

Building a Strategic Learning and Evaluation System for Your Organization

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to solve social problems

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Overview

The Urgent Need to Align Evaluation and Strategy

Evaluation in many of today's organizations is ad hoc, not aligned to strategy, underfunded, and underused. We have found this to be true regardless of sector, type or size of organization, or whether they are for profit, philanthropic, or nonprofit organizations. Often times, this situation has led to monitoring and evaluation efforts being perceived as adding little value to organization decision makers, and a perception that monitoring and evaluation efforts are not worth their cost.

At the same time, evaluation as a tool for strategic learning is gaining traction within the philanthropic field. This focus on learning is generating interest in evaluation methods and approaches that provide the insights needed to inform strategic decisions. Though concerns about the value of evaluation continue, foundations and nonprofits are increasing their investments in evaluation – and are experimenting with new approaches – expecting that they will help increase their effectiveness and impact.

Strategic learning is “the use of data and insights from a variety of information-gathering approaches – including evaluation – to inform decision making about strategy.”

[Coffman and Beer, 2011]

Further evidence of this continued commitment to evaluation was found in a recent study conducted by the Center for Evaluation Innovation for the Evaluation Roundtable [The Center for Evaluation Innovation, 2013]. Responses from more than 40 foundation evaluation staff via a survey and interviews indicated that:

- The evaluation function and investments continue to expand. Moreover, the number of FTEs dedicated to evaluation also appears to be increasing slightly [over 2009].
- Evaluation continues to play a role in shaping foundation strategy and its use during all phases of the strategy life cycle [beginning, middle, end] is improving.

With calls for evaluation to inform learning and a desire to move from outputs to outcomes and results, there is a tremendous opportunity and need to increase the value of evaluation, to connect it with strategy, and to elevate it to a meaningful and critically important function within an organization.

The Ideal Intersection of Strategy and Evaluation



The Challenge: Disconnection

In many organizations, the meaningfulness and usability of evaluation information has been limited because of its disconnection from strategic and organizational-level decision making. Even in the most well-intentioned organizations – with leaders who believe in evaluation’s ability to support individual, group, and organizational learning – evaluative thinking and practice are loosely aligned, fragmented, and siloed. Through our practice, we have observed:

- Most evaluations focus on program- or initiative-level questions only; they are not designed to answer important strategic questions within and across programs.
- There is a lack of alignment between the kind of monitoring and evaluation data being collected and the needs of program and organizational leaders in making strategic and organizational decisions.
- What gets evaluated is mostly ad hoc and reflects the needs of particular individuals or departments, rather than the organization as a whole.
- Evaluation budgets are a mystery; there is rarely a dedicated organizational-level budget line item for monitoring, evaluation, and learning work; as a result, this work is underfunded.
- There are few internal mechanisms for capturing, storing, accessing, and sharing learnings from evaluation efforts.
- There are few processes, systems, and opportunities for learning from and about evaluation, which limits the ability of organization members to make sense of findings and to translate them into action.

As a result, organizations spend significant amounts of time and effort developing a compelling strategy, defining goals, and articulating a convincing theory of change, without putting into place the infrastructure and support needed to monitor and evaluate whether or not the strategy is actually working. If organizations were to establish and maintain systems and processes that support effective monitoring, evaluation, and learning practices, they would be more effective in:

- Understanding and tracking their strategy’s effects, influence, and impacts;
- Ensuring the collection and use of meaningful and useful grantee and other stakeholder information;
- Facilitating and supporting individual, group, and organizational learning;
- Providing insights into the effectiveness and efficiencies of the organization’s core activities [e.g., communications]; and
- Informing the field about key learnings from their work.

The current state of evaluation in the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors points to the need for a more strategic approach to evaluation. In this guide, we address the question: ***How can organizations be more systematic, coordinated, and intentional about what to evaluate, when, why, with whom, and with what resources?***

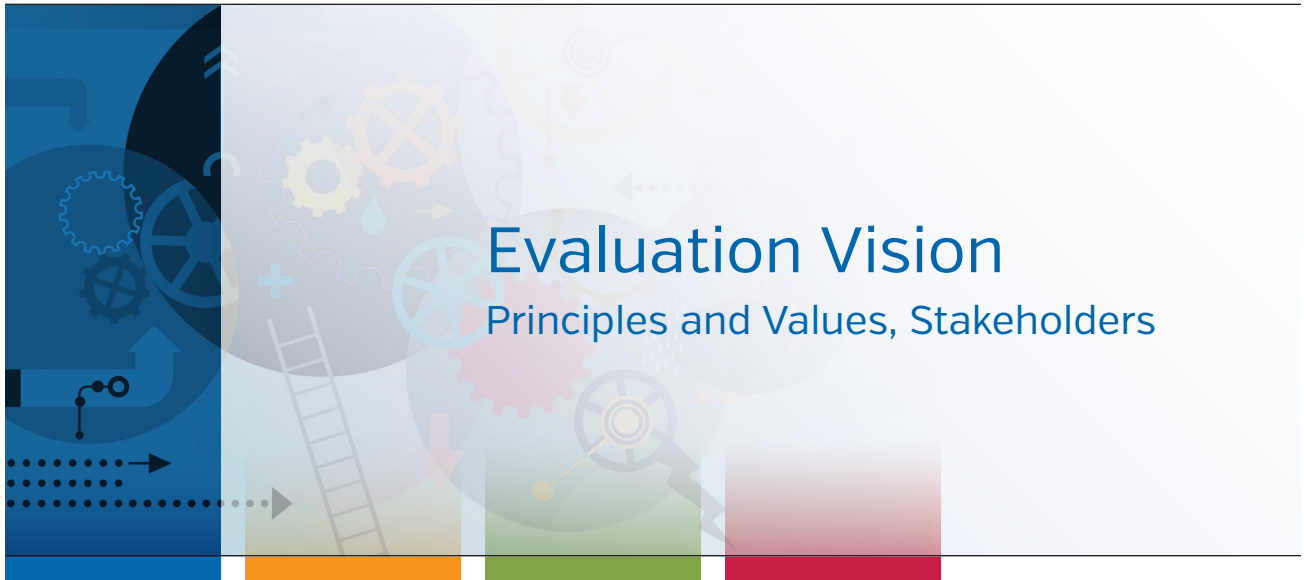
The Opportunity: Strategic Learning and Evaluation Systems

If learning and evaluation efforts are to inform an organization's decision making practices, then there needs to be a *comprehensive strategy for evaluation*. A strategic approach to evaluation requires a *clear vision* for evaluation; a culture that fosters individual, group, and organizational learning; a compelling and cogent *strategy*; coordinated *evaluation and learning activities*; and a supportive *environment*. When fully implemented, these elements work together to ensure that learning and evaluation activities reflect and feed into the organization's latest thinking. In this context, evaluation can help answer the most pressing questions of leadership and staff. The result is what FSG calls a **Strategic Learning and Evaluation System** [also known by the acronym SLES].

A Strategic Learning and Evaluation System



This brief describes each SLES component and how an organization **can achieve significant advances in the timeliness, relevance, credibility, and usefulness of evaluation practice.**



An evaluation vision reflects the values that the organization has for learning and evaluation, and communicates evaluation's role in strategic and organizational decision making. Organizations that clearly articulate the principles and values underlying their approach to evaluation find themselves more willing to use evaluation to build knowledge, inform action, and hold stakeholders accountable.

DEVELOPING AN EVALUATION VISION

To develop an evaluation vision, organization members should consider the following questions in crafting a 2–4 sentence vision statement:

- What role might learning and evaluation play in the organization?
- What value will learning and evaluation add to the organization and other stakeholders?
- How might evaluation contribute to strategic decision making?

The California Endowment (TCE), for example, uses its evaluation vision to describe its commitment to using evaluation (among other activities) for learning within the foundation and among its partners and grantees.

The California Endowment is committed to promoting learning among staff, grantees, partners, and the field through evaluation, research, and convenings that inform strategic decision making, build evaluation capacity, foster adaptive change, and help TCE and its partners achieve impact in Building Healthy Communities.

The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) is an international organization dedicated to human rights advocacy on behalf of people who experience discrimination or abuse on the basis of their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression. The organization focuses on two strategic goals: 1) Capacity building for the documentation of human rights violations, and 2) Global advocacy. Their vision for learning and evaluation is:

IGLHRC strives to engage in collaborative and learning-oriented monitoring and evaluation that guides internal decision making and informs conversations with external stakeholders about IGLHRC's influence, effects, and impact.

A clear vision for evaluation signals to staff and the field what evaluation is going to be used for and the values on which evaluation practice is based. Organizations may emphasize learning, collaboration, impact, accountability, organizational effectiveness, and a host of other purposes for evaluation in their vision statement. A list of core values for evaluation – transparency, authenticity, commitment to impact, among others – usually accompanies a vision statement. Values provide a guiding framework for making decisions about what to evaluate and the way in which it will be undertaken.

For example, the *Issues Affecting Women Programme* of the Oak Foundation developed its evaluation and learning system to reflect the following values:

We approach evaluation in a way that is:

- **Collaborative** – we aim to work with our partners and other actors in the field to contribute to the information we seek to collect, to determine the best ways to go about doing so, and to share in the findings;
- **Designed to generate actionable and on-going learnings** – we strive to only gather information that can guide our strategies and decisions; and we view evaluation as an ongoing process, not a one-time event at the end of a grant, project, or strategy;
- **Flexible and adaptive to the many dynamic contexts we work in** – we work with grantees of all shapes and sizes, working in contexts that are in constant flux; we thus do not subscribe to a rigid one-size-fits-all approach to evaluation; and
- **Mindful of our partners' time and resources** – we appreciate how precious time and resources are and thus strive to engage in evaluation that is not an onerous side-activity but rather strengthens the internal learning and capacities of our partners.

When it is not clear why evaluation is important, how it will be used, and who stands to benefit most, a mismatch between the expectations of funders and grantees can occur. Failure to communicate a clear, simple evaluation vision can result in confusion and misunderstanding, and in the some cases, an unproductive skepticism of an organization's intentions. Funders may see evaluation as a way to improve performance, while grantees see funders' interest in evaluation as an attempt to cut off or scale back their investment. This situation highlights the importance of communicating the evaluation vision with internal and external stakeholders in a consistent and authentic way to minimize any misconceptions about how evaluation is meant to be conducted and used.



Questions to Consider

- What value will learning and evaluation add to your organization?
- What role can learning and evaluation play in your organization?
- How might evaluation contribute to strategic decision making?
- Who needs to be informed about the evaluation vision, and what are effective ways for communicating with these stakeholders?
- How do we want to use what is learned from our evaluation work?



This element of a Strategic Learning and Evaluation System ensures that there are agreed upon **strategies to guide organization and program level decisions, that staff understand the larger system in which the work is happening, and that the majority of evaluation activities are guided by a set of strategic evaluation questions.**

STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

A SLES exists to support strategic decision making, both at the program and organization levels. Therefore, it is critically important that an organization not only have, but be able to articulate and agree on the strategies and tactics it is using to achieve its goals. In developing a SLES, an organization reviews and assesses the coherence of the current strategy or strategies being employed. Without a clear understanding of the organization's strategy, evaluation activities easily become scattershot and disconnected – making it difficult to turn evaluation findings into insights for strategic learning and change.

SYSTEMS MAP AND THEORY OF CHANGE

Taking a more strategic approach to evaluation requires an organization to a) understand the larger context in which its work is occurring, and b) reflect on and discuss the assumptions embedded in its strategy and how they believe change occurs. This conversation highlights potential conflicts or misunderstandings about expected outcomes, and clarifies the issue of contribution vs. attribution. We have found that engaging stakeholders in developing a “systems map” helps facilitate this dialogue. The activity typically involves providing flipchart paper and markers to groups of 3-4 and inviting participants to “draw a map of the system in which their work lives” [e.g., college readiness system, substance abuse and prevention

system, news and information system], and what organizations and/or actors, play a role in, influence, or work towards the same goals. Each group shares their map, which is followed by a large group discussion that focuses on commonalities and differences, faulty assumptions, new insights, and implications for evaluation.

The photo at right shows the results of such an activity with the Northwest Area Foundation’s work as they were developing a strategic learning and evaluation system. What is particularly interesting is how different their maps are; participants highlighted many important issues and questions that later became part of several SLES components.



It is also important for the organization to develop a high level theory of change that depicts the organization’s understanding of the problem, how it plans to address or solve the problem, and the long-term change it is hoping to affect. While there are many ways to illustrate a theory of change, we have found it best to keep it fairly simple. Its utility is in its ability to connect the organization’s strategy to the change[s] it seeks.

For example, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission developed the following theory of change that frames and guides their work:

IGLHRC believes that building capacity to document human rights violations and engaging in advocacy at regional and global intergovernmental fora constitute the most efficient way to contribute to building stronger LGBT rights movements that will help LGBT people around the world live richer, fuller, and fulfilling lives.

| | | |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| <p>Outcomes</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater level of LGBT rights institutionalized and operationalized at the UN and regional fora Allied movements are committed to LGBT rights issues Effective LGBT work is led by diverse, representative, community based groups, individuals, and organizations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> State and non-state and private actors are held accountable for SOGI related violations Improved cultural and social norms for LGBT people LGBT communities more effectively meet the broad needs of LGBT people living in their country and region |
| <p>Activities</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build the capacity of organizations and leaders in the South to document human rights violations Collaborate with partners on the ground to document human rights violations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lead effective LGBT engagement at international, regional, and national human rights bodies Support activists in the South in their advocacy efforts |
| <p>The Problem</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> LGBT people around the world are still discriminated against Activists in the South need to build their capacity to document human rights violations Lack of organizations focused on | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> LGBT human rights documentation capacity building Increased need to understand what works in advancing the LGBT human rights movement and demonstrate impact |

STRATEGIC EVALUATION QUESTIONS

Once the organization's strategy and tactics have been agreed upon and are explicit, and there is a broader understanding of the system in which the organization is working, then it's time to develop a set of **high level strategic evaluation questions** that will focus and guide the majority of the organization's evaluation and learning activities. These questions are the overarching questions that serve as guideposts for understanding what an organization is achieving, in what ways, and with what kinds of resources. The vast majority of future evaluations should be grounded in and help inform the answers to the strategic evaluation questions. Some strategic evaluation questions may be inward looking; for example, "In what ways are our organizational structures and processes supporting (or hindering) grantees' ability to implement innovative strategies to improve educational attainment?" Other questions may focus on the process, outcomes, and impact of the work, while others could address the ways in which the field is influencing the work and vice versa.

Good strategic learning and evaluation questions:

- Frame the scope and boundaries of evaluation activities
- Are grounded in the program's theory of change
- Reflect a variety of key stakeholders' information needs
- Are those that matter most for decision-making and action
- Can be answered through the collection and analysis of data

It is important to develop a set of questions that will guide the organization's evaluation activities for the next 1–3 years. Oftentimes, these questions address process, impact, organization, and field-level outcomes. The following is a general set of questions that could be tailored to the specific foci and issue areas of the organization's mission, values, and strategy:

Process:

- In what ways are the organization's statewide, regional, and local efforts working together to influence policy?
- How can the organization strengthen its relationships with and impact on grantees?
- To what extent, and in what ways, is progress being made toward accomplishing the organization's multi-year goals?
- What factors are influencing the extent to which progress is being made?

Outcomes and Impact:

- To what extent and in what ways have the organization's investments led to changes in local and state policies and practices?
- Which models are proving to be most effective?
- To what extent are the organization's strategic approaches effective relative to alternative approaches?
- What difference has our work made in the last ten years?

Organization:

- How have the organization's structures and processes helped or hindered progress toward addressing its goals?
- To what extent and in what ways is the organization effectively communicating its strategy, values, and vision within the organization?
- How has the organization increased its organizational capacity to respond to an increasingly challenging field?

Field:

- To what extent is the organization contributing to the field's knowledge? To what extent is it catalyzing action?
- What role is the organization playing relative to others working on these issues?
- To what extent and in what ways is the organization transforming the field?

The tailored set of questions would look something like the following, as illustrated by those developed by the King Baudouin Foundation in Brussels, Belgium. Here are a sample of their questions specifically focused on their process and outcomes:

1. Supporting capacity-building actions

- How have our capacity-building efforts helped the grantees and partners of those efforts?
- To what extent are the grantees and partners satisfied with our capacity-building efforts?

2. Raising knowledge (in a specific target population)

- To what extent has the amount of knowledge increased?
- To what extent has the quality of knowledge increased?
- To what extent has interest in the topic increased?

3. Forming opinions/attitudes

- To what extent are opinion leaders engaging with our content/events?
- What % of opinions/attitudes in our target group have we changed? How?
- To what extent and how have opinions/attitudes in the political arena or the popular media shifted?
- To what extent and how have shifts in opinion/attitudes led to shifts in action?

4. Initializing policy actions

- Has policy in fact changed?
- How are policy makers engaging with our content/events? How many?
- How are stakeholders, beyond the direct stakeholders of our project, embracing and advocating for the policy recommendations we've made?
- To what extent are members of parliament making public statements about the issues we're promoting?

Questions to Consider

- What are our organization's strategies for achieving its goals? Is there a strategic plan where these are made explicit? How current is this plan?
- How aligned are the various departments/programs with our organization's strategies?
- What is the system in which our work is taking place? Where is there energy in the system? Where are there gaps? Where is our organization in the system? What implications are there?
- What is our organization's or program area's theory of change? How is this theory of change reflected in our strategy? Is the theory of change articulated in written form?
- Who needs to be involved in developing program or project level theories of change and outcome maps if more work is needed?
- What are the questions our organization would like to have answered through its learning and evaluation system within the next 1-3 years? [These should be tied closely to the organization's strategies]



A major element of a Strategic Learning and Evaluation System is determining what to evaluate, when, and at what level, and how to communicate and use the evaluation findings for learning, adaptation, and change. This includes developing one or more program, initiative, and/or organization-level outcome maps, considering what to ask for from grantees and how often, determining which programs to evaluate, and how to communicate key learnings with multiple stakeholders [intended users of the key findings].

OUTCOME MAPS AND INDICATORS

It has become expected and common practice for program staff to develop outcome maps or logic models for their various programs.¹ Quite simply, an outcome map makes explicit, in one place, the activities, resources, outputs, and short, interim, and long-term outcomes of a program or initiative. When designed collaboratively, an outcome map clarifies the assumptions underlying the program in addition to expectations for what the program would look like if it were successful. Outcome maps often describe the relationships between activities and outcomes and anticipated or predicted pathways to success. The fundamental value of outcome maps is that they provide an opportunity for staff and senior leaders (and sometimes grantees) to negotiate understandings about the true purpose and hoped for outcomes of a strategy overall, as well as one or more programs. Even though outcome maps have their limitations (e.g., they are linear, they assume the program is based on a model that has been tested and the expected outcomes are known or can be predicted, and they don't capture systems variables), they are an invaluable resource for 1) helping organizations make explicit their assumptions and understandings about the issue and the organization's "solution", and 2) designing and implementing monitoring and evaluation activities.

¹ We use the term outcome map in this document since we have found that the nonprofit and philanthropic fields have mixed experiences and feelings about "logic models." We are more interested in what an outcome map or logic model offers staff than in what it is called.

GRANTEE REPORTING AND EVALUATION CAPACITY [RELEVANT TO FUNDERS]

Nearly every foundation asks its grantees to provide some kind of performance or accountability information once or twice a year during the grant period in the form of a narrative report, program documents, or survey. However, the information collected is often not aligned to either the program's or organization's strategy, and given foundation staff's multiple responsibilities and workload, grantee reports may not be read or used as much as might be desired.

Developing a SLES provides an opportunity to connect grantees' work with the foundation's and ensures that grantees are asked to collect information on topics that matter to them, and also to the foundation – those related to the organization's strategy and tactics. This component of the SLES addresses the extent to which grantees' work reflects:

- The desired outcomes embedded in the program and organization-level outcome maps;
- The degree to which grantee-reported information is aligned with the organization's strategic evaluation questions;
- The ways in which grantee information is reported and used; and
- The grantees' capacity to collect the requested information.

Insights from working on this component often highlight the need for making some adjustments to what is being asked for from grantees, how information is being collected, and potential areas in which to support grantee evaluation capacity.

PROGRAM, INITIATIVE, AND ORGANIZATION-FOCUSED EVALUATIONS

Evaluation planning provides a structure and set of processes for determining the scope, timing, and purpose of various evaluation efforts, so that evaluations are strategic, intentional, and learning-oriented. Without an overarching evaluation plan that includes all or most programs and initiatives, evaluation activities become fragmented and increasingly isolated from strategic and programmatic decision making. This fragmentation also makes it difficult to use evaluation findings for strategic learning.

Program- or initiative-level evaluations within nonprofits and foundations reflect many different types, approaches, sizes, and purposes. They are often conducted by a third-party evaluator who can bring the necessary time, skills, and expertise to the evaluation work. Since it is unnecessary to evaluate all programs at any given time, a SLES guides staff in prioritizing what kinds of information they need in the near term and from whom (which programs, activities, organizations).

Organization-level evaluations might focus on the organization's capacity to do its work (e.g., evaluating the effectiveness of its structures, processes, and functions), the field's perceptions of the organization's work, or the next phase of the organization's strategy. These evaluations may be conducted with internal personnel, or they might warrant hiring a third-party evaluator, depending on the need for an outside perspective and the staff's availability.

Each evaluation should have a set of its own key evaluation questions, and these are explicitly linked to at least one Strategic Evaluation Question that the leadership, board, or other stakeholders want to know more about. Once the questions have been determined, an organization can decide what types of resources it might need to carry out an evaluation (depending on the breadth, depth, and scope of the evaluation).

Different Types of Inquiry Address Different Kinds of Information Needs

| | |
|--|--|
|  <p>Research</p> | <p>Seeks answers to questions in order to generate new knowledge and/or understanding</p> |
|  <p>Developmental Evaluation</p> | <p>Supports innovation by bringing data to inform and guide ongoing decision-making as part of the development process</p> |
|  <p>Monitoring and Performance Measurement</p> | <p>Tracks adherence to accountability requirements; Assesses a program or initiative by quantitatively measuring key indicators of progress</p> |
|  <p>Process Evaluation [Formative]</p> | <p>Explores how a program or initiative is making progress towards its goals in terms of outputs and short-term outcomes</p> |
|  <p>Impact Evaluation [Summative]</p> | <p>Determines the long-term effects of a program or initiative</p> |

When it comes to evaluation approaches, there are several choices, but choosing the right one depends on the stage at which the program is in its life cycle and the purpose of the evaluation. For example, monitoring and performance measurement is commonly used by foundations to track grantees' performance as part of a grantee reporting process. Developmental evaluation may be used to understand and inform the development of an innovative and experimental program or initiative [Preskill and Beer, 2012]. Strategic reviews can inform an organization about the progress and/or impact of a particular strategy over time, or cluster evaluations can explore and determine the influence, effects, or impacts of a group of programs or grantees. Clarity around the purpose of evaluations will help determine which forms of evaluative inquiry are most appropriate for getting the information needed to inform the Strategic Evaluation Questions. The purpose and scope of the evaluation will, in part, determine the design and data collection methods used in implementing the evaluation.

COMMUNICATING AND USING EVALUATION FINDINGS

Improving the mechanisms for reporting and communicating evaluation information helps ensure that high quality, relevant, and timely evaluations are fully reflected upon, discussed, and ultimately used. Many organizations invest great resources in carefully designing a methodologically rigorous evaluation while giving little thought to the ways in which evaluation findings will be shared with and used by various stakeholders. This leaves many evaluation reports unread and unused, rather than actively informing decisions that are being made about key strategies and tactics. One of the ways to address this is by developing a plan for communicating evaluation findings and insights, both internally and externally.

For example, the Communities Foundation of Texas [CFT] determined that it wanted to share learnings from its evaluation work with both internal and external audiences and, as a result, developed the following communicating and reporting plan to guide these efforts. What's important to note is the variety of strategies the foundation uses to share its insights and findings with others.

Spectrum of Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT) Communications Approaches

| | ◀ Fewer Resources ————— More Resources ▶ | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|--------------|-----------------|-----------|--------------|--------------|---------|------------|----------------------|-------|-----------|
| | Discussion | Memo / Email | Progress Report | Dashboard | Presentation | Social Media | Webinar | Newsletter | Report / White Paper | Video | Convening |
| CFT Trustees | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | |
| CFT Leadership | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | |
| CFT Grantmaking and Program Staff | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| CFT All Staff | | | | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | |
| Grantees | ✓ | | | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Nonprofits / Partners | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Donors | | | | | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Media | | | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Other Funders | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Policymakers | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |

A sound communications plan requires identifying *who* can use and learn from the evaluation, *what* the key messages of the evaluation are, and *how* the intended audiences will best receive that information. For example, a board member will likely be interested in different kinds of information and expect it in a different format than a program officer or nonprofit staff member. The architects of an evaluation must plan and budget for communication efforts appropriately, and communications staff must also be aware of and support these activities.

Questions to Consider

- Are there theories of change and outcome maps for each of our program areas? To what extent are these complete, reflective of reality, and used?
- Taking into account the Strategic Evaluation Questions, which programs/portfolios would benefit most from evaluation within the next year or two?
- What kind of evaluation would be most appropriate for the program, given where it is in its life cycle – performance measurement, developmental, formative, or summative (or retrospective lookback)?
- What is our organization's perspective on what constitutes relevant, credible, and useful information? To what extent does our organization need/want numbers and/or stories?
- How are evaluation findings communicated and reported internally and externally?
- What communication and reporting strategies are working particularly well? What strategies are not achieving the desired impact?



Evaluation functions most effectively when it is well supported by a strong infrastructure, which includes supportive leadership and human, financial, and technological resources. The most critical is an organization's people – staff who are assigned responsibility to oversee and/or carry out evaluation activities. Financial and technological resources, such as knowledge management systems, are also critical to developing a fully functioning SLES. While designated evaluation staff may have direct control over certain evaluation and learning activities, it is often the case that the infrastructure needed to support the design, implementation, communication, and use of evaluation findings is the responsibility of other departments such as Information Technology (IT) and communications. Therefore, the support of organizational leadership and coordination across departments is essential to ensure that resources for evaluation are adequate and made available at the right time.

LEADERSHIP

For a strategic learning and evaluation system to work – for evaluation to be integrated into how the organization does its work and accomplishes its goals – it is critical that organizational leaders believe that evaluation is a meaningful and important activity. As such, they must consistently: a) communicate the importance of evaluation for decision making, b) encourage organization members to engage in asking questions, reflection, and dialogue, and c) provide the necessary time, personnel, and financial resources to ensure that evaluations can be conducted. Leaders who support evaluation:

- Actively engage in, and encourage others to think evaluatively;
- Provide resources (financial, time, personnel) for conducting relevant, credible, timely, and useful evaluations;

- Use findings to learn, make decisions, and take action;
- Clearly articulate staff's roles and responsibilities regarding how, when, and by whom evaluations are to be conducted; and
- Provide reward and recognition systems that value staff's engagement in learning and evaluation activities.



Questions to Consider

- How does our organization's leadership think about and value evaluation?
 - What can be done to help our leaders understand their role as champions of learning and evaluation?
 - Who might be internal champions or leaders of evaluation within our organization?
-

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

While it always takes a committed set of leaders to elevate evaluation and its use within an organization, adequate financial and human resources differ by organization size, annual expenditures, as well as the evaluation's purpose and role. On average, foundations tend to spend much less on evaluation than the often recommended 5–10% of grant making; in fact, most spend less than 1% (Patrizi Associates, 2010). A true commitment to evaluation is backed by a consistent allocation of financial resources earmarked for evaluative purposes on an annual basis. These resources must include the full array of evaluation activities – including investing in various kinds of evaluations (e.g., developmental, formative, summative, strategic reviews) as well as learning processes, such as retreats and staff, and communications costs. Providing adequate resources to learning and evaluation efforts is also a signal of the leadership's support of using evaluative inquiry to facilitate organizational learning.



Questions to Consider

- How are current evaluations budgeted? What percent of each program's budget is set aside for learning and evaluation activities?
- How does our organization determine how much is allocated to any one evaluation?
- How adequate are the current evaluation funds? What else is needed to ensure an ongoing ability to conduct learning, monitoring, and evaluation activities?

HUMAN RESOURCES

Successful implementation of a strategic learning and evaluation system also requires deliberate investment of time and staff resources to manage, design, and conduct the needed evaluations, as well as to plan for and facilitate learning from the findings. Some organizations rely almost entirely on external evaluators, whereas others depend primarily on internal staff to oversee and conduct monitoring and evaluation activities. The development of a SLES helps the organization determine what kinds of staff resources are needed to support its learning, monitoring, and evaluation work.

Questions to Consider

- To what extent does our organization have sufficient human resources to support ongoing evaluation and learning processes? What else might be needed?
- What are our internal staff's roles and responsibilities for learning and evaluation? What role might external evaluators play?
- Are there internal staff who would like to be more involved in the organization's learning and evaluation work? If yes, what can be done to support their increased participation?
- What kinds of evaluation capacity building activities would be beneficial to staff?

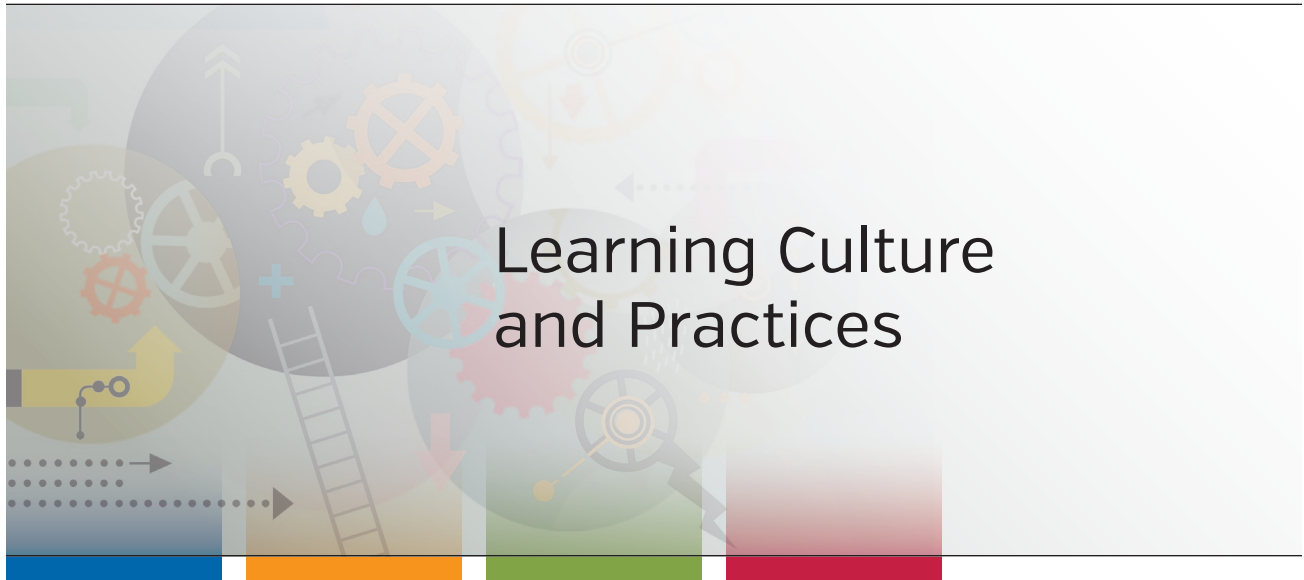
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Often overlooked in many organizations is the need for technological processes and resources that are necessary to support not only data collection and analysis but also the ability to capture, organize, and access monitoring and evaluation information for continuous learning and improvement. In many organizations, information is stored in multiple locations – email servers, websites (public and/or internal), personal hard drives, and in print. Access is either limited or challenging, creating challenges to using evaluation findings in meaningful ways.

An effective knowledge management and database system enables multiple inputs from multiple programs so that data can be captured, stored, summarized, and used by organization members when they need information. Knowledge management systems can range from simple shared drives where reports are posted online to cloud-based platforms with complex functionality. To create a useful and useable system for knowledge management, an organization should consider the primary audience for the system and its needs, the existing culture around data sharing, and the alignment with work processes, as well as the time available to input and use the information in the system.

Questions to Consider

- What kinds of technology/software currently support the collection and analysis of grantee and other forms of evaluation data? How effective/useful are these technologies?
- Does our organization have a knowledge management system? Is it used? What would need to happen to enhance the current knowledge management system so that it can support the learning and evaluation system?
- What kinds of learning and evaluation resources would be meaningful to organization members? How can these be made available to those who need and want them?



An organization may design an elegant and comprehensive evaluation system as described in this brief, but if it lacks a learning culture, the system will have little to no effect in making evaluation strategic and useful. Evaluation, at its core, is a means for learning, adapting, and changing. Organizations need to support a culture of risk taking, trust, tolerance for failure, and curiosity if they are truly going to benefit from evaluation efforts. In other words, organizations need to embrace and support a learning culture: *“An environment that supports and encourages the collective discovery, sharing, and application of knowledge”* (Gill, 2010).

Good evaluations affirm and challenge what we think we know, provide evidence on the influence, effects, and impact of our work, and give us the confidence to make decisions and to take action. Supporting this view, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations has written,

Evaluation is a core learning practice. It provides the content of learning as grantmakers and their grantees explore the results of their work and how to improve their performance...Evaluation, of course, is not the only way in which organizations learn. But grantmakers must think evaluatively about their work and have access to the information, feedback, and data that only evaluation can deliver.

[GEO, 2009, p. 6].

An important way to enhance the relevance and use of evaluation activities is to embed learning processes into the ways in which the organization gathers, analyzes, understands, discusses, and uses evaluation findings (Preskill and Torres, 1999). This creates a dynamic environment where learning takes place among multiple people, in various roles, and with different levels of responsibility for applying evaluation knowledge in their work. In many organizations, organizational culture is established at the top. While leadership plays a major role in setting the tone for learning, all staff are considered responsible for supporting evaluation and learning in their own ways.

Learning requires consistent engagement in 5 key learning processes.

1. Engaging in Reflection – creating space, slowing down, paying attention, creating new patterns of thinking, creating alternative interpretations, creating new theories of action.
2. Engaging to Dialogue – participants working together toward common understanding, finding common ground, re-examining all positions, admitting that others' thinking can improve on one's own, searching for strengths and value in others' positions, listening to understand.
3. Asking Questions – seeking clarification, probing assumptions, reasons, and evidence, illuminating viewpoints and perspectives, probing implications and consequences, questioning the questions (Socratic questions).
4. Identifying and Challenging Values, Assumptions, and Beliefs – asking questions (testing assumptions), surfacing mental models, seeking evidence, understanding inferences.
5. Seeking Feedback – asking for and providing feedback on experiences, assumptions, perceptions, and actions.

These learning processes are the key ingredients to creating a healthy and productive learning culture. Opportunities for embedding learning from monitoring and evaluation activities might include:

- Hosting learning convenings on various evaluation topics and findings with grantees and/or partners.
- Holding brown bag lunches to present and discuss learnings from an evaluation or to share learnings from engagement in daily work.
- Adding time to program staff meetings to reflect on, discuss, and learn about various evaluation topics.
- Conducting after action reviews (AAR), which are structured reviews or debriefings for analyzing what happened, why it happened, and *how* it can be done better. An AAR is distinct from a debriefing because it begins with a clear comparison of intended vs. actual results achieved.
- Engaging program staff in a 1–2 day quarterly or semi-annual retreat to discuss the implementation and learnings from individual evaluations or evaluation-related issues and challenges across evaluations.
- Using Appreciative Inquiry to illuminate effective, successful, and motivating evaluation experiences.²
- Hosting roundtable research discussions.
- Building and using a knowledge management system to serve as a resource for evaluation practices and key learnings.
- Administering the Readiness for Learning and Evaluation (ROLE) survey (available at www.fsg.org) and facilitating conversations around the findings.

² Appreciative Inquiry is a process that engages a group of people in searching for what a program, organization, situation, etc. looks like when it is at its best; when something is working and is providing new insights, excitement, and a future that is collectively desired. Within an evaluation context, Appreciative Inquiry can build on what is succeeding to further refine, develop, and adapt new learnings, processes, and goals.

For example, the Blue Shield of California Foundation is committed to being a learning organization and to using evaluation as a means for facilitating team and organizational learning. To this end, they are making significant efforts to integrate discussions based on the following questions into staff meetings and their efforts to build a culture of learning.

- In what ways is the Foundation evolving into a learning organization?
- To what extent has the Foundation grown in taking risks and learning from mistakes?
- How consistent are the messages about learning with actions taken by the organization's leadership?
- What have been the most effective tools for increasing learning across Foundation staff?
- How have staff integrated time for reflection and dialogue into their daily work practices?
- What assets do we have to build on, and what do we need to change so that BSCF can become more of a learning organization?

In the end, an authentic commitment to learning means recognizing the value of learning at the individual, group, and organizational levels. It means having learning leaders who champion and model learning; it means developing, nurturing, and sustaining a culture that supports the five learning processes, in addition to taking risks, and trusting one another; it means rewarding and recognizing staff for engaging in learning and evaluation processes; and it means making learning a priority through the expectation and provision of time and space to allow it to happen.



Questions to Consider

- To what extent does our organization have a culture of learning and evaluation, leaders who champion learning and evaluation, and the systems and structures in place to support learning and evaluation?
- To what extent and how are evaluation findings currently shared within our organization? Outside the organization?
- What kinds of learning activities currently exist within our organization? How effective are these?
- What else is needed to encourage and sustain learning?
- What systems and structures do we have that currently support staff learning?

Conclusion

So, What Now?

When all of the components of a SLES are in place – intentionally connected, interdependent, and dynamic – an organization is able to more effectively use evaluation findings to develop and refine its strategy and, ultimately, achieve its long-term impact. For readers who wish to develop a strategic learning and evaluation system, we recommend starting with an assessment of what is currently in place and possible gaps for each of the SLES components, as well as the alignment of current practices (e.g., to what extent and how are evaluation practices aligned with strategic decision making needs?). Once it is clear what is needed to build out the SLES, work can begin to develop or refine each component and to develop a road map or action plan for implementing the newly refreshed, aligned, and strategic system of evaluation activities. A strategic learning and evaluation system not only provides guidance for making important evaluation decisions, but it also gives the organization confidence that evaluation resources are being used efficiently and effectively. In the end, a SLES provides the organization with an evaluation strategy that ultimately increases the value of evaluation for the organization.

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