Strategy for Now

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strategy (n.) 1810, "the art of a general, …" from French *stratégie* (16c.) and directly from … Greek strategia "office or command of a general," from *strategos* "general, commander of an army," also the title of various civil officials and magistrates, from *stratos* "multitude, … army, … expedition, encamped army" … and meaning etymologically "that which is spread out" (… from root **stere-* "to spread"). With Greek agos "leader," from *agein* "to lead" (from PIE root **ag-* "to drive, draw out or forth, move"). … In non-military use from 1887. (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.a)

Introduction

History is a reference point for understanding the people, places, politics, and purposes that inform present day beliefs and approaches, which may or may not be explicit. These United States of America, birthed on stolen land from Indigenous peoples with wealth created by stolen and enslaved African bodies commodified as property, necessitates that we pay close attention to what we hold tightly. By looking at what underpins these beliefs and approaches, we can determine if what and how we do what we do now serves our aims and values. The experience of unprecedented temperatures around the globe, increasing fascism (in the U.S. and abroad), and reversals of human rights for many because of the rising tide of exclusionary and divisive ideologies requires that what we hold as default/norm and best practice no longer be assumed.

Strategy[1] is one of those things.

Strategy is particularly important as we more frequently (if not reluctantly) acknowledge the

> **Key Points**
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> - We are in a profound period of understanding who we are as a people, past and present. This applies to practices held as core to how society operates. If we are to thrive as a species, the present and future necessitate reimagining the structures, systems, and conventions that limit some and thus us all. This includes not defaulting to control, competition, and certainty as we navigate circumstances we created.
>
> - Amid growing desires to integrate and embody practices aligned with equity, emergence, and complexity, concepts and points of view that dominate business continue to lead conversations about strategy formation in philanthropy and nonprofits. These are frequently coupled with approaches to learning, defined as an organizational function, which insufficiently acknowledges that we, the humans, are what changes.
>
> - For the last three decades in the U.S. philanthropic ecosystem, the authors have experimented with an approach that fosters conditions and individual and collective curiosities that can become capacities and competencies. When we approach strategy differently, there is an opportunity for meaningful evaluative inquiry and sense-making that acknowledges learning is an ongoing responsibility that supports how we understand and move within complex systems.
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> - This article reintroduces a multifaceted definition of strategy, summarizes an approach in which strategy and evaluative inquiry are integrated, shares experiences of those who engaged in the approach, and offers considerations for strategy grounded in the now and the future.

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[1] For purposes of this article, the term "strategy" is for that of nonprofits and philanthropy. We do so acknowledging that within these (institutional and individual) there is a vast range of variants: maturity, geographic range, focus, asset size, staffing, and structure.

complexity of the world in which we live. For those engaged in efforts around democracy, equity, justice, and/or liberation, the means are as important as the ends. The former shapes the latter.

We wish to open a conversation in which the approach to strategy embeds evaluative inquiry.[2] With complexity and emergence often referenced as central to how organizations and movements are now considering their work (Kania et al., 2014; Darling et al., 2016; brown, 2017), evaluative inquiry (Preskill & Torres, 1999b) becomes an essential capacity.

Much has been written about the relationship between nonprofits and philanthropy (Hammack & Anheier, 2011; Hall, 2006). A common theme from the onset has been a focus on the individual and the desire to meet a need (sometimes defined as an issue) of some kind. "Need" is deficit framing, leading to a solve/fix formula. Given that the predominantly Christian early colonizers of what came to be known as the United States of America had an implicit belief about who is worthier, smarter, stronger, etc. (Muldoon, 2004), it is easy to understand how those with (as opposed to without) often deem themselves the arbiters of what should happen, how, to whom, and when.

Many of the early philanthropists were industrialists and scientists. The former operate in a capitalist marketplace where the goal of profit is achieved by securing a significant share of consumer interest and money. This is frequently accomplished by meeting (or creating) a need and then outperforming others with a similar or different offering — the competitors. Scientists are also driven by need, be it biological, botanical, environmental, etc. They define a need or an issue and through hypothesis and testing in controlled environments and determine how to address it. In recent times social entrepreneurs and venture capitalists have become philanthropists; their beginnings are slightly different, but the concepts of market, need, and return on investment remain relevant.

As this piece is being written, ideas about how philanthropy should approach its work are reactivated.[3,4,5] Interesting points are made and yet the tones and voices are similar and familiar. A few deeply embedded and often unstated orientations continue to influence the predominant approaches to philanthropic efforts.

1. *Focus on winning or a problem/fix.* Strategy's etymology has its origins in the military — a zero-sum game of winner takes all. The concepts of business strategy and ideas of competitive edge legitimize scarcity, leading to false constraints. The problem/fix suggests that something is "wrong" and there is a solution, often singular with a tendency toward simplicity.

2. *Causation, not contribution.* The effectiveness of the allocation of public dollars (Preskill & Russ-Eft, 2015; Shadish et al., 1991) is core to the early purpose and use of evaluation. The methods of scientific research — including controlling and isolating for contributing and confounding factors, controlled environments, and questions of dose — became central, regardless of foci, context, and population. Randomized controlled trials became the standard of evidence to determine

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[2] Preskill and Torres (1999a) drawing on Schwandt (1992) define Evaluative Inquiry as "a kind of public philosophy whereby organization members engage in dialogue with clients and other stakeholders about the meaning of what they do and how they do it. In this dialogue they pay particular attention to the historical, political and sociological aspects of the objects of inquiry" (p. 44). Sense making from evaluative inquiry informs learning, change, and decision-making.

[3] See Brothers, J. (2024, June). *Next week's SSIR will come out with a lead on how strategic philanthropy has failed, almost exactly a decade after. LinkedIn.* Retrieved June 17, 2024, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/drjohnbrothers_next-weeks-ssir-will-come-out-with-a-lead-activity-7199434121348014082-iCyV?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop

[4] See Buchanan, P. (2024, June 14). *Here we go again (and again and again): Let's stop looking for the one 'new approach' to philanthropy.* Center for Effective Philanthropy. https://cep.org/here-we-go-again-and-again-and-again-lets-stop-looking-for-the-one-new-approach-to-philanthropy/

[5] See Kramer, M., & Phillips, S. (2024). Where strategic philanthropy went wrong. *Stanford Social Innovation Review, 22*(3), 28–37. https://doi.org/10.48558/J9QB-AB63

effectiveness (Hogan, 2007). Because evaluation sought definable and observable changes, strategy became an exercise in predictability and linearity.

3. *Risk aversion.* When risk is defined by what we can predict to occur in a short time frame, we forget the long game and the big picture. Relationships and human connection become afterthoughts preventing new and different norms, conditions, and possibilities. Ultimately, we bypass or undervalue how philanthropic strategy is uniquely able to open space for creativity, emergence, and complexity and to live into the etymology of "philanthropy" — "love of humankind" (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.b, para. 1).

4. *The human element ignored.* There is a tendency to conceptualize strategy as a "thing" as opposed to a "way," with little recognition that how it comes to life depends on the heads and hearts of humans. Functional roles, titles, and training can only do so much if the humans cannot find a way to make sense of both internal and external dynamics in ways that are aligned and moving toward something shared.

Strategy should have sufficient clarity that inquiry anticipates the inevitable shifts. It should enable understanding ourselves in relationship to the larger whole and as one actor in an ecosystem. This is a peek into a strategy formation methodology in which the co-design of the engagement is in and of itself a practice in strategy and evaluative inquiry. Through attention to culture and context — cultivating relationships and paying attention to curiosities that arise — comfort with complexity and engaging in strategy and evaluative inquiry is bolstered.

In this article, we:

• Reintroduce a multifaceted definition of strategy.

• Summarize an approach in which strategy and evaluative inquiry are integrated.

• Share experiences of those who engaged in the approach.

• Offer considerations for strategy grounded in the now and the future.

Our Point of View

For almost 20 years, the authors have worked together in the U.S. settler-created philanthropic industrial complex (Rodríguez, 2017; K. Archie, personal communication, May 26, 2020).[6] We have engaged hundreds of organizations either through consulting or teaching — across the social sector ecosystem — in what we refer to as strategy formation and planning integrating evaluative inquiry. Our entry into this practice was founded on a mix of frustration and possibility.

In my role as an evaluator, I, Jara Dean-Coffey, would follow a strategic planning process that rarely left behind a sense of who the client was (their identity) and how they hoped the world would be different through their efforts. It happened repeatedly and was incredibly frustrating. I could not understand why, after what was often more than a yearlong engagement, there was an absence of clarity on the "to what end" — the soul of the organization (how it hoped to be in the world) and how it understood itself and its unique contributions in the ecosystem.

After eight years in an internal learning and evaluation role with a mid-sized nonprofit organization, I, Jill Casey, was naive in thinking that the integrated and integral role of evaluative inquiry through which my professional practices developed was the norm. Around the time Jara and I began working together, I was engaged in research into the ways in which logic models and theories of change were being used by partnership-driven, large-scale, multi-institutional STEM efforts and by the evaluation field writ

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[6] The authors acknowledge that their work experience is within a particular context, one that is place based (the U.S). and informed by people with mindsets that reinforce an orientation towards labor and the production of things within philanthropy, primarily institutional.

FIGURE 1 Linking the Elements of a Theory of Change to Ways in Which They Show Up as Part of a Strategic Framework
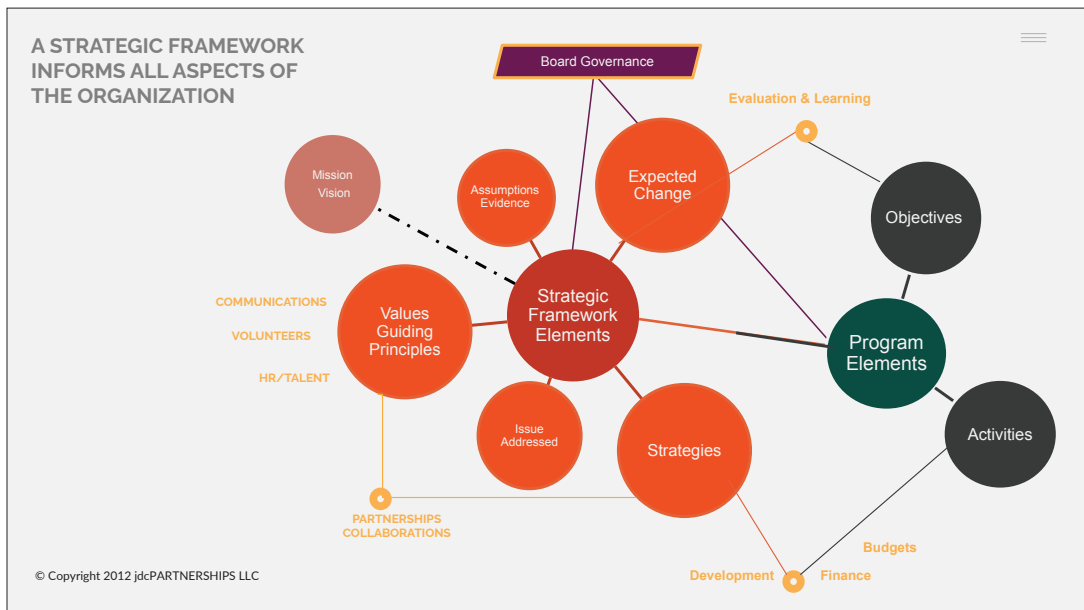
large. This experience illuminated how these models and associated processes and practices benefit ongoing design and decision-making in complex and emergent contexts.

Together we believed there was a way to bridge the disconnect between strategy and what folks often referred to as evaluation — the latter often being understood as something one did for someone else or episodically and with the bulk of effort on collecting and reporting data. Little energy was spent on defining areas of curiosity, crafting questions, and determining what types of information were necessary and from whom. Sense-making rarely happened, and when it did there was little attention to context. When change occurred — which it did — organizations were paralyzed by the fear of not doing the "right thing perfectly" or frantically "doing all the things." Executive leadership rarely had a cohesive reference point to steady and motivate either board or staff and navigate the external environment while holding a shared internal culture with intention and some ease.

A differentiator in how we feel and think about strategy is that perpetuity[7] of the effort is not assumed or even desired because changes in direction or focus of an effort may in fact be an indication that the strategy is successful.[8] If the purpose of your effort is to alter the current course of the planet and humanity, to be no longer necessary may be the best evidence of the success of your efforts.

An Entry Point: Integrating Strategy and Evaluative Inquiry

In 2008, we began working with CompassPoint to design an evaluation approach for an anchor program and then a newer program. In the course of being in relationship and grounding each initiative in a program model, the potential of working at the organizational level became apparent. To us a theory of change could reflect the larger values, strategies, and purpose of an

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[7] See Online Etymology Dictionary (n.d.), Perpetuity, at https://www.etymonline.com/word/perpetuity

[8] See Online Etymology Dictionary (n.d.), Success, at https://www.etymonline.com/word/success

organization and a program/logic model could describe how these manifested in more discrete efforts. (See Figure 1.)

There was a recent executive director change and a newly added practice director, so the timing was right to get clear on intentions, desired cultural norms, and how existing collective efforts, as well as potentially new ones, aligned. There was also discussion and ideas in the field around what strategy should entail and to what end for both nonprofits (Collins, 2005; LaPiana, 2008) and foundations (Porter & Kramer, 1999; Fleishman, 2007; Buteau et al., 2009; Tierney & Fleishman, 2011; Brest, 2012). These conditions, along with CompassPoint's organizational commitment to the ToC development process —including growing trust with board and staff — were ingredients for designing a different approach to strategy: one which could serve as an entry point for evaluative inquiry, institutional alignment, and a sense of organizational identity that could withstand the realities of our time. It is in this context that a multiyear engagement in which early versions of the components of a strategic framework and process — now named Clarity Not Certainty Effect™ — began to blossom.

Strategy Is More Than One Thing

The philanthropic sector selectively borrows ideas (Brest, 2018) from the for-profit sector (e.g., return on investment, shared value, and competitive advantage), so it felt appropriate to reintroduce the definition of strategy offered by Henry Mintzberg (1987), whose work was in the field of strategic management: "The word [strategy] has long been used implicitly in different ways even if it has traditionally been defined formally in only one" (p. 11).

Mintzberg proposed five definitions of strategy, clarifying and nuanced, which serve as reference points for intentional inquiry:

1. *Strategy as Perspective:* a way in which the world (larger than the ecosystem) is understood; a point of view, the personality of the organization/effort;

2. *Strategy as Position:* an understanding of organizational "niche" within the ecosystem in which it finds itself and how it moves within it;

3. *Strategy as Pattern:* a consistency in behavior, intended or unintended;

4. *Strategy as Plan:* a consciously intended set of actions designed to achieve an end goal/state; and

5. *Strategy as Ploy:* a version of Plan intended to confuse or distract an opponent or competitor.

Mintzberg notes that although distinct, there is a clear relationship between and among these definitions. Strategy as Plan (No. 4) tends to be the predominant definition of strategy with a focus on achieving end goal/state. To us, Perspective, Position, and Pattern (Nos. 1–3) lay a foundation for Plan(ning) that supports complexity and emergence. Evaluative inquiry becomes an organizational capacity and part of what is understood as integral to being strategic. Perspective and Position are critical in the crowded marketplaces where the resources of time, money, attention, and heart are constantly being pulled in competing directions. They offer a world view as well as an understanding of the unique offering within it.

New Directions in Evaluation: Evaluating Strategy (Patrizi & Patton, 2010) shared the value of Mintzberg's 5Ps as an important contribution during the early days of strategic philanthropy, offering numerous examples of its usefulness through case studies. With strategy as the evaluand, the distinctions offered by the 5Ps make clear the various entry points to evaluation based on whether the focus of strategy was Perspective, Position, Pattern, Plan, or Ploy (Patton & Patrizi, 2010).

Our contribution is that we invite evaluative inquiry into the co-creation of the various types of strategy. This strengthens evaluative culture from the onset as a natural and important element of strategy (or being strategic), which

FIGURE 2 Evaluative Inquiry Cycle Plus 4 of the 5 Ps for Strategy

THE EVALUATIVE INQUIRY CYCLE + 4 of the 5 Ps for Strategy

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Adapted from Preskill & Torres, 1999
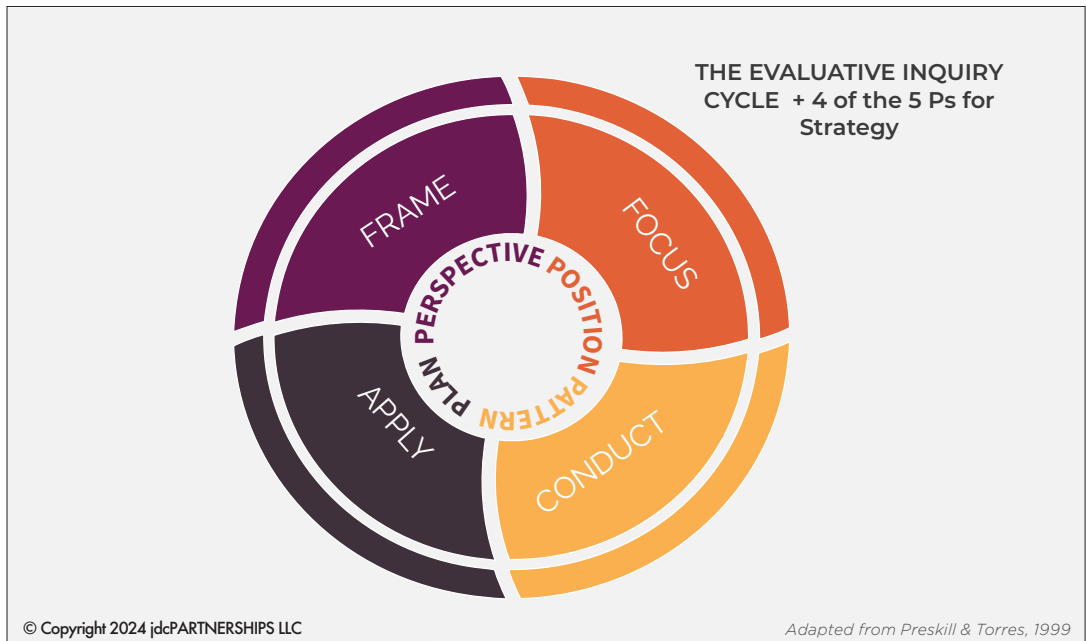
supports the ongoing understanding of how strategies are manifesting in real time, indications of progress towards stated ends, and what insights might inform shifts.
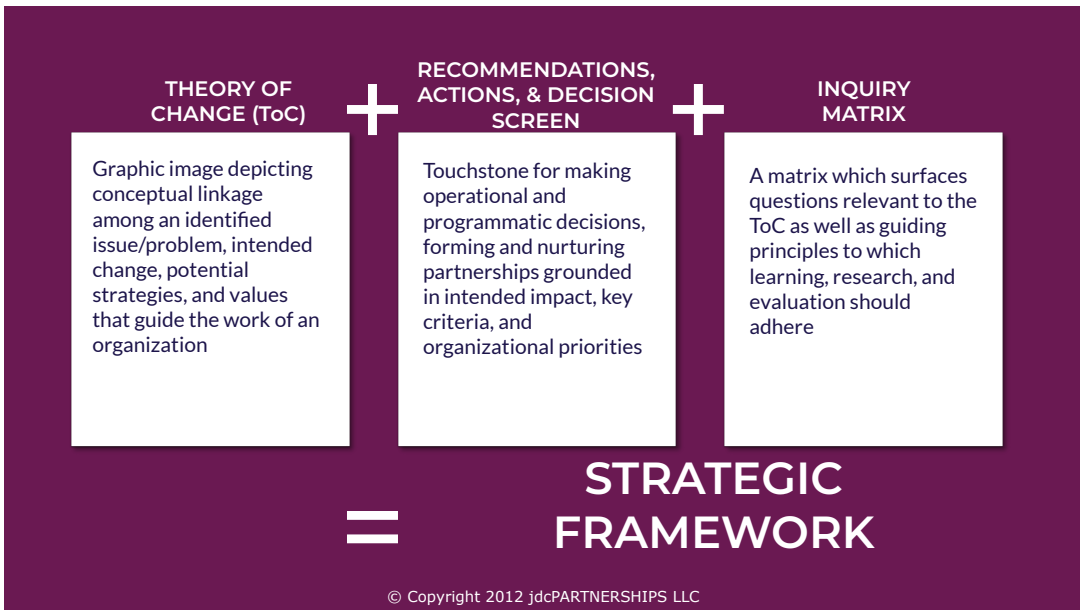
Our Approach

Six questions are explored in the Clarity Not Certainty Effect™ approach:

- What difference do you seek to make?

- What is your unique contribution to the issue you seek to address?

- How are you working (or should consider working) with/in the larger system to make sustainable change?

- What are you learning in your work?

- How are you sharing/applying your learnings internally and externally?

- What will increase the likelihood of demonstrable progress toward stated aims?

This is not about certainty, but instead, clarity. Clarity affords organizations and the people within them the freedom to move, respond, and react (Pattern) in ways to the internal and external environment (Position) that are more aligned and remain in service of something they collectively define and share (Perspective) — all of which support tactical decisions and resource allocation (Plan). Evaluative inquiry becomes essential to how an organization holds itself to its commitments within its Perspective and Position so that as commitments and realities shift, there's a durable core to the inquiry. (See Figure 2.)

A theory of change is a core component of this clarity, complemented by recommendations, actions, and decision screen and an inquiry matrix. Together they constitute a strategic framework. (See Figure 3.)

A framework provides a foundation for inquiry (Schlager, 2007) and a set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices (Binder et al., 2013). Combined, this supports adaptability in complexity and what to foreground and background

FIGURE 3 Strategic Framework Components

THEORY OF CHANGE (ToC)

Graphic image depicting conceptual linkage among an identified issue/problem, intended change, potential strategies, and values that guide the work of an organization

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RECOMMENDATIONS, ACTIONS, & DECISION SCREEN

Touchstone for making operational and programmatic decisions, forming and nurturing partnerships grounded in intended impact, key criteria, and organizational priorities

+

INQUIRY MATRIX

A matrix which surfaces questions relevant to the ToC as well as guiding principles to which learning, research, and evaluation should adhere

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STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

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(Currie & Walsh, 2019). They become a reference point for the people/organization across roles and responsibilities, creating cohesion that allows choices more likely to maintain shared ways of being as well as a focus on desired end, all within the container of the larger ecosystem.

What Happens?

In partnership with a core team typically composed of the executive, two board members, and others, we choreograph an experience bringing together the full board and staff, with perhaps a few other key advisors and partners. Over three sessions, we collectively draft the initial language for the first component of the strategic framework, the theory of change.

We describe the theory of change as the identity of the organization, and through its development Perspective, Position, and Pattern emerge. It includes the following elements: problem/issue statement, values/guiding principles, assumptions, context, evidence, outcomes, and strategies. Each is explored independently with

the core team offering back draft language to the whole group for continued refinement. Areas of clarity, uncertainty, and tension are shared. That practice of making feeling and thinking transparent as well as naming questions is part of the intersection of being strategic and evaluative. It norms where we are clear and where we are less so, if it matters, and how and when one might address. Graphic recording, written and video reflection materials, and a combination of individual and group activities are all part of the choreography. We appreciate and recognize that humans process information in a variety of ways and there are multiple ways of knowing.[9] The movement in and out of activities nurtures relationships and different understandings begin to form.

The inquiry matrix is populated with questions raised through this process of articulation and refinement. It holds questions relevant across an organization shaped by the theory of change and organized to surface what is pertinent to Perspective (e.g., where and in what ways are

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[9] See Perry, E. S. and Duncan, A. C. (2017, April 27). Multiple ways of knowing: Expanding how we know. *Nonprofit Quarterly.* https://nonprofitquarterly.org/multiple-ways-knowing-expanding-know/

our values showing up?), Position (e.g., how are we shifting/adapting to support alignment with our ToC and where are these opportunities for stronger alignment?), and Pattern (e.g., what have we learned so far, and how are we sharing this and in what ways toward the strength of our ecosystem?) It is holistic and designed to be integrated over time, reflecting evaluative inquiry held by the organization — not by an individual or a function.

The recommendations, actions. and decision screen, the final element of the strategic framework, becomes a collective consciousness for the organization. It makes robustly transparent a shared set of considerations from alignment with the theory of change to those around capacity, competency, and political and social context. All these influence whether and how an organization chooses to move (Pattern) in any given situation, given how it says it wants to be in the world (Position), and how it understands and describes the world (Perspective).

Inviting the practices of evaluative inquiry, the working ToC is explored for resonance internally and externally. The learnings inform communications, potential language refinements, and considerations for operations (Plan). This process affirms that the pursuit of the organization's Position is ongoing. Vigilance and ease are necessary as context shifts, assumptions change, and additional evidence emerges that shapes how our energies may be best directed — all while finding alignment with Perspective.

Organizations Amid 21st-Century Complexity

When strategy is co-created for clarity instead of certainty, evaluative inquiry is a natural partner. It encourages curiosity and sense-making that continuously assesses who we say we are: Has our place in the ecosystem shifted and has (or should) our understanding of the world change?

We reached out to a small group of former client partners, whose experiences span the earliest iteration of this approach to those who completed the process as recently as 2023, to share their reflections as well as inform our evolving practices. After a few conversations, several similar contextual things stood out at engagement onset, and how, in the months or years following, both the process and the products remain vital.

Demystifying and Distributing Evaluative Inquiry as Core to Strategy

If an organization is to hold its values toward its purpose, evaluative inquiry as an organizational capacity and staff competency is essential. Its importance is seeded during the development of the theory of change — through the rigorous practice of dialogue and reflection around a series of questions. No element is fully realized during its designated conversation. Each holds open space for what will emerge in the next, with the goal of clarity of concepts and connections over certainty of language. The inquiry matrix includes questions with immediate relevance toward internal alignment with the ToC and questions with a longer view on the organization's contribution to the change it seeks. The full organization is invited into a rigorous practice of inquiry not to arrive at certainty, but instead to continuously move toward clarity — even if we are not clear or in agreement on this.

Adriana Rocha,[10] project director at Moore Philanthropy, Giving Infrastructure Fund, observed:

> You really wanted us to be able to do this [evaluative inquiry] on our own. It felt really empowering to be like, this is how we gather information and how we understand the story of our impact, understand what we need to shift and change, and tell the story of that shift and change. It felt doable and removed a lot of mystique, power, and gatekeeping behind evaluation. To own the knowledge gathering, the data, the meaning-making, the storytelling is powerful. If this is our work, then we should have this level of closeness and understanding.

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[10] CompassPoint Nonprofit Services practice director, 2009–2015; Neighborhood Funders Group president, 2020–2022, and vice president of programs, 2017–2020.

With a strong frame and focus for inquiry via the ToC, curiosities find their collective mooring as questions once held by an individual or a program are viewed in relation to what the organization as whole is endeavoring to make real in this world.

Client and partner Jeanne Bell, co-founder and CEO of JustOrg Design,[11] said the theory of change "became our guide and our accountability source in (re)designing programming for our clients and stakeholders." She continued:

> This matters because our field, like so many, was in the process of unlearning and reimagining its core disciplines. … We could no longer rely on the so called "best practices" out there — many of which we had created or contributed to in fact. We needed our people to rethink and redesign. The ToC was both a "call to action" and a guide for that reimagination.

In this approach an organization's curiosities deepen and grow in relation to their theory of change. They move beyond collecting data because they can or think they should, and they reorient to questions and sense-making that support their learning about Perspective, Position, and Pattern. It becomes part of how they Plan and an integrated element of being strategic. Conversations around evaluation and the bigger question of "how we know what we know" are not only more inclusive, but also more valid and rigorous. As such they can inform and be more relevant to the complexity and multiplicity of our current realities and the efforts in which many are engaged. Indigenous evaluation frameworks (LaFrance & Nichols,

2008; Waapalaneexkweew & Dodge-Francis, 2015), culturally responsive evaluation (Hood et al., 2005; Hopson, 2009; Kirkhart, 2010), and critical systems heuristics (Gates, 2017; Gates et al., 2022) bring forward important considerations and guide us toward approaches that encourage us to question, reimagine, and repair. The Equitable Evaluation Framework™ (Equitable Evaluation Initiative, 2023) is a useful reference for understanding what is at play in and around an organization and the likelihood that the Patterns often associated with evaluative inquiry align with Position and Perspective.

With a strong frame and focus for inquiry via the ToC, curiosities find their collective mooring as questions once held by an individual or a program are viewed in relation to what the organization as whole is endeavoring to make real in this world. To foster this, inquiry that speaks to how the ToC is already showing up or becoming more present in the organization is the starting place to quickly make visible the link between inquiry and strategy. Within a matter of weeks organizations have useful information and more confidence in having the skills and the time continue to engage in inquiry.

Over time, the inquiry matrix asks organizations to consider where and with whom sense-making can happen, making this an explicit part of evaluative inquiry and opening the door to reciprocal ways of learning alongside systems partners. Sense-making includes questions of "What can we celebrate?" Building celebration into the practice of inquiry is one way of honoring the human element in work that extends beyond our lifetime. It opens us to possibilities we couldn't imagine prior.

Energizing and Clarifying During Leadership Transitions

These engagements commonly begin with new leadership — often following a founder or other long-tenured leadership. But it is interesting that these incoming leaders were willing, as Jeanne Bell stated, to "confront rather than avoid those

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[11] CompassPoint NonProfit Services president, March 2007–March 2018.

fundamental questions of organizational identity and purpose":

> We had a staff with widely varying tenures and approaches to the work — some very attached to existing methods and others energized to reimagine the work. I was in the latter group, and I needed a process that stayed at the "why, for whom, and how" level so that people could not niche out into existing program-planning or tactical goal-setting.

This approach is not about justifying existing efforts, but also clarifying and affirming given Position and Perspective. This is one reason why the final conversation is about the cross-cutting ways an organization will work toward the change it seeks. The focus on cross-cutting descriptions is critical, as they are larger than any single program, initiative, or investment area. They are stated in ways that allow an organization's values to do the heavy lift on what this work looks and feels like. Values and the change an organization seeks in the world invite us to be thoughtful about how we are doing our work (Position).

Situating these elements within the shared analysis at which an organization arrives through articulation of the other theory of change elements (problem, context, evidence, assumptions) brings clarity and flexibility to see oneself and the organization beyond the bounds of existing efforts (Perspective). Throughout the process an organization gains framing, practices formative discussions, and explores and deepens ways of being in relationship. These support the organization as it grapples with decisions about the highest and best use of its resources (in the broadest sense). Coherence around a shared purpose is critical: one that may emanate from the organization's founding but holds an aspiration larger than that of any one person and larger than the progress already attained.

Maricela Rios-Faust, CEO of Human Options, recalled,

> It was the biggest thing that helped the organization move from a founder identity to an identity that I believe the organization holds on its own

Coherence around a shared purpose is critical: one that may emanate from the organization's founding but holds an aspiration larger than that of any one person and larger than the progress already attained.

and can live on its own. It became a catalyst for organizing and getting the board and staff and everybody really behind this vision and organizational identity. … And it's something that we still strive to live into.

With Emergence and Complexity, 'The Whole Thing Is Strategic'

How does "being strategic" in the means and ends of a process like this support an organization to move more effectively within complex and emergent conditions? By involving all staff and board and in some instances close partners, organizations engage in dialogue and reflection centered around the questions that will continue to guide decision-making across roles. "We are not leaving the real strategic thinking to a few people on the team," Bell noted. "Everyone is left more capable of strategic thinking and dialogue."

In the words of other client partners:

> Your approach to developing theory of change is very much about relational organizing. … It's not going to come from like one, two, to three people. You engage people in it. You also articulated how the process can be leadership development for the folks involved.
>
> — *Marissa Tirona, executive director, Grantmakers Concerned With Immigrants and Refugees*

> We were having the right conversations. We were really coming together and not spinning our wheels or having a repeat of the same

conversation. I saw staff align to the bigger picture. Rather than everybody in their own programs, it became, "What are we trying to make happen together?"

— *Adriana Rocha*

The environment and the configuration of people [during the development of the theory of change] allowed us to think bigger, broader, better. The question of whether we were state- or nationally focused quickly became a both/and. When the question came up again during our name change, it passed quickly. Insisting on full board participation in the process meant the determinations we made couldn't later be undermined.

— *Sandra Henriquez, CEO, and David Lee, deputy director, ValorUS*

How we went about the theory of change just fundamentally became how we go about most significant changes in the organization, when we did a full rebrand and it was the same process of bringing in staff and leadership.

— *Maricela Rios-Faust*

Even as language lands for each theory of change element, words alone are not a magic fix during difficult or heightened decisions. We introduce the recommendations, actions, and decisions screen, and encourage testing and playing with it immediately after completing the working theory of change. This component of the strategic framework nurtures an organization's collective consciousness. It centers a series of questions which support dialogue and reflection toward understanding the ways in which an opportunity (defined in myriad ways depending on the type of organization is or isn't aligned with their theory of change (Position). It includes consideration of additional factors such as operational capacity, partnerships, resources, and influence or reputation that are of significance for any organization. By naming that which is often not apparent, transparency is increased and reference points for decisions are grounded in collective agreements or understandings (Pattern).

The decision screen is fundamental. It's a very real-life application, often at the most heightened time …, moments where everything feels so important, tense, and where there are multiple points of view. You can use the decision screen to ground "What is it we're trying to do and does this decision make sense within the direction we've set?"

— *Adriana Rocha*

The focus was not on a plan, but decisions: being able to focus on our decisions, being really nimble and taking advantage of opportunities because we know our direction.

— *Sandra Henriquez and David Lee*

The co-created elements of the theory of change shifts energy away from stagnant or circular questions within an organization. This is not about perfection or precision. It is a container to explore what, if anything, might shift to support greater alignment, and a memory of what was considered as a determination was made. Emergence and complexity are welcomed in these conversations. They exist in the theory of change so that an organization can place itself within the larger systems in play while holding a clear view of their values and purpose (Position).

An Offering

For organizations to remain viable and relevant, strategy warrants both rigor and nuance. We have a responsibility to embrace complexity in how we understand the world (Perspective), define our roles within it (Position), and wish for our efforts to unfold (Pattern and Plan). To not do so contributes to believing that individuals and organizations are separate from the context and conditions in which we are trying to bring about change. Strategy formation and articulation that is as nuanced as the world around us can mitigate that tendency. In our experience and through the reflections of client partners, these core components can improve your organizational capacity to move within emergence and complexity.

- *Co-creation and contribution beyond any one organization is vital.* If your purpose requires acknowledgement of and being in relationship with others with shared aims and values (Perspective), then your approach to strategy should mirror that. Co-creating a shared

understanding of the issue (and problem to be addressed), context, possibilities, evidence (empirical and experiential), and assumptions stimulates a more robust and rigorous understanding of the ecosystem, the actors, and the role one might play. The organizational niche (Position) becomes clearer. It is easier to determine what and how to activate what is uniquely yours to contribute. All this frames your evaluative inquiry.

- *Define the problem; root in values and purpose.* It's not an easy place to begin. Yet, each client partner recalled how critical beginning with defining the problem was as the starting point to developing their theory of change (Perspective and Position) and how it remains a beacon of clarity in ongoing strategic thinking and decision-making (Pattern and Plan). By carving out Perspective and Pattern, evaluative inquiry is focused, and one is better able to discern what is important to pay attention to and for what reasons as the effort unfolds and the context changes. Learning is grounded in relevance to the moment.

- *Curiosity, not certitude.* When people's inquisitive natures are activated, they ask questions that clarify and broaden their understanding. There are fewer implicit assumptions. They reflect a point of view around the world that they are willing to explore and challenge (Perspective). They are more able to find points of commonality with their colleagues to find ways of moving in concert toward shared aims (Pattern). The questions are deeper and more appropriate to ask, given the moment, of specific people and for specific reasons. They seek information and engage in sense-making that is more inclusive, contextualized, and thus more rigorous and valid. Their evaluative muscles are engaged.

- *Organizations are people.* Lastly, and most importantly, efforts and enterprises are composed of human beings. Humans are multidimensional, becoming even more so as we move with greater fluidity through our various identities. Humans also have origins influenced by their histories and experiences.

They have emotions, characteristics, qualities, and skills as individuals. When together there is interplay between and among them which is sometimes unpredictable. A plan does not have a heartbeat or a soul. It is not real. At best it is an aspiration to what one hopes will happen (Position) or how one will be (Pattern). No matter how well conceived a strategy, if the humans are not interested, equipped, or supported to bring it to life, it will not come to be.

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