions, the initiative started with the key assumptions and hypotheses identified in the logic models built for their strategies.

FIGURE 3 A Learning Plan

Learning Question	Hypothesis	Success Looks Like	Data Source	Participants	Leader	Date	Facilitation Technique
To what extent and in what ways... Are we creating a culture of learning at EMKF?	If we do X, then Y will happen: If we facilitate the development of learning champions, then reflection and learning practices will be more embedded in teams.	More frequent learning engagements in departments Higher survey scores on culture questions	Support-team survey CEP staff survey	Evaluation team, learning champions, Talent & Culture	BH	March 2018 March 2019	"Chalk Talk"
To what extent and in what ways... Are we producing actionable evidence for program staff?	If we do X, then Y will happen: If we improve third-party evaluation reports, then staff will be more likely to use them to inform strategy.	All third-party reports lead to at least one constructive discussion with staff about lessons.	Internal tracking	Evaluation team and third-party partners	MC	January 2018 January 2019	Data placemats

FIGURE 4 The Before and After Action Review Card

Questions to Prompt Learning

Learning is often created through conversation. In your everyday interactions (e.g., informal conversations, check-ins, team meetings), try sprinkling in some of these questions to uncover and clarify key lessons.

Before a project

- What would success look like? How will you know?
- What challenges might pop up?
- What have you learned from similar situations that you could apply here?
- What will help ensure this project is successful?

During a project

- How are things going so far?
- To what extent are the results in line with what you expected at this point?
- What changes are you thinking about making based on what you have seen so far? Why?

After a project

- What was the result?
- What do you think caused those results?
- What would you do again? What would you improve next time?
- What lessons have you drawn?
- How will you apply those moving forward?
- When is the next time you'll have an opportunity to try something similar?

SOURCE: Kauffman Foundation

from our evaluations. Program staff can then use these reports, along with other documents, to develop their individual, complementary learning reports.

Learning Reports

Complementing the Year in Review is the Learning Report, which focuses on a small set

of key lessons along with specific examples to bring them to life. (See Figure 6.) The creation of the content is facilitated by the learning champions, and then synthesized and distilled by the leadership team before being presented to the board. The creation of these reports encompasses every aspect of the strategic learning system and is the culmination of a long-term, focused effort

FIGURE 5 The Year in Review

FIGURE 6 The Learning Report

YEAR IN REVIEW: LESSONS LEARNED

Entrepreneurship New Entrepreneurial Learning

LESSON 1

Running entrepreneur-facing programs requires operational resiliency and robustness.

Operating programs that engage entrepreneurs directly must be run differently than grantmaking activities. They require more robust operations, which includes greater headcount, flexibility, and speed in execution; documentation of processes and practices; and operational redundancy to reduce failure points. Especially during times of active program development, it is important to devote adequate resources to document processes, support critical functions, and ensure high quality and continuity of knowledge and resilient operations throughout.

Example: Turnover of 1 Million Cups program staff

With several staff transitions in the past few months, we shifted our focus to capturing and preserving knowledge held by departing associates. This was critical to maintaining the integrity and quality of the program as new staff were brought on and trained.

LESSON 2

When making changes to programs with retail engagement, over-investing in customer research and feedback pays big dividends.

When investing in the development of new public-facing program offerings, it is crucial to conduct customer research to assure that what is built not only appeals to customers, but clearly and directly meets a need, and that can be clearly communicated. Additionally, when changing an existing program, over-investing in research to understand customer engagement from multiple angles can pay big dividends in customer satisfaction and retention.

Example: “Free FastTrac®” ads versus facilitated FastTrac affiliates

To lower barriers, we set the direct-to-consumer price of the new digital FastTrac to \$0, then promoted this new, free offering nationwide. Existing affiliates that offer facilitated FastTrac classes (often for \$100-\$500 per student) voiced concern that our “free” ads would reduce student demand. After multiple discussions, we adjusted our media targeting to minimize the risk of conflict.

LESSON 3

Technological innovation requires a collaborative, integrated strategy across at least three departments.

When selecting technology tools to deliver and support public-facing programs, we must work collaboratively with key stakeholders within the foundation (i.e., public affairs and technology) to develop an integrated strategy and ensure that the tools selected or developed fit within the larger EMKF technology plan, integrate as needed with existing systems, can be supported to ensure high-quality customer experiences, reduce duplicative technology, increase alignment and effectiveness, and reduce overall costs.

Example: Strategic marketing technology solutions

To scale our programs with existing resources, but without sacrificing quality, we needed to improve our customer understanding, targeting, messaging, and service. We collaborated with public affairs and technology to take stock of all existing EMKF tools, select the best possible solutions to meet our needs, and plan for a more strategic approach to the development of key organizational capabilities, such as a customer relationship management system.

The annual Learning Reports have provided an effective means of capturing, distilling, and sharing lessons across the foundation. We have noted that a common challenge to building strategic learning systems is the ability to show staff value for the effort required to be successful.

to develop both the culture and capacity of the foundation to engage in reflection and learning.

Programs That Utilize Learning Tools

The ability to generate specific, concrete, and meaningful lessons in the Learning Reports has led to constructive conversations about strengths and areas of opportunity for the foundation. Based on lessons captured in the Learning Reports, changes have already been made to several strategies:

- Staff reports that while postsecondary institutions are working to provide a more supportive campus environment and connect students to mental health services, they lack the capacity to adequately address these challenges. As a result, the foundation is creating community partnerships to provide additional supports outside of campus resources to help our Kauffman Scholars and Kansas City Scholars achieve success.
- Based on challenges experienced by several new public-facing program offerings, we have learned that it is crucial to conduct customer research to assure that what is built appeals to customers, clearly and directly meets a need, and can be clearly communicated to them. Additionally, when changing an existing program, we are now investing

significantly more in market research to better understand customer engagement from multiple angles and, as a result, improve customer satisfaction and retention.

- When it comes to Kansas City's most high-profile cultural institutions, we've learned that general operating grants create a far higher likelihood of reliance on ongoing foundation support than strategically focused resources for capacity building, leading to several shifts in how this grant portfolio is deployed.

Progress, Insights, and Lessons Learned

To date, results of the Learning Champions Initiative have generally been positive, though there have been notable challenges along the way.

Successes

The “questions to prompt learning” cards have proven to be very popular. We see more learning champions, and even a few nonchampions, keeping them on hand at all times and incorporating them in various meetings and conversations. At a recent speaker series event, for example, several staff members pulled out their cards during the Q&A portion and focused their questions on insights and lessons drawn by the speaker.

Every learning champion completed a comprehensive learning plan, with specific hypotheses, data sources, and a commitment to review and discuss the findings with colleagues by a specified date. Program areas tended to focus on the efficacy of key grants and programs, or on testing assumptions about the relationship between certain inputs and their causal relationship to desired outcomes. By contrast, more administrative departments, like finance and investments, tended to focus on questions related to operations and efficiency.

The “community of practice” model has led to greater cohesion and collaboration among the cohort members, increasing the reach and effectiveness of the initiative. On several occasions, for example, learning champions have helped a fellow cohort member plan or execute a

learning engagement with their team. It can be particularly difficult to simultaneously be both the facilitator and a participant in a session, and these situations present an ideal opportunity for cross-team partnerships where the two roles can be separated.

The annual Learning Reports have provided an effective means of capturing, distilling, and sharing lessons across the foundation. We have noted that a common challenge to building strategic learning systems is the ability to show staff value for the effort required to be successful. In our case, even if we have yet to find a viable “knowledge management” solution that can capture, store, and share back every lesson generated by staff, the Learning Reports have been a positive short-term step in establishing the value of engaging in learning activities, as these documents lead directly to strategic adjustments and other improvements to how we work.

Challenges

The learning log approaches tried so far have not turned out to be an effective means of capturing group learning. Even with a digital platform, it still took too long to get to the site and required too much time for staff to create posts. We will continue to use the formal Learning Reports, but will also seek out a more streamlined approach to capturing and sharing lessons more broadly.

Another challenge has been progress on specific and actionable solutions to cultural barriers, which has been much slower than creating learning moments within teams. One next step we are taking is to hold our first “Fail Fest” as an organization, with multiple associates sharing their stories of failure with the goal of increasing psychological safety and trust.

From these successes and challenges, there are five significant lessons that we have drawn from the Learning Champions project:

1. Prioritizing strategic learning in an organization requires creating incentives, extrinsic and intrinsic, to motivate a sustained commitment to the process where there are multiple preexisting and competing demands on staff time. The time spent on learning and reflection must be recognized as valuable but, even then, appropriate incentives can help drive behavior.
2. Embedding learning into the regular work of an organization is a goal that needs a long time horizon to accomplish. It requires continued and sustained management and direction for several years to fully take hold. And in the beginning, it is critically important to focus on small wins and seek to build on them.
3. Building a culture of learning is often difficult because it involves taking on several complex and interrelated challenges, simultaneously, around transparency, trust, collaboration, risk tolerance, and staff agency. Each of these is a considerable task in itself for an organization to shift, and expectations for how fast change can occur should be realistic.
4. There can be an inherent tension when an evaluation department is tasked with taking the lead on the creation and implementation of a strategic learning function. On one hand, there is a clear and intuitive fit between learning and evaluation, and a strong incentive for the evaluators who want to make sure staff are engaging with the evidence being produced. However, placing the strategic learning function within the evaluation department runs the risk of it becoming siloed there, as staff may begin to see it as a departmental function and not a shared responsibility.
5. The Learning Champions Initiative, which is inherently a bottom-up structure, needs to be paired with a top-down strategy to increase its effectiveness. While the cohort has been successful in increasing the number of learning moments, we are developing a leadership-focused strategy that includes tools and recommendations for how they can incorporate learning into their teams as another strategy to accelerate the impact of the initiative.

Conclusion

Strategic learning can be a powerful tool for leveraging the knowledge and experience of an organization to drive continuous improvement. But despite its intuitive nature, as we've discovered, creating the systems, processes, and supportive culture needed to actually capture, share, and apply what staff are learning every day can be far more difficult than expected. The Kauffman Foundation's Learning Champions Initiative is one example of what such a system can look like, though others may find different models better suited to the context of their organization.

Regardless of the model chosen, our experience suggests that there are three key factors needed for a strategic learning approach to be successful: an explicit framework that explains how evaluation and learning are connected, as well as the intent and purpose of spending time to reflect and collect lessons; an intentional approach to identifying barriers to learning activities — technological and cultural — and a plan for how they will be overcome; and a long-term view coupled with a commitment to making incremental progress through persistence.

References

- BREST, P., & HARVEY, H. (2008). *Money well spent*. New York, NY: Bloomberg Press.
- BUTEAU, E., & COFFMAN, J. (2016). *Benchmarking foundation evaluation practices*. Cambridge, MA: Center for Effective Philanthropy.
- CARR, M., & HEMBREE, B. (2018). *Kauffman Foundation annual learning report 2017*. Retrieved from <https://www.kauffman.org/evaluation/annual-learning-report-2017>
- CARR, M., HEMBREE, B., & MADDEN, N. (2018). *Developing expected outputs and outcomes*. Retrieved from <https://www.kauffman.org/evaluation/developing-expected-outputs-and-outcomes>
- CENTER FOR EVALUATION INNOVATION. (2018). *Strategic learning*. Retrieved from <http://www.evaluationinnovation.org/focus-areas/strategic-learning>
- CHEN, H-T. (1990). *Theory-driven evaluations*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- COFFMAN, J., & BEER, T. (2011). *Evaluation to support strategic learning: Principles and practices*. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation.
- COFFMAN, J. (2017, July 11). FaceTime, open workspace, and electronic calendars are a few of my least favorite things: Learning and the way we work. *Medium*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@jcoffman/facetime-open-workspace-and-electronic-calendars-are-a-few-of-my-least-favorite-things-learning-4cfd689c559e>
- COFFMAN, J. (2018). 5-a-day: Learning by force of habit. *Medium*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@jcoffman/5-a-day-learning-by-force-of-habit-6c890260acbf>
- COYLE, D. (2018). *The culture code: The secrets of highly successful groups*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- DARLING, M., GUBER, H., SMITH, J., & STILES, J. (2016). Emergent learning: A framework for whole-system strategy, learning, and adaptation. *The Foundation Review*, 8(1), 59–73. <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1284>
- DARLING, M., & PARRY, C. (2007). Growing knowledge together: Using emergent learning and EL maps for better results. *Reflections: The SoL Journal on Knowledge, Learning, and Change*, 8(1), 1–12.
- EASTERBY-SMITH, M. (1997). Disciplines of organizational learning: contributions and critiques. *Human Relations*, 50(9), 1085–1113.
- EDMONDSON, A. (2008, July-August). The competitive imperative of learning. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2008/07/the-competitive-imperative-of-learning>
- FORTI, M., & GOLDBERG, J. (2015, November 18). Measuring social return on investment before you invest. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/measuring_social_return_on_investment_before_you_invest
- GARVIN, D. (1993, July-August). Building a learning organization. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/1993/07/building-a-learning-organization>
- GUIJT, I. (2010). Accountability and learning. In J. Ubels, N-A. Acquaye-Gaddoo, & A. Fowler, (Eds.), *Capacity development in practice* (pp. 277–291). London, UK: EarthScan.
- GRANTMAKERS FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS. (2015). *Learning together: Actionable approaches for grantmakers*. Available online at <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/learning-together-actionable-approaches-for-grantmakers-682>
- HOOLE, E., & PATTERSON, T. (2008, Fall). Voices from the field: Evaluation as part of a learning culture. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 119, 93–113.
- HUBER, G. (1991). Organizational learning: The contributing processes and the literatures. *Organization Science*, 2(1), 88–115.

- KAHNEMAN, D. (2013). *Thinking fast and slow*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- KANIA, J., KRAMER, M., & RUSSELL, P. (2014, Summer). Strategic philanthropy for a complex world. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from https://ssir.org/up_for_debate/article/strategic_philanthropy
- LESTER, P. (2016, July 14). Defining evidence down. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/defining_evidence_down
- LIPSHITZ, R., POPPER, M., & FRIEDMAN, V. (2002). A multifacet model of organizational learning. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 38(1), 78–98.
- MACASKILL, W. (2015). *Doing good better*. New York, NY: Gotham Books.
- MCA RDLE, M. (2014). *The up side of down*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- MILWAY, K. S., & SAXTON, A. (2011, Summer). The challenge of organizational learning. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_challenge_of_organizational_learning
- NIELSEN, W. A. (2002). *Golden donors: A new anatomy of the great foundations*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction.
- PATRIZI, P., THOMPSON, E. H., COFFMAN, J., & BEER, T. (2013). Eyes wide open: Learning as strategy under conditions of complexity and uncertainty. *The Foundation Review*, 5(3), 50–65. <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1170>
- PRESKILL, H., & MACK, K. (2013). *Building a strategic learning and evaluation system for your organization*. Washington, DC: FSG. Available online at <https://www.fsg.org/publications/building-strategic-learning-and-evaluation-system-your-organization>
- PRESKILL, H., & TORRES, R. (1999). *Evaluative inquiry for learning in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- PRESKILL, H., GOPAL, S., MACK, K., & COOK, J. (2014). *Evaluating complexity: Propositions for improving practice*. Washington, DC: FSG. Available online at <https://www.fsg.org/publications/evaluating-complexity>
- PRESKILL, H., GUTIÉRREZ, E., & MACK, K. (2017). *Facilitating intentional group learning: A practical guide to 21 learning activities*. Washington, DC: FSG. Available online at <https://www.fsg.org/tools-and-resources/facilitating-intentional-group-learning>
- ROTH, G. (1996). *Learning histories: Using documentation to assess and facilitate organizational learning*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- SENGE, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- TANTIA, P. (2017, Spring). The new science of designing for humans. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_new_science_of_designing_for_humans
- TORRES, R., & PRESKILL, H. (2001). Evaluation and organizational learning: Past, present, and future. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 22(3), 387–395.
- WANG, J. (2016, March 22). Forgetting failure. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/forgetting_failure
- WEBB, A. (2018, March 15). Philanthropy's seven deadly sins. *Nonprofit Quarterly*. Retrieved from <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/2018/03/15/philanthropys-seven-deadly-sins>
- WESTLEY, F., ZIMMERMAN, B., & PATTON, M. (2007). *Getting to maybe: How the world is changed*. Toronto, ON: Vintage Canada.
- WINKLER, M., & FYFFE, S. D. (2016). *Strategies for cultivating an organizational learning culture*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved from https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/86191/strategies_for_cultivating_an_organizational_learning_culture_3.pdf
- WOOSTER, M. M. (2006). *Great philanthropic mistakes*. Washington, DC: Hudson Institute.
- Matthew Carr, Ph.D.**, is director of evaluation at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Matthew Carr, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, 4801 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, MO 64110-2046 (email: mcarr@kauffman.org).
- Brett Hembree, M.P.A.**, is senior analyst in evaluation at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.
- Nathan Madden, Ph.D.**, is an analyst in evaluation at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

Building a Culture of Learning: Teaching a Complex Organization How to Fish

Tiffany Clarke, M.P.P., M.P.H., Hallie Preskill, Ph.D., and Abigail Stevenson, M.B.A., M.P.H., FSG; and Pamela Schwartz, M.P.H., Kaiser Permanente

Keywords: *Strategic learning, organizational learning, learning culture, learning activities*

Introduction

In our communities, we are faced with seismic shifts in our national and local political contexts, economies, technological landscape, demographics, and health outcomes and needs. Many social-sector organizations are looking to balance carefully considered strategic plans with an ability to quickly see how change is unfolding, correct course, and be increasingly responsive to our communities.

This has increased many foundations' interest in individual, group, and organizational learning as a means for building capacity and resiliency to navigate the complexities of social change in uncertain environments.¹ Learning in this context means using data and experiences to test assumptions and understandings, to co-construct meaning among stakeholders, and to generate possibilities and future actions. Learning requires space and time for reflection and dialogue, and, ultimately, learning processes and activities need to be embedded in the normal course of doing one's work.

Kaiser Permanente Community Health has been no stranger to these dynamics. (See Table 1.) Growing for many years — but gaining particular urgency in 2015 — was a need to strengthen Community Health's ability to more rigorously and comprehensively understand the progress and impact of a growing and more complex

Key Points

- Many social sector organizations are looking to balance their strategic plans with an ability to respond more quickly to change as it unfolds in their communities. For many years — but gaining particular urgency in 2015 — Kaiser Permanente Community Health saw a need to better understand the progress and impact of its portfolio and use its data to adapt strategy in response to its changing context.
- To increase its capacity for strategic learning, Community Health worked with FSG to develop and implement a system called Measurement and Evaluation for Learning and Outcomes. While this process was tailored to Community Health, its underlying thinking, approach, and lessons learned can be informative to many others who are thinking about how to position their organizations and communities to thrive in times of change.
- This article shares the key approaches used to equip Community Health to operationalize learning and reflect on the results so far, as well as some of the ingredients for success that allowed it to make tremendous progress in a relatively short period of time

¹ Many foundations are making a greater commitment to evaluation and learning. A study by the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) and the Center for Evaluation Innovation (CEI) found that of foundations with a dedicated evaluation unit (34 percent), 19 percent were newly created during the past two years; and 50 percent perceived that funding levels for evaluation work had increased over the last two years (CEP & CEI, 2016). Other indications of this trend include organizations adapting the title of their evaluation unit to include the word "learning," stated commitments to evaluation and learning (e.g., William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, n.d., Bush Foundation, n.d., and Ford Foundation, n.d.), and the creation of practical resources for the field (see Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2015).

TABLE 1 About Kaiser Permanente Community Health and FSG**About Kaiser Permanente Community Health**

Kaiser Permanente was founded in 1945 and is recognized as one of leading health care providers and nonprofit health plans in the country, with over 200,000 staff serving over 12 million members across nine states and Washington, D.C. The Community Health program works in each of its eight regions and nationally to improve the health of the communities Kaiser Permanente serves.

Kaiser Permanente believes that better health outcomes begin where health starts — in communities. The Community Health strategy focuses on three areas:

1. ensuring health access by providing individuals served at Kaiser Permanente or by safety net partners with integrated clinical and social services;
2. improving conditions for health and equity by engaging members, communities, and Kaiser Permanente's workforce and assets; and
3. advancing the future of community health by innovating with technology and social solutions.

For many years, Kaiser Permanente has worked side-by-side with other organizations to address serious public health issues such as obesity, access to care, and violence.

About FSG

FSG is a mission-driven consulting firm that supports organizations and individuals in achieving large-scale, lasting social change through evaluation, strategy, research, and hosting learning communities.

portfolio. Community Health also saw a need to create structures and capacity for more quickly and meaningfully using its data to adapt strategy in response to shifting political and community challenges, opportunities, heightened complexity, and changing demands.

Community Health worked with FSG in an 18-month process to develop and implement a system called Measurement and Evaluation for Learning and Outcomes (MELO), aimed at increasing Community Health's capacity for strategic learning.² In embarking on this journey, we knew it would be important to build capacity among leaders, program and evaluation staff,

and evaluation consultants, and we designed a process that would engage all of those groups in a variety of ways. While our process was tailored to Community Health, we believe the underlying thinking, key elements of the approach, and lessons learned about success can be informative to many others who are thinking about how to position their organizations and communities to thrive in times of change.

The project unfolded in two phases. (See Table 2.) In Phase 1, we developed a set of “products” — theories of change, learning questions, outcomes, indicators, and an aligned dashboard — that were intended to clarify strategy and focus

²Strategic learning is “the use of data and insights from a variety of information-gathering approaches — including evaluation — to inform decision-making about strategy” (Coffman & Beer, 2011, p. 1). In 2013, FSG released *Building a Strategic Learning and Evaluation System for Your Organization* (Preskill & Mack, 2013), which provided a framework and guidance for deepening the use of evaluation as a tool for strategic learning through developing an evaluation vision, gaining clarity about strategy and strategic questions, identifying relevant monitoring and evaluation activities, and creating a supportive environment (e.g., leadership and culture, human and financial resources, knowledge management). This framework inspired the work with Community Health.

TABLE 2 Measurement and Evaluation for Learning for Outcomes Process

PHASE 1 Clarify Strategy and Focus Data Collection	PHASE 2 Operationalize Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vision for measurement, evaluation, and learning• Theories of change• Strategic- learning questions• Outcomes and indicators• Updated dashboard	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practice designing learning through the development of learning plans• Direct experience engaging in intentional learning• Training for staff – and consultants – in facilitating learning• Adapted roles, responsibilities, culture, and structures to support learning• Leadership that champions learning

data collection. In Phase 2, we focused on operationalizing learning within Community Health. With the understanding that many of the products we created in Phase 1 will be well-known to many readers, this article focuses on the activities we undertook in Phase 2.

For Community Health, the principles, practices, and structures needed to operationalize learning in daily work required dedicated efforts to put them in place. We have encountered several other foundations that are asking questions about how to operationalize learning in their work, and believe others might benefit from an opportunity to hear in-depth about one organization's journey. First, we will share the activities we undertook in Phase 2, and why. Then, we will reflect on the results so far — how learning mindsets and practices are being infused throughout Community Health and how they have impacted the organization's work. Finally, we will share some of the ingredients for success that allowed us to make tremendous progress in a relatively short period of time.

Community Health leaders knew that even more than the development of specific products to guide strategic learning, it would be essential to ensure that Community Health could operationalize learning by building confidence, skill, and plans for learning and by shifting culture and infrastructure. To do so, we

- developed learning plans so staff could practice designing group learning;

- provided as many staff and leaders as possible with direct experiences engaging in intentional learning;
- trained staff and consultants in facilitating intentional group learning;
- adapted roles, responsibilities, and infrastructure to support learning; and
- engaged key organizational leaders who were championing learning.

Practice Designing Learning Through the Development of Learning Plans

To build Community Health staff's fluency, experience, and confidence in using data to address strategic questions, we worked together to develop learning plans for the organization as a whole, and, additionally, for several program teams. These learning plans served primarily as a capacity-building exercise for staff to engage in structured thinking about how to identify the types of learning activities that were appropriate for specific strategic questions, and how to customize learning activities to meet their needs. We worked with a variety of teams on developing learning plans in order to build a broad base of capacity to deliver and catalyze learning across the organization.

The learning plans included five features that were intended to support staff in building understanding and confidence in thinking through

the elements of an effective group-learning experience:

1. *Priority learning questions that would be meaningful for shaping strategy.* These questions were chosen because they seemed urgent, and because the time seemed ripe to answer them.
2. *Identified data that would be useful for addressing the learning questions.* We took an expansive view of data to include research, monitoring and evaluation findings, and experiences, which encouraged staff and leadership to make deeper use of a wide variety of data sources and move forward with learning in situations where only partial or little data are available.
3. *Specific situations where group learning would be helpful for informing strategy.* These were forums where people were already gathering and there was an opportunity to engage in reflection and dialogue and to apply learnings to strategy (e.g., team retreats, grantee convenings).
4. *Goals and activities to facilitate intentional group learning.*³ One of the bigger insights for staff was the value of having clear goals for engaging a group around data (e.g., building understanding, generating ideas, making a decision), and customizing the facilitation of a meeting to reach those goals.
5. *Responsibility for who would organize and facilitate the learning activity.* By tying learning to the rest of the teams' objectives and workflow, staff could envision doing in-depth planning, making time and space, and channeling the results of learning activities into shifts in teams' work.

We knew that “just in time” learning opportunities would be identified in response to the emerging needs of the team. Setting aside

We knew that “just in time” learning opportunities would be identified in response to the emerging needs of the team. Setting aside a dedicated time to think through the arc of designing relevant learning built the capacity for staff to undergo this same planning process in the future.

a dedicated time to think through the arc of designing relevant learning built the capacity for staff to undergo this same planning process in the future.

Direct Experience Engaging in Intentional Learning

Through all of our work together, we embedded opportunities for staff and leadership to directly engage in intentional learning as a core part of the project, with a few objectives:

- Demonstrate the value of engaging in learning as a means of using data to more deeply inform strategy. Planning, facilitating, and using the results of intentional learning requires shifts in teams' time and effort. By giving Community Health leaders and staff firsthand experience of gaining deeper insights through intentional learning, we sought to build buy-in for doing more.
- Build staff and leaders' familiarity with interacting with data in ways beyond the status quo. Previously, many conversations involved a presentation of the data, followed

³ After hearing from the field a strong interest in practical guidance for facilitating learning, FSG developed Facilitating Intentional Group Learning: A Practical Guide to 21 Learning Activities (Preskill, Gutiérrez, & Mack, 2017). This guide curates and explains a number of group facilitation approaches (with gratitude to the many people who developed these activities), and contains in-depth notes on how and when to use them to accomplish a variety of potential learning goals.

By engaging groups in a variety of practices for generating reflections and dialogue, we hoped to bring a new level of enjoyment and insight to these discussions, and to make shifts in group norms more accessible to a broad base of staff.

by a discussion. By engaging groups in a variety of practices for generating reflections and dialogue, we hoped to bring a new level of enjoyment and insight to these discussions, and to make shifts in group norms more accessible to a broad base of staff.

- Grow staff's capacity for selecting, customizing, and facilitating intentional learning activities. We worked closely with program and evaluation staff who had lead roles in designing team retreats and other events. By helping them design activities, curate real data, and facilitate activities in settings that were relevant to their work, we built capacity to tailor learning for their teams.

We created new opportunities — and leveraged existing ones — to engage in learning among groups of various sizes and roles, including leadership team meetings, program team meetings, and retreat sessions that brought staff and leadership together in one group. (See Table 3.)

Each time we implemented a learning activity, we took time to reflect on how it was received. We found that the more staff and leadership were engaged in learning activities, the greater their appetite was for more of these experiences. And, the more we coached staff and leaders in how to conduct these activities on their own — or at least in why and how to build out their agendas with learning in mind — the more they wanted to carry learning into their own work. During

the course of the project, several staff members sought FSG's advice on how to facilitate learning with teams and partners to make discussions deeper and more generative.

Training for Staff — and Consultants — in Facilitating Learning

We also provided deeper training to a group of program and evaluation staff and consultants who were positioned to have a central role in facilitating learning with staff and grantees. In the few years preceding this project, several Community Health regions had been building out their evaluation staff, and these individuals were providing important support to measurement, evaluation, and strategy refinement efforts. Additionally, the program had been working for several years with a group of consultants who were playing instrumental roles in designing, collecting, and sharing data about the on-the-ground work of grantees and partners, and in supporting staff and grantees in deriving implications from evaluation findings for their work. Directly involving consultants was a key emphasis of the trainings we provided (and might have been overlooked in other situations).

To deepen the capacity of Community Health evaluators and consultants to facilitate learning, we hosted a daylong training to share an overview of key concepts in intentional group learning, provide hands-on experiences with a wide variety of learning activities, and “deconstruct” the activities so this group could replicate them.

Adapted Roles, Responsibilities, and Infrastructure to Support Learning

The Community Health senior director of impact and learning and FSG partnered closely to consider how evaluation staff's roles and responsibilities could be adapted to provide ongoing capacity to support organizational learning and to signal the importance learning for the organization.

As part of this work, Community Health adapted staff roles, performance management, and relationships with partners in several ways:

TABLE 3 Intentional Learning Activities Implemented With Community Health

Appreciative Inquiry	Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a storytelling and collective analysis technique based on the assumption that questions and dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes, and dreams are transformational. AI is not about being overly positive. Instead, it focuses on how the future can be built on the best parts of the past, believing that we have all experienced what success looks like, even if fleeting, and have the capacity to create the world we want. AI is particularly useful for forming shared visions and principles, identifying outcomes, and setting intentions for future collective efforts (Hammond, 2013; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).
Data Gallery	This activity provides participants with an opportunity to interactively and collaboratively review data. In so doing, participants may develop a shared understanding of what the data mean and the resulting implications pertaining to improved policies, programs, or other organization and community change factors. It has the potential to spur both individual and collective action among participants (Francek, 2006; Murray, Falkenburg-er, & Saxena, 2015).
What, So What, Now What?	This activity provides participants with an opportunity to share understandings and new insights, and to plan for next steps. It is particularly useful for generating ideas and solutions, engaging multiple perspectives, addressing complex challenges, and potentially making decisions. We often paired this activity with the Data Gallery to help participants identify key insights from evaluation findings and other data, identify specific implications for their work, and channel those insights into recommendations for action (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013).
I Like, I Wish, I Wonder	I Like, I Wish, I Wonder provides a simple framework for eliciting and processing feedback. It asks participants to first celebrate the good, and then to provide recommendations and express reservations in a productive way. This activity encourages openness, engages multiple perspectives, and supports groups in identifying solutions to pressing concerns. It can be used in groups of varying sizes, in-person or virtually, and with the participants identified or anonymous. Responses can be quickly aggregated, analyzed, and used to build collective buy-in and inform the work moving forward (Doorley, Holcomb, Klebahn, Segovia, & Utley, 2018).
Ecocycle Mapping	The Ecocycle model suggests that the long-term sustainability of adaptive organizations requires that elements of those organizations undergo periodic, natural processes of destruction and renewal. Ecocycle mapping engages participants in building a visual depiction of where on the Ecocycle different initiatives, programs, or parts of an organization are currently operating, and in identifying risks, challenges, and areas to free space and resources to invest in new work (Hurst & Zimmerman, 1994).

- making updates to responsibilities, job descriptions, and titles. For some staff, this led to new responsibility for rethinking the design and facilitation of many critical meetings and retreats to more strategically bring in data to drive decision-making;
- recommending individual performance goals around learning for evaluators to incorporate in their annual plans — so they would obtain managerial support and coaching for their role in facilitating learning;
- expanding the role of evaluation consultants in facilitating learning among staff and grantees when updating contracts;
- identifying ways for the head of evaluation to support evaluators (who are spread

We knew that building skills and designating roles would not be enough to shift Community Health toward strategic learning. There also needed to be changes in Community's Health's broader culture and structures to allow both evaluation and program staff to engage in individual and team learning.

across teams and geographies) as a community of practice to share strategies, participate in professional development, and be active in the evaluation field on behalf of Community Health; and

- setting clear expectations with grantees about the role of learning in their work with Community Health.

We knew that building skills and designating roles would not be enough to shift Community Health toward strategic learning. There also needed to be changes in Community's Health's broader culture and structures to allow both evaluation and program staff to engage in individual and team learning. We adapted and implemented an internal assessment, the Readiness for Organizational Learning and Evaluation (ROLE) survey,⁴ to highlight areas to change and elicit ideas for making desired shifts. The survey assessed seven elements of Community Health's ability to support effective learning: culture; leadership; systems and structures; communication of information; measurement, evaluation,

and learning; program office support; and community-of-practice functioning.

Using intentional learning activities such as Data Gallery (Francek, 2006; Murray, Falkenburger, & Saxena, 2015), What? So What? Now What? (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013), Appreciative Inquiry (Hammond, 2013; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010), and the World Café (2019), we engaged staff in interpreting the results and providing recommendations for change. Staff highlighted key areas to improve, including doing more to support informed risk-taking; addressing time constraints that make it hard to find time for reflection; and improving systems for making information accessible when needed to inform specific work.

Leadership That Champions Learning

We knew that we would need strong leadership support for the shifts we were encouraging to be embraced by the organization. Two vice presidents were deeply involved throughout the process. They acted as co-champions of this work by visibly dedicating time and resources to learning as part of the strategic work of the organization, and collaborated with FSG in reflecting on the findings of the ROLE survey and developing recommendations for facilitating learning in the organization. Their deep engagement helped to bring along other organizational leaders who were more reticent or uncertain, and ensured that all of the work we did was reflective of the core strategic considerations of the organization. Meanwhile, the Community Health senior director of impact and learning played a key role — both visibly and behind the scenes — in building support for the work and making sure it was meaningful to each team and implementable.

Results at the Organization and Team Levels

By the end of the project to develop MELO, the Community Health team had spent over 18 months finalizing the “products,” building

⁴The ROLE survey was developed by Hallie Preskill and Rosalie Torres, based on their book *Evaluative Inquiry for Learning in Organizations* (Preskill & Torres, 1999). The survey can be found at <https://www.fsg.org/tools-and-resources/readiness-organizational-learning-and-evaluation-instrument-role>.

momentum internally for using them, and deepening their capacity for continuous learning.

This emphasis on operationalizing learning came in handy immediately. Before the ink was dry on the products, dramatic changes occurred in late in 2016 and early 2017 that prompted substantial adjustments to the Community Health strategy. The presidential election and shift in the national political environment, particularly around health care and conditions for vulnerable populations, created significant uncertainty for Community Health. At the same time, Kaiser Permanente elevated Community Health to greater prominence within the organization and new leadership was hired, marking Community Health's first leadership change in over 15 years. With this new leader came a new, more ambitious and organizationwide vision as well as refreshed goals, with scale and impact driving the work more than ever. This all had implications for strategy, measurement, partnerships, and team structures.

Fortunately, Community Health had built an appetite for using data and experiences systematically and creatively to consider the implications of the current context and vision for the new strategy. Next, we explore some of the results of Community Health's multifaceted efforts to build a culture of learning by discussing outcomes for the organization as a whole and for specific teams.

Organizational Outcomes

As Community Health launched into a process of rethinking its strategy (and complementary measurement strategy and organizational structures) across all levels and all regions of the organization, an emphasis on learning has equipped it to be resilient and adaptive during this time of enormous change. Two examples describe this capacity.

Example 1

Community Health's new senior leader brought a bigger vision for positively impacting the lives of the 65 million people who live in Kaiser Permanente's footprint. For the past year,

Community Health has been involved in an endeavor to redesign its strategy and reorient the organization to carry it out.

Amid this process, Community Health was supported by I Like, I Wish, I Wonder (Doorley, Holcomb, Klebahn, Segovia, & Utley, 2018), a learning activity that allows participants to first celebrate the good, and then to provide recommendations and express concerns in a productive way. Community Health used this activity multiple times — with groups large and small, in person and online — to provide a framework for reflection and conversation as they solicited input and solidified the strategy. Using this activity to facilitate reflection offered a number of benefits:

- The resulting dialogues provided coherent, nuanced qualitative data in the form of endorsements, recommendations, and concerns that staff recorded, analyzed, and used to directly inform the strategy.
- The interactive nature of the activity allowed those leading the development of the strategy to engage over 200 of their colleagues. The strategy benefitted from the direct contribution of many more perspectives than would have been permitted by the input-gathering approaches Community Health had customarily used.
- The real-time process of sharing input, hearing and building off of others' reactions, and seeing these ideas shape the strategy left participants feeling heard and energized about the new direction. This high degree of engagement built significant collective momentum behind adopting and implementing the strategy.

While a strategy development process of this magnitude can be challenging, this exercise allowed for expressions of support as well as space for candor and feedback that has resulted in a stronger, more comprehensive strategy and a higher degree of buy-in among the wide array of staff that are responsible for implementing the new strategic framework.

Example 2

To accompany the new strategic framework, Community Health strategy and evaluation leaders from the national office developed a new, program-wide measurement strategy aimed at aligning data collection — across eight regions for 20 new initiatives — to meaningfully inform program strategy while also meeting complicated reporting requirements. The measurement strategy had important stakes for Community Health — for the first time, it was being held publicly accountable to improving health in the communities that Kaiser Permanente serves. This heightened accountability had significant implications for regional leaders and staff, who would be at the front lines of implementing the strategy and whose progress would be reflected in the data collected through the new measurement strategy. Additionally, in the measurement strategy, Community Health was articulating its role in addressing social determinants of health and its definition of “community.”

National leaders needed to socialize the measurement strategy with leadership, program staff, and operational staff in each region, and knew that the content could be challenging — both in terms of supporting a layperson audience to absorb complex data concepts and in terms of regions’ reception to the new strategic directions and regional accountabilities for outcomes. In a three-hour workshop, national leaders used learning activities, including Data Gallery; I Like, I Wish, I Wonder; and role-play, to help regional staff gain comfort with the plan and gather feedback. Through this experience, regional staff gained a deeper understanding of Community Health’s new strategy and how it would be reflected in measurement efforts, and gained greater comfort discussing the measurement strategy and its implications for their work (in preparation for continuing to have these discussions with other stakeholders at the regional level), which laid the groundwork for more effective and aligned efforts.

Team Outcomes

For several teams, this mindset and way of doing work has taken off. From cross-regional strategic-initiative discussions and region-specific planning meetings to sharing evaluation results with grantees, teams are engaging around evaluation, data, and learning in very different ways than they had before. Now, there are deeper, more interactive conversations about data, leading seamlessly to generative discussions about what to do next that allow teams to move to decisions faster. Since a wide swath of evaluation staff and consultants were all trained in facilitating learning,⁵ many of them are better able to play an active role in helping their teams make these shifts.

Three examples illustrate ways that organizational learning mindsets and practices are being infused through — and bringing value to — Community Health’s teams.

Example 1

In both the national office and Community Health’s Northwest Region, teams have adopted a regular practice of using Ecocycle mapping (Hurst & Zimmerman, 1994). The activity provides teams with a visual depiction of the different stages of the adaptive cycle — birth, maturity, creative destruction, and renewal — in which different programs have been operating. These teams use Ecocycle mapping to assess how they have been expending time and energy, with an eye toward finding ways to reallocate resources to invest in new efforts.

Staff have adapted the activity to meet their needs by categorizing items in “creative destruction” into additional categories — end, spin off, divest, and reinvent — and developing action plans with timelines and roles. Staff leave these Ecocycle mapping sessions in agreement about how intend to shift their efforts and are equipped to take concrete steps to make room for new work.

⁵The consulting group that participated in the training was formally acquired by Kaiser Permanente after the project. The former consultants are now officially staff, though they engage with grantees and other Kaiser Permanente departments in a similar capacity as they did before.

For example, the national office staff used Ecocycle mapping to discuss new directions for its place-based obesity prevention efforts. Community Health Initiatives (CHI) is a 10-year-plus effort focused primarily on obesity prevention in communities. Starting from a hypothesis that the place-based strategies had achieved important results but were ultimately too broad and needed to go through creative destruction, use of the Ecocycle mapping exercise to map and discuss components of the work provided clarity and agreement about focusing the future CHI strategy in schools and specific cities — places where Community Health could achieve substantial results.

Example 2

Building on the outcomes of the Ecocycle mapping session, CHI leaders recently hosted an all-day retreat with over 25 program officers and evaluators working in communities across the nation to review 10 years of evaluation data reflecting work in 60 communities, capture lessons learned, and identify implications for future efforts. This was one of the earliest learning retreats that Community Health implemented independent of FSG's involvement, and was an opportunity to test whether staff had “learned to fish” on their own.

Starting with the understanding (from the Ecocycle mapping and other discussions) that the strategy would evolve to focus squarely on schools and cities, the group identified key findings from the evaluations about which strategies in these settings had been most and least effective, and why. This discussion highlighted the need to focus on physical activity in schools and expand policy work at the city level. While the national and regional staff involved in this effort might have reached these conclusions through other means, the focus on learning allowed them to make sense of complex data much more quickly and come to conclusions collaboratively. As a result, the conclusions were absorbed more deeply, with a higher level of agreement about their implications. And, more people had an opportunity to weigh in on next steps and hear others' perspectives, leading to a greater degree

of buy-in and effectiveness in working together to implement the refocused strategy.

Example 3

The evaluation staff in Southern California has a history of working with their region's program team on strategic planning. Evaluation staff has built on this foundation of collaboration with program staff in order to incorporate more learning modules into the strategy process.

For example, for the region's Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNAs), for the first time they are creating learning questions to guide the process. The learning questions are intended to clarify and broaden what the region hopes to learn through the CHNAs, so they can more comprehensively reflect community priorities in the assessment and in their resulting plans to respond to community needs. Additionally, the region collects this information across 15 hospitals and, by clearly articulating their learning questions, they hope to bring a new level of consistency to the data they collect across hospitals and thus a greater level of coherence to the learnings that will inform their work.

Ingredients for Success

The experience of developing MELO and infusing learning throughout Community Health has marked a true transformation for the organization. Each element of the work contributed to the results Community Health is seeing today. However, they were only part of the story. This work could have only been accomplished through intention, dedication of time and resources, broad engagement, stewardship of the process, and willingness to take risks. For those who see reflections of themselves and their aspirations in this article, and are considering undertaking similar work, we offer the following reflections about ingredients for success.

- Involve the right people — at all levels of the organization — to achieve buy-in. We worked with everyone who had a significant role to play in facilitating strategic learning. For us, that meant engaging a wide range of actors: senior leaders, program

Be cautious at first, if needed; then, experiment shamelessly. We knew it would be important to demonstrate the value of new activities and approaches we were suggesting, and were meticulous about planning our first sets of learning activities. As we've cultivated excitement for this work — and learned more about what best fits Community Health's work and culture — staff have become more comfortable adjusting on the fly and running with a focus on learning in every venue possible.

directors and managers, evaluators, relevant operations staff, and grantees. We tailored engagement of each group in ways that set shared expectations, built excitement, sought their input, and resonated with what each group valued.

- Build learning capacity among evaluation and program staff. Often, evaluation staff are most closely identified with fostering learning in organizations. Here, program staff were deeply involved in developing the “products,” designing learning, and participating in learning activities. We also saw and built an enhanced role for evaluation staff in contributing to strategic planning. Thus, we leveraged and linked both roles and skill sets to enhance Community Health's learning capacity.
- Train as many people as possible — even consultants. We recognized that external consultants have an important role to play in enabling learning, and that if we did not include them with intention, we would be missing an opportunity to shift how Community Health's teams used data to gain strategic insights. We trained and engaged staff and consultants together to build a cadre of folks who were equipped spread strategic learning throughout Community Health.
- Immediately operationalize your plans — with roles and responsibilities — as part of the work. As soon as we finished the products, we pivoted to developing concrete plans and skills for infusing them into our work. Thus, when Community Health soon had a significant change in strategy that made the products almost immediately out of date, the organization could replicate key ways of engaging with data and staff to inform ongoing work and refresh the Community Health strategy.
- Be cautious at first, if needed; then, experiment shamelessly. We knew it would be important to demonstrate the value of new activities and approaches we were suggesting, and were meticulous about planning our first sets of learning activities. As we've cultivated excitement for this work — and learned more about what best fits Community Health's work and culture — staff have become more comfortable adjusting on the fly and running with a focus on learning in every venue possible.
- Take advantage of early adopters and easy wins. For many Community Health teams, this work represented a marked shift and came easier to some than others. To continue building buy-in and momentum, it was important to support those who were particularly excited to experiment with new ways of doing things. Over the course of the project, several people raised their hands to pilot a new learning activity. We provided as much support as we could, while keeping

them in the lead so they could build their ownership and capacity.

- See times of change as an opportunity to strengthen learning muscles. Particularly since undergoing this process, Community Health has leaned into times of change as an opportunity to use intentional learning to engage more people, build more experience engaging in interactive dialogue around data and experience, and gather more feedback about how staff and partners are experiencing learning efforts. As a result, Community Health has built stronger muscles for this way of working, and has become more resilient in the face of change.
- Connect accountability and learning. As we embarked on this work, we were careful to illustrate that there is no choice needed between accountability and learning. Rather, a commitment to learning holds organizations accountable to their intended impact as contexts shift. Learning also supports organizations in focusing attention and resources on data that is most informative (and discontinuing data collection that does not contribute to meaningful learning). These messages resonated with Community Health leaders and facilitated their buy-in. In order to strengthen their buy-in, it was also important to demonstrate quickly how engaging in reflection could lead to stronger strategies and therefore healthier communities.
- Meet short-term needs while keeping sight of longer-term learning goals. While Community Health has successfully kept learning at the forefront of its approach to change, it has focused on addressing “just in time” questions and has put less emphasis on refreshing its longer-term strategic questions. This has made sense during recent times of truly seismic changes, but now that Community Health has developed a new strategic framework and measurement strategy, there is more space for leaders to pay more attention to higher-level

questions about progress, implementation, and impact.

Conclusion

Building Community Health’s learning culture and capacity has been a journey that has ushered in an organizational transformation. Reaching this point wasn’t easy — it required a commitment to change, and to engaging a broad base of individuals and teams in building new muscles and habits. However, Community Health’s efforts have been reinforced by the immediate value this work has provided. When circumstances quickly changed, staff were prepared to collectively reflect and make needed shifts to strategies and day-to-day plans.

We understand that this isn’t a timebound project one completes. Like a muscle that has been strengthened, the capabilities Community Health has built can atrophy if not exercised. It will continue to take intention and effort to maintain — and continue to deepen — the organization’s capacity for strategic learning. And, as much as we were able to anticipate opportunities to equip staff and leaders with skills, experiences, and inspiration to engage in this work, there is more that could be done. Community Health plans to continue experimenting with new approaches to learning, engaging even more people in designing and participating in learning, and seeking new avenues for making sure learning continues to be deeply engrained in how Community Health does business.

We hope that by exchanging stories and insights from each other’s journeys to become stronger learning organizations, we can build a more resilient and nimble social sector, better prepared to create positive change in our communities and for the people we serve.

References

- BUSH FOUNDATION. (n.d.). *What We're Learning*. Saint Paul, MN: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.bushfoundation.org/learning/>
- CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE PHILANTHROPY & CENTER FOR EVALUATION INNOVATION. (2016). *Benchmarking foundation evaluation practices*. Cambridge, MA: Author. Retrieved from <http://research.cep.org/benchmarking-foundation-evaluation-practices>
- COFFMAN, J., & BEER, T. (2011). *Evaluation to support strategic learning: Principles and practices*. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation. Retrieved from <https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Strategic-Learning-Coffan-and-Beer.pdf>
- DOORLEY, S., HOLCOMB, S., KLEBAHN, P., SEGOVIA, K., & UTLEY, J. (2018). *Design thinking bootleg*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University. Retrieved from https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57c6b79629687fde090a0fdd/t/5b19b2f2aa4a99e99b26b6bb/1528410876119/dschool_bootleg_deck_2018_final_sm+%282%29.pdf
- FORD FOUNDATION. (n.d.). *Learning and Impact*. New York, NY: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/learning-and-impact/>
- FRANCEK, M. (2006). Promoting discussion in the science classroom using gallery walks. *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 36(1), 27–31. Available online at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42993895>
- GRANTMAKERS FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS. (2015). *Learning together: Actionable approaches for grantmakers*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/learning-together-actionable-approaches-for-grantmakers-682>
- HAMMOND, S. A. (2013). *The thin book of appreciative inquiry* (3rd ed.). Bend, OR: Thin Book.
- HURST, D. K., & ZIMMERMAN, B. J. (1994). From life cycle to Ecocycle: A new perspective on the growth, maturity, destruction, and renewal of complex systems. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 3(4), 339–354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105649269434008>
- LIPMANOWICZ, H., & MCCANDLESS, K. (2013). *The surprising power of liberating structures*. Seattle, WA: Liberating Structures Press.
- MURRAY, B., FALKENBURGER, E., & SAXENA, P. (2015). *Data walks: An innovative way to share data with communities*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.urban.org/research/publication/data-walks-innovative-way-share-data-communities>
- PRESKILL, H., & CATSAMBAS, T. (2006). *Reframing evaluation through Appreciative Inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- PRESKILL, H., GUTIÉRREZ, E., & MACK, K. (2017). *Facilitating intentional group learning: A practical guide to 21 learning activities*. Washington, DC: FSG. Retrieved from <https://www.fsg.org/tools-and-resources/facilitating-intentional-group-learning>
- PRESKILL, H., & MACK, K. (2013). *Building a strategic learning and evaluation system for your organization*. Washington, DC: FSG. Retrieved from <https://www.fsg.org/publications/building-strategic-learning-and-evaluation-system-your-organization>
- PRESKILL, H., & TORRES, R. T. (1999). *Evaluative inquiry for learning in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- WHITNEY, D., & TROSTEN-BLOOM, A. (2010). *The power of Appreciative Inquiry* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- WILLIAM AND FLORA HEWLETT FOUNDATION. (n.d.). *Openness, transparency, and learning*. Menlo Park, CA: Author. Retrieved from <https://hewlett.org/openness-transparency-learning/>
- WORLD CAFE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION. (2019). *The World Cafe: Shaping our futures through conversations that matter*. Greenbrae, CA: Author. Available online at <http://www.theworldcafe.com>

Tiffany Clarke, M.P.P., M.P.H., is an associate director of FSG. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Tiffany Clarke, FSG, 1020 19th Street NW, Suite 420, Washington, DC 20036 (email: tiffany.clarke@fsg.org).

Hallie Preskill, Ph.D., is a managing director of FSG and leads the Strategic Learning and Evaluation practice.

Abigail Stevenson, M.B.A., M.P.H., is a director of FSG.

Pamela Schwartz, M.P.H., is senior director for impact and learning at Kaiser Permanente Community Health.

Reflective Practice for Learning From Experience: Navigating the Back Roads at Work

Jan Jaffe, M.B.A.

Keywords: Reflective practice, experiential learning, professional development, organizational learning

“In modern organizations, new experiences tend to come easily, but reflection does not.”

– Quinn and Thakor (2018)

“Maybe reflective practices offer us a way of trying to make sense of the uncertainty in our workplaces and the courage to work competently and ethically at the edge of order and chaos.”

– Ghaye and Lillyman (2000, p. 7)

Introduction

Philanthropy practitioners are invested in getting things done and making things happen. Learning from experience on the job is less of a focus for investment. My colleagues and I at The Giving Practice, the national consulting team of Philanthropy Northwest, have engaged in reflective practice to observe ourselves and others in challenging situations, explore what might be going on beneath the surface, and adjust our behaviors to test and learn from different approaches. I believe that individuals, groups, and organizations mature by learning from reflecting on their experiences putting their expertise into play. However, I am aware that in philanthropy, the very word “reflection” can be viewed as self-indulgent, navel-gazing, and, potentially, a time-intensive roadblock to action.

Key Points

- What are the roadblocks that limit reflective practice in the field of philanthropy? Between the desire to move the needle on social change and the pressure to be productive, philanthropy as a field is understandably driven to focus on doing and resistant to taking time to reflect on practice. This article is designed to help foundations encourage leadership and staff to put their expertise into play as a learning strategy.
- This article defines reflective practice and traces roots and research that can inform its use. It also reports on interviews with philanthropy practitioners about how they use various reflective practice methods to navigate high-stakes situations.
- In an examination of some of the barriers to learning on the job in philanthropy, this article also suggests some activities that might build a more receptive environment for reflective practice for individuals, groups, and organizations.

The resistance to taking time to reflect on practice is understandable. The “fierce urgency of now” that drives social-change organizations is very real and has only intensified since Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963) declared that tomorrow is today for finding effective responses to social injustice and inequity. Even in organizations without a social mission, there can seem to be a lack of time for reflection. “In our daily battle against the clock, taking time to reflect on one’s work would seem to be a luxurious pursuit” (Di Stefano, Gino, Pisano, & Staats, 2014).

A lot of the most challenging work for philanthropy practitioners — work that requires adaptive learning — takes place not on high-speed expressways, but on back roads that are hard to navigate, where there are no maps, and where you cannot reach your destination on your own. These back roads are philanthropy's most important learning terrains.

Between the desire to move the needle on social change and the growing pressure in all work to be productive, philanthropy is understandably driven to focus on doing. It's also not surprising that the field turns to such planning and evaluation tools as scorecards, logic models, and theories of change when it comes to learning about doing. And why not? These metrics are like signs on the highway: They let us know if we are getting somewhere.

But here is the problem: A lot of the most challenging work for philanthropy practitioners — work that requires adaptive learning — takes place not on high-speed expressways, but on back roads that are hard to navigate, where there are no maps, and where you cannot reach your destination on your own. These back roads are philanthropy's most important learning terrains. Practitioners find themselves managing conflicts among partners in a collaborative group, or might face unexpected resistance to a new idea coming from their board. They may find themselves stuck while creating a proposal with a grantee, and are responsible when implicit bias leaves key players out of the picture. Those are

just a few of the hardy perennials that pop up when practitioners are asked, "What aspects of your work keep you up at night?" Most practitioners, regardless of position or tenure, report that they are ill-equipped to learn from these experiences in ways that will lead to better outcomes.

I believe that learning on the back roads is largely absent because practitioners in philanthropy have two big jobs — but are only resourced and prepared for one of them.

The first job is the "what" of the work, whether it be human resources or human rights. For learning the "what" of the job, there are professional associations, philanthropy-serving organizations, and gatherings with grantees. Foundations often support staff in learning the "what" of their work through underwriting the cost of attending conferences and organizing gatherings among partners.

The second job is the "how" of the work — putting one's expertise into play. Learning the "how" has traditionally been a deeply personal and private experience. Professionals usually have some way of making sense of how they work in challenging and uncharted terrain, but that way is largely unspoken and, therefore, can easily go unexamined. The landscape for learning is not completely arid, of course: Philanthropy-serving organizations offer one-off sessions on this topic at conferences and skill-building seminars, learning officers at larger foundations find themselves cataloging practices and ways of learning from them, and there are informal learning groups that spring up after cohort experiences to foster continued sharing. However, developing and sharing reflective practices for learning how to navigate these back roads is not approached as a discipline in the same way as learning the "what" of the work.

Could philanthropy encourage individuals, alone or in groups, to shift from the "how" as a private experience to an open engagement with others for the purpose of learning to navigate those back roads? Is there promise in linking this openness to building organizational and fieldwide

knowledge that could improve working internally and with partners?

A Minicase: Discovering the Value of Reflective Practice in Philanthropy

Over the past 40 years, I have done some testing and sharing of reflective practices for learning purposes in philanthropy at the organizational and field levels. As a program officer at the Ford Foundation, I was encouraged by Susan Berresford, then the foundation's vice president for programs, to turn my frustration with the absence of on-the-job dialogue into an exploration of how colleagues learn to navigate complex situations together. Berresford authorized me to interview foundation staff across fields and geography about what they were learning about their practice of managing common but critical programming dilemmas. We looked for patterns across stories about scaling up, authentic co-creation of strategy, and helping struggling projects and organizations. We gathered for informal yet semistructured conversations that spanned not only programs and geography, but also organizational hierarchy. The combination of good food and leadership that showed up in an explicitly peer role ensured foundationwide participation.

Individual program staff told me that they had not thought much about the “how” of their work as a discipline, and said they found it very useful to detach from the action, look at the dynamics of situations that had not gone as well as they wished, and compare their observations with those of colleagues in other fields and countries. We learned from one another in the moment. The knowledge generated from those conversations included noticing patterns of good practice that led to new thinking about how to organize our work. Individual learning became group learning and, in some cases, organizational knowledge that could then be shared through onboarding programs or even used to address gaps between espoused ways of working and actual behavior.

After most interviews and related workshops, practitioners would remark that these exchanges helped them clarify what they were learning from their practice and adapt new techniques for approaching their work.

Later, again thanks to support from the Ford Foundation, I was able to interview program officers in all kinds of foundations across the world about dilemmas they encountered, how they made sense of them, and what they did to adjust their behaviors to improve the “how” of their work. After most interviews and related workshops, practitioners would remark that these exchanges helped them clarify what they were learning from their practice and adapt new techniques for approaching their work. Candid¹ continues to offer the 30 GrantCraft guides that came from that project, as well as new ones. These reflections on practice are reported by new readers to be relevant to their experiences putting expertise into play.

Reflective Practice as a Tool for Individual and Group Learning

More recently, The Giving Practice has been looking into what role reflective practice might play to help practitioners engage in individual and collaborative learning on the job. Our curiosity about adding this type of reflection into the busy schedules of professionals is tied to our own use of reflective practices as consultants, what we have read in the literature from other fields, and, most important, what we have learned from practitioners about what is needed to create individual and group knowledge when there is no one right answer or technical solution to a problem. We've come to see that reflective practices

¹ Candid is the name of the new nonprofit formed jointly in February 2019 by Foundation Center and GuideStar.

FIGURE 1 Reflective Practice Methods: Examples

EXAMPLES OF Reflective Practice Methods

- **Clarify roles** with teams to match the needs of complex situations.
- **Enlist peers** to compare approaches to a dilemma.
- **Use a consultative stance** (e.g., How can I help?) versus a reactive one (e.g., How can I protect?) to advance knowledge.
- **Invite stories, images, and metaphors** that help illustrate different perspectives on a problem or solution.
- **Pause activities for joint exploration** of what might be happening “beneath the waterline” when a conversation or project flounders.
- **Build time into meetings** for individuals to write and compare notes on observations, questions, and preparedness for next steps.

These are some of the methods used by practitioners who contributed to *Philanthropy’s Reflective Practice Guide* (Jaffe, 2018).

can be used alone, to improve personal behaviors and strategies, and with others, to build more authentic relationships and get to outcomes that are based on collective insights. (See Figure 1.)

We are defining a reflective practice as a semi-structured process: observing what is happening within and around oneself and others, making collective meaning of what is observed prior to making decisions, and adjusting behaviors and strategies to test and learn ways to get to better outcomes. An invitation to observe can create mental space before decision-making in a high-stakes situation. Simple techniques for sense-making alone or in groups can invite insights into the dynamics beneath the surface of a conversation

or situation, and thereby add insight into a failing strategy or a stuck dialogue. Purposefully choosing to adjust behaviors — from shifting roles to changing tactics or strategy — to test a new approach invites learning, interrupts conditioned responses, and can lead to different outcomes.

In our interviews and consulting, my colleagues and I have observed that reflective practices work for individual learning but are especially useful for group learning. We find ourselves testing this hypothesis: If philanthropy practitioners learn reflective practices that they can use with others before, during, and after situations they find challenging and therefore intellectually and emotionally significant, they then will discover learning

in action that is adaptive, relevant, contextualized, and lasting for themselves, their teams and partners, and, perhaps, their organizations. This hypothesis is informed by four assumptions about how reflective practice works to advance learning on philanthropy's back roads:

1. Practitioners avoid learning on the job because they fear it will take too much time away from getting the work done. Reflective practice can disrupt the avoidance of learning from experience and the pressures from the "fierce urgency of now" by opening a space for authentic communication as a way to inform what actions to take.
2. Practitioners who apply reflective practices become more confident and deliberate about engaging partners and groups to reflect for better learning together.
3. Better group learning comes from authentic communication, sense-making, and creating meaning. Because reflective practice facilitates authentic, meaningful communication between individuals, use of reflective practice methods helps groups create and exchange knowledge, which is deeper and more meaningful than merely learning information.
4. When meaningful knowledge is shared, groups attain the preconditions of trust and collective understanding that precede problem-solving in challenging situations.

The use of a reflective practice as a tool for individual learning as well as building shared knowledge in real time is an idea that we'd like to see further explored. We think this is particularly important for a field like philanthropy, where much of the core work takes place in communities outside the organization. Could a foundation encourage reflective practice to help practitioners bring what they learn in the field back home to build shared knowledge? For example, a team working on a multidisciplinary initiative could be asked to take five minutes at the end of site visits and other partner meetings to write about any challenges that have come up in the work. This could be done with grantees as well

Reflective practice might be relatively new to philanthropy, but it has a rich and varied intellectual tradition.

Reflective practice is not a technical term with a single definition or one way of integrating doing and being in the world.

as separately, among the different partners. At monthly meetings, staff can break up into small groups and share dilemmas as a way to learn how others have handled similar problems, then report back to the whole group on the kind of problems that arose and look for patterns. Not only will individual staff members be learning from presenting and consulting on dilemmas, but the group as a whole will surface learnings that might suggest strategy adjustments or building out skills development. Information about approaches that worked could be shared with other teams at larger meetings and used in onboarding programs to orient new staff.

Given that some researchers believe collective learning drives individual learning (Rashman, Withers, & Hartley, 2019), we wonder whether reflective practices can function as an essential link between individuals and a collective group. Also, given that knowledge creation and learning occur when mere information attains greater meaning and value (Lee, Goh, & Chua, 2010), we speculate that reflective practice can act as the bridge that facilitates making sense of complex situations, thereby getting individuals closer to deeper learning.

The Bigger Picture: Reflective Practice Roots and Research

Reflective practice might be relatively new to philanthropy, but it has a rich and varied

We think the beauty of reflective practice lies in this invitation to be continually learning how to integrate being and doing as a lifelong discipline.

intellectual tradition. Reflective practice is not a technical term with a single definition or one way of integrating doing and being in the world. For the purposes of this article, we are highlighting a few 20th-century philosophers who have influenced thinking about reflective practice in the workplace. But it is important to note that they are standing on the shoulders of much earlier philosophers and spiritual leaders who are not always acknowledged.

John Dewey, a leader of progressive education reform in the United States, advocated an approach to inquiry that encouraged questioning assumptions and reflecting on experience (Smith, 2001). Scientist Michael Polanyi explored the tension between reasoned and critical thinking and other, more “tacit” opinions and assumptions that form the base of organized knowledge. He advocated open dialogue in scientific communities to encourage discovery and combat hidden resistance to changing opinions that are closely held but not openly discussed (Smith, 2003).

This theme of how professionals “know in action” is core to the work of management theorist Don Schön of MIT, whose work opened up exploration of reflective practice in the social sciences. A student of Dewey’s theory of inquiry, his case writing about architects, counselors, consultants, and other professionals at work shaped current thinking about the theory and practice of learning in organizations. Schön differentiated between the discipline required for technical problem solving and what is necessary to confront situations where there is more uncertainty and ambiguity about the right answer:

The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation. (Schön, 1983, p. 68)

Schön’s conceptual frame for reflective practice influenced this article in several ways. While, with business theorist Chris Argyris and others, he developed many useful tools and techniques for reflection, he resisted making it one thing. “Reflective practice is a dialogue of thinking and doing through which I become more skillful,” wrote Schön (1987, p. 31). We think the beauty of reflective practice lies in this invitation to be continually learning how to integrate being and doing as a lifelong discipline.

Ellen Schall (1995), former dean of the New York University’s Wagner School and a public service practitioner, points to Schön’s use of the term “swampy lowland” as the terrain for problems of the greatest concern to clients and to society, and his comparison to “hard, high-ground” problems which, while of real, technical interest, are often less likely to be most useful in addressing social problems. Schall suggests public service professionals must learn to love the work that takes place in the swamp in order to be of use to those they serve (p. 206).

The swamp is another way to look at the back-road dilemmas that preoccupied our interviewees. We think practitioners would recognize the difference between high-ground problems, which are often more about the “what” of their jobs, and the lowland problems, where what must be navigated is “how” to put their expertise into play.

In health, education, social work, and management fields, there is a vast amount of current writing on reflective practice. The research on its efficacy based on empirical studies is modest (White, Fook, & Gardner, 2006), with more focus on student learning in the classroom than on-the-job learning in the workplace. But a few

findings about the use of reflective practice in workplace settings might be relevant to the field of philanthropy:

1. *Time to reflect might improve performance of individuals and groups.* In a lab and field test, individuals were engaged with “doing” a project and then spent a short time being consciously reflective about what they were learning. The reflection involved 15 extra minutes of writing about their experience with very little direction about what to write or how to reflect. The research indicated that even small investments of time spent thinking can significantly enhance the learning process. In the field test, in a business setting around learning a new technique, the reflection group increased its performance by 22.8 percent over the control group. In terms of collective learning influencing individual learning and vice versa, the group that shared reflections in person for five extra minutes were 25 percent better at internalizing the learning than the control group (Di Stefano et al., 2014). In some of our interviews with philanthropy practitioners, this paradox surfaced when people noted that reflection on their practice made them more productive.
2. *Reflective practice may be a catalyst for organizational learning.* Hilden and Taikkämäki (2013) argue that the impact of reflective practice on learning inside organizations could be amplified if it was seen as contributing to knowledge management systems. They found the following:

Learning-oriented studies focus on the human factors of reflection and are imprecise regarding the power and impact mechanisms of the surrounding control system. In a similar vein, management studies search to understand the role of control in learning; yet, they tend to overlook the established theoretical notions in the individual and collective psychology of learning. Our argument is that an empirical investigation of reflective learning with an analysis of all three dimensions ([i.e.], individual, collective, and organizational learning), alongside combining cognition and action is both valuable and needed (p. 91).

These researchers propose new case studies to build what they call a “more analytical understanding of the intuitive hypothesis [that] reflection should not be a separated work task, but a shared value in organizational strategy and legitimized practice” (Hilden & Taikkämäki, 2013, p. 91). As philanthropy builds knowledge management systems, there could be opportunities to incorporate learning through reflective practice as well as lessons learned from narrative reports, scorecards, and other metrics. For example, imagine program officers writing about their stretch challenges during a site visit, or forming a new partnership and inviting feedback across fields about how others have handled similar situations.

3. *Rather than seeing organizational learning only as a movement from individual to collective levels, the movement might also work in reverse.* Rashman et al. (2009) cite several researchers who see “collective learning driving individual learning,” who “perceive social and interactive processes as shaping group and individual cognitive perspectives,” and who “describe interaction as the basis of simultaneous knowledge construction and transfer. Interaction can develop shared meaning and perspectives, which is the basis of knowledge” (p. 477).

Through this lens, reflective practice is not just in service of individual learning. Rather, it might help facilitate connection externally with others, in a group setting. The connection is the precursor to group learning. In other words, reflective practices could enable a group to learn collectively as they encounter the bumps in the back roads. And in that process, individuals learn as well. For example, a group might clarify and assign roles before a meeting starts, and then check in on whether that advanced learning toward the task at hand, and how. Doing so could build new knowledge in the group, and might also help individuals mobilize and manage themselves in a role, thereby building personal knowledge.

Practitioners consistently reported that using reflective practices deepened their working relationships. In most cases, practices enabled collaborative testing of new approaches and strategies. Interviewees often noted that their practices helped balance power differentials and achieve unexpected solutions.

Application of Reflective Practice in Philanthropy

The Giving Practice interviewed more than two dozen practitioners, who reported what they did to help themselves and others learn from challenging experiences and get to better outcomes in terms of both relationships and shared goals. Their stories were rich and similar to what arises in consultations or what can be found from GrantCraft. The challenges described almost always included partners — internal teams, grantees, or board members. Practitioners consistently reported that using reflective practices deepened their working relationships. In most cases, practices enabled collaborative testing of new approaches and strategies. Interviewees often noted that their practices helped balance power differentials and achieve unexpected solutions.

Four core reflective practice methods were most commonly and effectively used:

Practice No. 1: Paying Attention to Role

A common element in practitioners' stories was developing techniques to discern and take up whatever role needed to match the task at hand. By role, they were not referring to their position in the organization, but rather to their part in a

challenging situation. "Role" in their stories represented all the uncoded behaviors they had to explore and expect of themselves to accomplish a task, even those they preferred to avoid or that were counter to their position. Organizational theorists at CFAR define "role" as that which authorizes you to do the work. In that sense, it is a practice that can help you manage vulnerability when you are in a new or uncomfortable position (L. Hirschhorn, personal communication, n.d.).

Gail Christopher (2018), founder of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Truth and Reconciliation Program, described some of the challenges involved in working with policymakers to do a deeper dive on questions of equity when they have been trained to approach problems as technical ones. The program's process was personal as well as professional. Christopher said she knew it would work, but faced a skeptical group. To persuade them get on board, she explicitly clarified her role as making time for discussion of the emotional side of the work as well as identifying the measurable steps that needed to take place. She asked for their buy-in to help her hold that space, even though she recognized that they might not appreciate it at first. This allowed policymakers to gain new knowledge from their personal experiences with equity as a group, knowledge that in turn helped shape policy reforms.

Katie Hong (2017), director of the youth homelessness program at the Raikes Foundation, told a story about supporting a highly visible project that was floundering and her need to pay attention to her own disappointment, frustration, and fears about the impact of possible failure. At the same time, she was organizing a way to work with an outside facilitator to help unpack what she called "the collective we" had built. In the role of a participant in the process, she could encourage herself and others to detach and look at the whole system to search for improvements instead of fixing blame on one part of the system. By explicitly inviting a collective review of the whole system, she constructed a reflective practice bridge for everyone to use in moving from a difficult experience to a learning experience.

We construct roles all the time, often without even thinking about it. In challenging situations, it is useful to treat role construction as a reflective practice by identifying the primary task and the appropriate role: Does this situation require a mediator, a closer, a critical friend, an active listener, an analyst, or an advocate? This moment of toggling between task and role to get the correct calibration can be a helpful tool in all kinds of conversations, but especially where there is ambiguity about a task (e.g., site visits or collaborating on a proposal) or when a group is encountering a roadblock to achieving a goal.

Practice No. 2: Practicing Presence

Practitioners described techniques that helped them and others learn to “press the pause button” before or during an important meeting to reflect or review before taking an action or making a decision. Some said they used their daily commute for silent reflection, or calendared five minutes of quiet time between scheduled meetings. To facilitate an after-action review practice, another interviewee wrote down positive and negative reactions to calls and meetings during the day.

Headwaters Foundation CEO Brenda Solórzano (2018) developed a practice with her board to help strengthen the relationship between strategy and the foundation’s newly minted social justice values: The board reviewed its values out loud at the beginning of each meeting. While it seemed forced and awkward at first, she reported that it enabled board members to more readily and explicitly apply the values to some unexpected and challenging situations. June Wilson (2017), former CEO of the Quixote Foundation, would ask her board and staff to stop conversations to reflect in the moment when she sensed — often physically — that they needed to test assumptions and feelings tied to a conversation first in order to make a good decision.

A contemplative practice can condition the climate to integrate thinking and doing. The U.K.-based Mindfulness Initiative (2016), citing a range of research, defines mindfulness as “an inherent human capacity akin to a language acquisition,

We construct roles all the time, often without even thinking about it. In challenging situations, it is useful to treat role construction as a reflective practice by identifying the primary task and the appropriate role: Does this situation require a mediator, a closer, a critical friend, an active listener, an analyst, or an advocate?

a capacity that enables people to focus on what they experience in the moment, inside themselves as well as in their environment, with an attitude of openness, curiosity, and care” (p. 7). Organizational theorist William A. Kahn (1992) developed the concept of psychological presence as core to helping people “express thoughts and feelings, question assumptions, innovate” in their roles at work. “Presence creates conditions of trust and safety that allow difficult conversations to be engaged and worked through such that individuals learn and grow and their systems become ‘unstuck’” (p. 323).

Practice No. 3: Letting the “Right Brain” In

In cases where analysis of a problem was by itself insufficient to clear a barrier to getting the work done, some practitioners introduced “right brain” activities — e.g., drawing, use of images or metaphors, reading poetry — to help groups surface unspoken assumptions, feelings, and opposing viewpoints that might aid in the navigation of back roads.

Doug Stamm (2018), former CEO of the Meyer Memorial Trust, described shaking up a long-stuck conversation, taking place during several

Philanthropy is an analytic field that relies on explanations as its main communication tool. While there is nothing wrong with that, practitioners often need to get past competing explanations to arrive at a shared understanding of a problem or solution. Images, poetry, and metaphors can help people learn from one another in a new way.

years of meetings and learning tours, about the pros and cons of taking on mission-related investments (MRIs). At a gathering of investment advisors and the trust's board, he distributed a mock edition of the local newspaper that contained "coverage" of Meyer's investments in tobacco and support for treatment of children with cancer. Reading a headline and front-page story of a fake paper, even with the full knowledge that the story was not real, helped stimulate a more authentic conversation about the costs and benefits of MRIs — and catalyzed a policy change.

At the Center for Creative Leadership, Palus and Horth (2015) have written about their experiments with visual images to promote mediated dialogue that is a form of reflective practice. They refer to this technique as "putting something in the middle" of conversations to help reduce the anxiety and defensiveness inherent in contexts such as leadership development and social transformation and sustain attention to what is hard to talk about (p. 692). They hypothesize that the images help groups go through the stages of observing, collectively making meaning, and adjusting behaviors while focused

on a "third object," rather than getting stuck in defending their own assumptions or attacking those of others. Schön (1993) was also very interested in metaphors as another form of a mediated object that enables professionals to reflect on their practice.

Philanthropy is an analytic field that relies on explanations as its main communication tool. While there is nothing wrong with that, practitioners often need to get past competing explanations to arrive at a shared understanding of a problem or solution. Images, poetry, and metaphors can help people learn from one another in a new way.

Practice No. 4: Enlisting Peers

Philanthropy practitioners described learning from semistructured group interviews in which they shared a dilemma and actively listened to how others handled similar situations. The presentation of a dilemma in this fashion gives practitioners an opportunity to detach from the heat of the moment. The technique often includes writing down the dilemma before talking about it; in doing so, practitioners report that they can see more that way than by simply telling their story. Some of the practices include metaphorically stepping away from the situation — turning away from the group to take notes on what it is discussing. In most cases, peers talk among themselves about their experience with a similar dilemma — what they did and what they might do differently now — instead of simply advising the presenter on a response. As a result, the listeners are invited to reflect and learn from their own experiences with one another.

Two CEOs from a cohort facilitated by The Giving Practice to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in their organizations shared how peer consults helped them learn to shift their board's thinking from anonymity to transparency as an inclusion strategy and, in another case, to see equity as an internal as well as external value (The Giving Practice, personal communications, 2015–2018). Ryan Chao (2017), vice president at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, used meeting time with his team for 30-minute peer consults on an individual challenge to allow everyone to

reflect on what they have learned in similar situations. This helped combat some of the inevitable isolation in philanthropy, where much of the work takes place one-on-one and there are few opportunities for observation and feedback.

The use of peer consults in the workplace is often traced to research done by John Seely Brown, chief scientist for Xerox Corp. and director of the Xerox PARC research center. In the 1980s, Xerox hired ethnographers to figure out how its 21,000 technicians learned to solve day-to-day problems not addressed in the company's technical manuals. They discovered that the technicians learned by telling each other "war stories" that focused on sharing dilemmas they encountered alone on the job to build and discount theories about what works in different situations (Brown & Duguid, 1991).

This semistructured technique for learning from practice has been adapted by a number of training organizations familiar to philanthropy, including the Rockwood Leadership Institute, James P. Shannon Leadership Institute, the Center for Courage and Renewal's Heart of Philanthropy, Cambridge Leadership Associates, Liberating Structures, and Action Design. At *The Giving Practice*, we have observed that it doesn't take very long to transfer the knowledge about how to create and sustain a peer consult to a group.

What Is the Roadblock That Limits Reflective Practice in Philanthropy?

If reflective practices are so useful to practitioners, why haven't they been widely adopted in the field of philanthropy? While some of our interviewees reported being part of a group that deliberately used reflective practices to learn from one another, it was not within their own organization. Few of the positional leaders in our interviews who use reflective practices themselves have tried to systematically introduce them into the structure or culture of their organization. It is almost as if the spirit is willing, but on a systems level the call to make reflection a discipline is weak. Why is this the case? What is it in the system that gets in the way? I offer two hypotheses.

If reflective practices are so useful to practitioners, why haven't they been widely adopted in the field of philanthropy?

First, all social systems — including philanthropy — have protective mechanisms. The business of philanthropy is to help solve difficult problems, many of them chronic and seemingly intractable and others that are acute and horrifying in their own right. Getting it right (defining the problem, identifying the foundation's comparative advantage to address it, etc.) is important. But on the ground, the work of getting it right is messy and often looks very different from the original strategy. It is difficult to acknowledge that an organization's investment may not succeed in moving the needle or that the solution to a problem is simply not clearly evident.

As humans, a default response is to distance ourselves from the messiness or even painfulness of an effort. Menzies-Lyth (1960), a psychoanalyst and organizational theorist, described how hospital systems develop defensive protocols that "help" nurses and doctors avoid the anxiety of working with very sick patients. As one example, she cited the practice of waking people up from badly needed sleep to take their temperature. There might be a similar dynamic to be found in philanthropy. Consider, for example, how grantee narrative reports can replace a badly needed conversation on the ground about what may or may not be working. It can be difficult to talk about what an individual, group, or organization might have contributed to a failed conversation, meeting, or strategy. Reflective practices create space for those conversations and the learning that emerges from them, but people have to trust that those practices will work and not make things worse. Could the focus on "what" philanthropy does rather than "how" we do it be a social defense against fears and worries about the work itself?

What might help the field of philanthropy test the value of reflective practices for individual, group, and organizational learning? My inclination would be to look for features in the current landscape of activities in philanthropy that lend themselves to different ways of testing and learning through reflective practice. Three areas come to mind: networks, newcomers, and learning by doing.

My second hypothesis involves “doing” versus “being” as a corporate image. The philanthropic model of private money for public good has built-in inequities at macro and micro levels that can stimulate all kinds of irrational behavior when it comes to how we want to be seen. Proof of value lies in the outcome of an investment. Too much focus on internal learning, even if the learning is intended to improve that outcome, can be perceived as self-indulgent. This belief manifests itself in a commonly held, zero-sum argument that a dollar for staff development is a dollar less for grantees. The desire to keep overhead low and our eyes on the prize is a good thing. Still, might the attitude that some investments are excessive stem more from concerns about appearances than from the expense’s ultimate impact on grantees?

A Road Map for Testing and Learning From Reflective Practice

What might help the field of philanthropy test the value of reflective practices for individual, group, and organizational learning? My

inclination would be to look for features in the current landscape of activities in philanthropy that lend themselves to different ways of testing and learning through reflective practice. Three areas come to mind: networks, newcomers, and learning by doing.

Network the Beacons of Reflective Practice Activity

There are bright spots throughout the landscape. There are individuals in the field who use reflective practices, but because they often work in different programmatic fields or in unrelated organizations, they do not come together to form a critical mass. However, some of these practitioners might be interested in learning new practices from one another. There are informal, self-organized groups across the country that provide this kind of support. Some groups are limited to CEOs and others include a mix of positions, but most have shared a leadership development or peer-cohort experience that has made them reflective practitioners.

To build a critical mass of people using reflective practices, these individuals and groups could be invited to learn from one another through meetings at philanthropy-serving organizations and/or webinars about the variety of ways they use reflective practices. This may produce a network for ongoing learning and raise the visibility of reflective practice as a tool for the field as members communicate with one another about what is being learned.

Introduce Newcomers to Reflective Practices

Most regional associations and some larger foundations offer onboarding opportunities that could include training in reflective practices by current members or staff who use them. Consultants could also be tapped to help with this training. Some philanthropy-serving organizations work with leadership training groups to offer skill-building workshops; if foundations helped underwrite these offerings, they could become regular programs. And human resources staff at foundations could use their existing networks to disseminate curriculum for training in reflective practices inside foundations.

Learn by Doing

There are a few potentially transformative strategies in philanthropy where testing and learning through a reflective practice lens might be valuable to advancing that work:

- More foundations are exploring how DEI goals impact how they work internally and with grantees and partners.
- There is renewed interest among foundations with partners and grantees to discover the “how” of collaborating across the boundaries of different kinds of organizations.
- With the increasing presence of learning officers inside foundations, there is new interest in informal as well as formal learning from program and organizational strategy.

These are the types of efforts that require learning in action. The roads are not well traveled, and there is much work left to do translating experiences into signals and knowledge. Philanthropy could support research that offers teams working on these strategic initiatives, inside or across foundations, the opportunity to choose from a variety of reflective practices to help them advance the work. If process and outcome evaluations are built into the plan, we can learn whether reflective practices make a difference.

A road map makes it easier to travel on back roads. By amplifying the voices of those already using reflective practices, treating reflective practices as a teachable discipline for newcomers, and learning whether and how these practices can sustain organizational goals like DEI, collaboration, and learning across silos, we will be offering guides that can help practitioners learn as individuals and groups while they are traveling the back roads that are part of most critical experiences in philanthropy.

By amplifying the voices of those already using reflective practices, treating reflective practices as a teachable discipline for newcomers, and learning whether and how these practices can sustain organizational goals like DEI, collaboration, and learning across silos, we will be offering guides that can help practitioners learn as individuals and groups while they are traveling the back roads that are part of most critical experiences in philanthropy.

Acknowledgments

I want to express my thanks to peer readers who reviewed drafts and offered very helpful feedback, and to my colleagues at the Giving Practice, Mark Sedway and Pat Vinh-Thomas, for engaging in generative thinking and honest critique throughout the process of writing this article.

References

- BROWN, J., & DUGUID, P. (1991). Organizational learning and communities-of-practice: Toward a unified view of working, learning, and innovation. *Organizational Science*, 2(1), 40–57.
- CHAO, R. (2017, January 30). Stepping back to see more clearly ... alone and in teams [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.reflectivepractices.org/posts/stepping-back-to-see-more-clearly-alone-and-in-teams/>
- CHRISTOPHER, G. (2018, February 6). Effective philanthropy is heart work and hard work [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.reflectivepractices.org/posts/effective-philanthropy-is-heart-work-and-hard-work/>
- DI STEFANO, G., GINO, F., PISANO, G., & STAATS, B. (2014). *Learning by thinking: How reflection improves performance* (Harvard Business School Working Paper No. 14-093). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School. Available online at <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/learning-by-thinking-how-reflection-improves-performance>
- GHAYE, T., & LILLYMAN, S. (2000). *Reflection: Principles and practice for healthcare professionals*. Dinton, Salisbury: Quay Books.
- HILDEN, S., AND TAIKKÄMAKI, K. (2013). Reflective practice as a fuel for organizational learning. *Administrative Science Journal*, 3(3), 76–95.
- HONG, K. (2017, January 12). Systems thinking: How you show up matters [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.reflectivepractices.org/posts/systems-thinking-how-you-show-up-matters/>
- JAFFE, J. (2018). *Philanthropy's reflective practices: Build what you bring to the work*. Seattle, WA: The Giving Practice.
- KAHN, W. A. (1992). To be fully there: Psychological presence at work. *Human Relations*, 45(4), 321–349.
- KING, M. L., JR. (1963). *I have a dream*. Retrieved from <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>
- LEE, C. S., GOH, D. H., & CHUA, A. (2010). An analysis of knowledge management mechanisms in healthcare portals. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 42(1), 20–44.
- MENZIES LYTCH, I. (1960). Social systems as a defence against anxiety: A report of a study on the nursing service of a general hospital. *Human Relations*, 13(2), 95–121.
- MINDFULNESS INITIATIVE. (2016). *Building the case for mindfulness in the workplace*. Retrieved from https://www.themindfulnessinitiative.org.uk/images/reports/MI_Building-the-Case_v1.1_Oct16.pdf
- PALUS, C., & HORTH, D. (2015). Mediated Dialogue in Action Research. In H. Bradbury (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research, 3rd Edition*. (691–699). Sage Publications.
- RASHMAN, L., WITHERS, E., & HARTLEY, J. (2009). Organizational learning and knowledge in public service organizations: A systematic review of literature. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 11(4), 463–494.
- QUINN, R. E., & THAKOR, A. V. (2018, July-August). Creating a purpose-driven organization. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2018/07/creating-a-purpose-driven-organization>
- SCHALL, E. (1995). Learning to love the swamp: Reshaping education for public service. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 14(2), 202–220.
- SCHÖN, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York City, NY: Basic Books.
- SCHÖN, D. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- SCHÖN, D. (1993). *Metaphor and thought*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- SMITH, M. K. (2001). John Dewey on education, experience and community. *Encyclopaedia of Informal Education*. Retrieved from <http://infed.org/mobi/john-dewey-on-education-experience-and-community/>
- SMITH, M. K. (2003). Michael Polanyi and tacit knowledge. *Encyclopaedia of Informal Education*. Retrieved from <http://infed.org/mobi/michael-polanyi-and-tacit-knowledge/>
- SOLÓRZANO, B. (2018, September 12). Making values work for teams [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.reflectivepractices.org/posts/stepping-back-to-see-more-clearly-alone-and-in-teams/>
- STAMM, D. (2018, March 30). Putting something in the middle [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.reflectivepractices.org/posts/putting-something-in-the-middle/>
- WHITE, S., FOOK, J., & GARDNER, F. (2006). *Critical reflection: A review of contemporary literature and understandings*. In S. White, J. Fook, & F. Gardner (Eds.), *Critical reflection in health and social care* (pp. 3–20). Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- WILSON, J. (2017, February 8). How can I be 1% more? [Web log post.] Retrieved from <http://www.reflectivepractices.org/posts/how-can-i-be-1-more/>

Jan Jaffe, M.B.A., is senior partner for The Giving Practice at Philanthropy Northwest. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jan Jaffe, The Giving Practice, Philanthropy Northwest, 2101 Fourth Avenue, Suite 650, Seattle, WA 98121 (email: JJaffe@philanthropynw.org).

Knowledge Translation to Enhance Evaluation Use: A Case Example

Alison Rogers, M.P.H., M.Eval., and Catherine Malla, M.I.P.H., The Fred Hollows Foundation

Keywords: *Knowledge translation, evaluation, foundations*

Introduction

Foundations, nonprofits, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) need to harness information from needs assessments, monitoring, evaluations, and lessons learned for both accountability and improvement (Gill, 2010; McCoy, Rose, & Connolly, 2013; Moxham, 2014). Such knowledge is becoming an increasingly important commodity within foundations in order to function efficiently and competitively (LaPaige, 2010). Additionally, being able to capture the reality of programming in complex contexts is important knowledge for programming with an equity focus (Drake, Hutchings, & Elias, 2010). While the capacity to access, process, and use information varies among organizations, there are some common issues concerning information use, described here by Sonnichsen (2000, p. 82–85):

- Decision-makers will make decisions with or without sufficient information.
- Decision-makers urgently need information.
- Evaluations usually involve complex issues with complex solutions.
- Decision-makers are generally more comfortable with in-house information.
- Decision-makers want answers to “What works?”
- Information must be presented in an understandable format. Know the audience!
- Information sometimes acts as a “referee.”

Key Points

- Knowledge in the form of information suitable for decision making or advocacy by foundations is not always readily available – a situation unacceptable for those who need such information for accountability, learning, and influencing policy and practice. This article addresses how essential information about monitoring, evaluation, and lessons learned can be made available to foundations.
- The Fred Hollows Foundation identified a gap in this area through an evaluation capacity-building readiness assessment, and introduced the concept of participatory, real-time monitoring, evaluation, and learning bulletins grounded in the principles of knowledge translation. This article describes how those bulletins were developed and used within the foundation to ensure access to relevant and timely information, and examines how they provided a mechanism to promote internal reflection and shift attitudes around data, which supported the development of a culture of evaluation.
- This approach for the timely development, synthesis, sharing, and dissemination of relevant information will be useful for foundations that have limited resources. As knowledge translation is often not resourced sufficiently in and by foundations, this article seeks to add weight to the argument for prioritization of packaging information in accessible ways.
- Decision-makers may have program responsibility but insufficient decision-making authority.

In the context of this article, the knowledge being "translated" is collected from organizational projects rather than research, which is the more common form of knowledge referred to when describing knowledge translation.

All the issues resonate strongly in the context in which this article is based, but presenting information in an understandable format, we believe, is crucially important. Even though information is essential for informed decision making to ensure considered actions are implemented, these are problems that organizations continue to face and that may even be heightened in an age of information overload. "The need for and use of information can be unsystematic, situational, and driven by events and crises that, once concluded, are soon forgotten. ... This random approach to organizational problem solving is suboptimal use of knowledge-producing resources" (Sonnichsen, 2000, p. 86).

This article seeks to answer the question, How can information about monitoring, evaluation, and lessons learned be available when critical programming decisions need to be made or when tools for advocacy are required? Donnelly, Letts, Klinger, and Shulha (2014) found that although the field of evaluation has been focused on use of evaluation, there is minimal literature on how evaluation can support knowledge translation and how knowledge translation can support evaluation use. This article addresses this gap by sharing a case example of how The Fred Hollows Foundation's Indigenous Australia Program used knowledge-translation theory to enhance the uptake of monitoring, evaluation, and learning information. From the internal perspective of practitioners working within the

foundation, an international NGO concerned with eye health, we share how we applied the principles of knowledge translation when considering dissemination of evaluation information.

In the context of this article, the knowledge being "translated" is collected from organizational projects rather than research, which is the more common form of knowledge referred to when describing knowledge translation (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2016). This article clarifies what we understand knowledge translation to entail, discusses the importance of understanding and using evaluation and other learning information, and describes the context and the methods that were undertaken to address the information needs of foundation decision makers. We also discuss developing evaluation dissemination products that were appropriate, useful, engaging, and relevant, which may be useful for foundations in similar situations who need to communicate findings to multiple audiences.

Knowledge Translation

The field of knowledge translation, alongside other related terms (McKibbin et al., 2010), concerns the process of accessing, generating, synthesizing, and disseminating knowledge in order to make decisions and create action (Dagenais, Ridde, Laurendeau, & Souffez, 2009). The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) defines knowledge translation as

[a] dynamic and iterative process that includes synthesis, dissemination, exchange, and ethically sound application of knowledge to improve [health] ..., provide more effective health services and products, and strengthen the health care system ... within a complex system of interactions between researchers and users (2016, para. 5–6)

Effective knowledge translation can improve health and development and reduce health inequities through enabling appropriate knowledge to influence policy and practice (Welch, Ueffing, & Tugwell, 2009; Jönsson, Tomson, Jönsson, Kounnavong, & Wahlström, 2007; Ferreira, 2012), a key priority of many foundations. Foundations can play a wide range

FIGURE 1 Changes in Stakeholder Relationships Over Time: A Networking Map

of roles throughout the process of knowledge translation, including conducting, promoting, and advocating for relevant research and evaluations; managing knowledge effectively; utilizing knowledge for practice and advocacy; disseminating findings appropriately; and acting as knowledge brokers (Sanders, Labonte, Baum, & Chopra, 2004; Zachariah, Ford, Draguez, Yun, & Reid, 2010; Delisle, Roberts, Munro, Jones, &

Gyorkos, 2005; Hamel & Schrecker, 2011; Drake et al., 2010). Considering the important role that knowledge translation can play in improving health, it is important to support and build on foundations' capabilities to participate in knowledge translation activities.

Although the field of evaluation use and knowledge translation emerged as two separate fields

FIGURE 2 Multiple Patient Databases Restricting Flow of Information: A Systems Map

with different terminology, they in fact describe similar change processes (Donnelly & Searle, 2017). Knowledge translation has focused heavily on the translation of research to policy (Jacobson, 2007; Davies, Nutley, & Walter, 2008; Kitson et al., 2008), but the “knowledge” component need not be restricted to research. In fact, the term “knowledge” itself has many meanings, interpretations, and classifications (see, e.g., Brown, 2010) and is made sense of and understood in different contexts (Powell, 2006; Narayanaswamy, 2013; Miltenburg et al., 2016). This has particular relevance for foundations, whose characteristically unique connections to community and commitment to social justice make knowledge that can promote equity critically important. For example, presenting monitoring data in an infographic that highlights disparities among members of different cultural groups on a waiting list for surgery could be a powerful advocacy tool. Visual representations of change in stakeholder relationships through

social network maps or blockages in the flow of data also become tools that can be catalysts for change. (See Figures 1 and 2).

There are a vast number of models, frameworks, and theories of knowledge translation (Brehaut & Eva, 2012; Estabrooks, Thompson, Lovely, & Hofmeyer, 2006; Tabak, Khoong, Chambers, & Brownson, 2012). Jacobsen (2007) provides a concise overview of these — both push/pull and more interactive models of knowledge translation; those that focus on process and relationships; the “two communities” model;¹ and diffusion of innovation — sometimes with an additional component such as communication, organizational, political science, or behavior-change theories. Nevertheless, the purpose of knowledge translation remains the same, and, for this article, involves facilitating the awareness of the existence of knowledge and its use to improve health and creating action from this knowledge (LaPaige, 2010).

¹ The “two communities” model defines a cultural gap between knowledge producers and users (Jacobsen, 2007).

Much of the knowledge translation literature focuses on the instrumental use of knowledge: looking at how research has a direct impact on policy and practice (Weiss, 1979). But knowledge translation can also facilitate change through “shifts in perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs” (Davies et al., 2008, p. 189). This may be particularly relevant in the fields of work that concern foundations.

Understanding and Using Evaluation

How evaluation is undertaken, what approaches are adopted, what questions are asked, how the information is collected, and how the evaluative information is used varies greatly among organizations (Gill, 2010). Foundations source evaluation expertise in many ways to implement inquiry, feedback, reflection, and change, and to make value judgments (Baron, 2011; Beere, 2005; Bourgeois, Hart, Townsend, & Gagne, 2011). But despite the potential benefits of evaluation and the variety of approaches to it that are undertaken, the problem of evaluation use by foundation leaders and decision makers still exists. Even when evaluations are designed to consider how every step in the process will affect the utility and actual use of the evaluation findings, there can still be a mismatch in expectations. Based on interviews with internal evaluators using a utilization-focused approach, Patton (2008) observes: “Internal evaluators are often asked by superiors for public relations information rather than evaluation” (p. 139). A disconnect remains between undertaking evaluation and engagement with decision makers and applying the findings to learning opportunities.

Doherty, Eccleston, Hansen, Natalier, and Churchill argue that “evaluation literacy is what is really needed — the capacity to understand and use evaluation, not necessarily the capacity to do evaluation” (2015, p. 36). It is essential to ensure that there are opportunities to reflect and think critically, and that tools are available and mechanisms are in place so employees can access all types of evaluative information from any stage of a monitoring, evaluation, or learning process so they can understand and use the information to make decisions (Rogers, Kelly, & McCoy, 2019). Integrated knowledge translation can facilitate

Integrated knowledge translation can facilitate evaluation literacy, which consists of “the cognitive and social skills that determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand, and use evaluative information in ways that ultimately contribute to achieving organizational goals.”

evaluation literacy, which consists of “the cognitive and social skills that determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand, and use evaluative information in ways that ultimately contribute to achieving organizational goals” (Rogers et al., 2019).

Donnelly and Searle (2017) describe three ways through which knowledge translation can improve evaluation use:

1. the synthesis of knowledge surrounding a particular topic to ensure a more informed evaluation,
2. promoting action by ensuring that evaluation findings are translated into useable products, and
3. promoting evaluations that start with the intended use in mind.

This article describes the development of a communication product that supports item No. 2, translating evaluation findings. The useable product was not only about providing pure evidence that directly informed changes, but also about influencing a shift in perception.

To address this need, real-time monitoring, evaluation, and learning “bulletins” were introduced, similar to what other foundations have been using and grounded in knowledge translation theory.

Context of the Case

Both authors are undertaking doctoral-level research into topics that relate to knowledge and evaluation; both research projects are set within foundations, but focus on distinct topics. However, we are studying and working in the sector simultaneously and are seeking to ensure our work will be useful and relevant for practitioners. For over five years, we have held program-development positions with a focus on monitoring, evaluation, and learning, and have been embedded in a team that is delivering projects designed to strengthen health systems. The impetus for this article emerged from our experience in using knowledge translation for enhancing evaluation use and the recognition of a gap in the literature.

Separately located from the head office by a distance of more than 3,000 kilometers, The Fred Hollows Foundation’s Indigenous Australia Program was constantly being asked, “What are you doing up there?” “Where are the numbers?” “Why are you doing it that way?” Like many foundations, we were doing highly challenging human services and public health work that involved complex ethical issues. From global, political, and organizational perspectives, we needed to work toward enhancing the use of monitoring and information to learn, improve, and be accountable for how funds were being used to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Prior to 2014, the program was struggling, with limited resources, to meet the increasing demands from the foundation to demonstrate performance and effectiveness.

The Need for a Communication Tool

The Indigenous Australia Program went through a formal process of embedding evaluative thinking, critical thinking around evaluation, and integrating evaluation at all levels of the organization through an evaluation capacity-building (ECB) approach (Buckley, Archibald, Hargraves, & Trochim, 2015; Preskill & Boyle, 2008). Our overarching aim was to promote evaluation literacy to ensure that strategic goals were accomplished and effective development programs delivered; that project management decisions were made on the basis of monitoring and evaluating findings; and that we were able to demonstrate the use of evaluation throughout all systems, processes, and activities (Preskill & Boyle, 2008; Sanders, 2002).

In 2014, a readiness appraisal was conducted with all 14 staff members to assess the extent to which the program met the necessary conditions to support an ECB approach. The key question was, “What is required to embed ethical and appropriate evaluative thinking into the program’s processes and make evaluation an integral, efficient part of routine operations?” The appraisal concluded that the program met the majority of conditions required to embed evaluation throughout all systems, processes, and activities, such as support from leadership, an encouraging learning climate, and access to resources. However, it also identified a need to increase the use of evaluation findings for decision making and to purposefully communicate findings. To address this need, real-time monitoring, evaluation, and learning “bulletins” were introduced, similar to what other foundations have been using (Hwalek & Grich Williams, 2010) and grounded in knowledge translation theory.

Developing a Bulletin: A Case Example

The process of developing and disseminating a real-time monitoring, evaluation, and learning bulletin can be broken down into the following steps:

1. Using a Word template, project officers managing the grant with partners and involved with the evaluation process

FIGURE 3 Sample 2018 Bulletins From Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet

summarize into dot points a monitoring, evaluation, or key learning event under the following headings:

- Key achievements
 - Health-system reform
 - Training events/outcomes
 - Networking maps/graphs/tables
 - Background
 - Publicity/internet links
 - Reflections
 - Challenges
 - Improvements required/lessons learned — What would we do differently?
 - Quotes
2. The internal evaluator adds existing information from programming experience, previous findings, and published or gray literature; coordinates and encourages the engagement of others; and provides support to the project officers throughout the process.

In contrast to the initial difficulties we encountered when communicating our evaluation findings, the bulletins allow the Indigenous Australia Program to demonstrate to a wide audience its commitment to learning and provide us with a way to purposefully communicate evaluation findings.

3. The draft Word version of the bulletin is shared with other project officers for input.
4. A final draft is shared with management to add context, refine language for an external audience, and frame challenges effectively.
5. A graphic designer creates a modern, easy-to-read, four-page format for the text and visual elements that is aligned with the organization's style guide. (See Figure 3.)
6. An electronic PDF version of the bulletin is created and shared via email, launched on the organization's internal social media platform, uploaded to the organization's intranet, and attached to the quarterly board report.
7. Bulletins are then available to be referenced in project design documents, used as briefings prior to site visits, attached to grant proposals, shared with donors, analyzed for common findings in a meta-analysis, and shared with new staff as part of orientation.

While it is possible to produce such a bulletin in a day, the process required between four and six weeks in order to develop opportunities for

multiple stakeholders to contribute. In this context, where the evaluation may have been undertaken over four to six months, that represents a relatively short turnaround. The iterative process required time and sufficient opportunities for reflection, and multiple levels of checking and reviewing promoted important discussion. Active engagement required time for consultation, negotiation, and even conflict resolution as different perspectives and beliefs were acknowledged and incorporated.

Over 40 bulletins have been produced since 2014. Each contains rich, solid information from a variety of sources, such as summaries of external evaluation reports or monitoring data from partner organizations. The bulletins are brief, but contain evidence drawn from our programming experience in combination with knowledge from subject-matter experts. They provide data when critical decisions need to be made or tools for advocacy are required. The bulletins have an attractive layout and contain a balance of photos, models, and diagrams; flow charts, systems maps, and graphs; quotes; references and links; and text.

The range of bulletin topics has been extensive. They are determined by the project officers, at the request of a manager, or by the internal evaluator, and are usually driven by the release of information requiring timely dissemination. Some bulletins have captured what we learned from our programs focusing on the social determinants of health; others reflect on our approach and the way we work, consolidate our monitoring data, or summarize evaluation reports. Many of the bulletins synthesize knowledge that may otherwise have remained unshared and therefore unable to influence management decisions, policy, and practice — including the voices of community members, the reflections of project officers on what works and why, and the outcomes of critical conversations among staff that took place while they worked together on a bulletin.

Using the Information

The response from other sections of the organization since the introduction of the bulletins? “Ah, now we know what you’re doing up there!”

In contrast to the initial difficulties we encountered when communicating our evaluation findings, the bulletins allow the Indigenous Australia Program to demonstrate to a wide audience its commitment to learning and provide us with a way to purposefully communicate evaluation findings.

The bulletins are attached to the quarterly board reports to provide succinct, yet tangible, examples of the progress and challenges in our quest to improve health. They are distributed on our social media platform to our colleagues across the world, and uploaded onto our internal intranet so that staff around the globe can dive into learnings from the program. The team has also incorporated the bulletins into presentations and multimedia products, and for use as handouts or summaries of longer documents. Most importantly, decision makers can refer to these when determining where to allocate funds, as the bulletins are embedded in project design documents. Accessing short yet rigorously edited documents that have been subjected to a peer-review system at the grassroots level has helped boost the confidence of foundation representatives presenting information about the program to an external audience.

Many parts of the organization have expressed their enthusiasm for the bulletins, which have raised our profile and enhanced our credibility. Our willingness to share achievements —while also detailing the challenges, what we have learned, and what we would do differently — has demonstrated our commitment to improving and helping others to improve. Project officers indicate that they find documenting the future implications of what they have learned to be the most important section of any bulletin; the “next steps” content is often useful for other foundation sections.

The bulletins were developed as a tool for internal communication purposes, to allow frank and open discussion among staff about challenges and what didn’t work well. But the demand for information from sources outside the foundation revealed the need to share the bulletins externally. Conversations about learnings can

now be shared with partners via the Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet (2018), and form part of a broader knowledge-translation package.

Discussion

As practitioners sharing what we have learned with readers who may be considering developing similar bulletins, our key piece of advice would be to start small. Develop a bulletin based on a topic for which the information is readily available. Engage a small group in the production and create an appealing draft quickly. The timeliness, attractiveness, and ease with which you are able to craft the bulletin will generate momentum. Discussing the pros and cons of dedicating resources to developing bulletins may be an inevitable part of the journey, but producing an example that allows decision makers to grasp the potential of this tool is essential. In our case, it took only the first bulletin for management to see the potential benefits. The first topic was uncontroversial, but still captured challenges and learnings — and it opened a path for other, more divisive topics by demonstrating that such information would be handled respectfully. It was not long before demand for the bulletins was coming from the highest levels of the foundation, the necessary resources were allocated, and the bulletins became part of routine operations.

Translating evaluation information, evidence, and knowledge into products to have readily available for accountability, learning, and policy and practice influence proved to be very useful to and highly valued by a wide range of stakeholders in and outside the foundation. However, the value that had the most sustained impact on developing a culture of evaluation was found in the process of developing the bulletins. The process stimulated reflection among staff throughout all stages of the project. Opportunities for discussion and reflection became incorporated into routine operations, with time allocated to development sanctioned by management — not as an added extra, like some reflection activities can become.

The process also allowed program staff to engage and challenge management in a safe way. The power dynamic was shifted toward the

Using information, knowledge, and evidence in this way provides an example of how evaluation can be understood to be a change process, supporting the continuation of worthwhile initiatives while also prompting reflection about how and why things should change based on data, monitoring, and evaluation findings.

program staff and their knowledge was recognized, valued, and used for practical purposes (Nowotny, 2003; Hayman, King, Kontinen, & Narayanaswamy, 2016). Robust discussions about how the challenges were phrased were common as the perspectives of multiple audiences had to be considered. Draft bulletins become a beginning point for conversations: Program officers drafted the first version, then shared it with the internal evaluator. Managers then had an opportunity to hear the concerns and issues of the program staff, but make suggestions that framed the discussion in light of the broader policy and political context. The learning is an iterative process of back and forth until the achievements, challenges, and future implications are framed through the collaborative process.

Engaging relevant program staff also enabled the inclusion of community voices and on-the-ground realities into the bulletins, as these staff have unique connections with the communities in which the programs are implemented. This type of knowledge is important for developing future programs that reduce health inequalities.

The bulletins drew upon existing evidence and theory available in the published and gray literature. Developing the bulletins prompted staff

to consider what had already been published on the topic, what examples supported or contrasted with the proposed approach, and what theories might assist with understanding the situation. Rigorous evidence from the literature could either be used to add weight to programmatic decisions or demonstrate where the foundation could contribute to further developing the evidence base. The bulletins enabled theoretical models and concepts from the literature to be linked to relevant practical topics to extend thinking about specific topics. The bulletins, therefore, are also a “knowledge brokering” activity. They provide an opportunity for synthesizing knowledge for use in practice (Donnelly et al., 2014).

Using information, knowledge, and evidence in this way provides an example of how evaluation can be understood to be a change process, supporting the continuation of worthwhile initiatives while also prompting reflection about how and why things should change based on data, monitoring, and evaluation findings. The bulletins also enabled documentation of projects that had come to a natural end, so the learnings were not lost. Information reached the target audience in a timely way, enabling effective decision-making around advocacy and program planning. This meant that momentum continued to build and a culture of evaluation began to flourish. As the knowledge translation principles were incorporated, the participatory process of developing the bulletins became routine. Management allocated additional time and resources for the production of the bulletins, which meant more resources for monitoring, evaluation, and learning. Decision makers could see the value and responded accordingly.

Conclusion

Knowledge Translation of Australia (2018) states that “knowledge translation is about getting the right information, to the right people, at the right time, and in a format they can use, so as to influence decision making” (p. 1). We believe that real-time bulletins have given decision makers within our organization a means by which they can understand and use monitoring, evaluation, and learning information in ways that ultimately

contribute to achieving organizational goals. The process strongly aligns with a utilization-focused evaluation approach, where evaluation is “done for and with specific, intended primary uses for specific, intended uses” (Patton, 2008, p. 37). Developing these bulletins using a participatory approach is one tool that can facilitate evaluation literacy. These appealing, accessible, timely, and readily available products have resulted in increased motivation and ability for our colleagues to access, understand, and use information. We believe that these bulletins are helping to incorporate evaluation into routine operations and developing a learning culture. Showcasing evaluative information using a variety of multimedia communication tools may be possible in the future, but for now the bulletins are a step toward building further capacity for improvement and success, making evidenced-based decisions, and ultimately ensuring more positive outcomes (Gill, 2010).

References

- AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS HEALTHINFO.NET. (2018). *Eye health – The Fred Hollows Foundation bulletin*. Retrieved from <https://healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/learn/health-topics/eye-health/fred-hollows-bulletins-2/>
- BARON, M. (2011). Designing internal evaluation for a small organization with limited resources. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 2011(132), 87–99.
- BEERE, D. (2005). Evaluation capacity-building: A tale of value-adding. *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, 5(2), 41–47.
- BOURGEOIS, I., HART, R. E., TOWNSEND, S. H., & GAGNE, M. (2011). Using hybrid models to support the development of organizational evaluation capacity: A case narrative. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 34(3), 228–235.
- BUCKLEY, J., ARCHIBALD, T., HARGRAVES, M., & TROCHIM, W. M. (2015). Defining and teaching evaluative thinking: Insights from research on critical thinking. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 36(3), 375–388.
- BREHAUT, J. C., & EVA, K. W. (2012). Building theories of knowledge translation interventions: Use the entire menu of constructs. *Implementation Science*, 2012(7), 114–123.
- BROWN, V. A. (2010). Multiple knowledges, multiple languages: Are the limits of my language the limits of my world? *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*, 6(2), 120–131.
- CANADIAN INSTITUTES OF HEALTH RESEARCH. (2016). *Knowledge translation*. Retrieved from <http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/29529.html>
- DAGENAIS, C., RIDDE, V., LAURENDEAU, M., & SOUFFEZ, K. (2009). Knowledge translation research in population health: Establishing a collaborative research agenda. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 2009(7), 28–37.
- DAVIES, H., NUTLEY, S., & WALTER, I. (2008). Why “knowledge transfer” is misconceived for applied social research. *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, 13(3), 188–190.
- DELISLE, H., ROBERTS, J. H., MUNRO, M., JONES, L., & GYORKOS, T. W. (2005). The role of NGOs in global health research for development. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 2005(3), 3–23.
- DOHERTY, B., ECCLESTON, R., HANSEN, E., NATALIER, K., & CHURCHILL, B. (2015). Building evaluation capacity in micro community organisations — more burden than benefit? *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, 15(4), 29–37.
- DONNELLY, C., LETTS, L., KLINGER, D., & SHULHA, L. (2014). Supporting knowledge translation through evaluation: Evaluator as knowledge broker. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 29(1), 36–61.

- DONNELLY, C., & SEARLE, M. (2017). Optimizing use in the field of program evaluation by integrating learning from the knowledge field. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 31(3), 305–327.
- DRAKE, J. K., HUTCHINGS, J. E., & ELIAS, C. J. (2010). Making evidence work for communities: The role of non-governmental organizations in translating science to programs. *Journal of Women's Health*, 19(11), 2119–2124.
- ESTABROOKS, C. A., THOMPSON, D. S., LOVELY, J. J. E., & HOFMEYER, A. (2006). A guide to knowledge translation theory. *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions*, 26(1), 25–36.
- FERREIRA, S. (2012). Evolution and future of the knowledge commons: Emerging opportunities and challenges for less developed societies. *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*, 8(2-3), 141–168.
- GILL, S. J. (2010). *Developing a learning culture in nonprofit organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- HAMEL, N., & SCHRECKER, T. (2011). Unpacking capacity to utilize research: A tale of the Burkina Faso public health association. *Social Science & Medicine*, 72(1), 31–38.
- HAYMAN, R., KING, S., KONTINEN, T., & NARAYANASWAMY, L. (Eds.). (2016). *Negotiating knowledge: Evidence and experience in development NGOs*. Rugby, UK: Practical Action.
- HWALEK, M., & GRICICH WILLIAMS, M. (2010). The real-time evaluation memo: A tool for enabling evaluative thinking and learning in foundations and nonprofits. *The Foundation Review*, 2(3), 25–35. <https://doi.org/10.4087/FOUNDATIONREVIEW-D-10-00024>
- JACOBSON, N. (2007). Social epistemology theory for the “fourth wave” of knowledge transfer and exchange research. *Science Communication*, 29(1), 116–127.
- JÖNSSON, K., TOMSON, G., JÖNSSON, C., KOUNNAVONG, S., & WAHLSTRÖM, R. (2007). Health systems research in Lao PDR: Capacity development for getting research into policy and practice. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 2007(5), 11–20.
- KITSON, A. L., RYCROFT-MALONE, J., HARVEY, G., MCCORMACK, B., SEERS, K., & TITCHEN, A. (2008). Evaluating the successful implementation of evidence into practice using the PARiHS framework: Theoretical and practical challenges. *Implementation Science*, 2008(3), 1–12.
- KNOWLEDGE TRANSLATION OF AUSTRALIA. (2018). *Bring your research to life*. Melbourne, Australia: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.ktaustralia.com/>
- LAPAIGE, V. (2010). Integrated knowledge translation for globally oriented public health practitioners and scientists: Framing together a sustainable transfrontier knowledge translation vision. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Healthcare*, 2010(3), 33–47.
- McKIBBON, K. A., LOKKER, C., WILCZYNSKI, N. L., CILISKA, D., DOBBINS, M., DAVIS, D. A., . . . STRAUS, S. E. (2010). A cross-sectional study of the number and frequency of terms used to refer to knowledge translation in a body of health literature in 2006: A Tower of Babel? *Implementation Science*, 5(1), 16–26.
- McCOY, A., ROSE, D., & CONNOLLY, M. (2013). Developing evaluation cultures in human service organisations. *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, 13(1), 15–20.
- MILTENBURG, A. S., RIJKERS, E., MASELLE, N., BARASS, J., VAN ROOSMALEN, J., & BUNDERS, J. G. (2016). Reflections on the dynamics of the coexistence of multiple knowledge cultures in a community-based maternal health project in Tanzania. *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*, 9(2), 162–184.
- MOXHAM, C. (2014). Understanding third sector performance measurement system design: A literature review. *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*, 63(6), 704–726.
- NARAYANASWAMY, L. (2013). Problematizing “knowledge-for-development.” *Development and Change*, 44(5), 1065–1086.
- NOWOTNY, H. (2003). Democratising expertise and socially robust knowledge. *Science & Public Policy*, 30(3), 151–156.
- PATTON, M. (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- POWELL, M. (2006). Which knowledge? Whose reality? An overview of knowledge used in the development sector. *Development in Practice*, 16(6), 518–532.
- PRESKILL, H., & BOYLE, S. (2008). A multidisciplinary model of evaluation capacity building. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 29(4), 443–459.
- ROGERS, A., KELLY, L., & McCOY, A. (2019). Evaluation literacy: Perspectives of internal evaluators in non-government organisations. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 34(1).
- SANDERS, J. A. R. (2002). Presidential address: On mainstreaming evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 23(3), 253–259. Retrieved from [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1098-2140\(02\)00199-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1098-2140(02)00199-6)
- SANDERS, D., LABONTE, R., BAUM, F., & CHOPRA, M. (2004). Making research matter: A civil society perspective on health research. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 82(10), 757–763.
- SONNICHSEN, R. (2000). *High impact internal evaluation: A practitioner's guide to evaluating and consulting inside organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- TABAK, R. G., KHOONG, E. C., CHAMBERS, D. A., & BROWNSON, R. C. (2012). Bridging research and practice: Models for dissemination and implementation research. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 43(3), 337–350.

- WEISS, C. H. (1979). The many meanings of research utilization. *Public Administration Review*, 39(5), 426–431.
- WELCH, V., UEFFING, E., & TUGWELL, P. (2009). Knowledge translation: An opportunity to reduce global health inequalities. *Journal of International Development*, 2009(21), 1066–1082.
- ZACHARIAH, R., FORD, N., DRAGUEZ, B., YUN, O., & REID, T. (2010). Conducting operational research within a nongovernmental organization: The example of Medicines Sans Frontieres. *International Health*, 2(1), 1–8.

Alison Rogers, M.P.H., M.Eval., is the strategic and innovation advisor for the Indigenous Australia Program at The Fred Hollows Foundation and a Ph.D. candidate at the Centre for Program Evaluation with the University of Melbourne. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Alison Rogers, (email: Arogers1@student.unimelb.edu.au).

Catherine Malla, M.I.P.H., is regional program coordinator for The Fred Hollows Foundation's South Asia Middle East Region. She also holds a Graduate Diploma in Remote Health Management and is a Doctor of Public Health candidate with the College of Medicine and Public Health at Flinders University in Bedford Park, Adelaide, Australia.

Challenges and Opportunities in Philanthropic Organizational Learning: Reflections From Fellow Grantmakers

Jennifer Chubinski, Ph.D., Kelley Adcock, M.P.H., and Susan Sprigg, M.P.H., *Interact for Health*

Keywords: *Organizational learning, strategic learning, evaluation, reflecting on learning in philanthropy*

Introduction

As the field of philanthropy has matured over the past couple of decades, increasing attention has been paid to evaluating the impact of philanthropic investments. Twenty years ago, in fact, Easterling and Csuti (1999) saw this trend emerge and remarked that evaluation in the philanthropic sector had moved from often non-existent to slightly more sophisticated. They also recognized that grant evaluation for basic accountability — did the grantee do what they said they would do — is a standard practice at most foundations.¹ Beyond accountability, evaluation is used as a tool at many foundations for assessing and understanding the outcomes and impact of a cluster of grants, programs, or strategies. Finally, in recent years the scope of evaluation has expanded to include strategic learning, which focuses on real-time learning and “the use of data and insights from a variety of information-gathering approaches — including evaluation — to inform decision-making about strategy” (Coffman & Beer, 2011, p. 1).

In the two decades since Easterling and Csuti’s article, evaluation that is focused on grantmaking and strategy has become a more common practice at foundations. However, the practice of turning the lens inward, to engage in organizational learning within foundations, is still nascent. And while foundations are getting better at sharing successes in organizational learning, the field does not often stop to reflect and share the lessons learned, failures, and opportunities for improvement in the process of

Key Points

- As the field of philanthropy has matured, increasing attention has been paid to evaluating the impact of philanthropic investments. In recent years, the scope of evaluation has expanded to include an intentional focus on organizational learning with the goal of learning from ongoing work, informing decision-making, and ultimately improving impact.
- With this momentum to carry out organizational learning strategies and share successes, the sector has not yet stopped to reflect on challenges and lessons learned in the process of building the capacity for organizational learning — the messy yet meaningful middle between a desire for learning and the implementation of programming.
- Based on interviews with learning, evaluation, and research staff in philanthropy across the country, this article shares stories from the field on lessons learned and mistakes made in philanthropic organizational learning. It identifies points of struggle and opportunities for improvement in organizational learning, as well as what can be learned from mistakes in the process.

organizational learning. The authors embarked on this project to start this conversation, and to hear about both the roadblocks to good organizational learning at foundations and the ways to clear those hurdles.

¹ This is also reflected in personal communications with all members of the network of learning, evaluation, and research staff in philanthropy consulted for this article.

TABLE 1 Four Elements of Organizational Learning

Supportive leaders: Leaders are committed to organizational learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear vision and goals for organizational learning • Champions and role models
Culture of continuous improvements: Culture values organizational learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aligned beliefs and values • Reinforcing incentives • Commitment to measurement of results
Intuitive knowledge processes: Organizational learning processes are embedded into daily workflows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defined processes to set learning agenda and capture, distill, apply, and share knowledge • Technology platforms
Defined learning structure: Organizational structure is aligned to support organizational learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defined roles and responsibilities for capturing, distilling, applying, and sharing knowledge • Networks and coordination

(Milway & Saxton, 2011, p. 47)

Note: For sources of background material cited by Milway and Saxton for their model, see GEO, 2007; Hamilton et al., 2005; and Gupta & McDaniel, 2002.

What Is Organizational Learning?

This article relies on Milway and Saxton's definition of organizational learning: "the intentional practice of collecting information, reflecting on it, and sharing the findings, to improve the performance of an organization" (2011, p. 44). Organizational learning is an internal examination of what the organization is doing, how it is doing it, and how well it is doing it. The goal of this kind of learning is to propel the organization forward by improving work processes, to inform decision-making at all levels of an organization, and, ultimately, to sharpen the impact of the organization's work on the external world.

The concept of organizational learning is relatively new to philanthropy. While there are numerous reports available in the grey literature (Hamilton et al., 2005; Putnam, 2004; Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2016, 2014b) — very few of the peer-reviewed articles that do exist focus specifically on organizational learning within philanthropic organizations.

One often-cited resource on learning, evaluation, and philanthropic culture is the work carried out by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations

(GEO). Many of the individuals interviewed for this article identified GEO's work as important to their individual and organizational learning. GEO's description of a learning mindset is particularly helpful:

Learning is supported by effective evaluation practices, inquisitive and reflective organizational cultures, strong leaders dedicated to driving improvement, the willingness to bring key partners into the conversation about what's working and what's not, and a commitment to use data and information to inform decision-making and take action. (GEO, 2014a, para. 4)

Other resources suggest elements necessary to create an effective learning organization. *The Smarter Grantmaking Playbook* (GEO, n.d.) outlines seven core characteristics of foundations that influence learning; Milway and Saxton (2011) offer "Four Elements of Organizational Learning." (See Table 1.)

These descriptions illuminate what it takes to be an effective learning organization. In practice, internalizing and embodying these characteristics is often a challenge.

This project was designed as an opportunity for foundation colleagues with a strong connection to organizational learning to have conversations that allowed them to be honest and transparent about their organizations' learning journeys and the specific successes, challenges, and pitfalls along the way. There is a lot to be said by, and a lot to be learned from, peers.

When Organizational Learning in Philanthropy Falls Short

Traditionally, philanthropic dissemination and sharing has focused on the successes: where grants have succeeded and where programs have prevailed. Ten years ago, GEO and the Council on Foundations (2009) reported that an increasing number of grantmakers were also trying to embrace their failures, recognizing that as much is learned from failure as from success. For example, the 2017 GEO Learning Conference included a “Fail Fest,” where participants heard “candid stories from four grantmakers on their favorite failure and hard lessons learned” (para. 3). And in their article “Lessons (Not Yet) Learned,” Darling & Smith (2011) offer a list of foundations that publicly shared their evaluation findings on large and very public failures.

At its core, discussing failure in grantmaking is about learning in order to improve and avoid the same mistakes next time. While foundations have begun to publicly discuss these failures,

however, we have not yet applied this same failure lens internally, to the process of organizational learning. What challenges, lessons learned, and mistakes have been made by foundations trying to integrate learning practices into their organizations? Where does organizational learning in philanthropy often fall short?

This project was designed as an opportunity for foundation colleagues with a strong connection to organizational learning to have conversations that allowed them to be honest and transparent about their organizations' learning journeys and the specific successes, challenges, and pitfalls along the way. There is a lot to be said by, and a lot to be learned from, peers.

Methods

Sixteen semistructured phone interviews, lasting 45 to 60 minutes, were conducted in July and August 2018 by two members of the research and evaluation team at Interact for Health, a foundation based in Cincinnati, Ohio. Because of the provocative nature of the interviews, a snowball sampling² methodology was used. Email invitations were sent to 18 learning, evaluation, or research foundation staff with whom one of the two interviewers had an existing relationship; the invitation explained the authors' interest in a candid conversation about the strengths and weaknesses of their organizational learning experiences. As a result of suggestions from initial interviewees, an additional six participants were invited and interviewed. Of the 24 people contacted, 16 completed interviews. Thirteen participants were current foundation employees and three were former foundation employees who now provide consulting services to the sector. Four interviewees requested that their participation remain anonymous.

Interview questions were designed to develop rapport, establish the context of the participant's role and experience in the organization, and provide multiple and diverse opportunities to discuss their successes in and challenges with organizational learning. (See Appendix 1.) After

² Snowball sampling is a nonrandom sampling technique where current study subjects help to identify additional study subjects. For this study, each participant was asked, “Who else do you think we should talk to?”

the interviews, all participants were given a chance to review and edit interview notes; several also reviewed the final draft of this article. A third author then coded the interview notes and performed a thematic analysis, using an inductive approach.³ All three authors reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the analysis.

Results

Participants received interview questions that fell into four broad categories:

- their current structure and process for organizational learning;
- successes in and facilitators of their experience of organizational learning;
- challenges, failures, or struggles experienced during the process; and
- advice to other foundations wanting to engage in or strengthen their organizational learning practices.

Participants shared a fascinating breadth of experiences and stories as they and their organizations have made efforts to effectively learn. In these stories, four distinct areas emerged where action and intention are necessary to avoid significant challenges that, if not anticipated and managed, can derail good intentions for learning: 1) executive leadership and resources for learning, 2) a strong culture of learning across the organization, 3) staff roles and relationships to support learning, and 4) processes and tools to help facilitate learning.

Each of these themes will be explained in detail and with examples from participants. Although the authors set out to identify challenges and failures in organizational learning, participants went one step further, acknowledging the challenges and then offering suggestions on how to plan for, manage, and structure organizational

Although the authors set out to identify challenges and failures in organizational learning, participants went one step further, acknowledging the challenges and then offering suggestions on how to plan for, manage, and structure organizational learning practices with the goal of facilitating success in the future.

learning practices with the goal of facilitating success in the future.

Executive Leadership and Resources for Learning

Support from leadership is identified throughout the literature as a critical component of most successful initiatives, including organizational learning. Realizing this support, however, may be challenging. As GEO notes in *The Smarter Grantmaking Playbook*,

It is crucial for the board and senior leadership of a foundation to make the necessary changes and commitments that develop an organizational culture that fosters learning. This means prioritizing learning work by both embedding it in our personal habits as well as the processes of the organization as a whole. (2014b, para. 10)

In participant interviews, top-down support for organizational learning was one of the most frequently identified necessities for success in organizational learning. Within this category, three subcategories emerged: visible and active support for organizational learning; allocation

³ An inductive approach to data analysis involves review of the data with no predetermined assumptions about context and meaning. This means that all of the interviews were reviewed and coded on their own, and general categories were created from the interview results and not from predetermined assumptions of the authors.

of organizational resources, such as staff, time, incentives, and funding; and communicating clear goals and a vision for organizational learning that aligns with the organization's goals.

Visible and Active Support by Leadership

Engaging leadership as an ally in learning was a strong recommendation from multiple interview participants. This support needs to be both visible and active. The participants, however, reported challenges more frequently than successes in this arena. One stated that the CEO of their organization believes that learning is part of everyone's job, and identified that as a success. But there were difficulties getting to this positive position: the organization had started with mid-level staff members leading the learning and developed a thorough bottom-up approach, but not a robust top-down approach. While the participant saw having those champions for learning within staff as critically important, in retrospect leadership should have been provided more guidance and support on how to be a champion of learning: "We have very supportive leadership, but didn't do enough to pull that through and drive further development of that broader culture piece. Leadership needed more guidance as well about how to be more visible in supporting these activities."

But another participant argued that starting from the middle could be a strategic choice: "They can push learning both up and down in the organization." Still, the importance of pushing learning "up" was specifically mentioned.

Several organizations were mulling a right-sized role for the board, with no clear consensus among interview participants. One regretted not investing more time to be sure key board members were more invested in the learning approach because, at this smaller foundation, they are "ultimately the continuity within the organization" — when executive leadership changed, some of the learning processes were lost. In contrast, another participant reported that their board was too involved; it was deeply engaged in all day-to-day processes of the organization, which made the work move very slowly.

One participant described a situation where the staff and CEO, having engaged in a robust learning process, presented the board with options for moving the organization forward. However, the board was removed from and mistrustful of the learning process, and chose to take a completely different path — one that staff felt was not supported by the evaluation results. In general, as a different participant observed, it is a "challenge to bring people along who are removed from the work on a day-to-day basis."

While there was no consensus on the ideal path to executive and board support, it was clear that such engaged support is important. As one participant said,

Learning feels most impactful when it makes its way up to the CEO or board. It is not just learning for the evaluation team, but causes framing, policies, and staffing structures at the executive level. In an ideal situation, the CEO has strong connections to the evaluation and learning function. The CEO has his/her own desire to learn and wants to grow and evolve, on both a personal and organizational level. Unfortunately, this is not typical.

Allocate Appropriate Organizational Resources

The visible and engaged support of leaders becomes actualized in the form of specifically allocated resources. Four overlapping resources were frequently mentioned:

1. funding to support learning,
2. time for the evaluation and learning staff to compile the learnings,
3. time for the organization as a whole to absorb and reflect on the learnings, and
4. incentives to learn.

Staffing and funding are closely related: The organization must be willing to fund learning and allocate staff to support it. This can be a challenge. Two participants acknowledged that there can be resistance to funding an evaluator

position if that move appears to take funding from programs serving the community.

Lack of time for the organization to learn was the most common concern, mentioned by half the interviewees. One organization reported that while it had obtained vocal support from leadership, it was still struggling because there was no time available to learn: “If learning isn’t valued from the top, no one is going to make time for it. We are valuing it; now we just need to make time.” Leadership is vital to making this happen. If leaders show they are willing to take the time, it is more likely to become accepted practice in the organization.

To demonstrate how the organization values learning, leadership can also provide incentives to the staff. “We don’t often incentivize reflection and learning,” one participant said; another pointed out, “If you really want [learning] to happen, you put that in staff objectives and evaluations. It must be intentional.” Without that focus, learning can easily become an “extra” that never rises to the top of the agenda.

Clear Goals and Vision for Organizational Learning

Finally, many participants discussed the challenge of successful organizational learning when a clear vision and sense of direction is absent, both for the organization and for the learning process. This was related to conversations around alignment: Learning that does not align with the vision of top leadership may not be successful.

One organization reported how oversight of the learning function moved from a vice president to the CEO. When under the vice president, learning happened within the vice president’s vision; but this did not align with the CEO’s vision for learning. The interviewee said,

I had a hard time anticipating the thinking of what the CEO wanted — because I was not in close enough contact to determine what the CEO wanted. ... If I could have done it all over again, the vision needed to be streamlined from the top down from the beginning. Learning needs to be connected with the executive’s vision.

[M]any participants discussed the challenge of successful organizational learning when a clear vision and sense of direction is absent, both for the organization and for the learning process. This was related to conversations around alignment: Learning that does not align with the vision of top leadership may not be successful.

Multiple participants discussed the goals for learning specifically within their organizations. As one interviewee noted, the opportunities to learn are extensive and it can get overwhelming quickly, so it is critical to be able to put aside the “interesting” and focus on what is most important at that point for the organization. For many, this was an area of success or clarity: Internally, staff and leadership had been able to come to consensus around the overall learning goals.

Interviewees mentioned a range of goals for learning among their foundations:

- Impact strategy.
- Shape future work.
- Learn if the organization is doing the right thing.
- Learn if the organization is doing it the right way.
- Inform the field.

All these goals are in areas where the leaders of an organization must be able and willing

As one participant stated, “the question of how do you turn the ship within an organization — it can’t happen without the culture piece coming along with it.” And in our interviews, many of the challenges and failures identified by participants can be linked directly to a mismatch between organizational culture and organizational learning.

to be vocal participants. Without support and resources — without a leader who values the foundation’s ability and responsibility to learn and change — organizational learning will be ineffective.

Strong Culture of Learning Across the Organization

An organization’s culture is defined as the aggregate set of expectations, attitudes, beliefs, values, and customs — written and unwritten — within the organization. And organizational learning culture has been widely identified as a critical ingredient for successful learning organizations. This was recognized two decades ago by Easterling and Csuti: “Foundation-focused evaluation requires an organizational culture that values learning and rewards experimentation, even when the experiment ‘fails’” (1999, p. 12). The importance of philanthropic culture has been recognized by GEO in its philanthropic culture work: “Cultural forces are powerful precisely because they exist under the surface and are rarely identified and addressed” (David & Enright, 2015, p. 7). Kennedy Leahy, Wegmann and Nolen (2016) also identify organizational

culture as an important ingredient in an effective strategic learning culture.

This sentiment was apparent in our research. As one participant stated, “the question of how do you turn the ship within an organization — it can’t happen without the culture piece coming along with it.” And in our interviews, many of the challenges and failures identified by participants can be linked directly to a mismatch between organizational culture and organizational learning. The comments, experiences, and stories related to organizational culture most frequently fell into the category of challenges, barriers, and failures; the participants identified culture as the source of the challenges to successful organizational learning. Their comments highlighted two defining aspects of learning culture: it must span all areas of the organization and it requires an openness to dialogue about challenges and failures.

A Strong Culture of Learning Is Organizationwide

A strong culture of organizational learning is, by definition, woven into the entire fabric of an organization. Many of the participants struggling with organizational learning reported that their foundation’s culture made such learning difficult. All reported being in a fluid state in terms of adopting this culture; it was widely recognized that changing a culture — which involves changing people and their behavior — is extremely difficult and takes time. Interviewees from several organizations said that a structure for learning should reflect the organization’s culture and structure, and that there should be opportunities for continuous improvement.

One foundation reported that its learning has continued to evolve because of what it called a “build and destroy phase” — a time of much change and reinvention — beginning in 2014 that has produced ongoing organizational shifts. While it started with no formal learning practices in place, the foundation has been able to reevaluate its organizational learning approach several times over the past five years. “It felt very natural for the organization,” the interviewee said, “since other departments

were cycling through various rapid-cycle learnings.” The foundation reports that its learning has remained somewhat inconsistent across its areas of focus, and that this is in part intentional because the learning team places an emphasis on creating “strong moments of learning in spaces where key decisions are imminent or there is a lot of uncertainty.”

In order for organizational learning to be effective, people need to see the added value of learning — beyond mere measurement. As one participant described it:

[The] value in unpacking the thinking, beliefs, mental models, and then applying evidence and pressure testing those, is core to learning. It’s not just about looking at data or dashboards; it’s the application of scientific thinking, hypothesis testing, critical thinking to the work, and bringing together thinking and evidence.

Another barrier to a strong organizational learning culture is poorly prioritized time. If the “thing due tomorrow” always takes precedence, it is hard for learning to rise to the top of the list. As one participant said, “If people don’t believe that learning is part of their strategy work, then it’s always the last thing on their agenda.”

Sometimes a learning culture is not what it seems. One foundation created a retrospective report (its first) on a whole body of its work that brought up missed opportunities; none of it was a surprise to the staff, who considered the report a fair and accurate representation. Yet when the report was presented to the board, its members were very upset: “This is wrong; how did you say we did a bad job? This is the best work the foundation has ever done.” The board’s reaction was a surprise to the staff; it had typically been more than willing to provide critical feedback on the foundation’s work. But board members were not ready to understand that the foundation had missed some opportunities in a major portfolio and, as a result, the report landed with a thud — the board could not hear the results. While the discord was unpleasant, the experience showed the staff that the board must be

A strong culture of organizational learning is, by definition, woven into the entire fabric of an organization. Many of the participants struggling with organizational learning reported that their foundation's culture made such learning difficult.

prepared in advance for a process of self-reflection, which may include an evaluation with negative results.

For a healthy learning culture to exist, learning needs to be valued by the whole organization. One former foundation evaluation officer said,

[When] the culture is conducive to learning, we see learning questions translated directly into appropriate RFPs, contracts, and evaluation methods; and the evaluation team is providing both process and outcome data that feeds decisions. Program directors also have an interest in learning and improving what they are doing at work. That organization has a true desire to learn — it permeates all parts of the organization. Evaluators simply fuel that learning fire.

Another foundation reported that its organizational learning is still very aspirational:

We’re still discovering the steps we need to take to get to where we want to go. Our organizational culture is not one of recognizing the different ways data can and should inform decision-making or organizational learning — we have to start where our organization is.

A healthy learning culture involves building relationships with staff across the organization, and sometimes those relationships are not with those in the positions with the most power. One foundation participant said that relationships with the

A healthy learning culture involves building relationships with staff across the organization, and sometimes those relationships are not with those in the positions with the most power. One foundation participant said that relationships with the administration team are critical to get items on the calendar and help to frame learning in a way that is meaningful to the foundation's administrators.

administration team are critical to get items on the calendar and help to frame learning in a way that is meaningful to the foundation's administrators. Another interviewee said it is important to "let your own interests go and let others advance their own learning agenda. You need to be more of a facilitator and not always a driver."

Openness to Dialogue About Challenges and Failures

An openness to challenges and failures within a foundation was a theme that emerged multiple times in interviews — sometimes as a reported success within the organization, sometimes as a challenge. Two participants made powerful statements based on their experiences: "Good organizational learning allows leadership to break the stranglehold of the idea that we did everything perfectly," one interviewee said. "A good organizational learning process can show that we weren't perfect, that we should learn, be self-reflective, and continue learning." Another observed:

Learning from mistakes requires letting go of ego, because the hierarchy within organizations and that power imbalance is a barrier to real organizational learning. Grow. Change. Try things and be OK with them failing.

Participants recognized how difficult accepting failure can be. "This is hard work and there isn't a great instructional guide," one interviewee remarked. "You need to be open to trial and error." Another said, "We keep making the same mistakes over and over again. Something is not working in our learning culture, and staff turn-over does not help with this." A third foundation, however, reported being able to make progress:

After working on our learning culture, we now talk more about challenges, we are more open about things that aren't going well. The benefit is that this leads to course corrections along the way. We are not waiting for a three- to five-year evaluation report. If our staff sees a challenge six months in, they do course corrections. They are talking about their learning and challenges with the board and the senior leadership team; there is more transparency now. For us it's become a self-fulfilling prophecy — there is more hunger for learning as we get better at it. At our next board meeting, we will be presenting learning reports for all of our strategies. These are one-pagers that will discuss the most significant challenges each strategy has faced and what staff are doing differently moving forward.

As observations from interviewees clearly confirmed, a culture of learning must be embedded in all parts of an organization, and the organization must embrace the fact that failure will happen.

Staff Roles and Relationships to Support Learning

While leadership and culture form the foundation of organizational learning, participants said that building the right staffing structure is essential for learning to become a reality in practice.

In their quest to understand strategic learning in philanthropy, Kennedy Leahy, Wegmann, and Nolen (2016) outlined various ways that foundations build and staff evaluation and learning functions and noted that "no one model

emerged as a clear example of how foundations could best structure these functions” (p. 28). They added that “foundation leaders were seeking an adaptive culture that allowed organizational staff to move beyond structure, whatever form it assumed, to develop strategy that fully leveraged the collective knowledge of the foundation” (p. 34).

Our interviews support this, and the significance of all staff and their various roles in organizational learning emerged as a theme. While there are many ways to structure people and roles to carry out organizational learning, there are three fundamentals: ownership of organizational learning; clear roles and responsibilities to support learning for all staff; and an organizational structure that is right-sized, iterative, and purposeful.

Ownership of Organizational Learning

The majority of participants discussed the value of a person or people owning and facilitating the practice of organizational learning. These internal champions need the skills, resources, and authority to implement organizational learning processes and cultivate trusting relationships across organizational silos. As one participant observed,

If you don’t have someone who is charged with pushing this forward, stewarding it along, then it won’t happen effectively. Of course, learning has to be a part of everyone’s role in some way, but if you set it up so that “everyone is responsible,” then actually no one will end up being responsible and it’s tougher to make happen.

Most of the interviewees have evaluation, learning, and/or research positions in foundations, and many said that those roles were often either designed to facilitate and support the learning function or took on the learning function as their foundation went through organizational changes. Many foundations have formalized that learning function by adding the words “learning” or “strategic learning” to evaluation department titles. One participant also described the value of investing in opportunities for these staff to build their expertise and skills to carry

While leadership and culture form the foundation of organizational learning, participants said that building the right staffing structure is essential for learning to become a reality in practice.

out effective organizational learning: “Building internal and external capacity, experience, and soft and hard technical skills” is critical to what is often their role as the bridge builder for people across the organization.

Although the roles and responsibilities of the organizational learning facilitator varied, a few ways that this role can make learning meaningful emerged:

- *Help staff and leadership use learning to make better decisions.* Focus and tie learning to the next critical decision point. Ask the question, What are the things the organization needs to learn in order to make better decisions the next time?
- *Integrate learning into the regular business of the foundation.* When possible, use existing structures — program or staff meetings, the budget process, individual and organizational goal-setting time — to embed organizational learning.
- *Curate learning, knowledge, and evidence for staff, leadership, and the board.* Organize and package information in a way that allows people to work with it, reflect on it, and make decisions using it.
- *Provide time and space for reflection.* Sometimes, organizational learning requires dedicated and facilitated time and space of its own. This is often necessary

Participants consistently identified the importance of well-defined roles and responsibilities for all staff and informal or formal networks for organizational learning.

during times of strategic decision-making or organizational change.

At one foundation, the lack of dedicated staff to own and manage organizational learning made it challenging to execute in a coordinated way. Another interviewee described organizational learning as “still very aspirational for us. ... Progress really depends on the program officer in each area. We are making a lot of progress where there is a champion.” Many participants noted that identifying the right-sized role for the organizational learning facilitator was a challenge. Because this role often crosses silos within the organization, determining the most effective use of time and resources is an ongoing, push-pull process. As one participant reflected, “How much should they be integrated into different areas — how much, and how close?” What is the right balance?

Clear Roles and Responsibilities to Support Learning for All Staff

Participants consistently identified the importance of well-defined roles and responsibilities for all staff and informal or formal networks for organizational learning. While learning can be facilitated or led by a designated internal champion, all learning does not reside with that individual or a particular department. It is called “organizational” learning because it reaches across the organization in many ways, and needs to be supported and valued by all staff. A few interviewees concurred, with the observation that “learning should be part of everyone’s job”; one pointed out that at their foundation, “it’s called

the Evaluation Department without learning in the title, because the CEO saw learning as everyone’s job.”

A broader culture of learning can be cultivated in part by an effective organizational structure where all staff understand how their work and engagement in the learning process aligns with the organization’s goals. Often, participants discussed cross-silo learning at their organizations as something they were most proud of. One said that their goal is to “share knowledge and forge connection across the teams”; another was “proud they have a learning plan for every body of work.”

Carving out roles and responsibilities for all staff in organizational learning can create many points of tension. Time is a major issue, especially at smaller foundations or those with lean staffing where people are expected to wear multiple hats every day. Integrating learning into existing meetings, and not as an add-on, is often essential, and staff skills and capacity to carry out or engage in effective organizational learning may require capacity building and practice. Finally, tension can emerge when learning — which is about reflection and improvement — meets evaluation — which often is about accountability.

Right-Sized, Iterative, and Purposeful Organizational Structure

While designing and implementing an organizational structure that supports learning across a foundation was identified as a worthwhile pursuit, a core message from the interviews was that the structure must be right-sized, iterative, and purposeful for each foundation’s own organizational mission, culture, and processes.

Many participants advised that when building an organizational structure for learning, foundations should start small and build on existing processes so as not to overburden staff. Inherent in organizational learning is the fact that, if effective, organizations will continually discover new things that will lead to changes and new ways of working. The structure should be viewed from

this lens, too: Try something, learn from it, and build on it the next time. One participant, the internal champion for learning at their organization, reflected that over time the organization came to recognize the end game was not a standardized structure, systems, and processes. The foundation had developed a learning practice without that approach, and it grew apparent that “systems become overbuilt and they collapse on themselves ..., and you spend all the time of the team managing and curating the system instead of actually doing the work.”

One interviewee advised foundations seeking to strengthen their organizational learning practices to remember that “organizations are made up of people, and people change at different paces. For some, the status quo is easier than change.” Another shared a story about how a senior leader and her department were not truly engaging the organizational learning work around equity because they saw it as important only for the program staff, and did not see the relevance of it for their particular positions.

Organizational learning does not just happen. Our interviews revealed that learning requires a staffing structure that intentionally organizes people, communicates their roles, and gives them direction.

Processes and Tools to Facilitate Learning

Processes to facilitate learning need to be in place at each stage to make organizational learning work. These include tools to collect incoming learning, to consolidate it into something useful, and to make it available to the staff on an ongoing basis. Organizations varied greatly in this category, and each participant had a unique tool to describe. However, two overarching approaches emerged from the interviews: learning embedded in existing or new organizational processes, and appropriate tools deployed and used to aid in effective learning. Organizational learning needs to fit the organization’s culture, and there are many processes and tools to facilitate the process. (See Appendix 2.)

Inherent in organizational learning is the fact that, if effective, organizations will continually discover new things that will lead to changes and new ways of working. The structure should be viewed from this lens, too: Try something, learn from it, and build on it the next time.

Learning Embedded in Organizational Processes

Several participants reported that for organizational learning to work effectively, it needs to be embedded in existing or new organizational processes and in the structure and culture of the organization. These processes must match learning that is flexible and structured to staff requirements. Participants noted that reflection and learning must be built into existing processes for participants to see value in it, but that there is often some trial and error required to get it right.

Knowledge management can be complicated. One foundation had grand plans at the beginning of its learning journey to synthesize all its learnings across all sources and departments. But over time, it came to see that its current knowledge management system is good enough. Staff can track down results from previous work and learning conversations; they know enough about knowledge management to find what they need for the next decision. “This system is not perfect or particularly sophisticated, but it gets us 75 percent of the way there with minimal effort and cost,” one interviewee said. Several participants noted that the perfect can be the enemy of the good — that a critical piece of early learning has been to go with what works, even if it’s not flawless.

Learning is one thing; but subsequent knowledge management or the output of learning can be another challenge. Several organizations struggle with how to use everything that has been learned. And staff turnover can cause significant gaps in knowledge — the staff learns, but then leaves or does not share that learning and the mistake is repeated.

Several organizations were going through or had recently experienced staff or leadership transitions. Learning and knowledge management is even more complicated during such periods of change. One interviewee remarked:

There are short attention spans within foundations; this is often related to turnover in staff and board. Often the most valuable evaluations are for long-term initiatives, but when [there is] board and CEO turnover there is often a pretty dramatic shift in priorities — especially around strategy and learning questions.

This means that learning related to an earlier strategy may no longer be viewed as relevant when the foundation changes strategy. Even if the strategy stays the same, turnover in program staff may bring new expectations, or questions may no longer make sense or be relevant.

Appropriate Tools Deployed and Used to Aid in Effective Learning

Participants made many comments about how staff charged with organizational learning were focused on creating something that worked for

their specific organization. Learning is one thing; but subsequent knowledge management or the output of learning can be another challenge. Several organizations struggle with how to use everything that has been learned. And staff turnover can cause significant gaps in knowledge — the staff learns, but then leaves or does not share that learning and the mistake is repeated. Organizational learning cannot work if it is confined to one department. Several participants commented on the need to create a long-term vision and tie learning to the next decision point.

Several interviewees said having the right amount of information in the right form for your audience — in other words, making information usable — is a critical job skill. At one foundation that was working to identify new priorities, the evaluation and learning team led a process to pinpoint 10 areas of focus using staff input, literature, and other data. The team developed attractive, digestible, page-long snapshots, which were worked on by various program staff. At the time, the culture of the program staff was to present 15-page reports with numerous citations. When the strategic learning team returned a one-pager without citations, the program team was shocked. But the format worked perfectly for the board. The evaluation and learning team was trying to create a tool that would be most useful for the decision-making process.

Three participants said that connecting their organizations' learning goals with annual staff evaluations is key. One foundation ties organizational goals and team goals to the annual planning and budget process. It creates cascading goals so that all employees have annual goals that are directly connected to the foundation's goals. "The feedback has been that people now feel more aligned than they did in the past," the interviewee said.

A wide variety of learning tools are being used at the 16 organizations that participated in these interviews. (See Appendix 2.) Interviewees identified processes and tools that included structured learning conversations; daylong retreats; before-action and after-action reviews; and

book groups and brownbag lunch-and-learns. No one tool fits every organization. Several of these organizations participate in the Center for Effective Philanthropy's (CEP) staff survey; one has done so for 10 years and now has long trend lines: "The open-ended questions are anonymous and that is where people pour their heart out," the interviewee said. The entire staff gets the feedback from open-ended categories, the learning team pulls out themes, and the whole organization then spends months working in small groups to break the information down and make foundationwide changes.

Another foundation does an in-depth midpoint evaluation of larger, longer bodies of work, typically bringing in leading experts on an issue from around the county for one-day reviews of the foundation's learnings, evaluation findings, and strategy for that issue area. The foundation has learned much of value from these midpoint check-ins and has made some significant changes to strategy based on results of the one-day meetings. It is also changing how it concludes a body of work, seeking a more journalistic approach to the story of the work and trying to use different perspectives and angles for analysis to inform future work.

One foundation found a reading group to be an effective staff-training tool:

We would read and discuss over lunch. We were focused on books that would make us smarter as grantmakers (e.g., Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* and Mindy Thompson Fullilove's *Urban Alchemy*), especially in support of health equity [and] our efforts to do our grantmaking through a health equity lens.

Several participants talked about the desire to be better storytellers, recognizing that a good story helps to communicate important organizational learnings. One foundation has had a storytelling group and is publishing stories about its programs and campaigns; the goal is to develop publications based on their stories. "I wish they would have done this sooner," noted

Several participants talked about the desire to be better storytellers, recognizing that a good story helps to communicate important organizational learnings. One foundation has had a storytelling group and is publishing stories about its programs and campaigns; the goal is to develop publications based on their stories.

the participant; it has been effective for the foundation to put a lot of energy into telling its story.

Discussion

Sixteen diverse foundations had candid, honest conversations about organizational learning. Each organization has a unique story, and is moving at its own pace on the learning journey. While experiences, structures, challenges, and successes were diverse, the four distinct categories explored in this article emerged as areas where organizational learning can encounter either significant success or challenge. While the experience of the participants differed, some of these areas were identified as challenges more frequently than others. Many organizations reported struggling with the best way to effect culture change — never an easy task. Several foundations noted some successes with organizing people — their roles, relationships, and responsibilities.

One notable finding was how frequently participants reported that they were in the middle of trying "something new" when it came to learning together as an organization. Several stated that they could not yet report success or failure

We have been fascinated both by philanthropy's willingness to amplify success and by the lack of space and time it devotes to discuss failure — projects and processes that did not yield the desired results. Without that space, philanthropy — a field generally full of small shops of evaluators and researchers — is moving more slowly than it could to develop alternative models and methods.

because they were still evaluating a new process. Another question that came up multiple times was the ability of organizations to continue to learn when undergoing dramatic change, such as leadership transitions or shifts in focus. Some participants questioned whether an organization should focus on learning during such turbulent times.

Interview participants validated the findings from peer-reviewed and grey literature that identify the key characteristics of a successful learning organization, and were willing to share some of their toughest challenges in the process. And the authors learned that success and challenge go hand in hand. Finding stories of failure and challenge in organizational learning is hard to do without also talking about successes, about taking the next step toward solutions to strengthening organizational learning. So many of the failures shared by participants were noted as important pivot points or learning opportunities — there was much optimism among most participants about progress their foundations were making toward becoming a better learning organization.

Limitations

The size of the foundations participating in our study varied and, while peers of the authors, the evaluation or learning staff who were interviewed represented diverse levels of experience. On this point, it is worth noting that only 34 percent of the more than 100 participants in the 2016 *Benchmarking Foundation Evaluation Practices* survey had a dedicated evaluation unit, and that those units are more common at larger foundations (CEP & Center for Evaluation Innovation, 2016).

Our study contains several strengths and weaknesses. The authors were using a standard definition of organizational learning, but interviewees were not provided with an explicit definition. This proved to be problematic when it was time to code the responses; each participant seemed to be working from a slightly different definition.

Our initial focus was on learning from failure, but we ultimately learned a great deal about organizational learning — particularly some general findings about successes and failures. We have been fascinated both by philanthropy's willingness to amplify success and by the lack of space and time it devotes to discuss failure — projects and processes that did not yield the desired results. Without that space, philanthropy — a field generally full of small shops of evaluators and researchers — is moving more slowly than it could to develop alternative models and methods.

It is worth noting that we chose participants with whom we already had personal relationships, believing this allowed for richer discussion of the challenges and failures involved in learning at each organization. We recognize, however, that the sample is in no way representative of the philanthropic field.

Conclusion

No single learning method works for every organization; each foundation must do what is right for itself at the time and within its current culture. Often, fancy data systems are not required: instead, look to executive leadership

and resources for learning, a strong culture of learning across the organization, staff roles and relationships to support learning, and processes and tools to help facilitate it.

The participants in this study represented foundations of a variety of sizes, expertise, focus areas, and geography. None, however, reported mastery of organizational learning — which, in itself, is likely a significant finding. It may be true that authentic organizational learning will, by definition, be ever-changing. But, as such, we believe it is valuable to understand how other foundations have faced similar challenges.

As one participant remarked, these may not be things “you would say from the podium of GEO, but what you would say in the hallway to help your colleagues avoid the pitfalls.” We are hungry for a space to learn and share learnings so that we can help colleagues avoid the pitfalls and avoid them ourselves. We hope this article leads to more conversations about how to make that happen.

References

- CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE PHILANTHROPY & CENTER FOR EVALUATION INNOVATION. (2016). *Benchmarking foundation evaluation practices*. Cambridge, MA: Author. Available online at <http://research.cep.org/benchmarking-foundation-evaluation-practices>
- COFFMAN, J., & BEER, T. (2011). *Evaluation to support strategic learning: Principles and practices*. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation. Retrieved from http://www.pointk.org/resources/files/strategic_learning_coffman_beer.pdf
- DARLING, M. J., & SMITH, J. S. (2011). Lessons (not yet) learned. *The Foundation Review*, 3(1), 97–109. <https://doi.org/10.4087/FOUNDATIONREVIEW-D-10-00037>
- DAVID, T., & ENRIGHT, K. (2015). *The source codes of foundation culture*. Washington, DC: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. Retrieved from <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/the-source-codes-of-foundation-culture-683>
- EASTERLING, D., & CSUTI, N. B. (1999). *Using evaluation to improve grantmaking: What's good for the goose is good for the grantor*. Denver: The Colorado Trust. Retrieved from <https://www.socalgrantmakers.org/sites/default/files/resources/EvaltoImprove1999.pdf>
- GRANTMAKERS FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS & COUNCIL ON FOUNDATIONS. (2009). *Evaluation in philanthropy: Perspectives from the field*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/evaluation-in-philanthropy-perspectives-from-the-field-689>
- GRANTMAKERS FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS. (2016). *What does it take to learn together well?* Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/what-does-it-take-to-learn-together-well-890>
- GRANTMAKERS FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS. (2014a). *The smarter grantmaking playbook: How can we embrace a learning for improvement mindset?* Washington, DC: Author. Available online at <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/658>
- GRANTMAKERS FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS. (2014b). *The smarter grantmaking playbook: What is a learning organization?* Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/what-is-a-learning-organization-674>
- GRANTMAKERS FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS. (2007). *Learning for results: GEO action guide*. Washington, DC: Author. Available online at <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/1151>
- GRANTMAKERS FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS. (n.d.). *The smarter grantmaking playbook*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.geofunders.org/what-we-offer/the-smarter-grantmaking-playbook>

GRANTMAKERS FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS. (2017, July 10.) The Learning Conference 2017 Recap. The Learning Conference. Chicago, IL. May 31 – June 1, 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.alphawoodfoundation.org/newsroom/geo2017>

GUPTA, A., & MCDANIEL, J. (2002). Creating competitive advantage by effectively managing knowledge: A framework for knowledge management. *Journal of Knowledge Management Practice*, 3(2), 40–49.

HAMILTON, R., BROWN, P., CHASKIN, R., FIESTER, L., RICHMAN, H., SOJOURNER, A., & WEBER, J. (2005). *Learning for community change: Core components of foundations that learn*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Chapin Hall Center for Children. Retrieved from <http://racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/hamilton.pdf>

KENNEDY LEAHY, S., WEGMANN, S., & NOLEN, L. (2016). Through the looking glass: Foundation evaluation and learning and the quest for strategic learning. *The Foundation Review*, 8(5), 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1339>

MILWAY, K. S., & SAXTON, A. (2011). The challenge of organizational learning. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 9(3), 44–49.

PUTNAM, K. (2004). *Measuring foundation performance: Examples from the field*. Oakland: California Healthcare Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.chcf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/PDF-MeasuringFoundationPerformance.pdf>

Jennifer Chubinski, Ph.D., is vice president for research and evaluation at Interact for Health. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jennifer Chubinski, Interact for Health, 3805 Edwards Road, Suite 500, Cincinnati, OH 45209 (email: jchubinski@interactforhealth.org).

Kelley Adcock, M.P.H., is an evaluation and research officer at Interact for Health.

Susan Sprigg, M.P.H., is a research officer at Interact for Health.

APPENDIX 1 Interview Questions**Demographics and Background**

1. What are the focus areas of your foundation?
2. How big are the financial assets at your foundation?
3. How many staff work at your foundation? How many of those staff work specifically on evaluation, learning, or research activities as part of their core job?
4. What is the approximate size of your evaluation, learning, and/or research budget?
5. What is your role at the foundation? What are some of your key responsibilities? How long have you been in your role?

Organizational Learning

6. Describe what organizational learning looks like for your organization.
7. How long has your foundation engaged in organizational learning activities?
8. When you think about organizational learning within your foundation, what are you most proud of? What have been the biggest benefits of organizational learning to your foundation?
9. We are talking today because while there has been great momentum to carry out organizational learning strategies within foundations and share successes, we do not often stop to reflect on failures and lessons learned in the process of building the capacity for organizational learning. We also recognize that sometimes, organizational learning “fails” or doesn’t go as planned because of things outside of your and others’ control. With that in mind:
 - When you think about your foundation’s organizational learning, if you could do something over again, what would you do differently and why?
 - Describe a specific time when something did not go as planned. What happened? Why do you think it happened?
10. Think about how you would design and implement the perfect organizational learning structure at your organization. What would you anticipate the biggest facilitators and barriers would be to making your perfect organizational learning structure happen?
11. If you could give advice to other foundations to strengthen their organizational learning practices based on the challenges and “failures” you have experienced, what would you tell them?

Wrap-Up

12. What other foundations should we talk to for this project? (Get contact information.)
13. We may include a list of foundations that contributed to the article. Would you like to be listed or would you prefer to remain anonymous?

APPENDIX 2 Learning Tools and Resources Suggested by Participants

1. Many resources provided by GEO were mentioned by many of the participants, including:
 - GEO's work around culture and learning (see, e.g., GEO, 2016, 2014a, 2014b, 2007),
 - GEO's annual conference, and
 - a list of case studies from funders having success with learning, available at <https://www.geofunders.org/resources?topics=Learning+and+Evaluation&events=Member+Story&date=#>
2. Several organizations reported using the Center for Effective Philanthropy's staff satisfaction survey to track staff engagement anonymously; one foundation had its own staff culture survey.
3. Several foundations reported offering lunch-and-learns, brown-bags, or book clubs.
4. A number of participants identified the Evaluation Roundtable as a good resource. (See <http://www.evaluationroundtable.org/publications.html>.)
5. Numerous trainings or methods were reported by participants as helpful to their individual or team development:
 - Before-action reviews and after-action reviews (see <https://hbr.org/2005/07/learning-in-the-thick-of-it>)
 - The Fourth Quadrant training on emergent learning (see <http://www.4qpartners.com/certification-program.html>)
 - Situational Leadership training (see <https://com-peds-pulmonary.sites.medinfo.ufl.edu/files/2014/01/Hanke-Situational-Leadership.pdf>)
 - Annie E. Casey Foundation's Results Count leadership development program (see <https://www.aecf.org/work/leadership-development/results-count/>)
 - FSG's ecocycle mapping approach (see <https://www.fsg.org/blog/new-systems-thinking-tool-ecocycle-mapping>)

Study Participants

1. Christine Baker Mitton, director of knowledge and learning, Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland, Ohio 2. Nancy Csuti, vice president of research, evaluation, and strategic learning, The Colorado Trust 3. Kathleen Lis Dean, senior director of evaluation, outcomes, and learning, St. Luke's Foundation 4. Kristy Klein-Davis, vice president of strategy and learning; Sarah Smith, learning officer; and Megan Klenke-Isgiggs, learning officer, Missouri Foundation for Health 5. Jill Miller, president, and Jennifer Zimmerman, director of grants and evaluation, bi3 6. Kelci Price, senior director of learning and evaluation, Colorado Health Foundation 7. Barbara Schillo, vice president, ClearWay Minnesota 8. Allen Smart, independent philanthropic and rural strategist and former vice president of programming for two southern U.S. foundations	9. Sandra Wegmann, learning officer, Episcopal Health Foundation 10. Matthew Carr, director of evaluation, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation 11. Geoff Zimmerman, senior director of impact and improvement, Knowledge Works Foundation 12. Doug Easterling, professor, Wake Forest University School of Medicine 13. Former leader of a small health foundation in the Southeast 14. Learning officer for a large international family foundation 15. Vice president of programs for a small, city-focused health foundation on the West Coast 16. Vice president of programs for a small, city-focused health foundation on the East Coast

Shifting Mindsets: How Meaningful Accountability Systems Can Strengthen Foundation Learning and Improve Impact

Marc J. Holley, Ph.D., and Marcie Parkhurst, M.C.P., Walton Family Foundation

Keywords: Learning; accountability, evaluation, strategy, framework

Introduction

Questions of whether, how, and to whom philanthropic foundations are accountable have been taken up in several ways over the past 15 years (Rourke, 2014). Over the same period, there has been increased interest in the topic of strategic learning in philanthropy (Coffman & Beer, 2011; Lynn, 2012; Reid, 2016; Kennedy Leahy, Wegmann, & Nolen, 2016). Amid these developments, a few authors have examined the relationship between accountability and learning, arguing that these practices, while often perceived as conflicting, are in fact complementary and mutually reinforcing (Guijt, 2010; Preskill, Parkhurst, & Juster, 2014). In this article, we build on these arguments and explore what it looks like in practice when a foundation attempts to integrate accountability and learning practices.¹

In theory, as Irene Guijt (2010) writes, accountability and learning are mutually reinforcing: “They need each other. Understanding effectiveness requires both” (p. 277). Unfortunately, as she continues, “that is the theory. The daily reality is that tensions between the two are alive and kicking” (p. 277). Drawing on our experience in the strategy, learning, and evaluation department at the Walton Family Foundation (WFF), we offer some promising practices that can help manage the tensions between learning and accountability and help address the common misperception that accountability is a barrier to learning. We argue that the belief that learning and accountability are somehow oppositional

Key Points

- This article explores what it looks like when a foundation attempts to integrate accountability and learning practices, and presents a framework for the unique and complementary contributions that accountability and learning can make to the work of foundations.
- The article also looks at the tensions that can arise when a foundation’s internal evaluation staff attempt to design, implement, and make use of accountability systems. Specifically, it identifies three problematic perspectives that can hold foundations back from full engagement in internally driven accountability initiatives, and offers practical guidance on how to shift these mindsets to more productive practices.
- It concludes by calling on evaluation and program staff, foundation leaders, and board members to address the structural, cultural, and mental barriers to constructive accountability systems in philanthropy. In doing so, the authors hope to prompt reflection and action that will strengthen foundation practice and support greater philanthropic impact.

not only heightens tension between program staff and internal evaluators, but it can also undermine a shared goal among all people working in philanthropy — namely, to continuously

¹ We acknowledge that the tension between accountability and learning plays out as much, if not more, within the context of the grantee and foundation dynamic. For the purposes of this article, however, we focus on the particular dynamics at play within a foundation’s walls.

improve our work in order to impact the large-scale problems we seek to address.

To situate the particular type of accountability we aim to explore, we begin with a brief review of the conversation about philanthropic accountability writ large. We then present a framework that illustrates the unique and complementary contributions that accountability and learning can make to the work of foundations. Finally, we explore the tensions that can arise when a foundation's internal evaluation staff attempts to design, implement, and make use of accountability systems. Specifically, we identify three problematic perspectives that can sometimes hold foundations back from full engagement in internally driven accountability initiatives, and we offer practical guidance on how to shift these mindsets to more productive practices. We conclude by calling on evaluation and program staff, foundation leaders, and board members to take steps to address the structural, cultural, and mental barriers to constructive accountability systems in philanthropy. In doing so, we hope to prompt reflection and action that will strengthen foundation practice and support greater philanthropic impact.

Setting the Context: Accountability in Philanthropy

In the broadest sense, there has been a question about whether private foundations are sufficiently accountable in a democratic society. In a number of publications, Rob Reich (2016, 2013) and others (e.g., Rourke, 2014) have discussed how foundations are immune from both market-based accountability (in the form of consumers being able to choose alternative providers of goods and services) and political accountability (in terms of answerability through elections). At the same time, others (e.g., Kramer, 2013) have pointed out that foundations do face some public pressure to perform or else face reputational risks that can ultimately undermine their effectiveness. Notwithstanding this qualification or the feelings of some foundation staff (Gates & Rourke, 2014), there is little current dispute that foundations are largely unaccountable — in the traditional sense — for generating results.

In the absence of traditional, externally imposed accountability structures, some have argued that the philanthropic sector should take efforts to regulate itself. As Rick Cohen (2005) explained, there are different ways that foundations can participate in self-regulation, including subjecting themselves to ratings and evaluations or joining trade associations that have codes of practice. Cohen acknowledged that these sector-level approaches suffer from at least two inherent weaknesses: participation in them is voluntary, and they lack a strong enforcement mechanism. The organization Cohen once led, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, has tried to address some of these challenges as a sector watchdog (e.g., by instituting its Philamplify series). Despite these efforts, it is fair to say that accountability largely remains an internal, elective practice for most foundations.

Foundations' elective practices include a range of initiatives implemented at the foundation, program, and grant levels. For example, more than 95 foundations are participating in the Foundation Center's GlassPockets project (n.d.), which aims "to increase understanding of best practices in foundation transparency and accountability in an online world" by publishing descriptive information about foundation structure and processes across 26 indicators (para 2). Many foundations have also taken steps to increase their accountability to grantees. For example, there are now 320 foundations of all sizes and missions participating in the Center for Effective Philanthropy's *Grantee Perception Report*, an instrument that allows grantees to provide anonymous feedback to foundations across a range of topics, from perceptions of approachability to impact.

While these are important steps in the right direction, perhaps the most meaningful self-imposed efforts to promote accountability, particularly among larger foundations, have come as part of investments in internally driven monitoring and evaluation. In their most recent survey of evaluation practice among independent and community foundations giving at least \$10 million annually, the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) and the Center for Evaluation Innovation

(CEI) (2016) found that about half of responding foundations had at least 1.5 full-time-equivalent positions dedicated to evaluation work and that about a quarter of foundations reported spending at least \$1 million annually on evaluation. In total, 71 percent of survey respondents (including those working at foundations without dedicated evaluation staff) reported spending time “compiling and/or monitoring metrics to measure foundation performance” (CEP & CEI, p. 20). Interestingly, more than half of survey respondents believed they spent too little time on these activities.

Internal evaluation staff are not solely focused on accountability, though: More than 70 percent of evaluation staff also report spending time designing and/or facilitating learning activities.² For purposes of this article, we are most interested in the time that evaluation staff invests in strategic learning, defined as “the use of data and insights from a variety of information-gathering approaches — including monitoring and evaluation — to inform decision-making about strategy” (Coffman & Beer, 2011, p.1). In other words, whereas accountability systems are oriented retrospectively to assess progress against predetermined objectives, strategic learning is oriented prospectively, toward shaping future decisions and actions. It is also worth noting that accountability systems are almost always narrowly focused on tracking progress toward intended outcomes or impact goals, whereas learning activities can cover a much broader range of topics and questions. As a practice, learning is an active process that can take many forms; it can be done individually, in groups, through facilitated activities, or in quiet reflection; for example, FSG’s recent toolkit, *Facilitating Intentional Group Learning* (Preskill, Gutierrez, & Mack, 2016), describes 21 activities through which organizations can structure shared learning experiences.

The differences between accountability and learning in terms of purpose and use should in theory make them complementary practices. We explore this argument when we present a

framework for how foundations can integrate learning and accountability to help strengthen philanthropic practice, and offer an example of how this has worked at the WFF. The challenge is that the reality of implementing robust accountability and learning practices within foundations often creates tension. We also identify some of the common mindsets that can limit program staff support for accountability practices, and offer some guidance on how foundations can overcome these challenges.

The Case for Synergy Between Accountability and Learning

Guijt begins her seminal 2010 article by stating, “You cannot be accountable if you do not learn. And you need to know how well you live up to performance expectations in order to learn. The tug-of-war between learning and accountability is nonsensical” (p. 277). We completely agree.

To take a fairly simple example, it is hard to imagine how a program officer could learn to improve the effectiveness of her work on health disparities without credible information about how her work to date has (or has not) influenced those disparities — in other words, she needs to know how well her work measures up to expectations. In this way, accountability serves as an engine that helps power the learning process. At the same time, by actively learning and making changes to her approach — including, perhaps, working with different grantees or funding different approaches — the same program officer can improve the effectiveness of her work and, in so doing, become more accountable to the foundation and the field.

Knowing how best to balance learning and accountability is certainly more of an art than a science. As Guijt suggests, “being clear about the nature of the context in which one is operating can help [funders] understand what is needed and what is feasible in connecting accountability and learning” (p. 286). In particular, foundations should expect that these practices will look different when applied to fairly straightforward

² Other types of learning activities can include developing and delivering skill-building trainings or facilitated learning-exchange opportunities (e.g., “lunch and learns”).

FIGURE 1 A Framework for Understanding the Complementary Roles of Learning and Accountability

interventions (e.g., meal-delivery services) as compared to more complex systems-change efforts (e.g., improving access to fresh foods). In our framework for learning and accountability, we illustrate how foundations can use accountability and learning to improve their work, whether it is a relatively simple program implementation or a more complex, systems-change effort. (See Figure 1.)

As the framework illustrates, there are several ways in which both foundations and their grantees can be held accountable for their efforts to advance a particular goal. While there is some overlap between these practices under simpler and more complex conditions, there are also some important differences. Specifically, when funding grantees working in complex environments, foundations should not aim to hold grantees accountable for precise execution of an overly

detailed plan amid changes in context. Rather, foundations should be looking at how effectively grantees (and foundation staff) respond to those changes as they pursue the intended objectives of a given grant or initiative.

The framework also illustrates the symbiotic nature of the two practices: the same data that feed the accountability structure (e.g., on grantee execution or foundation responsiveness or flexibility) also provide fuel for robust learning activities. To complete the cycle, the results of learning activities (e.g., insights about success factors, system dynamics, or unintended consequences) can help shape future approaches to accountability (e.g., performance expectations).³

It is important to note that the data used to support learning and accountability can come from a variety of evaluative approaches. The key to

³ Guijt further expands on the dynamics of learning and accountability under conditions of complexity, describing this as the “domain where accountability and learning depend on each other. Accountability is demonstrated by showing how learning has led to adaptation or response-ability” (p. 287).

determining the most appropriate evaluation approach is to identify the type and maturity of philanthropic strategy or investment being assessed. Again, the complexity spectrum and the framework can be instructive. (See Figure 1.) For example, as a part of its city-level work to improve education and life outcomes for young people, in 2017 the WFF's K–12 Education Program funded 35 community and parent organizing grants totaling over \$15.9 million. This strategy is newer for the foundation, and the very nature of the work of community organizations is often emergent and responsive. While the K–12 Education Program has an overarching strategy for this grant portfolio and each grant has clear objectives, the work often unfolds in less predictable ways. As such, for this type of more complex work the foundation commissioned a third-party developmental evaluation. In partnering with the program team to scope the evaluation, our internal strategy, learning, and evaluation team (of which we are a part) sought to match the evaluation methods to the nature of the work. By contrast, when we evaluate the effectiveness of simpler, more discrete investments related, for example, to starting new autonomous schools (e.g. district innovation schools, independent public charter schools), we use different methods and data sources, such as quasi-experimental designs that compare funded versus nonfunded schools on the value-added academic growth of their respective student bodies. While we are aiming to expand the ways we measure school quality in the coming years as new types of measures become available, the nature of this school-funding strategy is more straightforward and something that the K–12 Education Program officers and our partners often have much more experience in doing. It is for these reasons that a relatively more straightforward, even if technically complicated, impact evaluation makes sense.

Evaluation in service of learning and accountability occurs at multiple levels across the foundation. In one example, the foundation worked to balance learning and accountability in the context of a midstrategy review of its Home Region Program, which contains both simpler

and more complex bodies of work. (See Table 1.) This example aims to illustrate how these concepts apply at a level above individual grants or even clusters of grants.

Our foundation's grantmaking has benefited significantly from the combination of accountability and learning activities that we engaged in through the Home Region Program strategic review. We acknowledge, though, that the experience for an individual program officer or program director of being held accountable for her or his work is quite different from the experience of a board member or a senior leader holding someone accountable. The power differential that is intrinsic to the practice of accountability can elicit a range of emotional responses — fear, stress, resentment — from those on the receiving end of an accountability discussion that can have real implications for their ability or willingness to learn (Wigert & Harter, 2017; McDonald, 2018). Matthew Carr, evaluation director at the Kauffman Foundation, (personal communication) describes the situation this way:

Evaluation will always carry the connotation of accountability, no matter how much emphasis is placed on learning or similar lenses for interpreting and using evidence. Successfully building a culture of learning and reflection requires confronting this fact explicitly and continuously reinforcing the message through words and actions that the primary purpose of measurement is to ground reflection and drive continuous improvement.

These reflections raise an important question: What steps can a foundation take to mitigate the challenges associated with accountability in order to support an appropriate balance between learning and accountability? We next identify three promising practices that can help evaluation staff be better partners on accountability and learning; then we discuss some of the problematic perspectives that can hold staff back from full engagement in foundation-led accountability and learning initiatives and offer practical guidance on how to shift these mindsets.

TABLE 1 Learning and Accountability in Action at the Walton Family Foundation

The Home Region Program’s most recent strategic plan, approved in April 2014, includes several strategies that support the program’s two core initiatives: one focused on quality of life in northwest Arkansas, the other focused on quality of life in two counties in the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta.		
Initiative	Northwest Arkansas Attract and retain top talent at all levels and ensure the long-term viability of the region.	Delta Region Address pre-K–12 educational improvement in the broader region while addressing other key basic needs in targeted counties in order to establish a base on which future economic development can occur.
Strategies	1A. Create world-class pre-K–12 school options. 1B. Establish the region as a leader in arts and cultural amenities. 1C. Strengthen coordinated regional economic development. 1D. Preserve a sense of place.	2A. Support pre-K–12 educational improvement. 2B. Improve public safety. 2C. Engage and develop youth. 2D. Invest in targeted job creation.
<p>Each strategy has a set of associated performance measures and five-year targets. For example, among the performance measures for Strategy 1D (“preserve a sense of place in northwest Arkansas”) are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 53 new miles of multi-use trails constructed with WFF funding• 1,500 cumulative acres of public green space preserved with WFF funding• 4.0% of population using active transportation (walking, biking) to commute to work as measured by the American Community Survey (versus 2.6% at baseline) <p>Among the performance measures for Strategy 2A (“support pre-K–12 educational improvement in the Delta”):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 580 Teach for America (TFA) corps members in the Delta (versus 529 at baseline)• 9 independent public charter schools with 2,000 total students enrolled (versus 6 schools with 1,404 students at baseline) <p>In 2017 — about three years into the current strategic plan — the program underwent a midstrategy review to enable the board and senior leadership to (1) hold the program accountable for progress toward the goals set forth in the plan, and (2) engage in deep learning and reflection about how to approach the remaining two years of the program’s strategic plan. The midstrategy review drew on a range of data sources (e.g., strategy level-metrics, grant evaluations, third-party research studies, conversations with grantees and other stakeholders). On the next page, we outline some of the findings from the midcourse review related to strategies 1D and 2A, and we describe how the foundation used these findings to drive improvements in program strategy and implementation.</p>		

Common Mindsets and Necessary Shifts in Understanding and Approach

The first step in better balancing a foundation’s learning and accountability practices is identifying the forces and factors that are pushing against accountability. As noted earlier, one of these factors is the “power over” dynamic that is

inherent in accountability systems — few people enjoy having their work evaluated by others. That said, the “power over” dynamic is ubiquitous in the workplace, so there must be other forces and factors at play. We posit that there are actually some significant structural, cultural, and mental barriers in place for many foundations.

TABLE 1 Learning and Accountability in Action at the Walton Family Foundation (continued)

On Strategy 1D, the midstrategy review found:

- **Need to revise targets:** The program had already achieved its goals in terms of new miles of natural surface trails constructed and acres of high-priority open space preserved. *As a result, the program agreed to set more ambitious performance targets.*
- **Evidence of progress:** The program was on track to achieve its goal of seeing 4% of the population using active transportation to commute to work. *As a result, the program agreed to stay its course in terms of strategy implementation.*
- **Unintended consequences:** The midstrategy review observed that the program's successes in terms of expanding trails and investing in arts and culture may have contributed to a shift in the local housing market, which is affecting working families living in the downtown area and the region's ability to attract artists. *As a result, the program is exploring opportunities to support local partners working at the intersection of housing and arts and culture. Additionally, the program continues to monitor the state of housing affordability in and around regional downtowns and will be considering this issue in its next strategic planning process.*

On Strategy 2A, the midstrategy review found:

- **Evidence of progress:** The program was on track to achieve its goal of seeing 2,000 students enrolled in charter schools. *As a result, the program agreed to stay its course in terms of strategy implementation.*
- **Changes in the system:** There was a significant shift in the K–12 ecosystem that held important implications for Strategy 2A. Due to changes in the economy and at the organization, TFA adjusted its approach to recruiting and placing teachers, resulting in a significant decrease in the size of the TFA corps in the Delta. *As a result, while the program continues to partner closely with TFA, the foundation also decided to work both to better understand the drivers of the teacher shortages in the region (e.g., by commissioning a third-party qualitative research study) and to explore ways to build new alternative teacher pipelines to support schools in the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta.*
- **Context and resources:** Finally, the strategic review prompted observations that there are opportunities to participate in more coordinated institutional philanthropy efforts in the region in a way that may address capacity challenges across the nonprofit and public sectors. *As a result, the program decided to host a "Delta Summit" as a way of attracting new funders and strengthening connections among existing funders in the region.*

To begin with, the functional and often operational division between evaluation and program staff can lead to an unhelpful, "us versus them" dynamic in some foundations. Evaluation staff have a responsibility to help mitigate this challenge by being good partners to program staff on accountability and learning. We have identified three promising practices for evaluation staff to consider:

1. Respect the program officer role;
2. Seek to advise, not to prescribe; and
3. Practice self-awareness and humility.

On the program side, we believe that a number of misperceptions and unchallenged mindsets about accountability can undermine a foundation's efforts to create accountability and link it to learning. The relative prominence and intensity of each of these mindsets varies by institution, of course, based on each foundation's context. In general, though, these mindsets include the following:

- *Accountability is unfair* — the belief that foundations should not hold grantees or themselves accountable for specific results when they are tackling tough problems in an unpredictable world;

Ultimately, all members of the foundation team — program and evaluation staff, foundation leadership, board members, and internal evaluators themselves — share the responsibility for creating a trusting and constructive accountability and learning practice.

- *Accountability is incompatible with learning* — the belief that accountability systems inhibit staff (or grantees) from learning; and
- *Accountability information is irrelevant* — the belief that information about past performance is less valuable or important than deep expertise in a given issue area.

These mindsets play out in various ways; our goal is to identify these attitudes, consider them with reference to contemporary research and how the field has engaged with them, and offer solutions. Ultimately, all members of the foundation team — program and evaluation staff, foundation leadership, board members, and internal evaluators themselves — share the responsibility for creating a trusting and constructive accountability and learning practice.

Internal Evaluators: Being a Good Partner to Program Staff

When adopted by internal evaluators, the following three practices can help create the conditions that support both accountability and learning among across the organization:

1. Respect the program officer role. Internal evaluation staff should begin by taking a collaborative approach that recognizes program staff as colleagues who bring

valuable expertise to a difficult role. One way to promote greater understanding of the complexities of program work is for evaluation staff themselves to have the opportunity to make grants on occasion; in this way, they can better understand the many pressures and tradeoffs that program staff must confront. At the WFF, the strategy, learning, and evaluation team manages approximately \$12 million annually in third-party research and evaluation grants and contracts.

2. Advise, don't prescribe. Evaluation staff should not be responsible for setting performance measures at a distance. When it comes to setting grant-level targets, grantees should generate the first draft in order to promote a sense of ownership and fairness. Program staff can collaborate on these measures to ensure alignment with foundation priorities, and evaluation staff can play a supportive role as technical advisors. When it comes to setting strategy-level performance targets, program staff, foundation leadership, and board members should in turn have an opportunity to weigh in, again with evaluation staff as advisors. At the WFF, we make it a priority to support program staff who are working with grantees to set, measure, and report on their performance metrics, with the goal of building true partnerships with grantees. Data from the CEP survey of WFF grantees in 2017 indicate that, for the most part, this process is working well. For example, 87 percent of grantees across the sample (557 organizations participated, or 58 percent of all of our grantees) stated that they either played the largest role or there was an equal balance with the foundation when setting grant measure targets. However, a minority of grantees (13 percent) said the foundation played too strong a role. One grantee wrote:

The staff is friendly, open, and honest. That said, they were not always as flexible as one might have hoped. We heard a lot of “yes, we understand your point of view, but we prefer to do it our way.” When that comes from the check-writer, it carries inordinate weight, of course.

Creating a sense of shared ownership over performance measures is a difficult process that requires skill and experience in balancing multiple perspectives.

3. Practice self-awareness and humility. The same cognitive biases that affect program officers can interfere with evaluators' objective assessment and decision-making. For example, as we are learning through our work with the Equitable Evaluation Initiative,⁴ when we fail to include multiple perspectives in evaluation design, analysis, and reporting, we run the risk of perpetuating some of the very inequities we seek to address through our philanthropic activities. It is important for evaluators to be mindful of their own vulnerabilities and preferences and to recognize that there are sometimes limits to what particular data can tell us. Involving program staff (and grantees, as appropriate) in analyzing data and determining implications is one way to help mitigate bias on the part of the evaluation team. For example, WFF recently included several program staff and core grantees in a discussion of the initial findings from a third-party evaluation. Including multiple different perspectives as part of the sense-making process helped us gain a better understanding of the data and its implications for program strategy.

Adjusting Unhelpful Mindsets About Accountability

Guijt's earlier research, as well as our experience in the field of philanthropy over the past decade, indicate there are a variety of problematic mindsets about accountability that, when adopted by evaluation and program staff, foundation leadership, or board members, can undermine an organization's efforts to create accountability and link it to learning. We identify some of these problematic perspectives and suggest how they may be shifted to more productive practices. Our goal is to highlight how all staff and board members have roles to play in using data to help drive impact.

Internal evaluation staff should begin by taking a collaborative approach that recognizes program staff as colleagues who bring valuable expertise to a difficult role.

Problematic perspective no. 1: Accountability is unfair. On one hand is the attitude that leadership shouldn't hold program staff and grantees accountable for planning and getting results because they are tackling tough problems in an unpredictable world. With a more productive mindset, however, accountability approaches can be designed and implemented fairly, and they can provide value even when a foundation is working on more complex issues.

At the core of any good accountability system is a predetermined plan and a set of expectations for performance against that plan. In philanthropy, as most readers know well, many foundations use tools such as logic models to describe their plan for a project or program. The idea is to articulate clearly how the foundation's provision of resources will support grantee partners to undertake actions that will lead to shared goals for change to social and environmental problems. Through these planning processes, foundations and their partners identify targets that become a shared definition of success to which everyone will hold themselves accountable.

Several critics (Kania, Kramer, & Russell, 2014; Guijt, 2010; Coffman & Beer, 2016) have argued that setting a priori targets about what can be accomplished before funding complex interventions, such as systems-change efforts, subordinates learning to an unhelpful form of accountability. As Coffman and Beer write:

Accountability mechanisms that overly focus on the upfront quality of the plan and faithful

⁴ See <https://www.equitableeval.org>

[I]t is not the acts of planning and target setting themselves that need to change; rather, it is the way we design and implement our accountability systems.

implementation of it are not actually addressing the kinds of failures that get in the way of results for complex change initiatives. In fact, they might actually reduce chances for success because they incentivize the wrong kind of thinking and action: sticking to the plan instead of adapting. (2016, p. 38)

An alternative view is that regardless of the complexity of the undertaking, careful planning and target setting are essential for responsibly investing a foundation's limited resources — all of which have alternative uses. As Paul Brest (2014) has argued:

Granted that some problems are more challenging than others, it's more useful to think of simple and complex problems as lying on a continuum rather than on two sides of a divide. Strategic planning and prediction are essential from one end of the continuum to the other, and there is no point at which they are replaced by complexity science. (para. 2)

We agree. When understood in this way, it is not the acts of planning and target setting themselves that need to change; rather, it is the way we design and implement our accountability systems.

When working under conditions of complexity, these systems need to allow for adaptive management. We should anticipate, for example, that the outcome of a gubernatorial election might influence our ability to make progress toward specific, state-level policy goals, and we should adjust the targets or timelines in our accountability systems to reflect this change in context, just as program officers will be adjusting their activities and grant pipelines.

The type of accountability we are advocating for here is “strategic accountability.” Guijt (2010) explains that strategic accountability is about having the conversation about whether program staff and grantees made the best decisions they realistically could while considering shifts in context. Conceived in this way, as Lerner and Tetlock (1999) write, accountability has to do with “the implicit or explicit expectation that one may be called on to justify one's beliefs, feelings, and actions to others” (p. 255).

What remains unstated is the second half of the accountability equation — namely, what should happen if the best decisions weren't made or justifications are judged to be inadequate. Most of us have learned to expect consequences for poor performance in other aspects of our lives, but within foundations we often struggle to embrace that mentality. People are perfectly happy to see a corrupt politician lose his job or a restaurant that serves bad food go out of business, but we resist walking away from the hard-working but repeatedly failing nonprofit that is dedicated to a worthy cause. The faith and trust that foundation boards place in their program staff and in turn that program staff places in their grantees makes sense, but foundations need to be willing to ask themselves and their partners tough questions when both program theory and program implementation repeatedly fail to achieve reasonable results.

Problematic perspective no. 2: Accountability is incompatible with learning. A more productive mindset recognizes that accountability is a fundamental component of an effective learning system. As Guijt (2010) notes, “you need to know how well you live up to performance expectations in order to learn” (p. 277).

Program staff and grantees sometimes raise the concern that accountability is incompatible with learning, and, depending on the circumstances, this assertion can be legitimate. It has been shown that the brain can effectively shut down under acute stress and that chronic stress can undermine the brain's ability to learn (Gill, Lerner, & Meosky, 2016; Farber, 2015). Not only can excessive or repeated stress from an

ill-conceived accountability system undermine the learning most foundations are after, but overly strong, fear-based incentives are simply not constructive in the modern workplace.

On the other hand, research also indicates that some degree of accountability can actually help create the conditions that promote learning (Wigert & Harter, 2017). For example, providing settings for program staff to justify decisions or to explain what they have learned from past performance can actually incentivize true reflection. The challenge for foundations is to be intentional on the front end about how accountability systems are designed and to be intentional on the back end about how, when, and with whom accountability conversations take place. On the front end, recent research from Gallup shows that “the effectiveness of goal setting and subsequent performance is largely determined by: 1) goal clarity and specificity, 2) appropriate goal difficulty, 3) involving employees in the process, and 4) feedback and progress monitoring as performance occurs” (Wigert & Harter, 2017, p. 16). In the context of philanthropy, incorporating grantee perspectives in the process is also important. On the back end (i.e., facilitating accountability conversations) Gallup’s research shows that reviews should be “achievement-oriented, fair and accurate, and developmental” (Wigert & Harter, 2017, p. 29).

Setting clear and measurable performance targets goes a long way toward ensuring that accountability conversations are perceived as fair and accurate. It is also helpful to create opportunities for staff to review and discuss findings about progress toward goals prior to any decision-making meetings. In other words, the first time a program officer is asked a hard question about a grant or strategy’s progress toward its previous goals should not be during the meeting where leadership is making a decision about grant renewal or strategy refresh. Sequencing conversations in this way can help ensure that there are authentic opportunities for growth and development and that accountability systems are not perceived as punitive.

Setting clear and measurable performance targets goes a long way toward ensuring that accountability conversations are perceived as fair and accurate.

Problematic perspective no. 3: Accountability information is less important than expert judgment and staying the course in preferred solutions. Again, this mindset is based in an important reality: Program staff are in fact hired for their expertise, their networks and relationships, and their ability to make effective strategic decisions about how to deploy resources. Particularly in philanthropy, which plays an essential role supporting innovative solutions to the toughest problems of our times, the people making investment choices need authority that matches with their responsibility.

Those considerations, however, are not incompatible with a mindset acknowledging that well-designed accountability systems provide timely and relevant information that can help both staff and grantees understand and improve their work. And at the same time, the very things that are often key to success (e.g., expert judgment, strong relationships) can become liabilities. As Beer and Coffman (2014) have explained, foundation staff can reasonably fall prey to cognitive traps such as availability bias, escalation of commitment, and groupthink, which may lead to continued funding for particular grantees or approaches even when internal or third-party evaluations show that they are not effective.

To address this reality, foundation staff should agree to a standard for credible evidence at different stages of program implementation and to decision-making hygiene. For example, when reviewing relatively larger proposals to renew a long-term grant relationship, how and when are evaluation staff brought into the conversation, and who is present when evaluation staff are asked to give their opinion? The idea is that both

[E]valuation staff lack the authority needed to fully empower an organization's accountability system on their own. This means that senior leaders, and particularly board members, have a critical role to play in ensuring that accountability and learning systems are not just well-designed and managed, but used effectively.

evaluation and program staff can be empowered to influence sound decision-making in service of impact.

Conclusion

Effectively integrating accountability and learning within a foundation requires intentional effort, time, and, importantly, leadership. Evaluation staff can certainly do their part to create the right conditions for success (e.g., co-designing accountability and learning systems that support, rather than penalize, adaptive management practices among program officers and grantees). But when it comes to the effective use of the data provided by accountability systems — whether in support of learning activities, strategy review discussions, or individual performance reviews — organizational leadership is essential. That is because accountability works only when the body that has the power to hold another body to account applies that power constructively; otherwise, accountability becomes a voluntary exercise that lacks any real effect.

As referenced earlier, most internal evaluation staff are expected to partner with and support program staff in pursuing the foundation's

mission and goals. As such, and with good reason, evaluation staff lack the authority needed to fully empower an organization's accountability system on their own. This means that senior leaders, and particularly board members, have a critical role to play in ensuring that accountability and learning systems are not just well-designed and managed, but used effectively. For example, program staff and leadership need time and support to engage with the information they receive. Fitting in extra conversations to make sense of complicated and sometimes contradictory information can be very difficult amid all the responsibilities and deadlines that foundation staff face. If foundations want true engagement with the data provided by accountability systems, or they seek the flexibility to engage in true learning and adaptation, they may need to slow down, staff up, or change some of their ways of working.

We believe that the strategic and organizational benefits of a fully-functional, well-balanced accountability and learning system are well worth the time and effort required to implement the system. From a strategy perspective, as illustrated by the Home Region Program case, access to reliable, well-organized data on progress toward program objectives provides a solid basis for thoughtful reflection, deep learning, and informed decision-making about course corrections. From an organizational perspective, accountability data allow us to have confidence in the value of our work and the impact we are having on the issues we care about. We can stand behind our mission because we have data to indicate we are serving it effectively, or we can change what we are doing in order to make greater progress.

As a sector, philanthropy has embraced the idea that we have a responsibility to learn and continuously improve our work. If, as we argue (and as Guijt [2010] argued before us), we accept that learning requires accountability, then we must take action to overcome the structural, cultural, and mental barriers that stand in our way. In so doing, we can better position ourselves — as individual organizations and as a field — to have a greater impact on the problems we care most about.

References

- BEER, T., & COFFMAN, J. (2014). *How shortcuts cut us short: Cognitive traps in philanthropic decision making*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Evaluation Innovation. Retrieved from <https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/how-shortcuts-cut-us-short-cognitive-traps-in-philanthropic-decision-making/>
- BREST, P. (2014, Summer). Response to “strategic philanthropy for a complex world.” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from https://ssir.org/up_for_debate/strategic_philanthropy/paul_brest
- CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE PHILANTHROPY & CENTER FOR EVALUATION INNOVATION. (2016). *Benchmarking foundation evaluation practices*. Retrieved from <http://research.cep.org/benchmarking-foundation-evaluation-practices>
- COHEN, R. (2005, Spring). The accountability toolbox. *Responsive Philanthropy*, 2, 2–6. https://www.ncrp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/RP-Spring-2005-The_Accountability_Toolbox.pdf
- COFFMAN, J., BEER, T., PATRIZI, P., & HEID THOMPSON, E. (2013). Benchmarking evaluation in foundations: Do we know what we are doing? *The Foundation Review*, 5(2), 36–51. <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1155>
- COFFMAN, J., & BEER, T. (2016). How do you measure up? Finding fit between foundations and their evaluation functions. *The Foundation Review*, 8(4), 27–43. <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1325>
- COFFMAN, J., & BEER, T. (2011). *Evaluation to support strategic learning: Principles and practices*. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation. Retrieved from http://www.pointk.org/resources/files/strategic_learning_coffman_beer.pdf
- FARBER, N. (2015, June 28). This is your brain on stress: Ground-breaking research on neuroplasticity [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-blame-game/201506/is-your-brain-stress>
- FOUNDATION CENTER. (n.d.). *Foundation Transparency*. Retrieved from <http://foundationcenter.org/gain-knowledge/foundation-transparency>
- GATES, C., & ROURKE, B. (2014, May 18). Foundations must rethink their ideas of strategic giving and accountability. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. Retrieved from <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/Foundations-Must-Rethink-What/153103>
- GILL, B. P., LERNER, J. S., & MEOSKY, P. (2016). Reimagining accountability in K–12 education. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 2(1), 57–70.
- GUIJT, I. (2010). *Accountability and learning*. In *Capacity development in practice* (pp. 277–291). London, UK: EarthScan. Available online at http://snv-website-2015.live.dpd.com/public/cms/sites/default/files/explore/download/capacity_development_in_practice.pdf
- KANIA, J., KRAMER, M., & RUSSELL, P. (2014, Summer). Strategic philanthropy for a complex world. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from https://ssir.org/up_for_debate/article/strategic_philanthropy
- KENNEDY LEAHY, S.; WEGMANN, S.; & NOLEN, L. (2016). Through the looking glass: Foundation evaluation and learning and the quest for strategic learning. *The Foundation Review*, 8(5), 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1339>
- KRAMER, L. (2013, March 1). Money, power, and constraint. *Boston Review*. Retrieved from <http://bostonreview.net/forum/what-are-foundations/money-power-and-constraint>
- LERNER, J. S., & TETLOCK, P. E. (1999). Accounting for the effects of accountability. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125(2), 255–275.
- LYNN, J. (2012). *Strategic learning in practice: Tools to create the space & structure for learning*. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation. Retrieved from <https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/strategic-learning-in-practice-tools-to-create-the-space-structure-for-learning/>
- MCDONALD, M. (2018). Do your measures make employees mad? Or motivate them? [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/224342/performance-measures-motivate-madden-employees.aspx>
- PRESKILL, H., PARKHURST, M., & JUSTER, J. S. (2014). *Guide to evaluating collective impact*. Boston, MA: FSG. Retrieved from <http://www.collectiveimpactforum.org/sites/default/files/Guide%20to%20Evaluating%20CI%2001.pdf>
- PRESKILL, H., GUTIERREZ, E., & MACK, K. (2016). *Facilitating intentional group learning: A practical guide to 21 learning activities*. Boston, MA: FSG. Retrieved from <https://www.fsg.org/tools-and-resources/facilitating-intentional-group-learning>
- REICH, R. (2016, July). Repugnant to the whole idea of democracy? On the role of foundations in democratic societies. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 49(3), 466–471. Retrieved from <https://inequality.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Reich-paper-2.pdf>
- REICH, R. (2013, March 1). What are foundations for? *Boston Review*. Retrieved from <http://bostonreview.net/forum/foundations-philanthropy-democracy>

REID, C. (2016, October 4). So you want to become a more intentional learning organization? [Web log post.] Retrieved from <http://cep.org/so-you-want-to-become-a-more-intentional-learning-organization/>

ROURKE, B. (2014). *Philanthropy and the limits of accountability: A relationship of respect and clarity*. Washington, DC: Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement and the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.pacefunders.org/publications/philanthropy-and-the-limits-of-accountability.pdf>

WIGERT, B., & HARTER, J. (2017). *Re-engineering performance management*. Washington, DC: Gallup. Available online at https://www.gallup.com/file/workplace/238064/Re-Engineering%20Performance%20Management_Gallup%20Report.pdf

Marc J. Holley, Ph.D., is director of strategy, learning, and evaluation at the Walton Family Foundation. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Marc J. Holley, Walton Family Foundation, P.O. Box 2030, Bentonville, AR 72712 (email: mholley@wffmail.com).

Marcie Parkhurst, M.C.P., is deputy director of strategy and learning at the Walton Family Foundation.

Evaluators as Conduits and Supports for Foundation Learning

Clare Nolan, M.P.P., Engage R+D; Meg Long, M.P.A., Equal Measure; and Debra Joy Pérez, Ph.D., Simmons University

Keywords: Learning, philanthropy, evaluation, consultants, knowledge

Introduction

As stakeholders in the social sector, evaluation and philanthropic professionals care deeply about impact. We are driven to move the proverbial needle in ways that will improve individual and community outcomes in the fields where we work: education, health, community development, the environment, civic society. As such, we think deeply and continuously about how to improve the likelihood of impact. Learning and evaluation — the “R&D” of the social sector — are critical functions to help us do so, supporting innovation, adaptation, and continuous improvement processes that help us get closer to the changes we seek.

For over a decade, these critical functions of learning and evaluation in philanthropy have been evolving rapidly, becoming more essential to supporting decision-making and strategy. These shifts come in part because the adaptive nature of philanthropic investments has required foundations to position within and continuously adapt to shifting contexts, as noted by Patrizi, Heid Thompson, Coffman, and Beer (2013) in *Eyes Wide Open: Learning as Strategy Under Conditions of Complexity and Uncertainty*. Foundations continue to place greater emphasis on achieving measurable results while tackling increasingly more complex work, such as movement-building and systems change.

While the types of philanthropic investments, and therefore learning and evaluation needs, have evolved, we also know that demand for evaluation and learning functions has grown within philanthropy. A study from the Center for Effective Philanthropy and the Center for Evaluation Innovation (Coffman & Buteau, 2016)

Key Points

- Evaluators play a critical role in supporting philanthropic learning, programming, and strategy, but evaluation and learning in philanthropy is often limited in ways that impede deeper resonance and impact.
- Most philanthropic evaluation is focused on the needs of individual foundations, knowledge sharing with the broader field is limited, and foundations struggle to integrate evaluation and learning as a management tool. This article makes the case that evaluators and funders can do more to build the collective capacity of evaluators working in philanthropy in order to enhance their contributions to community change.
- This article also examines the ways that evaluation in philanthropy is evolving, lays out root causes of its limitations, and looks at emerging tools, techniques, and lessons that showcase new ways evaluators and funders are working together to strengthen practice.

elevated the growth and diversity of the evaluation and learning functions in philanthropy, noting that while demand for these has increased over 10 years, evaluation staffing and internal philanthropic resources have not kept pace.

As a response to the increasing prevalence and demand for evaluation and learning, the growing complexity of philanthropic investments, and foundations’ internal capacity constraints, evaluation professionals working with and within philanthropy are experiencing a time of rapid evolution that has challenged them to develop

[E]valuation professionals working with and within philanthropy are experiencing a time of rapid evolution that has challenged them to develop not only more appropriate analytical frames and methods, but also new skills and approaches that go well beyond evaluating discrete programs or serving an accountability function.

not only more appropriate analytical frames and methods, but also new skills and approaches that go well beyond evaluating discrete programs or serving an accountability function. Increasingly, evaluators are being called upon for strategic-planning efforts, group facilitation processes, constituent engagement, communications support, capacity building, and other skills and learning-supportive activities that foundation clients require (Coffman, 2016).

Within this context, external evaluation professionals have come to play an important role in supporting foundation learning, offsetting the requests for internal philanthropic evaluation and learning functions and seeking to help meet those multiple demands. External evaluators can supply essential learning supports, including articulating hypotheses, theories, and logic models that inform strategy; gathering information from grantees and community members; synthesizing information across multiple data sources to help assess progress and impact; and facilitating conversations with staff, trustees, grantees, communities, and other evaluation stakeholders to apply what has been learned (Raynor, Blanchard, & Spence, 2015). Despite these and

other functions external evaluators may play in philanthropy, there are still concerns about the usefulness and influence of evaluation. The study by Coffman and Buteau (2016) highlighted a number of challenges in philanthropic evaluation, including limitations in generating useful insights for the social sector, lessons for grantees, and action-oriented recommendations for foundation staff.

There are many stakeholders in the social sector impacted by the evolution of learning and evaluation in philanthropy, including individual evaluation professionals; small, medium, and large evaluation firms; foundation evaluation and program officers; foundation executives; non-profit and philanthropic infrastructure organizations (Foundation Center, 2018); and, of course, nonprofits seeking to integrate learning and evaluation into their own practice.

The authors of this article — leaders of two small to mid-size professional-services firms that offer philanthropic evaluation, and a long-time foundation evaluation and learning executive — began exploring these concerns about the utility and influence of philanthropic evaluation based on our own professional experiences. We opened the conversation to include other interested stakeholders, eventually forming a diverse network of professionals interested in addressing these concerns. This article seeks to summarize these discussions thus far. We begin with an overview of how the network of philanthropic evaluation members has evolved, provide a summary of what network members identify as key factors that impact the utility and influence of philanthropic evaluation, present some emerging actions to address these issues, and end with next steps for the network and an invitation.

Launch of the Funder and Evaluator Affinity Network

With initial funding support from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, we launched a dialogue to explore ways funders and evaluation professionals could work together to deepen the impact evaluation and learning has on philanthropic practice. Specifically, we sought to raise

this question: Are evaluators' roles proscribed in ways that inhibit broader social impact? Considered more broadly, how can small and mid-size evaluation firms and their philanthropic clients move from a contracting relationship to one where the partnership is a conduit for learning, and the evaluator is viewed as a critical actor in the social-sector ecosystem?

In June 2017, we convened a group of 27 leaders of small and mid-size evaluation firms and funders (primarily evaluation and learning officers) to discuss the state of evaluation and test the salience of some key issues proposed by Nolan and Long (2017). The first meeting, held alongside the Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) Learning Conference in Chicago, Illinois, affirmed the resonance of those issues among a diverse set of participants. It also underscored and elevated the need for funders and evaluators to work together in new ways to build the shared capacity of philanthropic evaluators — those within philanthropy as well as external consultants. Building this sort of shared capacity requires a shift in perspective; rather than viewing evaluators as mere contractors, funders recognize the crucial role evaluators can play in advancing knowledge about how to drive social change most effectively (Halverstadt, 2018).

Since the first convening, this informal network — the Funder and Evaluator Affinity Network (FEAN) — has grown to over 250 individuals and includes individual evaluators, larger firms, and foundation professionals with programmatic and other roles beyond evaluation and learning. Additional convenings were held at the annual American Evaluation Association (AEA) conferences in 2017 and 2018 and at the April 2018 conference of GEO. Each FEAN event was attended by 80 to 100 people, both new and returning participants. We have intentionally sought to raise broader awareness of this effort by providing updates on our work on blogs hosted by the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP), GEO, the Foundation Center, and AEA.

FEAN and related efforts are now being supported by multiple funders, including The

Building this sort of shared capacity requires a shift in perspective; rather than viewing evaluators as mere contractors, funders recognize the crucial role evaluators can play in advancing knowledge about how to drive social change most effectively.

California Endowment and the Ewing Marion Kauffman, David and Lucile Packard, Ford, California Health Care, William and Flora Hewlett, Walton Family, and MacArthur foundations. We are actively partnering with both the Center for Evaluation Innovation (CEI) and the Luminare Group, and will launch action teams this year to make further progress on issues raised through this effort.

Identifying Root Causes and Crowd-Sourcing Solutions

As the network has grown and become more diverse, recent FEAN discussions have moved from contextual shifts in philanthropic evaluation to identifying the underlying inhibitors to stronger application and resonance of evaluation and learning in philanthropy. The assumption is that FEAN members can begin to act — formally and informally, individually and organizationally — to address the root causes of these barriers to greater influence and impact of philanthropic evaluation.

To gain a better understanding of existing efforts and to fuel more solution-oriented exchanges, Equal Measure and Engage R+D surveyed FEAN members in August 2018. The survey highlighted possible approaches for other FEAN members or interested evaluators or funders to address root causes of impediments to the influence of philanthropic evaluation, and sought to help organize

action teams to work together over the coming year to provide more examples, guidance, and resources for funders and evaluators within and beyond the network.

The web-based survey, which was shared with all FEAN members (207 individuals at the time), asked participants to identify the root causes they were working to address in their professional setting and describe how they and their organizations were addressing each of those root causes. Forty-two individuals responded to the survey, representing 20 percent of the network and a diverse cross-section of organizations, professional roles, and geography. The survey was not intended to be a robust study, but instead designed to surface emerging actions with respect to the root-cause challenges identified by the network; and it generated a wide range of initiatives and ideas to improve the practice of evaluation in philanthropy.

FEAN members elevated five root causes of impediments to stronger influence and impact of philanthropic evaluation. What follows is a discussion of each root cause, along with a summary of the open-ended survey responses to highlight emerging actions among FEAN members to address those causes.¹

Root Cause No. 1: Limited Evaluator Professional Development Specific to Philanthropy

The increased demand for evaluation overall and interest in different evaluation approaches requires evaluation professionals to have wide-ranging and diverse skill sets. Beyond classic social science research methods, these include working knowledge of and experience with technical assistance and capacity building, business strategy, communications, design thinking, return on investment, management consulting, organizational development, facilitation of learning, and community engagement. Being all things to all people may be one of the most

challenging expectations facing today's evaluation professionals.

As members noted, professional development rarely prepares evaluators to understand and work strategically within the philanthropic context. Many evaluators are trained in assessing the impact of nonprofit social programs, and may lack familiarity with methods to evaluate adaptive initiatives or investments designed to build systemic capacity. In addition, evaluators working with nonprofits or government agencies may lack understanding of foundation power dynamics, the limitations of grantmaking, and internal culture and norms that influence the uptake of findings.

Professional development in evaluation typically falls within three categories: academic training, field learning opportunities (e.g., conferences, in-person workshops, and online resources offered through professional associations, universities, and nonprofit intermediaries), and on-the-job learning. Academic training for evaluators often focuses on methodology divorced from the specific context of the work being evaluated. In addition, few field learning opportunities address the role of evaluation within philanthropy. As one survey respondent observed,

There does not appear to be a field of evaluation that trains and supports people working either within or outside of foundations on foundation strategy, place-based evaluation, and foundation's internal culture. ... If you put out an RFP for evaluation services as a funder, undoubtedly the majority of responses will be from those with no knowledge of how funders work.

To accelerate skill development while developing a deeper understanding of philanthropic culture and ways of working, most small and mid-size evaluation firms have adopted an apprenticeship model. On-the-job learning or apprenticeships can be effective methods for transferring critical knowledge and skills, but they require large

¹ Many of the issues identified by the network are also relevant for community-based, nonprofit, public, and private stakeholders working in the social sector. The focus of this effort, however, continues to be on funders and evaluators working in philanthropy; expanding the scope of this work would require additional resources and infrastructure to support a sectorwide conversation. It is also important to note that the list of these root causes and solutions is not exhaustive, but rather a reflection of where the energy of recent network discussion resides.

TABLE 1 Efforts to Increase Evaluator Knowledge Specific to Philanthropy

Mechanism	Sample Efforts
<i>Professional networking tailored to evaluators working with funders</i>	The Center for Evaluation Innovation (CEI), a nonprofit whose aim is to push philanthropic and evaluation practice in new directions and arenas, has played a leading role in supporting the development of foundation evaluation and learning capacity. CEI directs the Evaluation Roundtable, a network of foundation leaders seeking to improve how they learn about the impact of their work. Center Director Julia Coffman reported that CEI “is experimenting with cross-fertilizing the Evaluation Roundtable network with evaluation consultants working in philanthropy. We want to create better alignment among evaluation consultants and foundation evaluation leaders about what constitutes high-value evaluative work and how both roles can better support it.” CEI convened the Evaluation Roundtable network and evaluation consultants in spring 2019 and used lessons from that convening to inform future efforts.
<i>Funder-supported peer-to-peer learning</i>	The David and Lucile Packard Foundation regularly brings together its monitoring, evaluation, and learning partners across programs to engage in peer learning and professional development. Its most recent convening involved optional training in facilitation methods in addition to peer-to-peer learning opportunities. The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) is sponsoring an advisory and peer-learning group for consultants engaged in applying <i>Power Moves</i> , an assessment toolkit focused on equity and justice, in their own practices. Participants share their learnings and insights with one another and the NCRP. While participating consultants span a range of service areas, evaluation consultants are represented in the initial cohort.
<i>Internal training and mentoring for evaluators</i>	Athena Bertolino of Ross Strategic noted that her firm “has been making a concerted effort internally to get more staff connected with philanthropic evaluation work and to provide more opportunities for staff to attend relevant conferences and participate in field-building discussions.” Corey Newhouse of Public Profit noted that in addition to providing staff with an annual budget to support outside professional development, her firm “hosts regular practice-shares among team members to share new frameworks, strategies, or methods.” Doug Easterling of the Wake Forest School of Medicine has hired, oriented, and mentored master’s-level researchers on foundation-sponsored projects in addition to advising faculty colleagues on how to work effectively with foundations.

investments of time and resources and often take a back seat to the more immediate needs of satisfying clients and building new project pipelines. Finding ways to better prepare and support evaluation consultants working in philanthropy is critical to meeting today’s needs. An analysis of survey responses found several mechanisms that are emerging to address this, including professional development specifically geared to philanthropic evaluation, foundation-sponsored peer-to-peer learning, internal training, and mentoring. (See Table 1.)

Root Cause No. 2: Disincentives for Collaboration and Shared Learning

The high demand for evaluation has fueled competition among evaluators, which can impede collaboration and knowledge sharing with potential to advance shared capacity across practicing evaluators. Funders, too, may withhold information or be reluctant to share lessons learned from their own evaluation experiences so as not to privilege or provide “inside” information to contractors. Moreover, the social sector lacks structures and supports to facilitate learning and

TABLE 2 Efforts to Support Collaboration and Shared Learning

Mechanism	Sample Efforts
<i>Intentionally designed convenings</i>	<p>Several respondents cited the FEAN convenings sponsored by Equal Measure, Engage R+D, and supporting funders as a rare opportunity to discuss cross-cutting issues in philanthropic evaluation with funders and evaluators in the same room.</p> <p>Foundations are often in a good position to sponsor learning exchanges across evaluators and foundation staff. The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, with support from the Center for Evaluation Innovation, recently brought together program staff and evaluators of systems-change initiatives throughout the country to discuss approaches to evaluating systems-change efforts. Stephanie Lerner described an effort by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) to bring together its current evaluators and program officers to share learning across individual programs and evaluations.</p> <p>Foundation convenings can take multiple forms, ranging from episodic, topically driven gatherings and annual or semiannual meetings to resourcing an ongoing network of participants.</p>
<i>Formal partnerships and collaboration</i>	<p>Several evaluators described participating in formal partnerships to pursue joint consulting projects. Such efforts are not entirely new — as Lindsay Hanson and Christina Kuo noted, Grassroots Solutions and other firms have pursued joint partnerships for nearly a decade — but they represent one strong approach for increasing collaborative learning.</p> <p>Foundations can also play a role in encouraging collaborative responses to requests for proposals, either through specific opportunities or systemic efforts. The Annie E. Casey Foundation explicitly encourages partnerships between evaluation firms and members of its Advancing Collaborative Evaluation Network of experienced evaluators from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups.</p>
<i>Informal knowledge exchanges</i>	<p>Several evaluators described taking part in informal knowledge exchanges, some of which are ongoing.</p> <p>Public Profit convenes informal networks of evaluators to talk about shared interests once or twice a year.</p> <p>Grassroots Solutions participates in quarterly CEO learning circles with other organizations, takes part in informal networking, and facilitates discussions with other evaluators and philanthropic organizations.</p> <p>Harder+Company has engaged in 90-minute learning exchanges between internal staff and practice leaders from outside firms, while offering a reciprocal opportunity to share its own expertise.</p> <p>Several FEAN members have developed loosely organized regional affinity groups among independent evaluators to share resources, discuss challenges, provide support, and identify opportunities for collaboration.</p>
<i>Embedded learning and reflection practices</i>	<p>Many foundation survey respondents discussed embedding learning and reflection processes into organization and project work to deepen collaboration and learning exchange across evaluators and funders.</p> <p>The NMEF regularly engages in sense-making sessions where “evaluators facilitate and share what they’re seeing, and [together with foundation staff] collectively make meaning and reflect on the work,” Lerner said.</p> <p>FSG offers a service designed to help foundations build learning capacity; it recently worked with the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation to build the collective capacity of both foundation staff and the foundation’s external evaluation consultants to facilitate intentional group learning.</p> <p>One foundation described how its adoption of emergent learning practices led to the implementation of intentional structures that support formal and informal learning moments involving internal staff and evaluation partners.</p>

collaboration among funders and evaluators and with community stakeholders. Indeed, many philanthropic conferences explicitly exclude participation by non-foundation staff, impeding cross-sector discussion and reinforcing unproductive power dynamics (Bokoff, 2018). Events that focus on evaluation, such as conferences sponsored by AEA, the Center for Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment, and regional networks, attract only a small contingency of foundation leaders and are not typically designed to foster deep exchanges that support relationship building, collaboration, and authentic knowledge sharing.

Funders and evaluators participating in FEAN convenings cite a need for new mechanisms to support shared learning among evaluators and across funders and evaluators. The good news is that both evaluators and funders are experimenting with a variety of approaches to deepen collaboration and shared learning, including intentionally designed convenings, formal partnerships, informal knowledge exchanges, and embedded learning and reflection practices. (See Table 2.)

Root Cause No. 3: Lack of Advancement on DEI Challenges

FEAN raised three diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) concerns, related to talent, methodology, and funder readiness. First, it is broadly recognized that new voices and diverse perspectives in evaluation are essential to advancing equity. As in other fields, structural racism and other forms of oppression continue to plague the evaluation profession, which remains far too homogenous despite greater efforts to bring individuals with diverse lived experiences and perspectives into the field. Firms and foundations will benefit from recruiting, developing, and retaining evaluators with diverse backgrounds and experiences who can contribute their thinking to the major equity challenges facing our society. Second, the practice of evaluation must continue to evolve and adopt new design and methodological approaches that are consistent with and promote equity, an effort championed

by the Equitable Evaluation Initiative.² This includes considering how the notion of knowledge itself is culturally based and often tied to the establishment of cultural hegemony. Finally, foundations are key to these first and second efforts. Unless funders are ready to accept and value new voices, different ways of thinking, and new ways to think about evidence, efforts to cultivate and support new talent and better integrate DEI into evaluation and learning will fail.

Foundations and evaluators are acting to address DEI within evaluation and philanthropic practice. In addition to pipeline programs, designed to create paths into the evaluation profession for underrepresented groups, survey respondents described national initiatives to advance DEI broadly within evaluation and philanthropy, as well as organizational efforts — often in tandem with consultants — to embed DEI in their work, experimenting with new design and methodological approaches and taking steps to build momentum for deeper DEI work. (See Table 3.)

Root Cause No. 4: Single-User Focus for Most Philanthropic Evaluations

Most evaluations commissioned by philanthropy are intended for the foundation and, perhaps, its grantees, and this single-user focus limits their value. A heavy focus on the needs of individual clients means that evaluation findings rarely inform the communities those findings are intended to benefit, and much less future investments by other funders or larger social-change efforts. While starting to take root, sharing evaluation findings beyond individual organizations is a nascent best practice. Broader sharing often is limited to posting an evaluation report on a website; an important step further would be to actively engage people with shared interest in evaluation findings to more deeply interact with the content. This would also help to increase the accountability of philanthropy to show how they are applying lessons learned to continuously evolve more impactful strategies. Another step is to support organizational capacity-building efforts as part and parcel of evaluation engagements so that targeted stakeholders

² See <https://www.equitableeval.org>

TABLE 3 Efforts to Support Advancement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Mechanism	Sample Efforts
<i>Talent pipeline programs and internships</i>	<p>The Annie E. Casey Foundation and allied funders have long supported Leaders in Equitable Evaluation and Diversity, a professional development program that provides evaluation training and practical experience for historically underrepresented people of color. Scholars are often placed in foundations or firms that evaluate philanthropic efforts and are provided with mentoring support designed to help them navigate these environments effectively.</p> <p>The American Evaluation Association operates a Graduate Education Diversity Internship (GEDI) program to provide paid internship and training opportunities for students from groups traditionally underrepresented in the evaluation profession. Host sites include foundations as well as firms that conduct philanthropic evaluations.</p> <p>Several foundations are experimenting with internally sponsored internships as a way to build understanding of philanthropic work for recent graduates or early-career evaluators, especially those of color. One foundation even encourages its evaluation partners to include GEDI interns in consulting teams.</p> <p>Bright Research Group is a good example of firms that are developing their own talent diversification strategies. Bright established the Perez Research Fellowship, which provides a one-year stipend for undergraduates, graduate students, and retired professionals of color who want to learn about and contribute to the field of applied research and consulting.</p>
<i>Engaging in national field-advancing initiatives</i>	<p>Survey respondents cited several national efforts to advance equity in philanthropic evaluation and practice, many of which they are sponsoring, participating in, or otherwise supporting through their work.</p> <p>The Equitable Evaluation Initiative “seeks evaluation to be a tool for and of equity for those that have placed equity as core to their work,” according to Jara Dean-Coffey, founder of the Luminare Group. Over the next five years, this initiative will build an infrastructure that supports and advances (1) the imperative of putting equitable evaluation principles into practice; (2) shared inquiry, or learning and sharing insights as opposed to seeking “right” answers or a check-box approach to execution; (3) cross-sector learning and shared leadership; and (4) field building and mutually beneficial support to advance shared goals. Several foundations are undertaking equitable evaluation initiatives under the umbrella of this effort, including the Vancouver Foundation.</p> <p>The Center for Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment sponsors an annual conference and other resources to support evaluations and assessments that embody cognitive, cultural, and interdisciplinary diversity.</p>
<i>Working with consultants and experts to build DEI centrally into organizational practices</i>	<p>Foundations and evaluators described efforts to build DEI into their organizational practices broadly and/or within their learning and evaluation work. A number of respondents noted that they are in early stages of efforts to embed DEI into their evaluation and grantmaking practices. Steps to build momentum for deeper work included developing a shared language around DEI, identifying values, creating a common understanding of DEI approaches, engaging a consultant to support planning, and using a DEI lens in hiring consultants.</p> <p>Steven LaFrance of Learning for Action highlighted his firm’s partnership with the David and Lucile Packard Foundation’s Organizational Effectiveness program to explore how to include DEI principles in capacity-building strategies throughout the foundation’s national and global work.</p> <p>Evaluator Susan Foster described partnering with a foundation client to conduct a developmental evaluation of its internal racial equity process.</p> <p>Findings from an external evaluation helped the Nellie Mae Education Foundation assess its strategy of responding to community needs.</p> <p>Harder+Company is working on a reflection guide to help staff understand where foundations are on their DEI journey and how to support next steps.</p>
<i>Methodologies, designs, and frameworks</i>	<p>Survey respondents described experimenting with new designs, methodologies, and frameworks for advancing DEI as part of philanthropic evaluation efforts. They ranged from including perceptual feedback from foundation beneficiaries and reconsidering “what counts as credible evidence” to engaging community input and defining what it means to improve a foundation’s equitable evaluation practices.</p>

TABLE 4 Efforts to Improve Knowledge Dissemination and Broader Learning

Mechanism	Sample Efforts
<i>Building broad sharing into projects</i>	<p>Several respondents from foundations acknowledged the importance of planning for dissemination early in a learning engagement, considering as core audiences both local communities and others in the sector working on similar challenges, and making resources available to evaluators to support dissemination and shared learning.</p> <p>Jasmine Haywood noted that Lumina Foundation is “working more diligently to share evaluation learnings both internally and with stakeholders.” The foundation often builds resources into budgets to support the creation of blogs and infographics by evaluators.</p> <p>Mari Wright observed that the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation has become more focused on transparency in evaluation findings and has committed to sharing all evaluations with its grantees and partners.</p> <p>The Nellie Mae Education Foundation is supporting one of its evaluation firms to turn a report into two issue briefs, one geared toward youth organizers and the other toward funders. The foundation covered the evaluator’s time to write the briefs and managed the graphic design process.</p> <p>The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation is partnering with the Center for Evaluation Innovation to author a book chapter on the developmental evaluation of its Madison Improvement Initiative. The chapter will describe “the methods used, how the evaluation informed strategy, and reflections and lessons about the developmental evaluation experience and approach,” Julia Coffman said.</p> <p>Likewise, some evaluation firms described being more mindful of audiences beyond the foundation from the beginning of an evaluation effort. In its work with Unbound Philanthropy, Learning for Action considered audiences beyond funders in the immigration movement during the planning stage of the evaluation, and then discussed how to match product and dissemination approach to audience. According to Steven LaFrance, “After considering the needs of internal audiences, we generally think through how what we’ve learned can support movement actors (activists, advocates, leaders, etc.) as well as funding partners.”</p> <p>Athena Bertolino of Ross Strategic described a similar emphasis on “encouraging and supporting product development that has outward-facing, field-building focus,” using an example of the firm’s work on the Kresge Foundation’s City Energy Project to highlight its approach.</p>
<i>Contributing to and supporting dissemination platforms</i>	<p>IssueLab by Candid was repeatedly identified as a key resource for knowledge sharing and dissemination. IssueLab is an accessible, searchable, browsable collection of more than 23,000 case studies, evaluations, white papers, and briefs from social-sector organizations around the world. Many foundations and firms are electing to post all of their evaluations to IssueLab.</p> <p>IssueLab and the Foundation Center by Candid’s #OpenforGood campaign were identified as key players in raising awareness and influencing norms related to transparency in the social sector. The Foundation Center by Candid, in partnership with Engage R+D, also released a GrantCraft guide to knowledge sharing that provides resources and tools (Nolan, 2018).</p> <p>Some foundations, including the Vancouver Foundation, have adopted an open licensing policy. Open licensing platforms like Creative Commons establish public copyrighting for published materials, giving users a legal means to download, share, or translate them. Many foundations and evaluation firms share reports and briefs on their own websites and blogs, or on sites of intermediary organizations.</p>
<i>Taking early steps</i>	<p>Some organizations reported that they are still building internal capacity and cultivating a supportive culture around knowledge sharing. Important to these foundations were small steps toward broader dissemination, such as sharing brief reports highlighting selected evaluation findings, providing memos to peer foundations working on similar issues, and synthesizing insights for internal program staff. The recent GrantCraft guide makes a strong case to foundations that sharing their knowledge is an integral, strategic aspect of philanthropy (Nolan, 2018).</p>

- nonprofits, evaluation firms, sector partners
- can integrate lessons learned into practice.

Broadening the focus for evaluation beyond that of the commissioning foundation is critical to increasing the use and influence of evaluation. By shining a light not only on accomplishments, but also failures and lessons learned, funders and evaluators can accelerate the spread of knowledge about how to drive social change more effectively. Evaluators are well positioned to play an important “translator” role, helping to share relevant and useful findings across organizations working on similar issues from different vantage points. According to survey respondents, organizations are testing several new approaches to strengthen knowledge sharing and ensuring that insights and lessons from evaluative work are broadly shared, with the intent of broader application. These include planning for and embedding resources for dissemination in advance, contributing to and supporting dissemination platforms, and taking steps to ease into broader sharing of knowledge (See Table 4.)

Root Cause No. 5: Missed Connections to Strategy and Decisions

To be most effective, external evaluation partners should be engaged as strategies are developed, investment decisions made, initiatives launched, and grants awarded. Too often, outcomes and impact have been defined by board members, executive leaders, program officers, and implementing partners before evaluators join the discussion. As a result, foundations may often have inappropriate expectations for what can and should be measured, which leads, unsurprisingly, to disappointment in the results and limited application of findings. While some evaluators are moving toward more developmental and formative approaches that help inform strategies as they unfold, too often evaluation products are untimely, laden with jargon, or ill-suited for action from the intended audience.

To support stronger resonance of evaluation and learning in philanthropy, findings must be actionable in the sense of informing decision-making and strategy. Both funders and evaluators are experimenting with techniques to increase the

uptake and application of findings; approaches include creativity in design and product format, better integration of facilitated learning and product development, support of design capacity, and utility as a driver of evaluation. (See Table 5.)

Looking Ahead

Foundations and evaluators will better serve the social sector by moving toward a relationship in which evaluators serve as conduits of knowledge that gather and aggregate insights across diverse contexts and organizations. Embracing the solutions outlined in this article would reposition evaluators as playing a “crucial role in the social sector ecosystem” (Halverstadt, 2018, p. 16), rather than impartial vendors with little concern for driving social change. The authors of this article believe this key shift has the potential to accelerate the spread of knowledge, broaden and diversify the experience base of external evaluators working in philanthropy, and increase the value of evaluation and learning within foundations and, more broadly, across the social sector.

The authors are committed to deepening our exploration of how to increase the value that evaluation brings to philanthropy. We have secured resources to support an analysis of existing talent identification and development efforts by the Luminare Group, explore a shared-learning effort hosted by CEI, and ensure ongoing communications, network development, and management led by Engage R+D and Equal Measure. In 2019 we will work with FEAN members to identify five action areas to engage individuals in smaller work groups with a dedicated facilitator and documentarian to promote knowledge exchange. The goal of these groups will be to identify steps evaluators and funders can take together to advance outlined solutions and, ideally, produce more in-depth case examples of emerging efforts discussed here.

The intent is not to build an initiative with substantial infrastructure, but to rely on an informal, network approach to instigate changes among FEAN members testing different ways of working. We will crowdsource the topics of highest resonance and continue to share what we learn.

TABLE 5 Efforts to Support Uptake and Application of Findings

Mechanism	Sample Efforts
<i>Creative design and alternative products</i>	<p>Participants identified strategies they are using to create appealing products for different audiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making findings more accessible by improving data visualization, creating brief visual snapshots of selected findings, and developing easily digestible infographics. • Sharing findings in multiple, often dynamic formats, including blogs; interactive web-based platforms; video; interactive digital storytelling; and social media updates. • Translating findings into actionable tools (e.g., diagnostic criteria, field guides, action-planning rubrics) that others working on similar issues can use.
<i>Integration of facilitated learning</i>	<p>Survey respondents discussed the importance of structuring deliverables so that they ask and answer critical evaluative questions using supporting evidence. Ideally, reports are tied to upcoming decisions about program investments, and clients are engaged in facilitated conversations that enable them to be part of interpreting data and prioritizing next steps. Tools such as data placements and gallery-walk presentations can be really helpful, along with techniques for facilitating intentional group learning.</p>
<i>Support of design capacity</i>	<p>Small and mid-size evaluation firms often have limited in-house design capacity. Some foundations, including the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, make support from graphic designers and data visualization technical assistance providers available to evaluators as a way to improve the clarity and appeal of reported findings. The Kauffman Foundation also worked with Evergreen Data to produce a guide to actionable reporting that will be shared with all foundation grantees and be available on its website. Another strategy for supporting strong design involves having foundation communications staff partner with evaluators to build capacity in this arena.</p>
<i>Utility as a driver of evaluation</i>	<p>A few foundations emphasized the importance of clearly understanding how an evaluation will influence decision-making and strategy before embarking on an effort. As Trilby Smith of the Vancouver Foundation observed, “[We] embark on an evaluation of a particular granting program only when we can articulate exactly how we are going to use the results of the evaluation. This helps to ensure that the results will be actionable and have influence.”</p>

Acknowledgments

We wish to acknowledge the many individuals whose time, resources, and generous sharing of insights informed the development of this article. This includes the funders supporting this work: the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, The California Endowment, California Health Care Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, Ford Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and MacArthur Foundation. We are also grateful to the more than 200 active Funder and Evaluator Affinity Network members who have engaged in this field-building work on their own time and own

dime. A very special acknowledgment also goes to the 42 respondents to our Solution Sourcing Survey who agreed to be publicly recognized for contributing their insights to this article: the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Barr Foundation, Center for Evaluation Innovation, Colorado Health Foundation, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, Foundation Center, FSG, Grassroots Solutions, Harder+Company, Kaiser Permanente Community Health–Southern California, Learning for Action, Lumina Foundation, Luminare Group, MacArthur Foundation, Marin Community Foundation, Moore Foundation, National Endowment for Democracy, Nellie Mae Education Foundation, PhilanthropywRx,

Public Profit, Ross Strategic, Susan Foster Associates, Vancouver Foundation, and Wake Forest School of Medicine.

References

- BOKOFF, J. (2018, September 14). When the dichotomy blurs. *Alliance*. Retrieved from <https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/when-the-dichotomy-blurs/>
- COFFMAN, J. (2016, April 28). Oh for the love of sticky notes! The changing role of evaluators who work with foundations. *Medium*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@jcoffman/oh-for-the-love-of-sticky-notes-the-changing-role-of-evaluators-who-work-with-foundations-66ec1ffed2e4>
- COFFMAN, J., & BUTEAU, E. (2016). *Benchmarking foundation evaluation practices*. Washington, DC: Center for Effective Philanthropy. Available online at <http://research.cep.org/benchmarking-foundation-evaluation-practices>
- FOUNDATION CENTER. (2018). *U.S. foundation funding for nonprofit and philanthropic infrastructure 2004–2015*. New York, NY: Author. Retrieved from <http://infrastructure.foundationcenter.org/>
- HALVERSTADT, A. (2018). *Hiring an external evaluator*. San Francisco, CA: S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation. Retrieved from http://sdbjrfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/04_Evaluation-Consultant_2018Oct25.pdf
- NOLAN, C. (2018). *Open for good: Knowledge sharing to strengthen grantmaking*. New York, NY: GrantCraft. Retrieved from http://www.grantcraft.org/assets/content/resources/OFG_GUIDE-FINAL.pdf
- NOLAN, C., & LONG, M. (2017). *From contractors to conduits: An exploratory dialogue among funders and evaluators*. Palo Alto, CA: Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.equalmeasure.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Moore-Foundation-Community-of-Practice-Issue-Brief-FINAL.pdf>
- PATRIZI, P., HEID THOMPSON, E., COFFMAN, J., & BEER, T. (2013). Eyes wide open: Learning as strategy under conditions of complexity and uncertainty. *The Foundation Review*, 5(3), 50–65. <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1170>
- RAYNOR, J., BLANCHARD, A., & SPENCE, M. (2015). Shine a light: The role of consultants in fostering a learning culture at foundations. *The Foundation Review*, 7(1), 98–112. <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1238>

Clare Nolan, M.P.P., is co-founder of Engage R+D. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Clare Nolan, Engage R+D, 556 South Fair Oaks Avenue, Suite 101, No. 603, Pasadena, CA 91105 (email: cnolan@engagerd.com).

Meg Long, M.P.A., is president of Equal Measure.

Debra Joy Pérez, Ph.D., is senior vice president of organizational culture, inclusion, and equity at Simmons University.

Building Principle-Based Strategic Learning: Insights From Practice

Kelci M. Price, Ph.D., Colorado Health Foundation; Chera Reid, Ph.D., Kresge Foundation; and Suzanne Kennedy Leahy, Ph.D., Episcopal Health Foundation

Keywords: *Strategic learning, foundation evaluation, evaluation, learning practice, strategic philanthropy*

Introduction

Strategic learning enables greater impact and improved outcomes in mission-driven organizations. At its core, strategic learning is simply the process of building evidence and reflection into the strategy process in meaningful ways, so that decisions can be improved (e.g., Coffman & Beer, 2011). In recent years, learning has emerged as central to conversations about the intersection of evaluation and strategy (Preskill, 2017). Yet, foundations have struggled to create practices and behaviors that effectively support organizational learning, including learning about strategy. With a growing cadre of foundation staff with responsibilities that cut across strategy, evaluation, and learning, the topic of strategic learning is ripe for strengthening.

Many foundations have positioned themselves as engaging in strategic philanthropy, in which the foundation has specific conditions in the world it is seeking to change and so takes intentional actions to help these changes occur (Bolduc, Buteau, Laughlin, Ragin, & Ross, 2007). Given this intent, foundation staff need effective ways of testing and adapting their strategies. Strategic learning is a key mechanism through which foundations can strengthen the ability to adapt as they seek social change. Patrizi, Heid Thompson, Coffman, & Beer pointed out that for complex environments and complex problems, “learning is strategy” (2013, p. 50). Strategic learning supports deeper inquiry into the thinking that guides a foundation’s strategies, identifies what evidence needs to be gathered about the results those strategies are generating, allows the foundation to make sense of that evidence, and supports application of that new knowledge to decisions about strategy

Key Points

- Strategic learning is a powerful tool for foundations to achieve greater impact, yet foundations have struggled to create practices and behaviors that effectively support them in learning about strategy. Given that many foundations are engaged in strategic philanthropy, where they have specific conditions in the world they are trying to change, it is critical that they have the capacity to effectively learn about and improve their strategies.
- This article offers three principles for strategic learning, informed by the field of strategic learning and insights from practice across three foundations. Each principle is explored in terms of what it means and why it is important, along with examples from how it could look in practice.
- By taking a principle-focused approach to strategic learning, this article offers a base from which to build a rigorous practice of strategic learning in any organization and to tailor the specifics of that practice to the organization’s unique context and culture.

in a way that improves impact. Despite the central role strategic learning plays in increasing a foundation’s likelihood of success, many of them struggle to develop a strong practice that advances their mission.

Three Principles for Strategic Learning Practice

Reflecting on practice, we sought to write an article that would have accelerated our own early

While organizational context and culture must be considered, we have found that certain principles hold across our respective practices. By grounding in principles, we seek to illuminate approaches that can be applied across contexts to advance strategic learning practice.

efforts. Each of us has had numerous conversations with peers to compare notes on how to build a strategic learning practice in our organizations. While organizational context and culture must be considered, we have found that certain principles hold across our respective practices. By grounding in principles, we seek to illuminate approaches that can be applied across contexts to advance strategic learning practice. This discussion offers three principles for strategic learning that support greater impact and improved outcomes, each informed by insights from practice.¹ For each principle, we describe what it means and why it is important, and provide examples of how we have taken action. The article has two primary audiences: philanthropic and nonprofit staff who are building a new strategic learning practice, and those who may have an existing practice of evaluation or learning and want to position it more strongly within the realm of strategic learning. The principles offered here are intentionally not exhaustive, as they are offered as a starting point from which practitioners can build within their particular contexts. For additional considerations, we suggest reviewing related literature (e.g., Patrizi, 2010).

Principle No. 1: Position Learning and Evaluation in Service of Strategy

This first principle recognizes the intersection of strategy, learning, and evaluation, and the importance of ensuring that a foundation's practices around learning and evaluation (L&E) are strongly aligned with its strategic work. A significant barrier to quality strategic learning is the lack of integration among the functions of strategy, evaluation, and learning. Positioning L&E in service of strategy requires that the foundation create ways in which L&E staff are actively engaged with strategy processes, and that L&E activities are intentionally embedded throughout decision processes and strategy workflows. These considerations apply across the strategy life cycle, including developing new strategy, implementing and adapting existing strategy, and making decisions about exiting or refreshing strategy.

In making the transition to more effectively integrate strategy, learning, and evaluation, we offer two practical considerations: 1) Strategy must be made visible and testable, and 2) L&E questions must be crafted such that they effectively inform strategic decisions.

Focus on Making Strategy Visible and Testable

A necessary step in strategic learning is being able to describe the actual strategy that is being enacted. This description of strategy then becomes the central element with which L&E can be aligned. At the most basic level, strategy is simply "a set of logical hypotheses about how to achieve a goal" (Buchanan & Patrizi, 2016, para. 10). Strategy names an organization or team's mental models about how change happens, rather than merely describing what actions are being taken or what outcomes are supposed to occur. Being able to clearly describe the thinking that guides strategy is key to being able to test and learn about the results of this thinking.

To be successful in this, we need tools that support work in complex, adaptive systems. Many

¹ Many thanks to the Center for Evaluation Innovation and The Evaluation Roundtable for conversations at the September 2017 convening, where they offered ideas about the capacities and habits of effective learning, which sparked the conversations on which this article is based.

of us have stumbled when we tried to use traditional tools, such as theories of change and logic models, to describe actions and desired changes that are not linear and that have many unknowns. However, at its core, theory of change is an important idea. An actionable theory of change process should “increase awareness of the system of actors, conditions, and dynamics” (Patrizi et al., 2013, p. 53).² We found that making foundation strategy visible required us to reconsider assumptions and adjust our tools and practices to reflect different understandings of what foundation strategy is and how it functions. The Colorado Health Foundation (CHF) and the Kresge Foundation have experimented with ways to adapt standard evaluation tools (e.g., logic models, causal loop diagrams) in ways that help us describe the thinking behind the strategy, how this links to the foundation’s proposed actions, and what is expected to happen because of those actions. Assumptions and beliefs are surfaced, discussed, and documented so their validity can be assessed and reflected on.

In our work, we explicitly talk about theories of change as representations of the foundation’s current thinking about how to create change, not as plans of action or representations of the “right answer” about how to achieve impact. This positions them as tools for strategic learning; they contain hypotheses that can be tested and informed by a range of evidence, and they are documents we return to regularly as we assess what we are learning and refine our strategies.

Emerging and Shifting Strategy

Strategic learning is still powerful for foundations where strategy is not yet fully formulated or when foundations are still exploring how they think about strategy. Within philanthropy, there remains some debate about whether strategy is a role that foundations should assume (Brest, 2015), but even the choice to not have an explicit strategy is in fact a strategy for how the foundation can effectively do its work. Strategic learning activities can play an important role in making strategic beliefs and assumptions visible in these circumstances.

In our work, we explicitly talk about theories of change as representations of the foundation’s current thinking about how to create change, not as plans of action or representations of the “right answer” about how to achieve impact. This positions them as tools for strategic learning...

In 2014, CHF chose to move from broad strategies to more defined strategic approaches. L&E staff saw an opportunity to help the organization integrate learnings from past work into the new strategy planning. But since the foundation hadn’t had clear outcomes or strategies in the past, the team needed a different way of distilling learnings. They capitalized on Mintzberg’s (2007) thinking around strategies as patterns of behaviors. This allowed them to analyze past grantmaking and policy work by looking for what patterns had emerged, how they connected, and what impact that work had. Staff discussions generated insights into what had been effective in helping move the foundation toward its intended results. Learnings that surfaced from this process were integrated into the design of the new strategies.

As a new foundation, the Episcopal Health Foundation (EHF) first focused on operational considerations of grantmaking (e.g., how to conduct due diligence, dealing with the required volume of grants). Strategy was not yet something considered or understood as core to the working of the foundation. Through their study of the field, L&E staff, in contrast, became laser-focused on identifying the underlying and unspoken strategy that guided decision-making at the

² Also see this reference for considerations of common pitfalls around how theory of change is often used.

At first it can be difficult for staff to articulate what questions need to be answered to inform upcoming strategic decisions. But every foundation has natural cycles of decisions (e.g., grant cycles, initiative renewal decisions, getting board approval), and these can be used as starting points around which to build evidence gathering and strategic learning moments.

foundation: What did our grant investments point to in terms of directional changes pursued? How did we recognize a good opportunity for other types of programmatic investment? And, now that the underlying assumptions guiding our behavior were more visible, how might we now articulate our thinking as testable hypotheses? Though simple, these were critical strategic conversations which, three years later, helped set the stage for a new outcome-focused strategic plan that provided greater clarity about desired results and the pathways the organization was testing to reach them.

Focus Evaluation and Learning on Strategic Decisions

If the goal of strategic learning is to help organizations make better decisions about strategy — including what paths to pursue, how to implement, and when to exit or scale — then L&E needs to be directly positioned to address those questions. Making strategy visible, as discussed above, creates the groundwork to identify what L&E activities will be most useful to support strategic decisions.

Aligning L&E activities with the strategy process entails making sure the collection of evidence is useful to strategic decisions. Alignment requires L&E staff to ask and answer questions that will inform decision-makers. It also means that evaluative evidence must be available at the right time to be integrated into decision-making processes. Strategic decisions take into account many considerations beyond evaluative information: organizational values, identity, risk tolerance, others funders in the space, etc. The role of evaluative evidence is to help decision-makers distinguish among potential strategic choices, and provide information about those that are more likely to result in success.

When first starting its strategic learning practice, CHF's L&E team struggled to discern what, out of all possible evaluation questions, would be most useful to program staff. So they began asking: "What's the next strategic decision you need to make?" By identifying specific strategic decisions, the L&E team was able to assess what evaluative questions should be asked, what evidence would best inform the decision, when evidence needed to arrive, and when to schedule formal learning sessions about that evidence. This foundational concept has been so effective that CHF continues to integrate it into all of its L&E work.

At first it can be difficult for staff to articulate what questions need to be answered to inform upcoming strategic decisions. But every foundation has natural cycles of decisions (e.g., grant cycles, initiative renewal decisions, getting board approval), and these can be used as starting points around which to build evidence gathering and strategic learning moments.

Principle No. 2: Systematically Gather Evidence to Answer Questions About Strategy

Gathering and reflecting on relevant evidence is central to strategic learning in every phase of the strategy process. A foundation's ability to engage in robust strategic learning is directly tied to its ability to generate, make sense of, and apply a variety of evidence to strategic decisions. Though this may sound expensive and dependent upon

special expertise, any size organization with any size budget can create a rigorous practice of learning from its evidence. Evidence is not just about investing in evaluation studies, though indeed these may be necessary to answer certain questions. Foundations have access to plenty of evidence from their own experiences in grantmaking, engagement with community, conversations with partners and grantees, understanding of political context, etc. Strategic learning should effectively leverage existing evidence as well as create whatever new evidence is needed to answer key strategic questions.

High-quality evidence relevant to strategy does not need to involve extensive, sophisticated evaluation. It does, however, require a disciplined focus on what evidence needs to be gathered to answer your questions. EHF began with just a few questions to answer for the board of trustees, e.g., What types of investments did the foundation make and where? Evaluation staff collected a small, standardized data set from each program area to answer these questions and validated these data with the teams on a regular cycle. This evidence then was available to support inquiry across program areas. For example, the data were used to discover which programs were reaching rural areas. In turn, this more descriptive inquiry prompted strategic questions: Why weren't programs reaching rural areas equally? What constituted sufficient reach in rural areas? What programmatic structures could be adjusted to improve reach when desired?

We choose carefully what we evaluate. At the foundations featured here, evaluation is an important tool for generating evidence about how our strategies are playing out. The priority for evaluation is at the strategy and initiative levels, and addresses questions about the ways in which the foundation's strategies are playing out. We prioritize evaluation studies around strategies where social change is complex, unknown, or risky; where the hypothesis for how change happens is more tentative; or the scale of investment raises the stakes for the foundation and its constituents.

We prioritize evaluation studies around strategies where social change is complex, unknown, or risky; where the hypothesis for how change happens is more tentative; or the scale of investment raises the stakes for the foundation and its constituents.

What Counts as Credible Evidence?

High-quality strategic learning involves deliberately and rigorously incorporating a variety of evidence sources into the strategy process. Though evaluation practice has traditionally grounded definitions of rigorous evidence in experimental methods (e.g., Nutley, Powell, & Davies, 2013), recent conceptualizations have challenged the evaluation field to adopt more inclusive thinking about what constitutes credible evidence (e.g., Schorr, 2012). This includes a challenge to evaluators to recognize the ways in which current conceptualizations of evidence reflect and reinforce dominant paradigms that contribute to inequity and oppression (e.g., Luminare Group, Center for Evaluation Innovation, & Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy, 2017). Such thinking has been deeply impactful on our own practices around L&E, and is discussed in the later section on equity.

In 2018, CHF's L&E team wanted to develop the foundation's practice around incorporating multiple forms of evidence into strategic learning. They partnered with the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) to craft a definition of evidence for the foundation, and to describe what characteristics of evidence make it rigorous (see, e.g., Schorr & Gopal, 2016; Schorr, 2003). The L&E team used this framework to engage with program staff to help them recognize evidence

An effective way to approach learning work is by seeking out and reshaping existing processes that provide opportunities to reflect or apply new thinking. This approach capitalizes on what staff already have built into their workload, but makes how that time is used more powerful.

they were surfacing through their work in communities, and to build their skills around collecting, making sense of, and integrating this evidence with other sources to apply to their strategies.

Using Evidence

It is useful to remember that no matter how much evidence we gather — whether through evaluation or other means — this evidence will never be completely comprehensive, answer all possible questions, or clearly lay out which strategic path a foundation should take. Teles and Schmitt (2011) offer the useful metaphor of an intelligence analyst. The authors point out that although evidence only ever provides a partial understanding of the world and our work in it, it is entirely possible to take a variety of imperfect sets of evidence, apply critical thinking to assess its quality and value, and engage in sense-making that will provide a clear enough understanding of the world to inform our strategic actions.

An important learning from our own work was that high-quality evidence has the power to

inform thinking and raise new questions about strategy at any point in the strategy life cycle. During planning, foundations should gather evidence to understand the nature of the problem itself, potential solutions, what's been tried before and what happened, how communities are thinking and feeling about both the problem and solutions, etc. During implementation, foundations need evidence that allows them to compare what they intended to accomplish with the actual results they are experiencing, including the response to their strategy from various groups of constituents, interactions of the strategy with the context it's being enacted within, unintended consequences, and changes in outcomes.³ High-quality evidence about both the context and results of strategy is necessary for effective strategic learning.

Principle No. 3: Embed Strategic Learning Into Everyday Work

A major challenge when introducing strategic learning practices can be the perception that it will create more work. This fear is legitimate, as any change can mean new and different work. An effective way to approach learning work is by seeking out and reshaping existing processes that provide opportunities to reflect or apply new thinking. This approach capitalizes on what staff already have built into their workload, but makes how that time is used more powerful.⁴ Adding new structures should only happen when they have a clear and tangible benefit that could not be achieved through what already exists.

Integrating Into Existing Structures

Begin with transforming meetings and activities already on your calendar. When Kresge created its learning and evaluation practice, grantmaking staff had the existing structure of a monthly two-hour meeting called Program Forum with rotating topics related to strategic and grantmaking interests. This meeting was identified by L&E staff as a rich opportunity

³These categories are deeply informed by the work done by CHF in partnership with CSSP around defining credible evidence.

⁴This is rooted in a concept from "emergent learning" (see <http://www.4qpartners.com/>). The fourth quadrant of an emergent learning table asks people to think about opportunities that are already on their calendars and to consider how to put their new thinking into practice during these already planned events, rather than creating a new "to do" list that will add to the work they already have planned.

for strategic learning. They reformatted the meeting to move away from topical lectures and toward interactive staff learning. L&E staff were clear upfront with other staff about what they were trying to accomplish, and invited staff into the experiment by explicitly naming that they wanted to try something a little different together. Some of the everyday practices Kresge has incorporated into the forum include case consultation (Heifetz, Linsky & Grashow, 2009), which allowed colleagues to present a question or challenge they are experiencing in real time and gain insight from peers, and trend mapping (Preskill, Gutiérrez, & Mack, 2017; Parkhurst & Reid, 2016) across grantmaking strategies for staff to consider how to bring a racial equity lens into their efforts.

At both Kresge and CHF, L&E staff leveraged existing meetings where program teams were taking stock, planning, and budgeting for the next year. These meetings were powerful opportunities to increase strategic learning because they were natural inflection points where program teams were engaging in strategic planning and making strategic decisions. L&E staff worked with the meeting owners to structure (and sometimes facilitate) opportunities for the program teams to discuss their theory of change, consider evidence about the intended and actual results for their strategies, and explore which of their strategic approaches were gaining traction and which were stagnating. The discussion also surfaced strategic questions that were top of mind for the program teams, which the L&E team could then feed back into their plans for future learning.

These two examples highlight major organizational practices — but don't underestimate the power of tweaking day-to-day activities that will allow you to have more effective strategic conversations. These opportunities are easy to overlook, but contain great potential for change. This might include weekly team meetings, check-ins with the CEO or board, lunch-and-learns for staff, conversations about grantee progress reports, site visits to grant applicants, etc. Existing opportunities abound and provide

rich forums to more effectively use the time we already have in a way that improves strategic learning.

Spanning Boundaries

We limit ourselves when we stay within siloes of expertise and job function. At its best, strategic learning is shared across the organization because all staff have a common understanding of what change the foundation is seeking, and how their efforts contribute to mission. If L&E is to be effectively embedded into work across the organization, foundation staff need to be better at spanning boundaries and sharing ownership (see, e.g., Yip, Ernst, & Campbell, 2016).

This may come through organizational structures, decision authority, or simply cultural norms and behaviors. At CHF, strategy is overseen by a team made up of representatives from functions across the organization (including program, policy, and communications). L&E staff have always been included as a full part of this team, which provides them with direct connections to strategy and decision processes. This structure has provided a way for L&E staff to incorporate strategic learning nudges into strategy processes, including influencing strategy planning templates to include a theory of change, suggesting learning moments when the team could reflect on evidence about their strategy and plan next steps, co-leading staff reflection to build capacity around equity practices, and participating in designing and implementing organizational capacity building related to strategic learning (e.g., systems thinking, use of evidence).

Based on the desire to share ownership, Kresge has created a strategic learning champions group that includes a grantmaker from each of its program areas. This became possible because the L&E team gained the support of program managing directors to nominate a team member to serve for 18 months, and gained executive sponsorship and a budget to support learning needs. Champions help steward everyday discussion about what their teams are learning as they enact their strategies, often using the “What? So What? Now What?” experiential-learning cycle

Recent thinking about equity in both foundation strategy and evaluation has invigorated conversations among L&E staff about how equity shows up in the work. Equity is not just something to measure about what changes "out there" in the world; it is a core value that should inform the way foundations think about their work, how they do their work, and how they assess their work.

framework to guide more powerful discussions (Borton, 1970; Jasper, 2003). The group uses tools like before-and-after action reviews (Darling, Guber, Smith, & Stiles, 2016) to strengthen their team's view to a shared objective and assess the actions they are taking to reach the desired outcomes.

Equity and Community Engagement as Cornerstones of the Work

Each of our foundations is committed to improving equity in the communities we serve, and our L&E teams are focused on figuring out how we improve equity in our own practices. The philanthropic learning and evaluation field is at an inflection point. Recent thinking about equity in both foundation strategy and evaluation has invigorated conversations among L&E staff about how equity shows up in the work. Equity is not just something to measure about what changes "out there" in the world; it is a core value that should inform the way foundations think about their work, how they do their work, and how they assess their work. This mindset is

causing some foundation L&E departments to deeply reflect on their own beliefs and practices, creating an important opportunity for greater alignment with commitments to equity and justice. This is the time for us all to have courageous conversations about the history of evaluation, the taken-for-granted paradigms and beliefs which guide our practice, and the ways in which the practice of evaluation can serve to perpetuate the very inequities foundations are often dedicated to improving. Those engaged in L&E need to consider how they reflect equity in the work, and how they use evaluation to illuminate and disrupt the systemic injustices that promote oppression. Each of us, in our respective foundations, has been deeply influenced by longtime thinking on issues of data collection, measurement, equity, and evaluation (e.g., Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, 2008), as well as the more recent Equitable Evaluation Initiative.⁵

A key consideration around equity in both foundation strategy and L&E practice is rooted in engagement with community. Our discussion has focused on how a foundation can establish strategic learning about its own strategy. After all, foundations are not just bankrolling change — they are active decision agents and actors within the very systems they seek to support or disrupt. To become continuously better at this work, it is necessary that they engage in high-quality strategic learning. But foundations are ultimately institutions that enact their strategies in partnership with others (e.g., nonprofits, government entities, policymakers, businesses, resident groups) who are actually on the front lines of social change, every day. If foundations are to embed L&E effectively into their strategic thinking, it must reflect and integrate the expertise and experience of these partners. This means foundations need to improve both their will and skill around listening and partnering with community as part of their strategic learning processes, including strategy design, implementation, and adaptation. At our foundations, we are consciously improving our practice around community engagement, knowing we have not yet fully achieved our vision. This has included

⁵ See www.equitableeval.org

such steps as including community in the process of evaluation (including design, analysis, interpretation), constructing learning designed to benefit both the foundation and its partners, sharing control over evaluation resources and decisions, and providing direct technical assistance around learning and evaluation to grantee partners as they make strategic decisions for their own organizations.

Conclusion

The concept of strategic philanthropy is relatively popular among foundations seeking social change, and positions the foundation as an active participant in crafting social change rather than simply a funder of others who are interested in change. This role for foundations necessitates that they continuously, and effectively, improve the way they engage in strategy. Having a robust practice of strategic learning provides foundations a mechanism through which to continually improve their strategies and practices, so they can enhance the likelihood they will achieve the outcomes they are seeking.

Creating a really effective practice of strategic learning is no easy feat for any organization, as it necessitates an integration of strategy, evaluation, and learning. Our own experiences in crafting strategic learning have led us to believe that the three principles shared here are necessary for an effective practice of strategic learning: 1) position learning and evaluation in service of strategy, 2) systematically gather evidence to answer questions about strategy, and 3) embed strategic learning into everyday work.

Building an organization's capacity to do strategic learning brings with it considerations about how this might be affected by an organization's existing culture. An excellent first step is to intentionally assess the culture of your organization. Consider what attributes may support or detract from strategic learning, and design learning to take these into account. It's also helpful to understand: Why do we aspire to integrate strategic learning into our work? What's behind this intention? What do we hope to gain from this? Doing so helps create a full, and more visible, picture of why your foundation aspires to

Our own experiences in crafting strategic learning have led us to believe that the three principles shared here are necessary for an effective practice of strategic learning: 1) position learning and evaluation in service of strategy, 2) systematically gather evidence to answer questions about strategy, and 3) embed strategic learning into everyday work.

integrate strategic learning and what it will take to get there. Some components of culture might need to change to support the vision for strategic learning, which can necessitate broader organizational changes beyond those over which L&E staff have direct influence. Yet, in our experience, a substantial amount can be accomplished without taking on wholesale organizational change, and changes created by smaller shifts will often trigger larger shifts that couldn't otherwise have been accomplished.

We started within our spheres of influence in our own foundations. We discovered that we were indeed able to influence our contexts in important ways, although our practice was also shaped by the context and culture of our organizations. It can be beneficial to bring an organizational-change mindset when designing strategic learning — that is, the ability to design and lead a nonlinear, adaptive process that drives toward a particular vision for change. There is a wealth of literature that we encourage you to explore around organizational culture and organizational change, as it provides valuable insights for considering how to approach building and

The core principles discussed here serve as stepping stones for those interested in using learning and evaluation to improve strategy, regardless of whether they are just starting out or working to improve their current practices.

improving strategic learning practices (e.g., Coffman & Beer, 2016).

Action Steps

We offer here a few additional thoughts for those considering how to strengthen strategic learning in their foundation.

Start small. It can be daunting to think about where to start with strategic learning. An effective approach can be to start with gaining clarity about what successful strategic learning would look like for your organization, and then seek out small opportunities to move the organization in that direction. Good starting points can be with staff who take a keen interest in learning or would be open to integrating it into their work differently, or places where there is an imminent decision that could be informed by evidence or facilitated learning activities. Don't aim for wholesale change from the start; instead, focus on small changes that provide opportunities to test what will be effective and really resonate within your organization. Over time, increase the use of learning approaches that are effective and let go of those that are not working as well.

Learn deliberately. The best learning takes some planning and prioritization. Starting with current opportunities is effective, but over time it's important to start building practices that allow for learning and evidence gathering to be planned ahead of time. Crafting longer-term plans to support learning around a strategy helps

integrate the collection of evidence, appropriate moments for reflecting and learning from the evidence, and application to strategic decisions. Achieving more deliberate learning involves identifying the key decisions and timeline for a body of work, and engaging with program staff and leadership to clearly understand what strategic questions need to be answered to inform key decision moments. This can be a space where L&E staff need to consider enacting new practices or templates to document plans for evaluation and learning across the life cycle of a strategy.

Get better at learning. A key challenge of strategic learning is that few people in foundations, including L&E staff, have necessarily had any formal training in how to do it well. Many L&E staff come from backgrounds in research and evaluation, disciplines which are often disconnected from organizational strategy. To effectively support strategic learning, L&E staff may need to build their own skills in multiple areas, including evaluation, strategy, learning, facilitation (e.g., Coffman, 2016), and equity.

A robust commitment to strategic learning is a key to success for mission-driven organizations seeking social change. The core principles discussed here serve as stepping stones for those interested in using learning and evaluation to improve strategy, regardless of whether they are just starting out or working to improve their current practices.

References

- BOLDUC, K., BUTEAU, E., LAUGHLIN, G., RAGIN, R., & ROSS, J. A. (2007). *Beyond the rhetoric: Foundation strategy*. Cambridge, MA: Center for Effective Philanthropy. Retrieved from <http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/BeyondtheRhetoric.pdf>
- BORTON, T. (1970). *Reach touch and teach*. London, UK: Hutchinson.
- BREST, P. (2015, April 27). Strategic philanthropy and its discontents. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from https://ssir.org/up_for_debate/article/strategic_philanthropy_and_its_discontents#
- BUCHANAN, P., & PATRIZI, P. (2016, October 4). Ditch strategic philanthropy — but don't throw out strategy with it. *Chronicle of Philanthropy*. Available online at <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/Opinion-Ditch-Strategic/237938>
- COFFMAN, J. (2016). *Oh for the love of sticky notes! The changing role of evaluators who work with foundations*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@jcoffman/oh-for-the-love-of-sticky-notes-the-changing-role-of-evaluators-who-work-with-foundations-66ec1ffed2e4>
- COFFMAN, J., & BEER, T. (2011). *Evaluation to support strategic learning: Principles and practices*. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation. Retrieved from <https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/evaluation-to-support-strategic-learning-principles-and-practices/>
- COFFMAN, J., & BEER, T. (2016). How do you measure up? Finding fit between foundations and their evaluation functions. *The Foundation Review*, 8(4), 27–43. <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1325>
- DARLING, M., GUBER, H., SMITH, J., & STILES, J. (2016). Emergent learning: A framework for whole-system strategy, learning, and adaptation. *The Foundation Review*, 8(1), 59–73. <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1284>
- HEIFETZ, R. A., LINSKY, M., & GRASHOW, A. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press.
- JASPER, M. (2003). *Beginning reflective practice*. Cheltenham, UK: Nelson Thorn.
- LUMINARE GROUP, CENTER FOR EVALUATION INNOVATION, & DOROTHY A. JOHNSON CENTER FOR PHILANTHROPY. (2017). *Equitable evaluation project framing paper*. Equitable Evaluation Initiative. Retrieved from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RBWoWVduMvh4S68qdmPLN3WPEyPWQwOS/view>
- MINTZBERG, H. (2007). *Tracking strategies: Towards a general theory of strategy*. New York City, NY: Oxford University Press.
- NUTLEY, S., POWELL, A., & DAVIES, H. (2013, February). *What counts as good evidence?* Retrieved from <https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/What-Counts-as-Good-Evidence-WEB.pdf>
- PARKHURST, M., & REID, C. (2016, August 18). New systems thinking tool: Trend mapping [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://www.fsg.org/blog/new-systems-thinking-tool-trend-mapping>
- PATRIZI, P. (2010). Strategy evaluation: Emerging processes and methods. *New Directions in Evaluation*, 10(28), 87–102.
- PATRIZI, P., HEID THOMPSON, E., COFFMAN, J., & BEER, T. (2013). Eyes wide open: Learning as strategy under conditions of complexity and uncertainty. *The Foundation Review*, 5(3), 50–65. <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1170>
- PHILANTHROPIC INITIATIVE FOR RACIAL EQUITY. (2008). *Critical issues forum: Measuring what we value*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20170619084500/http://www.racialequity.org/docs/final%20layout.pdf>
- PRESKILL, H. (2017, November 27). What have we learned about learning in the past 10 years? [Web log post]. Retrieved from https://fsg.org/blog/what-have-we-learned-about-learning-past-10-years?utm_source
- PRESKILL, H., GUTIÉRREZ, E., & MACK, K. (2017). *Facilitating intentional group learning: A practical guide to 21 learning activities*. Boston, MA: FSG. Retrieved from <https://www.fsg.org/tools-and-resources/facilitating-intentional-group-learning>
- SCHORR, L. (2003). *Determining “what works” in social programs and social policies: Toward a more inclusive knowledge base*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/determining-what-works-in-social-programs-and-social-policies-toward-a-more-inclusive-knowledge-base/>
- SCHORR, L. (2012, Fall). Broader evidence for bigger impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Available online at https://ssir.org/articles/entry/broader_evidence_for_bigger_impact
- SCHORR, L., & GOPAL, S. (2016, August 3). Broadening the evidence base without “defining evidence down” [Web log comment]. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/broadening_the_evidence_base_without_defining_evidence_down#When:15:30:00Z
- TELES, S. & SCHMITT, M. (2011, Summer). The elusive craft of evaluating advocacy. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_elusive_craft_of_evaluating_advocacy

YIP, J., ERNST, C., & CAMPBELL, M. (2016). *Boundary spanning leadership: Mission critical perspectives from the executive suite*. San Diego, CA: Center for Creative Leadership. Retrieved from <https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/BoundarySpanningLeadership.pdf>

Kelci M. Price, Ph.D., is senior director for learning and evaluation at the Colorado Health Foundation. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kelci M. Price, Colorado Health Foundation, 1780 Pennsylvania Street, Denver, CO 80203 (email: kprice@coloradohealth.org)

Chera Reid, Ph.D., is director of strategic learning, research, and evaluation at The Kresge Foundation.

Suzanne Kennedy Leahy, Ph.D., is senior managing associate at Working Partner, a Houston-based strategic planning and evaluation consulting group, and former director of evaluation at the Episcopal Health Foundation.

Working Contexts

The Colorado Health Foundation is the nation's third largest health-focused foundation, with annual giving in excess of \$100 million, a staff size of about 65, and a commitment to bringing health in reach for all Coloradans. The learning and evaluation team is made up of four dedicated staff, is separate from the program team, and is integrated into the foundation's strategy teams as a full partner.

The Kresge Foundation, with a focus on promoting human progress, fulfills its mission by building and strengthening pathways to opportunity for low-income people in America's cities, seeking to dismantle structural and systemic barriers to equality and justice. In 2017, Kresge awarded grants totaling \$144.2 million and made social investment commitments totaling \$51.7 million to organizations that expand opportunities in American cities for low-income people. The Strategic Learning, Research, and Evaluation practice sits within the executive office and has four team members. The team brings an equity lens to all of its efforts.

The Episcopal Health Foundation was launched in 2014 and is based in Houston, Texas. Its mission is to transform the community health of a 57-county region of southeast Texas. The foundation has several programs, applied health research, community and congregational engagement, and had grantmaking to health organizations in excess of \$30 million in 2017. Learning and evaluation had been closely coordinated during the first several years of the foundation's operation, but in 2017 organizational restructuring separated these functions, with evaluation falling under the research program and learning placed within the administrative arm of the president's office.

Executive Summaries

Tools

7

Strategic Learning in Practice: A Case Study of the Kauffman Foundation

Matthew Carr, Ph.D., Brett Hembree, M.P.A., and Nathan Madden, Ph.D., Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation

Increasingly, foundations and nonprofits are seeking to engage their staff in learning and reflection activities that assess successes and challenges, and then generate insights that can improve their strategies. This case study describes how the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation cultivated a staff cohort “learning champions,” created simple tools and processes that can more easily capture lessons generated internally and externally, and provided training in facilitation techniques to ensure insights are connecting back into strategies to drive decision-making.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1451

22

Building a Culture of Learning: Teaching a Complex Organization How to Fish

Tiffany Clarke, M.P.P., M.P.H., Hallie Preskill, Ph.D., and Abigail Stevenson, M.B.A., M.P.H., FSG; and Pamela Schwartz, M.P.H., Kaiser Permanente

Many social sector organizations are balancing their strategic plans with an ability to respond more quickly to change as it unfolds in their communities. To increase its capacity for strategic learning, Kaiser Permanente Community Health developed and implemented a system called Measurement and Evaluation for Learning and Outcomes. While this was a tailored process, its underlying thinking, approach, and lessons learned can be informative to others who are thinking about how to position their organizations and communities to thrive in times of change.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1458

35

Reflective Practice for Learning From Experience: Navigating the Back Roads at Work

Jan Jaffe, M.B.A., Philanthropy Northwest

Between the desire to move the needle on social change and the pressure to be productive, philanthropy as a field is understandably driven to focus on doing and resistant to taking time to reflect on practice. This article is designed to help foundations encourage leadership and staff to put their expertise into play as a learning strategy. This article defines reflective practice and traces roots and research that can inform its use. It also reports on interviews with philanthropy practitioners about how they use various reflective practice methods to navigate high-stakes situations. In an examination of some of the barriers to learning on the job in philanthropy, this article also suggests some activities that might build a more receptive environment for reflective practice for individuals, groups, and organizations.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1452

Executive Summaries (continued)

49

Knowledge Translation to Enhance Evaluation Use: A Case Example

Alison Rogers, M.P.H., M.Eval., and Catherine Malla, M.I.P.H., The Fred Hollows Foundation

This article addresses how essential information about monitoring, evaluation, and lessons learned can be made available to foundations. The Fred Hollows Foundation identified a gap in this area through an evaluation capacity-building readiness assessment, and introduced the concept of participatory, real-time monitoring, evaluation, and learning bulletins grounded in the principles of knowledge translation. This article describes how those bulletins were developed and used within the foundation to ensure access to relevant and timely information, and examines how they provided a mechanism to promote internal reflection and shift attitudes around data, which supported the development of a culture of evaluation. This approach will be useful for foundations that have limited resources.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1453

Sector

62

Challenges and Opportunities in Philanthropic Organizational Learning: Reflections From Fellow Grantmakers

Jennifer Chubinski, Ph.D., Kelley Adcock, M.P.H., and Susan Sprigg, M.P.H., Interact for Health

As the field of philanthropy has matured, increasing attention has been paid to evaluating the impact of philanthropic investments. In recent years, the scope of evaluation has expanded to include an intentional focus on organizational learning with the goal of learning from ongoing work, informing decision-making, and ultimately improving impact. Based on interviews with learning, evaluation, and research officers in philanthropy across the country, this article shares stories from the field on lessons learned and mistakes made in philanthropic organizational learning. It identifies points of struggle and opportunities for improvement in organizational learning, as well as what can be learned from mistakes in the process.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1454

Reflective Practice

81

Shifting Mindsets: How Meaningful Accountability Systems Can Strengthen Foundation Learning and Improve Impact

Marc J. Holley, Ph.D., and Marcie Parkhurst, M.C.P., Walton Family Foundation

This article explores what it looks like when a foundation attempts to integrate accountability and learning practices, and presents a framework for the unique and complementary contributions that accountability and learning can make to the work of foundations. The article also looks at the tensions that can arise when a foundation's internal evaluation staff attempt to design, implement, and make use of accountability systems. It identifies three problematic perspectives that can hold foundations back from full engagement in internally driven accountability initiatives, and offers practical guidance on how to shift these mindsets to more productive practices.

DOI:10.9707/1944-5660.1455

95

Evaluators as Conduits and Supports for Foundation Learning

Clare Nolan, M.P.P., Engage R+D; Meg Long, M.P.A., Equal Measure; and Debra Joy Pérez, Ph.D., Simmons University

Evaluators play a critical role in supporting philanthropic learning, programming, and strategy, but evaluation and learning in philanthropy is often limited in ways that impede deeper resonance and impact. Most philanthropic evaluation is focused on the needs of individual foundations; knowledge sharing with the broader field is limited; and foundations struggle to integrate evaluation and learning as a management tool. This article makes the case that evaluators and funders can do more to build the collective capacity of evaluators working in philanthropy in order to enhance their contributions to community change. This article also examines the ways that evaluation in philanthropy is evolving, lays out root causes of its limitations, and looks at emerging tools, techniques, and lessons that showcase new ways evaluators and funders are working together to strengthen practice.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1456

107

Building Principle-Based Strategic Learning: Insights From Practice

Kelci M. Price, Ph.D., Colorado Health Foundation; Chera Reid, Ph.D., Kresge Foundation; and Suzanne Kennedy Leahy, Ph.D., Episcopal Health Foundation

Given that many foundations are engaged in strategic philanthropy, where they have specific conditions in the world they are trying to change, it is critical that they have the capacity to effectively learn about and improve their strategies. This article offers three principles for strategic learning, informed by the field and insights from practice across three foundations. Each principle is explored in terms of what it means and why it is important, along with examples from how it could look in practice. By taking a principle-focused approach to strategic learning, this article offers a base from which to build a rigorous practice of strategic learning in any organization and to tailor the specifics of that practice to the organization's unique context and culture.

DOI: 10.9707/1944-5660.1457

The Grantmaking School

Professional Education for Foundation Staff and Donors

Explore all of our programs at:

JohnsonCenter.org/TheGrantmakingSchool

Upcoming Courses:

Strategy and Evaluation in Grantmaking

June 19–20
Detroit, Mich.

Strategy and Evaluation for Health Foundations

July 8–9
Durham, N.C.

Social Movements and Grantmaking

Sept. 18–19
Detroit, Mich.

Questions?

Email Michael Pratt at prattm@gvsu.edu
for more information.

JOHNSON CENTER
AT GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

Call for Papers

FOR VOLUME 12, ISSUE 2

Abstracts of up to 250 words are being solicited for Vol. 12, Issue 1 of *The Foundation Review*. This issue will be an open (unthemed) issue. Papers on any topic relevant to organized philanthropy are invited.

Submit abstracts to submissions@foundationreview.org by July 31, 2019. If a full paper is invited, it will be due October 31, 2019 for consideration for publication in June 2020.

Abstracts are solicited in four categories:

- **Results.** Papers in this category generally report on findings from evaluations of foundation-funded work. Papers should include a description of the theory of change (logic model, program theory), a description of the grant-making strategy, the evaluation methodology, the results, and discussion. The discussion should focus on what has been learned both about the programmatic content and about grantmaking and other foundation roles (convening, etc.).
- **Tools.** Papers in this category should describe tools useful for foundation staff or boards. By “tool” we mean a systematic, replicable method intended for a specific purpose. For example, a protocol to assess community readiness and standardized facilitation methods would be considered tools. The actual tool should be included in the article where practical. The paper should describe the rationale for the tool, how it was developed, and available evidence of its usefulness.
- **Sector.** Papers in this category address issues that confront the philanthropic sector as whole, such as diversity, accountability, etc. These are typically empirically based; literature reviews are also considered.
- **Reflective Practice.** The reflective practice articles rely on the knowledge and experience of the authors, rather than on formal evaluation methods or designs. In these cases, it is because of their perspective about broader issues, rather than specific initiatives, that the article is valuable.

Book Reviews: *The Foundation Review* publishes reviews of relevant books. Please contact the editor to discuss submitting a review. Reviewers must be free of conflicts of interest.

Questions? Contact Teri Behrens, editor of *The Foundation Review*, with questions at behrenst@foundationreview.org or (734) 646-2874.

Subscribe today!

ONLINE

1 YEAR, 4 ISSUES

Individual \$87

Institutional..... \$360

Student \$41

PRINT & ONLINE

1 YEAR, 4 ISSUES

Individual \$107

Institutional..... \$405

HOW TO ORDER

➤ Go Online:

www.TheFoundationReview.org

➤ Send an Email:

tfr@subscriptionoffice.com

➤ Call Us:

(205) 995-1567

\$30 service fee added to international print orders.

FREE TRIAL SUBSCRIPTION

Start your 90-day free online trial at **www.TheFoundationReview.org**. You'll also receive a complimentary print copy of the latest issue in the mail.

MULTI-SITE PRICING FOR INSTITUTIONS

Full price for one site, plus a **50% discount** for each additional site

PLUS...

Your subscription includes access to **FREE** quarterly webinars!

Sponsor Subscriptions

If you or your organization are interested in supporting the work of *The Foundation Review*, please contact Teri Behrens at behrenst@foundationreview.org.

Become a Partner

Discounted subscriptions are offered to members of partner organizations. Contact Pat Robinson at pat.robinson@gvsu.edu for more information.

The Foundation Review is the first peer-reviewed journal of philanthropy, written by and for foundation staff and boards and those who work with them. With a combination of rigorous research and accessible writing, it can help you and your team put new ideas and good practices to work for more effective philanthropy.

The Foundation Review is published quarterly by the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Learn more at **www.TheFoundationReview.org**.

Master of Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership

Ranked 13th in the nation and #1 in Michigan!*

Grand Valley State University's Master of Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership prepares students for careers or advancement in the nonprofit and philanthropic sector through **classroom study, applied research, professional development, and field experience.**

Students learn to lead and manage philanthropic and nonprofit organizations ethically and effectively, and go beyond traditional boundaries in the pursuit of prosperous, safe, and healthy communities.

Learn More

Visit gvsu.edu/spnha or email Michelle Wooddell at wooddellm@gvsu.edu for more information.

**Fully accredited by the
Nonprofit Academic
Centers Council
(NACC)**

Coursework includes:

- Financial management
- Fund development
- Grantmaking
- Marketing
- Nonprofit management
- Program evaluation
- Social entrepreneurship

*GVSU's Nonprofit Management program was ranked 13th in the nation and #1 in Michigan by U.S. News & World Report in 2019.

THE FoundationReview®

The Foundation Review is the first peer-reviewed journal of philanthropy, written by and for foundation staff and boards and those who work with them. With a combination of rigorous research and accessible writing, it can help you and your team put new ideas and good practices to work for more effective philanthropy.

Our Mission: To share evaluation results, tools, and knowledge about the philanthropic sector in order to improve the practice of grantmaking, yielding greater impact and innovation.

Published Quarterly by the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University

www.thefoundationreview.org

ISSN 1944-5660 | eISSN 1944-5679