

Engaging Boards and Trustees in Strategic Learning: A Toolkit

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Contact

hallie.preskill@fsg.org

Authors

Hallie Preskill, Managing Director, FSG

Joelle Cook, Director, FSG

Colleen McCann, Senior Consultant, FSG

Caitlin McConnico, Consultant, FSG

Amy Shields, Former Program Manager, GEO

Meghan Duffy, Vice President of Programs, GEO

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Introduction

In 2009, FSG wrote and published **What's the Difference: How Foundation Trustees View Evaluation**, with support from The James Irvine Foundation. The purpose of the paper was to provide foundation leaders and staff with insights into how boards and trustees were thinking about evaluation and with practical tools for helping board members better understand the critical role evaluation plays in grantmaking for social change. In addition to providing insights from a number of foundation leaders, trustees, and evaluation experts, the paper included snapshots describing how trustees use evaluation, an evaluation-related self-assessment tool, and a set of discussion questions with an accompanying facilitation guide.

Ten years later, the topic of when and how to engage boards and trustees in supporting a grantmaker's learning and evaluation efforts remains important, especially given a growing recognition that solving social problems requires an understanding of systems change and complexity, and that learning along the way is critical to creating impact. We also have realized that addressing issues of inequality and inequity in social, economic, and health outcomes is multi-dimensional and relational, requires multiple voices, and needs varied approaches. Effecting social change in rapidly changing political and technological environments and an increasingly interconnected and complex world requires foundations to adopt a learning orientation and to embrace adaptive approaches to their work. Without continuous learning, grantmakers—and thus boards and trustees—are unaware about what is working where, with whom, and why, as well as what changes or refinements are needed in order to achieve the grantmakers' desired results. The fields of strategic learning and evaluation have also grown and shifted over the last decade, and new ways of thinking about and evaluating grantmaking and its impacts have emerged.

This paper responds to these changes and provides a fresh outlook and set of resources for grantmaker CEOs, evaluation staff, and senior leaders to use to engage their boards and trustees in strategic learning. Our hope is that staff and leaders use any or all of the ten tools we have developed to help board members and trustees understand what strategic learning is (and isn't), why it is important, and how to better incorporate strategic learning practices into their work. These tools include an updated board self-assessment; a glossary of evaluation terms and concepts; several activities dedicated to understanding equity and systems change

and the relationship of their work to both; and other activities designed to stimulate members' thinking and practice.

A recent study commissioned by the Hewlett Foundation revealed the number one knowledge need for grantmakers—by a significant margin—is to learn more about evaluation and assessment. Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) has been sensing the same level of interest and importance from its membership, as its members report wanting to know more about this issue every time a survey is conducted. It's also why learning and evaluation has been a top priority for the GEO community for the past 20 years. GEO's 2017 study of staffed foundations in the United States, **Is Grantmaking Getting Smarter?**, found that 77% of grantmakers evaluate their work. Of those who evaluate their work, 90% report to their boards on grants, 61% use this information to plan or revise strategies, and 49% use this information to plan or revise programs. Since boards are such a key audience, it is important that they engage in learning.

Kim Ammann Howard, Director of Impact Assessment and Learning, and Daniel Silverman, Vice President for Strategic Services, of The James Irvine Foundation, wonderfully articulated the importance of boards and trustees engaging in learning from evaluation:

"We want the board to really understand and own our grantmaking strategy. That's pushed us to diversify the backgrounds and experiences of board members, including adding some with deep expertise in social change and the role of philanthropy. We've also prioritized board members who are more comfortable with debate and disagreeing, and are comfortable in the role of 'friendly critic,' willing to ask tough questions that really hone the strategy."

We have chosen to frame this resource around the concept and practice of "strategic learning," as we believe that data and experiences of all types, collected through various approaches and methods, should contribute to the ways boards and trustees learn. As defined by Julia Coffman and Tanya Beer of the Center for Evaluation Innovation:

"Strategic learning means using evaluation to help organizations or groups learn quickly from their work so they can learn 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."¹

1 Coffman, J., & Beer, T. (2011). **Evaluation to support strategic learning: principles and practices**. Center for Evaluation Innovation.

In the spirit of organizational learning and continuous improvement, and based on what we have learned from interviewing 21 CEOs, board members and trustees, and evaluation directors from grantmakers across the United States (see Appendix A); from the literature; and our own practices, we believe it is time to revisit this topic, building from what FSG published nearly a decade ago. Our hope is that the ideas presented in this paper and the tools we provide will help grantmaker evaluation staff, senior leaders, and CEOs engage their boards and trustees in conversations about the importance of strategic learning in their decision-making and deliberation processes.

The good news is that we can learn from several grantmakers that are already doing so:

The board finds the idea of strategic learning really stimulating and exciting because they are learning a lot about the work we do, and... about communities beyond their own, and they understand how to relate to people from outside their own community in different ways than they may have had a chance to before. So there is some kind of magic going on around this commitment to learning...It has just become part of our culture.

Kevin Walker—President and CEO
Northwest Area Foundation

Today our learning is shifting from an approach of assessing outcomes against goals of each individual grant toward one of overall program evaluation. We spend more time learning and understanding the work and challenges faced by our grantee partners.

Diana Spencer—Executive Director
The William C. McGowan Charitable Fund

Evaluation is the idea of collecting and interpreting the evidence that shows we're being effective and completing our program area activities. We're using that evidence to inform allocation of foundation resources, make midcourse adjustments, and check our targets. As a philanthropic organization, we always ask, 'How does what we do make a difference?' Answering this question requires having the systems in place to collect data and information that will help us improve our strategies and facilitate our reporting. We use evaluation evidence and results to understand how we're achieving our longer-term objectives, and to generate knowledge to share with the community. We also make sure to facilitate periodic reflection among all of our stakeholders.

Christine Mitton—Director, Knowledge and Learning
Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland

This paper is organized into four sections:

- **Current Realities of Boards and Trustees:** This section describes four “current realities,” or observations that reflect factors that may present grantmaker evaluation staff, senior leaders, and CEOs with some challenges to engaging boards and trustees in strategic learning.
- **Action Imperatives for Engaging Boards and Trustees in Strategic Learning:** In the second section of the paper, we acknowledge these realities and their associated challenges, but suggest there are certain “action imperatives” that require boards and trustees to participate in conversations and activities that support their continuous learning so that they may better support the foundation’s work. Embedded in this section, you will find examples and three case studies of foundations that have put these action imperatives into practice.
- **Case Studies:** This section tells the stories of two grantmakers that are engaging their boards and trustees in strategic learning: The California Endowment and Northwest Area Foundation.
- **Tools for Engaging Boards and Trustees in Strategic Learning:** The final section of the paper includes ten tools linked to the action imperatives that CEOs, senior leaders, and evaluation staff can use to engage boards and trustees in a variety of strategic learning conversations. The tools provided are merely a jumping-off point, and are included as a means for starting this journey. This section also includes a reference table of how the tools map onto one or more action imperatives.

“Although learning can and does occur within an organizational context, and evaluation for strategic learning aims to infuse learning into the thinking and practices of groups, learning inherently starts and ends with individuals. It is a personal experience.”²

2 Williams, A. (2014). **Evaluation for Strategic Learning: Assessing Readiness and Results**. Center for Evaluation Innovation.



Current Realities of Boards and Trustees

The meaning, value, and purpose of strategic learning for grantmakers has evolved greatly over the past decade as grantmaker staff—including those working in evaluation and learning, program teams, and CEOs and other senior leaders—have worked hard to adapt to the changing contexts in environments with profound economic, climate, political, and social uncertainty. As Jonathan Fields, author of **Uncertainty: Turning Fear and Doubt into Fuel for Brilliance**, writes, “The future is always to some extent uncertain, but never more so than now. ‘Disruption is the new normal.’”³ Therefore, it is more important than ever for boards and trustees to engage in, and actively support, strategic learning.

However, we have learned that there are certain realities that influence the ways and frequency with which boards and trustees participate in strategic learning conversations. We acknowledge these realities below and believe that the following set of action imperatives and practical tools will help you navigate these realities in effective and meaningful ways.

Reality #1: Board members come to their roles with vastly different backgrounds and experiences, and their understanding of and support for strategic learning varies greatly.

Individual board members may bring varying ideas, knowledge, exposure to, and levels of understanding about strategic learning. While some members may have prior experience with and knowledge of learning and evaluation for social impact, many come from different sectors and backgrounds, such as finance, academia, business, healthcare, nonprofit organizations, public policy, or community activism. As a result, they may have divergent mental models, use language differently, and think about the purpose of learning and evaluation through particular lenses, such as (a) What did our money buy? or (b) Do we have proof that our intervention solved the problem? Diversity of thought and experience among members is

³ Fields, J. (2012). *Uncertainty: Turning Fear and Doubt Into Fuel for Brilliance*. Portfolio Publishing.

valuable for boards, but can pose challenges to aligning all members on the purpose, goals, and value of different kinds of data. Developing a shared understanding takes time, especially for large boards.

A further complicating factor is that most boards have term limits for members, and existing members rotating out and new members cycling on can disrupt a process of developing buy-in and capacity to engage in strategic learning. With the variety of backgrounds and perspectives on strategic learning that board members bring and the rotating nature of boards, it can be challenging to find opportunities for engaging boards and trustees in strategic learning activities.

Some of our board members have lots of experience evaluating financial success, where you're more likely to have one clear message: 'Is it making money? Great; do more of it. Is it not? Let's find a better investment.' They are aware that it's much more difficult in the social sector, but they are pushing us to get as clear and quantitative as possible about whether our grant investments are having the intended impact.

Kim Ammann Howard—Director of Impact Assessment and Learning
The James Irvine Foundation

I think we're learning as a board that you can't evaluate everything. You've got to be strategic in what you choose to evaluate. The most important evaluation work is not at the individual grant level but at the strategy level. What are we trying to achieve, and are we succeeding or not? If so, why? If not, why not? I think there has been good development along those lines.

Don Kimelman—Board Member
William Penn Foundation

Reality #2: Board members come together only a few times a year, and when they do, their time is limited.

Boards and trustees convene infrequently and, when they do, they are expected to address a number of topics, which often doesn't involve learning from program officers' experiences, grantees, communities, research, or evaluation findings. Limited time together influences what information is presented and how boards are expected to engage with it.

I really wish we had more time to engage the board in learning... If I had a magic wand, I would find some ways for us to think out loud with each other together and create the space that allows that in a way that is not about threatening anyone's work.

Chera Reid—Director of Strategic Learning, Research, and Evaluation
The Kresge Foundation

Reality #3: The roles of boards and trustees vary, often depending on the size and type of the foundation.

Depending on the size and type of foundation, boards and trustees play different roles at different organizations. For example, some boards serve primarily as a governance entity, while others are intimately involved in grantmaking decisions. Some focus on operational issues, such as finances, legal, staffing, and communications, while others are more heavily involved in the grantmaking process. Many also have subcommittees or dedicated task forces to consider particular types of issues or perform certain roles (e.g., approving grants and at what level of investment, if there is an evaluation subcommittee, deciding how much to spend on strategic learning activities). The type, scope, and depth of data boards need to effectively execute their role depends on the extent to which the board is involved in programs and/or strategy. Customizing the levels and types of information to fit boards' needs is important in order for data to be useful.

Our board is very much a policy board. As a staffed foundation, most of the trustees' time commitment involves making strategic decisions at their meetings. Trustees bring a range of expertise that advises us on issues, and the board makes the decision on each grant we do based on strategic fit and staff recommendation.

Christine McCabe—Executive Director
College Spark Washington

We have a number of task forces that meet as often as needed and last as long as needed. That's when we really roll up our sleeves and get into issues like how we should refocus the education program or what the criteria should be for our culture philanthropy... We get into stuff that at other foundations might be staff-led with the board eventually being presented with something to approve or not. Here it's more an iterative process where a handful of interested board members work with senior staff to develop a policy or a strategy that then gets presented for approval to the full board.

Don Kimelman—Board Member
William Penn Foundation

The board provides strategic guidance for the organization. This includes participating in shaping our strategic plan, monitoring progress of our work at critical milestones, and making a decision on our budget each year.

Dianne Riter—Senior Director, Strategy, Communications and Evaluation
Arcora—The Foundation of Delta Dental of Washington

Reality #4: Board members may prefer or request simple metrics, quantitative information, and dashboards, which may paint an incomplete picture of how things are actually going.

Whether it is because of their background or their belief in the value of quantitative data, many board members request and rely on metrics, often abridged and presented on dashboards, to gain insights into the progress and impact of their organization's work. Quantitative data are certainly important for measuring progress and impact, but in the context of the complex systems change work that grantmakers support, it is also important to consider the contextual, situational, and historical information that qualitative data can provide. Simple metrics alone are also inadequate for answering crucial questions about why or why not and how impact is occurring. In addition, a set of metrics rarely provides an opportunity to engage in conversations about failure or missteps—more qualitative, contextual, and explanatory information is needed to understand what has happened and why. This information often includes insights into the experiences of the people living the changes grantmakers are trying to catalyze.

Given time constraints and varying levels of comfort with types of data, boards' temptation to request distilled, simplified data is understandable. However, in order to truly understand the full picture of how their organization's complex work is proceeding and make informed decisions to push it forward, board members need to consider and make sense of multiple types of data from a variety of sources.

I've got several bankers on our board, so when we're talking numbers, I know the bank frame is different. They are used to tables—I know the bankers will look at the numbers in a certain way, but I'm not sure if everyone understands them in the same way.


Tom Kelly—Vice President of Knowledge, Evaluation, and Learning
Hawaii Community Foundation

Some trustees are looking to the quantitative data as the only yardstick to measure with, while others prefer to learn the anecdotal stories of change. What we've learned is that social problems are really complex—therefore, measuring impact is most likely also complex.

Diana Spencer—Executive Director
The William C. McGowan Charitable Fund

When we create dashboards that present assessment and evaluation data in quantitative terms with graphics, they are clearer and more unequivocal. However, some of our intended social impacts are harder to simplify and quantify. That doesn't mean that they are less important, so we are always playing with that tension between providing the most important types of evidence and not just the simplest, most numerical evidence.

Kim Ammann Howard—Director of Impact Assessment and Learning
The James Irvine Foundation



Action Imperatives for Engaging Boards and Trustees in Strategic Learning

Regardless of the existence of these realities, which certainly vary by grantmaking organization, the real question is: *How can executives as well as strategy, evaluation, and learning staff help board members and trustees understand, value, and support strategic learning?*

An important first step in addressing this question is for grantmaker staff to understand their board's readiness to engage in this newer way of working. Learning about the levels of understanding and openness to strategic learning that board members and trustees have, as individuals and as a group, will help staff determine the best ways to engage them, which elements of strategic learning to prioritize, and when to start. Staff can approach learning about board readiness in a variety of ways, including an open dialogue or administering a strategic learning self-assessment to board members (one of the tools included in this guide; see page 37).

When grantmaker staff are ready to engage boards and trustees in strategic learning, we believe that anchoring engagement with them in the six action imperatives described below will further boards and trustees' use of data and experiences to guide their work.

In this section, we describe each of the action imperatives and include a set of discussion questions that leaders and staff can use to frame conversations about these topics with boards and trustees. We also mention tools and processes that may help support boards' and trustees' engagement with these topics. The Tools section begins on page 34, and page 36 includes a reference table illustrating how each tool maps on to one or more action imperatives.

Action Imperatives for Boards and Trustees

Boards and trustees need to:

1. Understand the necessity of and **advocate for strategic learning**.
2. Develop and **use strategic learning questions** to guide decisions and actions.
3. Value and **consume different kinds, levels, and presentations of data**.
4. Value and **build in time for reflection and dialogue** in pursuit of strategic learning during board/trustee meetings.
5. Understand the importance of, and be explicit about, **integrating an equity focus** into the organization's work.
6. Understand the nature of **systems change and complexity** and how this relates to the organization's work.

Action Imperative #1:

Understand the Necessity of and Advocate for Strategic Learning

As noted above, board members and trustees bring a wide range of experiences, perspectives, and interests to the grantmaking organizations they serve. Regardless of their individual backgrounds, they should be intellectually curious and interested in continuous learning and improvement of their organization's investments, operations, and role in the field. Being an advocate for strategic learning means understanding basic **evaluation concepts and terms and the relationship between strategy and evaluation**. It also means they support the grantmaker's commitment to learning from data and experiences about what works, what doesn't, and why, and they help provide human and financial resources to collect and use data for decision making and continuous learning.

Common vocabulary is important so that when I say the word ‘strategy,’ everybody understands what I mean. If I say ‘strategy’ or ‘initiative’ or ‘cluster of grants,’ or ‘indicator,’ are they all referencing the same thing? It’s important to have a set of terms that doesn’t feel too wonky but that avoids misunderstanding, so everybody’s clear what’s being proposed if we say, ‘We’re going to develop performance indicators at the level of the initiatives.’

Yvonne Belanger—Director of Learning and Evaluation
Barr Foundation

Strategic learning has to be part of the conversation early in the grant process—from beginning to end. We have to align our program goals with the outcomes of the grant from the onset. In prior years we spent a great deal of time spinning our wheels to make this connection at the end of the grant period.

Diana Spencer—Executive Director
The William C. McGowan Charitable Trust

[Strategic learning isn’t] this separate thing that happens afterwards with a report card that focuses on whether our grantees did their job. It’s something that’s integrated into the grantmaking strategy and processes, all along the way. It is important to have this learning lens as you go, and that is how we presented it to the board. It made sense to them and they seemed to support the idea of learning and adjusting based on what we learn.

Kim Ammann Howard—Director of Impact Assessment and Learning
The James Irvine Foundation

A perspective I brought [from a prior foundation] was for the planning and evaluation unit to be involved at the front end as well as the back end so that as strategies are developed, the tires are being kicked right from the start. Here’s what we expect to achieve. Is that remotely realistic? Evaluation staff are there at the beginning to say yes, this makes sense. This is a goal that can be measured, versus one where we’ll never be able to know whether we succeeded. With that kind of input on the front end, the Board understands what the expectations are for a given line of grantmaking and how we’ll know whether or not we’re achieving them.

Don Kimelman—Board Member
William Penn Foundation

Being an advocate for strategic learning is also about being committed to both **accountability and learning** at the same time—they aren't mutually exclusive propositions. In other words, evaluation can be used to monitor grant progress (accountability), while also supporting evaluation that provides insights about what, why, and how grantees are making progress on achieving the program's intended outcomes (learning). This often requires boards and trustees to understand what it means to be a learning organization and the importance of establishing and nurturing a **learning culture**.

Being accountable to learning is—from a staff, program, or a grantee perspective—about ensuring that we have good mechanisms to help us answer the kinds of questions that will help us be successful over time with quality data, making sure we use those mechanisms, and most importantly, ensuring that our decisions account for what the data reveal and adapting accordingly.

Tanya Beer—Associate Director
Center for Evaluation Innovation

I think we need to reframe evaluation to be about learning and accountability, but learning for decisions. To me, boards are about accountability, advice, and they have authority... I think it's saying to them, 'What quality and accuracy of information do you need to keep this organization accountable, have intelligent discussions, and make intelligent decisions? This is what we recommend that will give that to you.'

Tom Kelly—Vice President of Knowledge, Evaluation, and Learning
Hawaii Community Foundation

Everybody [at our foundation] understands that the purpose of learning is to do better. It's learning for impact and improvement, and we're not stuck in a sort of a navel-gazing type of learning for learning's sake. The other interesting element of what we're trying to do here is that the learning and evaluation function is not siloed in any way.

Kevin Walker—President and CEO
Northwest Area Foundation

Action Imperative #1: Questions for Boards and Trustees to Consider

The following are questions that leaders and staff can ask boards and trustees to consider when discussing how to **understand the necessity of and advocate for strategic learning**.

- » As a board, how do we learn about what is going well and what needs to be changed regarding our organization's strategy, grants, and role in the field?
- » What is our board's common frame for talking about strategic learning? How do we define key terms related to evaluation?
- » What does it look like for the organization to be accountable to our mission? What does it look like for the organization to be accountable to grantees and the communities we serve? What might we need to stop doing to better hold our organization accountable to ourselves, grantees, and to learning?
- » What is the information we as a board need to hold this organization accountable to our mission and to make good decisions? How is learning related to the organization's underlying values, principles, and mission?
- » What kinds of board decisions or actions should data and experiences inform?
- » How open and comfortable are we as a board to discussing things that have not worked (e.g., missteps, failures) among ourselves, as well as those things that have gone well (successes)? How would we describe our risk tolerance? Why might this be the case? *(Note: This question is first focused on internal conversations, but could be expanded to consider how comfortable the board/trustees are with sharing failures with the field).*
- » How can we support the staff's efforts to engage in continuous learning and adaptation? How can we support the efforts of our nonprofit and community partners?

(See Case Study #2, Northwest Area Foundation, for more on implementing Action Imperative #1).

Action Imperative #2: Develop and Use Strategic Learning Questions to Guide Decisions and Actions

When boards and trustees support strategic learning, they understand the importance of generating and using strategic questions to guide and inform their deliberative decision-making practices. As Appreciative Inquiry founders David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney have noted, “The moment we ask a question, we begin to create change. The questions we ask are fateful.”⁴ Strategic questions highlight important information; they serve as guardrails for moving the organization’s strategy forward; and they stimulate the collection of information to inform that journey.

Within weeks of my arrival at the foundation, the (then) president brought a grant file to me, and wanted to know ‘how we did on the grant.’ I was happy to review and report back, but when I did she seemed disappointed. I asked what was wrong, and she replied that the details I provided were not the information she wanted. She wanted to know how many patients were helped from our support. Since the grant was for the hiring of post-docs, supporting a scientific retreat, and infrastructure, I had to share that this information did not exist, as the grant was not framed to support patients. We had not asked the right questions on the front end.

Diana Spencer—Executive Director
The William C. McGowan Charitable Foundation

One of the things we’ve been trying to do is ask the board to pose questions that incentivize curiosity and reflection about how change works rather than only questions about what progress we are making. However, I’ve also realized that it doesn’t work for the board to ask overly abstract questions, distant questions. To incentivize meaningful reflection that informs next steps, they have to ask really concrete questions that relate directly to the work of staff and grantees.

Tanya Beer—Associate Director
Center for Evaluation Innovation

4 Cooperrider, D., & Whitney, D. (1999). *A Positive Revolution in Change: Appreciative Inquiry*. Taos, NM: Corporation for Positive Change.

I think we should be lifting up questions, topics, and getting more precise about what we are learning about leaders and leadership, for example, in the nonprofit sector. I think about it as building a body of evidence to inform our work and the social sector more broadly... in order to do this well, we have to have some agreement on what those most pressing questions are for topics... collectively, there seems to be increasing board member appetites for asking really hard questions and engaging with us in how we are finding our way through the work.

Chera Reid—Director of Strategic Learning, Research, and Evaluation
The Kresge Foundation

It is getting people used to and understanding the utility of having information and asking questions. I joke all the time that I think that my favorite word in the English language is 'why.' It's encouraging and motivating our staff to keep asking these why questions in terms of, 'Why is this happening, or why is it not happening, or what can we do better here?'... That means we have to devote resources and ask questions that are difficult and/or that may take a while to answer, but we're trying to get the most accurate information so that we can all make smart investment decisions.

Isaac Castillo—Director of Outcomes, Assessment, and Learning
Venture Philanthropy Partners

Action Imperative #2: Questions for Boards and Trustees to Consider

The following are questions that leaders and staff can ask boards and trustees to consider when discussing how to **develop and use strategic learning questions** to guide decisions and actions.

- » What are the questions we as a board keep asking ourselves about the work? What questions have we not asked but should be asking?
- » What do we as a board need to learn about how well our organization's strategy is being implemented, as well as its progress, effects, and impact?
- » How will our organization know whether we are successful in the short and long term?
- » How open are we as a board to learning the answers to these questions?
- » Whose perspectives are included in or left out of our questions?

Action Imperative #3:

Value and Consume Different Kinds, Levels, and Presentations of Data

We noted earlier that two realities of boards and trustees are that members have limited time together, and many come from financial backgrounds or are more comfortable making decisions based on quantitative information alone. The combination of these factors has led to a proliferation of simple dashboards and scorecards as communication tools to report on a set of progress and impact metrics. While these may provide a glimpse into the grantmaker's work, there are serious limitations to relying on tables and charts of numbers alone. Boards and trustees should be exposed to other forms and representations of information when seeking to understand if, where, and how their organization is making progress on its goals. Enhancing presentations with grantee and/or beneficiary experiences, interview quotes, photographs, videos, or other qualitative data, and designing activities that help boards and trustees process and interpret quantitative data (as well as using different forms of data visualization), will provide opportunities to develop deeper insights into the organization's strategy, progress, and impact.

Collecting and sharing both quantitative and qualitative data in the form of findings and insights recognizes that there are multiple ways of understanding the data and no one approach will tell all. Board members as individuals also have different data and learning preferences, styles and needs, so thinking more broadly as a group about what types, levels, and formats of data they can request and use is more inclusive.

The challenge for CEOs in dealing with the board is always to give them enough information for action, but not drown them in information so their eyes glaze over and they stop reading.

Susan Zepeda—Trustee
Community Foundation of Louisville

I've seen dashboards that were very holistic, and ones that were very quantitative. It's important to know what the leader imagines when they say, 'Go build a dashboard.' What works well for one leadership team can be useless for another. You could create a very well-designed online dashboard that is dynamic and rich, but the reaction from leadership may be negative—'No, no, we need a dashboard designed for print.'

Yvonne Belanger—Director of Learning and Evaluation
Barr Foundation

I like having hypothetical discussions about what kind of information board members would like to have in certain situations so that I can bring that if those situations ever come up. What is the kind of information that the board would like to have in front of them to help engage in that conversation? It's probably financials and outcome data, but is it financials and outcome data for just the past year? For two years? For three years? Having people think through that a little bit in the abstract to tell us what they would like to have has been super helpful so that when we get to a particular point, we know what to prepare and how to bring it and put it in front of people.

Isaac Castillo—Director of Outcomes, Assessment, and Learning
Venture Philanthropy Partners

Action Imperative #3: Questions for Boards and Trustees to Consider

The following are questions that leaders and staff can ask boards and trustees to consider when discussing how to **value and consume different kinds, levels, and presentations of data**.

- » What kinds of information, and from whom, do we as a board find most useful to our discussions and decision-making processes (e.g., metrics, stories, quotes, examples, site visits)? What are the benefits of including these data and the tradeoffs of not collecting them or excluding them? Whose points of view are included? Whose are excluded?
- » What level of quality and accuracy of information do we as a board need to make good decisions?
- » How useful is the information our board is receiving in its current format? What could be different?
- » What capacity for information/data can we as board members reasonably consume? What levels of detail are most useful for us?
- » How can we make sure we are not burdening the staff and our nonprofit partners by asking them to collect and supply data and information that isn't being used?
- » What more do we need to learn about different types of data, their relevance to our work, and how to make sense of them to inform our decisions?

(See Case Study #1, The California Endowment, for more on implementing Action Imperative #3).

Action Imperative #4: Value and Build in Time for Reflection and Dialogue in Pursuit of Strategic Learning during Board/Trustee Meetings

As you have probably noticed by now, much of what we are recommending in this paper is related to changing how boards and trustees spend their time together. If they are to be advocates for and active participants in strategic learning, boards and trustees must be able and willing to engage in individual and group reflection and dialogue. They will need time to think aloud with each other, to engage in constructive conversations about data and experiences, and will need space to participate in collective sensemaking as they deliberate about decisions in front of them or come to new understandings about the organization's work and external context. Given the size of board books and the number of items on board agendas, this may be challenging. However, grantmakers that don't rethink how boards and trustees spend their time together are not likely to have adequate time to learn together in meaningful ways. Board retreats are good opportunities to allocate time for learning. Consider asking the board chair to add time for strategic learning to the next board retreat; or if board retreats are not a current practice, to schedule one as an opportunity to delve into this topic.

One of my own personal goals for this year is to embed learning and reflection opportunities into all of our regular practices, such as when the staff reports out in the board meeting, or written into the president's quarterly report... It might be a visualization of some of our own grant data or it might be highlighting recent national or field research such as the UN report on poverty that was released back in December 2017.

Christine Mitton—Director, Knowledge and Learning
Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland

When we introduced the concept of putting most of the items on a consent agenda, it freed up what felt like big buckets of time to use more creatively. Every board meeting includes what we call a learning session, which is visiting with grantees or hearing from outside experts on a topic related to our work. That learning space—it is now baked into how the board thinks of its role. That they are here to learn and to apply that learning to making sure that our strategy and our grantmaking are as effective as they can be.

Kevin Walker—President and CEO
Northwest Area Foundation

Action Imperative #4: Questions for Boards and Trustees to Consider

The following are questions that leaders and staff can ask boards and trustees to consider when discussing how to **value and build in time for reflection and dialogue** in pursuit of strategic learning during board/trustee meetings.

- » Can we recall a time when we engaged in true reflection as a board, and had a great conversation that helped us support our organization more effectively? What did we do and how did we accomplish that? What should we try again?
- » How might we find time in our packed board agendas to reflect on what is being learned from grantees and others about our work?
- » How could we change the ways we spend our time together in board meetings so that there are more opportunities to develop deeper understanding about the progress, effects, and impact of our work?
- » What skills would we need to build, or what supports would we need, in order to be more comfortable with reflective types of activities?

(See Case Study #2, Northwest Area Foundation, for more on implementing Action Imperative #4).

Action Imperative #5: Understand the Importance of, and Be Explicit about, Integrating an Equity Focus into the Organization's Work

Grantmakers exist to address particular social challenges, whether related to health, education, economic mobility, or other issues. These challenges disproportionately affect specific groups of people who are more likely marginalized in our societies, including people of color, people who have lower incomes or wealth, people with apparent or non-visible disabilities, and more. In order to effect significant and lasting social change, a grantmaker's strategy must consider this fact and be intentional about keeping equity⁵ at the forefront of the work.

As stewards of a grantmaker's vision, resources, and execution, boards and trustees should deepen their understanding of who is most significantly affected by the issues their organization aims to address, what historical context and underlying causes may be particularly relevant, and the inherent power dynamics that are present. They should engage in ongoing conversations about how to integrate a focus on equity into the organization's work. Additional topics to address include whether

⁵ **PolicyLink** defines equity as "Just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential."

there are meaningful disparities in outcomes across different subpopulations (and if so, why), and implications for how the organization might adapt strategies and investments to address the unique needs of varying subpopulations. By leveraging strategic learning tools to continually probe at the “why” behind population-level outcome disparities, boards and trustees can uncover critical insights that can improve their effectiveness.

We’ve been pretty intentional about engaging the board on the issue of equity, and we’ve had a deeper focus on it over the last two years. Last year we invited a panel to come and talk about social determinants of health. The board was really engaged because it enabled them to learn about how housing, jobs, and education can impact the ability of communities to access health care and lead healthy lives.

Dianne Riter—Senior Director, Strategy, Communications, and Evaluation
Arcora—The Foundation of Delta Dental of Washington

We’re just starting this process [of discussing racial equity] with the board. In many ways, it moves the racial equity conversation from being implicit in our work to being more explicit. We’re sharing an analysis of root causes and structures and equality and why we make the decisions that we do of focusing on particular populations. I think we’ll get to a better place because of [these conversations].

Hanh Cao Yu—Chief Learning Officer
The California Endowment

Understanding and reaching agreement on how to assess equity and how to evaluate policy change are important conversations.

Susan Zepeda—Trustee
Community Foundation of Louisville

Grantmakers whose boards and trustees are relatively new to conversations about equity and how it shapes the organization’s work may want to consider hiring a facilitator skilled in this area to lead early discussions. Shawn Ginwright, a board member at The California Endowment, shared his experience of a discussion about racial equity led by a facilitator: “Quality conversations require a curated process. Our facilitator curated that process in a really sound way that allowed us to really feel comfortable in engaging and talking about this issue of racial equity.”

It is also important to consider how equity-focused thinking shows up in the organization's learning and evaluation efforts in addition to the grantmaking strategy. Evaluation and learning staff may want to examine the methods used, definitions of success, the kinds of learning questions asked, who is seen as an expert, processes for sensemaking, and other evaluation activities that reflect a commitment to equity. The **Equitable Evaluation Initiative** provides some helpful resources for thinking about how to better integrate an equity lens into the work.

Action Imperative #5: Questions for Boards and Trustees to Consider

The following are questions that leaders and staff can ask boards and trustees when discussing how to **explicitly integrate an equity focus** into the organization's work.⁶

- » To what extent and in what ways is our organization committed to a more equitable future? Are we focusing on particular subpopulations (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ableness, religion, age, geography, class)? If not, why not?
- » Are the data our board looks at to inform our decision making disaggregated to show the impacts on subpopulations? If not, what are the implications for the types and sources of data our grantees collect and report?
- » How are we ensuring that the voices of the people who are most affected by the problems our work aims to solve are represented, both in our work and in our learning and evaluation efforts? Are there ways for us to get closer to these communities and community members?
- » What opportunities might we have to better align our work with our commitment(s) to a more equitable future?
- » How can learning and evaluation help our organization understand whether we are making progress towards our equity goals? How do we keep the organization accountable and moving forward in our commitment?
- » In what ways can we use learning and evaluation to understand historical contexts and systemic drivers of inequities, uncover potential conscious or unconscious biases, and identify targeted strategies that might more effectively address the issues we are focusing on?
- » How might learning and evaluation help us understand and address power dynamics to improve the ways in which our organization learns from community partners and grantees?

(See Case Study #1, The California Endowment, for more on implementing Action Imperative #5).

⁶ See call-out box at the end of this section for additional resources on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Action Imperative #6: Understand the Nature of Systems Change and Complexity and How This Relates to the Organization's Work

The social sector acknowledges that there is no single solution to any particular social challenge, and that the work is increasingly complex. Most social impact work aims to change long-standing and entrenched problems held in place by multiple interrelated systems. This complexity means that grantmaker staff need to consider how their organization is contributing to social change through its different levers. To effectively steer the organization, boards and trustees need to have a common understanding of the nature of systems change (e.g., relationships and connections, resource flows, policy, mental models, power, and practice⁷) so they can effectively support the organization's investments in changing the conditions that are holding problems in place.⁸

If we're going to tackle systems change, we have to be certain we have value to add and know what the end is. We can't experiment for 20 years or 10 years to figure that out. We also have made a conscious decision that this isn't just about our discretionary money, but this is also about engaging other donors. We can't sell a complex systems initiative unless we can be clear about the outcomes we're trying to achieve... when you're in systems, you're talking policies, government, and politics, so it's about making your board feel comfortable that you don't just engage in systems change lightly. Once you're in there it is messy.

Tom Kelly—Vice President of Knowledge, Evaluation, and Learning
Hawaii Community Foundation

Part of what our work is meant to do is to influence policies, but when politics change, the players change, and their priorities change. Those are the things that influence policy. So I think our program staff are keenly aware of the dynamic nature of the systems in which they operate. I think they work hard to communicate the complexity of these systems to the board members.

Marc Holley—Strategy, Learning, and Evaluation Director
Walton Family Foundation

It is challenging to show how thinking about knowledge and learning differently can actually make our work better, so that board members who question every dollar spent will understand that this is a long-term investment. After 10 years, we're seeing real change; we're tackling complex problems.

Christine Mitton—Director, Knowledge and Learning
Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland

7 Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). **The Water of Systems Change**. FSG.

8 Draisin, T., & Spitz, K. (2014). **Building Ecosystems for Systems Change**. Social Innovation Generation National.

Action Imperative #6: Questions for Boards and Trustees to Consider

The following are questions that leaders and staff can ask boards and trustees to consider when discussing how to **understand the nature of systems change and complexity** and how this relates to the organization's work.

- » What are the kinds of changes our organization is seeking to effect, and in what system(s)? How and when do we expect to see change?
- » To what extent is the work we are supporting complex? Why is it complex? What does this mean for how we do our work and understand its impact?
- » How do we understand our organization's place within the systems in which we work? What does our relative place in the system(s) mean for how we are seeking to intervene or create change?
- » How comfortable are we with accepting the fact that our work contributes to change and is not the sole factor effecting change?
- » How can we make sure we are considering equity as we are working for systems change and social impact?

Additional Equity and Systems Change Resources

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Grantmaking with a Racial Equity Lens

<http://www.grantcraft.org/assets/content/resources/equity.pdf>

Awake to Woke to Work: Building a Race Equity Culture

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56b910ccb6aa60c971d5f98a/t/5adf3de1352f530132863c37/1524579817415/ProInspire-Equity-in-Center-publication.pdf>

Policies, Practices, and Programs for Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

<http://www.d5coalition.org/work/policies-practices-and-programs-for-advancing-diversity-equity-and-inclusion/>

Vision and Voice: The Role of Leadership and Dialogue in Advancing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

http://www.d5coalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/vision_and_voice_2014_final.pdf

Four Ways to Incorporate a Gender Lens in Your Measurement and Evaluation Efforts

<https://www.fsg.org/blog/four-ways-incorporate-gender-lens-your-measurement-and-evaluation-efforts>

Systems Change

Systems Grantmaking Resource Guide

<http://systems.geofunders.org/systems-grantmaking>

Case Study #1: Learning Structures and the Role of Reflection and Dialogue at The California Endowment

ABOUT THE CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT

The California Endowment's mission is to expand access to affordable, quality health care for underserved individuals and communities and to promote fundamental improvements in the health status of all Californians. Founded in 1996 and headquartered in Los Angeles, the foundation gave more than \$150 million in grants in 2016.

THE STUDY

To make sense of data and how to use it to drive decision making, boards need the space and time to reflect on what they are hearing and learning. The California Endowment (the Endowment) Board has created several committees to help manage the board's work effectively, and much of the board's reflection and deliberation activities happen first at the committee level. The chair of each committee is responsible for synthesizing their committee's discussion and reporting back to the entire board. The CEO also has an opportunity to reflect with board members during bi-monthly meetings with the board chair and vice-chair to talk more informally about what is on the CEO's mind. This gives the board chair and vice-chair insight into where the board may need to lean in and provide another opportunity for shared reflection and dialogue.

To signal the Endowment's commitment to organizational learning, the Endowment converted its Board Program Committee to the Learning and Performance Committee (L&P Committee) in 2010. Nearly half of the board members serve on this committee, which creates a structure for board members to have rich, learning-focused conversations about creating better health outcomes in California, and particularly for Californians from disenfranchised communities.

The L&P Committee has committed to ongoing learning, and one of their primary roles is to structure visits for board members to different Endowment-funded sites across the state. Shawn Ginwright, former L&P Committee chair, shares, “Site visits are an intentional way [for board members to] stay close to the issues that we care deeply about. We talk to young people, we talk to community residents, we talk to organizations—then we come back and share what we learned as a result of those site visits.” The L&P Committee identifies the questions to guide those visits, helps board members think about what they can learn during these site visits to bring back to the whole board, and leads the synthesis of what board members learn across these visits.

In addition to site visits, the L&P Committee is charged with holding special meetings to take advantage of key learning opportunities through reviewing and discussing major evaluation reports and data for the rest of the board. To accomplish this, the L&P Committee members work closely with Hanh Cao Yu, who serves as the Chief Learning Officer at the Endowment. If the board has specific questions about learning or strategies that have come out of the reports, the committee works with Yu and her team to get updates and answers, then shares the implications of these learning opportunities for the board’s decision making.

The L&P Committee finds it helpful to develop a series of learning questions to guide reflections on what people learned from their various site visits. As L&P Committee chair, Ginwright played a key role in developing those questions and vetting them with the rest of the committee. Then, he set the learning agenda for the board based on those questions to help guide the discussion. These questions have also helped the committee understand how to focus the site visits and to tie them back to the Endowment’s larger priorities.

The board is also committed to creating reflective spaces in order to discuss learning as a whole group as well as at the committee level. These deliberative spaces are created in a few ways. At meetings, the board invites external experts to provide the board with more information about big issues relevant to their work. Topics at past meetings include the power-building, social determinants of health, youth, education, economy, and public policy. Afterwards, the board might read an article and then discuss that particular topic that is related to the scope of the Endowment’s work. Once a year, the board also brings back former board members. Last year, the emeriti board members engaged in reflection about the findings from a community engagement study. This shared reflection helps keep past board members connected to the Endowment after their service term ends.

When it comes to having reflective space for more complex issues, Ginwright stresses that the design and facilitation of those conversations matter. “One of the lessons I’ve learned is that you need to have the space for quality conversation; you can’t assume that quality conversation happens naturally. Quality conversations require a curated process,” he shares. For example, during a recent board discussion on racial equity, the Endowment brought in a facilitator to guide the conversation. They allocated a half-day to the discussion and had different activities for furthering the conversation. They met in small groups and had full group discussions. “Most of the board members thought that it was really substantive. They really felt good that we moved the dial on the discussion,” says Ginwright.

Further, the Endowment has also changed the structure of their board retreats to allow more time for reflection. While the board still covers important business during the retreat, it also provides the time and space to dive into complex issues. Recent conversations have been about the Endowment’s 2020 planning and different scenarios that could play out. At the 2018 retreat, the board took the time to continue to have an in-depth racial equity training. This allowed the board to discuss what it means to focus on race and its implication on the Endowment’s transition plan. Not only did the board formally approve a resolution to center racial equity in all aspects of the foundation’s work, this conversation also allowed the board to reach a new level of candor in its discussion and deliberations on other difficult topics.

Yu also believes that co-creating this shared understanding and analysis is important. “While we’re just starting this process, in many ways, we’re moving our racial equity conversation from being implicit in our work to being explicit. Having these conversations allows us to come to a shared analysis of the root causes and structures, and why we focus on particular populations. I think we’ll get to a better place because of these level-setting conversations.”

From a staff perspective, Yu has seen several outcomes from the board taking time for reflection and dialogue. She believes that there is a deeper commitment to learning from failure and to getting the full and balanced story. She observed that the board is really taking the time to get to know the work and to learn more about what’s happening on the ground through site visits, which goes hand in hand with grounding strategy adjustments in community feedback. She has also seen a greater commitment to co-designing programs and inviting nonprofit and community participation in the Endowment’s work. Lastly, she notes that she has seen a strong

commitment to tying their learning framework to a set of defined North Star goals and indicators.

Endowment staff have also seen benefits from the board's reflective practices. "I think it's not just the board creating that space to reflect [among themselves], but also really strong communications about the reflections back to the staff. I think that both of these practices are important," Yu shares. She has seen greater transparency in sharing the work of staff with the board and a greater sense of alignment between the board and staff. She has also seen the board solidify their long-term commitment to power-building, place-based policy systems change work that is rooted in racial equity. "The board really sees how challenging and difficult this work is. They're supportive of priorities such as capacity and infrastructure building for power building, for example. It's not just, 'Okay, we're done with this 10-year initiative and now let's move on to something else.' We are deep in that work and committed to the partners who we've really worked with in California." Yu sees that as a huge benefit to both the board and the Endowment overall.

"It's not just the board creating that space to reflect [among themselves], but also really strong communications about the reflections back to the staff."—Hanh Cao Yu, Chief Learning Officer

Case Study #2: Northwest Area Foundation's Path to Becoming a Learning Organization

ABOUT THE NORTHWEST AREA FOUNDATION

The Northwest Area Foundation supports organizations anchored in the culture of the people they serve and dedicated to expanding economic opportunity in under-resourced communities. Headquartered in St. Paul, Minnesota, the foundation serves Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Washington, and 75 Native Nations. Founded in 1934, the foundation gave more than \$16 million in grants in 2017.

THE STUDY

It is difficult to imagine how an organization could consider itself a learning organization without the board of directors being deeply invested in strategic learning. At the Northwest Area Foundation (NWAf), the board has evolved over the past decade to embrace strategic learning as a priority. The Foundation defines strategic learning as using data and information to inform adaptations to their work. It goes beyond learning for the sake of learning.

Strategic selection of board members is another important part of being a learning organization. The NWAf serves an eight-state region and tries to have representation from all eight states on its board. Of the current board of 13, seven are people of color, including four Native Americans. The board includes two members of the founding family, and the rest of the board comprises people whose professional and personal backgrounds align with the mission of the organization. "We're looking for a true breadth of skill and experience [among our board members]. We seek people who have some connection to the work that we do and whose life path reflects that connection to some degree," shared CEO Kevin Walker.

Having this diverse pool of board members with lived experiences is particularly important as the board provides guidance on the foundation's strategy and brings its perspective to interpreting what the NAAF has learned through its work.

In order to create more time for the board to actively take part in building a learning organization, the NAAF moved to a consent agenda for the board meetings. The NAAF takes advantage of the freed-up space for learning in different ways, like having generative conversations, but it has become a fundamental part of how the board sees its role at the Foundation. Walker contrasts this with boards that are set up to focus on the next set of grants for approval and with staff members who primarily relate to their board through this approval process. "That's not in harmony with a real learning environment," he shared. "Every board meeting includes meeting with grantees and reflecting on what the grantees shared. Learning and reflection are the core activities of the meetings."

The NAAF has institutionalized its commitment to being a learning organization by including learning as one of its high-level goals. Setting this tone for the entire organization also helps the CEO and senior leaders focus the board on learning and keep learning at the forefront of everyone's work. The NAAF has also developed indicators of progress related to this goal, which gives staff an incentive to consider how to tie learning goals to department goals and other accountability measures. "We've been talking the talk and trying to walk the walk around learning for so many years now, that it really is becoming second nature," Walker explained. "We think about it all the time."

There is also an attitude of humility that the board and staff have adopted in order to build a learning organization. The NAAF's work focuses on fighting poverty in under-resourced communities, including indigenous communities, and helping people thrive. As Walker says, "If you just think about Indian Country, our grantee partners are trying to change 400 to 500 years of traumatic history. This is really difficult work. Our board and staff members bring expertise on various pieces of the work, but nobody is an expert on everything that we're trying to advance, and I think everybody has actually bought into that idea." This opportunity to take on challenging but important issues, impact people outside of their own communities, and work with a diverse and knowledgeable group of staff and board members to learn together about how the NAAF can effect change is what brings new people to the board.

A marker of the NWF's progress towards being a learning organization is that staff no longer need to ask what that means; organizational learning practices are embedded in the organization's operations. As program director Karla Miller shared, "I can remember us having a conversation many years ago about being a learning organization. The question came up and kept coming up, 'What does that mean? What does it mean to be a learning organization?' I don't hear that question anymore, which suggests our actions are successfully answering that question. Now, we're talking about what we are learning by doing this, or how we shape this initiative so that we can maximize the learning and be able to then inform the field. We talk about the results of our work in all kinds of different ways." With the board, Walker says, "We've been intentional about this over a number of years so that it has become a part of board practice. Everyone understands we are continuously engaged in learning to advance what we want to accomplish. I often get feedback from board members on how much they learn. The learning and growth opportunities are palpable to them."

As Walker says, "You can't enter into learning thinking, 'If we just think about it hard enough, we can answer every question about everything, and then we'll really know if we're doing a good job or not.' Whether you're the NWF or the richest foundation on the face of the earth, you're not going to have enough resources to actually do that, so you have to make some choices." Walker recommends that organizations and boards ask themselves a series of questions in order to make choices about where to focus their learning resources:

- » Why do we want to do more learning and evaluation?
- » What are we trying to find out?
- » At what cost are we willing to pursue that knowledge?
- » What are we going to do with it?
- » What things are we deciding we're **not** going to evaluate or spend resources to learn?

Staff and board members feel the power of evaluation and learning. Miller shared, "Continuous learning helps us better support the work of the organizations we fund. Before we had a consent agenda or a strategic learning path, we were doing

a lot of one-year grants, simply because we didn't have a strong mechanism for determining how the grants fit into what we were doing and trying to achieve. Continuous learning helped us understand the importance of multi-year grants and supporting these organizations for a longer term."

Focusing on continuous learning "helps us hold ourselves accountable. It helps us stay out of the trap of scrutinizing our grantees in a negative way," Walker says. "Having that learning approach makes staff and the board ask, 'How can we do better?'"

"Every board meeting includes meeting with grantees and reflecting on what the grantees shared. Learning and reflection are the core activities of the meetings."—Kevin Walker, CEO



Tools for Engaging Boards and Trustees in Strategic Learning

The final section of this paper includes ten resources and activities (tools) to use with boards and trustees to engage them in discussions about the six action imperatives. While the tools are not listed in any particular order, it might be helpful to start with the Strategic Learning Self-Assessment. To guide you in choosing among the tools, we have also provided a matrix on page 36 that shows which tools may be more useful for facilitating conversations with board members and trustees about certain action imperatives. We also want to acknowledge that some of these tools may be of more or less use to you depending on the types of conversations you have already had with your board, or their readiness to engage in some of the action imperative conversations. Our hope is that these resources serve as a jumping off point, and that you experiment with them, adapt them, and develop new ones that engage boards and trustees in meaningful and productive strategic learning conversations.

List and Description of Tools

- 1. Strategic Learning Self-Assessment:** A short survey for CEOs and evaluation directors to use with boards/trustees to reveal information about and goals for strategic learning.
- 2. What It Means To Be a Learning Organization:** A brief overview of the concept and characteristics of organizational learning and the learning organization. This includes an activity designed to help boards and trustees reflect on the extent to which the grantmaker has these characteristics (or aspires to).
- 3. Strategic Learning Glossary:** A guide to frequently used terms related to strategic learning and an accompanying learning activity that helps uncover assumptions, perceptions, opinions, and attitudes about key concepts and practices related to strategic learning.
- 4. What Does “Integrate an Equity Focus” Mean?** Two activities related to understanding equity and how to center it in the organization’s work; includes pre-work to assign to board members before a conversation about equity to stimulate their thinking about equity and philanthropy.
- 5. Systems Change Primer:** An overview of key terms, frameworks, and resources related to the concept of systems change, along with an activity to help understand the grantmaker’s work as it relates to systems change.
- 6. Using Your Theory of Change To Develop Strategic Learning Questions:** A guide to and learning activity for developing strategic learning questions grounded in your organization’s theory of change.
- 7. What Types of Data and Evidence Do We Need?** An introduction to thinking about what types of data and evidence your board needs to understand progress and impact, including a levels of evidence learning activity.
- 8. What Does It Mean To Be Accountable in Philanthropy?** An introduction to thinking about the connection between accountability and learning, including an accountability and learning activity.
- 9. Full List of Discussion Questions:** Includes options for facilitating conversations about one or more of the Action Imperative discussion questions.
- 10. Engagement Practices from Your Peers:** Five examples of practices for engaging boards and trustees in strategic learning from grantmaker CEOs, evaluation directors, and board members.

How Tools Relate to Action Imperatives

The following table illustrates which tools pertain to each of the action imperatives. This may be helpful in selecting one or more of the tools given your interest and purpose.

Tool	1. Advocate for strategic learning	2. Develop and use strategic learning questions	3. Consume data of varying types and formats	4. Build in reflection time at board meetings	5. Integrate an equity focus into the work	6. Understand relationship of systems change to the work
Strategic Learning Self-Assessment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
What It Means To Be a Learning Organization	✓					
Strategic Learning Glossary	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
What Does “Integrate an Equity Focus” Mean?					✓	
Systems Change Primer					✓	✓
Using Your Theory of Change To Develop Strategic Learning Questions		✓				
What Types of Data and Evidence Do We Need?			✓			
What Does It Mean To Be Accountable in Philanthropy?	✓					
Full List of Discussion Questions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Engagement Practices from Your Peers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Tool #1

Strategic Learning Self-Assessment

Relevant Action Imperatives

All

Introduction

We recommend administering this short self-assessment to your board members or trustees when you are ready to begin engaging them in strategic learning. This self-assessment will help you reveal board members' understandings about and goals for strategic learning. Questions in this self-assessment cover all six action imperatives and can help you identify which action imperatives are priorities for the board to work on. This self-assessment should not take board members more than ten minutes to complete. You can also administer this self-assessment periodically to "pulse check" how board members' knowledge and mindsets related to strategic learning have shifted, and identify new areas on which to focus with them.

Board Member Self-Assessment: Strategic Learning

Boards and trustees need to:

1. Understand the necessity of and **advocate for strategic learning**.
2. Develop and **use strategic learning questions** to guide decisions and actions.
3. Value and **consume different kinds, levels, and presentations of data**.
4. Value and **build in time for reflection and dialogue** in pursuit of strategic learning during board/trustee meetings.
5. Understand the importance of, and be explicit about, **integrating an equity focus** into the grantmaker's work.
6. Understand the nature of **systems change and complexity** and how this relates to the grantmaker's work.

Tool #1: Strategic Learning Self-Assessment

Current Strategic Learning Practices

1. Please rate your **level of agreement** with the following statements. (*Choose one answer in each row.*)

	5. Strongly Agree	4. Somewhat Agree	3. Not Sure	2. Somewhat Disagree	1. Strongly Disagree
I think it is important for the board to have a set of strategic questions about our work that we seek to answer each year.					
I want to hear from organization staff about what's not working as well as what is working with our grantees and grants.					
I wish we had more time at each board meeting for thinking aloud with each other.					
I believe the board should be as accountable to ourselves for our own learning as we hold grantees accountable for the good use of grants.					
I think the board usually has enough information (e.g., numbers, stories) to make good decisions.					
I am clear about the kinds of systems changes the organization is trying to achieve.					
The board needs to improve the ways in which our organization learns from community partners and grantees.					

Tool #1: Strategic Learning Self-Assessment

Preferences for Data (Type and Presentation)

2. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements about your **preferences for information** when learning about the organization's **progress and impact**. (Choose one answer in each row.)

I prefer information...	5. Strongly Agree	4. Somewhat Agree	3. Not Sure	2. Somewhat Disagree	1. Strongly Disagree
In the form of stories, quotes, and examples					
In the form of numbers or metrics					
In the form of written executive summaries, reports, or memos					
That is presented, in person, by grantees and/or community members					
That is presented in a dashboard or another simplified format					

Tool #1: Strategic Learning Self-Assessment

Understanding Our Work/Context

3. Please rate your **level of agreement** with the following statements about the context in which the organization does its work. *(Choose one answer in each row.)*

	5. Strongly Agree	4. Somewhat Agree	3. Not Sure	2. Somewhat Disagree	1. Strongly Disagree
It is important for the board to understand that our organization's work is about changing the systems that hold problems in place.					
It is important for the board to understand the complexity of the organization's work and the long time horizons to achieve our goals.					
It is important for the board to understand the historical context of the communities in which we work and the issues we work on in order to address them effectively.					
It is important for board members to understand their own potential conscious or unconscious biases to effectively address the issues we are focusing on.					
It is important that the organization's work address power and privilege dynamics within systems.					

4. If I could change one thing about **how we learn** about the organization's progress and impact, it would be ... *[Please write in your answer.]*

Tool #1: Strategic Learning Self-Assessment

5. Our board's greatest strength in terms of thinking about and practicing strategic learning is...

[Please write in your answer.]

6. When it comes to strategic learning, the area(s) in which our board has the most room to grow

is/are... *[Please write in your answer.]*

After board members complete the self-assessment, collect the surveys. To analyze them, calculate mean scores for responses to questions 1–3, compile board members' responses to questions 4–6, and summarize key themes from the open-ended questions. The responses to all questions should help you identify which action imperative(s) to focus on with your board. Use the table on page 36 to determine which tools may be useful for starting discussions about the relevant action imperatives. You can also share the aggregated results from this survey with the board, and facilitate a discussion, perhaps asking them what they find surprising or focusing them on a particular question.

Tool #2

What It Means To Be a Learning Organization

Relevant Action Imperative

1. *Understand the necessity of and advocate for strategic learning*

Introduction

To understand the necessity of and to advocate for strategic learning, it is helpful for board members and trustees to understand what it means to be a learning organization. The following definitions and characteristics of organizational learning can serve as a starting place for a conversation about developing a set of organizational learning norms for the board or trustees that reflect who they are, their role, and how to embed strategic learning into their work.

Organizational Learning Activity

It is easy to talk about the importance of being a learning organization, but it's entirely different to actually be a learning organization. The robust literature on organizational learning and the learning organization has provided us with many definitions and plentiful lists of characteristics, as outlined below. To engage boards and trustees in a rich conversation about this topic, you might first start by sharing the definitions below and helping them reflect on what these mean to them. You might also ask if they have ever worked in an organization that exemplifies these ideas. To build on this conversation, you could use a dot-voting exercise. Print the learning organization characteristics on poster-size paper to display on the meeting room walls, and invite board members and trustees to place dots on those characteristics that they think the foundation either currently embodies or aspires to. After members have voted, facilitate a discussion about where and why they placed their dots. Implications for either deepening these characteristics, or strengthening certain characteristics, could result in a hearty discussion, with implications for next steps, if desired.

What Does it Mean To Be a Learning Organization?

The following explains what a learning organization is and how organizational learning occurs.

Tool #2: What It Means to Be a Learning Organization

- **A learning organization** is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and skills.⁹
- **Organizational learning** is the intentional use of learning processes at the individual, group, and system levels to continuously transform the organization in a direction that increasingly satisfies its stakeholders.¹⁰

Characteristics of a Learning Organization

Organizations that learn...

- Provide time for reflection (both individually and collectively).
- Seek to understand individuals' values and beliefs through dialogue.
- Develop a culture of asking questions (inquiry).
- Enable individuals to feel safe stating their opinions and beliefs (there is psychological safety).
- Have a high level of trust among individuals.
- Have systems that reward and recognize individuals for new ideas and taking risks.
- Establish clear rules of inclusion.
- Seek out diverse perspectives.
- Have systems for capturing and storing knowledge.
- Have leaders who model and support individual and team learning.
- Know when they need to unlearn something.
- Translate data into information and knowledge.
- Connect learning with the strategic goals of the organization.
- Hold individuals accountable.
- Support experimentation and creativity.
- Acknowledge and learn from mistakes and/or failures.

9 Garvin, D. (1993). **Building a Learning Organization**. *Harvard Business Review*. July–August 1993.

10 Dixon, N. (1994). *The Organizational Learning Cycle. How We Can Learn Collectively*. McGraw-Hill.

Tool #2: What It Means to Be a Learning Organization

How Foundations Can Support Organizational Learning

In addition to the above list of actions or commitments that organizations need to take or make in order to learn, foundations can also support organizational learning by doing the following:¹¹

- 1. A clear and concrete value proposition.** We know what it means to learn and how learning will contribute to our work and the achievement of our goals. This value proposition should be communicated to board and staff to ensure buy-in.
- 2. An internal structure aligned with learning.** We create organizational structures that promote and encourage learning within the organization.
- 3. Leadership committed to learning.** Board, executive, and staff leaders embrace learning and embed it in their own work.
- 4. A learning partnership with grantees and communities.** We create the conditions for learning and sharing with nonprofits and community partners.
- 5. A learning partnership with foundation peers.** We form partnerships and networks for learning, while exploring other opportunities to learn from (and with) each other through collaboration.
- 6. A commitment to share with the broader field.** We share what we learn so that others can apply our lessons.
- 7. An investment in a broad and usable knowledge base.** We produce learning that is accessible, that answers common questions, and that can be applied by practitioners in the field.

¹¹ Hamilton et al., **Learning for Community Change: Core Components of Foundations that Learn**, Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2005.

Tool #3

Strategic Learning Glossary

Relevant Action Imperatives

- 1. Understand the necessity of and advocate for strategic learning*
- 4. Value and consume different kinds, levels, and presentations of data*
- 5. Understand the importance of, and be explicit about, integrating an equity focus into the organization's work*
- 6. Understand the nature of systems change and complexity and how this relates to the organization's work*

Introduction

For boards and trustees to be advocates for strategic learning, it is important that they understand basic evaluation terms and concepts. Since the evaluation field is replete with jargon and words that are frequently interpreted and used differently, we offer the following as a place to start. Consider sharing this glossary during a board meeting to orient current board members and trustees to strategic learning and evaluation language, and then including it in onboarding materials for new members. We have also included an activity at the end of this tool to help create shared understanding of key terms among board members by surfacing their mental models to reexamine and shift.

LEARNING AND EVALUATION

EVALUATION

An ongoing and integrated learning process for investigating and understanding social, community, organization, and program issues. Ultimately, evaluation is about sense-making, reality checking, assumption testing, and answering questions—increasing our ability to take risks and learn from both failures as well as successes. Evaluation involves the systematic collection of relevant, credible and useful information for making decisions and taking programmatic and strategic actions.

- Preskill, H. & Torres, R. T. (1999). *Evaluative Inquiry for Learning in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

EVALUATIVE THINKING

Systematic results-oriented thinking about what results are expected, how results can be achieved, what evidence is needed to inform future actions and judgments, and how results can be improved in the future.

- Patton, M. Q. (2014). **Evaluation Flash Cards: Embedding Evaluative Thinking in Organizational Culture**. St. Paul, MN: Otto Bremer Foundation.

STRATEGIC LEARNING

The use of data and insights from a variety of information-gathering approaches—including evaluation—to inform decision making about strategy.

- Coffman, J., & Beer, T. (2018). **Strategic Learning**. Center for Evaluation Innovation

STRATEGIC LEARNING AND EVALUATION SYSTEM

An overarching strategy and framework, a set of processes, and a supportive infrastructure for determining what to monitor, evaluate, and research, to what extent, when, with what resources, and by whom.

- Preskill, H., & Mack, K. (2013). **Building a Strategic Learning and Evaluation System for Your Organization**. FSG.

GRANTEE PROGRAM DESIGN AND RESULTS

IMPACT

Positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by an intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended.

- OECD/DAC. (2002). **Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results-Based Management.**

INDICATOR

Quantitative or qualitative variable that provides reliable means to measure a particular phenomenon or attribute.

- USAID. (2009). **Glossary of Evaluation and Related Terms.**

INPUTS

The human, financial, organizational, and community resources a program has available to direct toward doing the work; sometimes this is referred to as “resources.”

- The Community Health Worker Tool Kit. (2000). **Logic Model Development Guide.**

OUTCOMES

Changes that result from a program or initiative’s activities; these may be changes in individuals, organizations, or systems that occur during or following the intervention.

- USAID. (2009). **Glossary of Evaluation and Related Terms.**

OUTPUTS

The direct products of program activities; immediate measures of what the program did or produced.

- Centers for Disease Control. (Updated September 2017). **Program Development and Evaluation.**

TYPES OF INQUIRY (E.G., EVALUATION, RESEARCH)

CASE STUDY

Focuses on a particular unit—a person, a site, a project. It often uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Case studies can be particularly useful for understanding how different elements fit together and how different elements (implementation, context, and other factors) have produced the observed effects and impacts.

- Better Evaluation. (n.d.). **Case Study**.

DESIGNED EXPERIMENT

A designed experiment is one for which the analyst/evaluator controls the specifications of the treatments and the method of assigning the participants to each treatment.

RANDOMIZED CONTROL TRIAL (RCT)

A designed experiment in which participants are randomly assigned into a treatment and *control* group (the treatment group receives the intervention while the control group does not).

QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

A designed experiment in which participants are sorted into a treatment and *comparison* group, but the sorting is not random.

- Adapted from: McClave, J. T., & Sincich, T. (2006). *Statistics*. 10th Edition. Upper Salle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.

DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION (DE)

Informs and supports innovative and adaptive development in complex dynamic environments. DE brings to innovation and adaptation the processes of asking evaluative questions, applying evaluation logic, and gathering and reporting evaluative data to support project, program, product, and/or organizational development with timely feedback.

- Patton, M. Q. (2011). *Developmental Evaluation*. New York: The Guilford Press. p. 1.

FORMATIVE EVALUATION

Formative evaluation typically connotes collecting data for a specific period of time, usually

during the start-up or pilot phase of a project, to improve implementation, solve unanticipated problems, and make sure that the participants are progressing toward desired outcomes.

- Patton, M. Q. (2008). *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*. 4th Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

IMPACT EVALUATION

The study of changes that can be attributed to a particular intervention, such as a project, program or policy; impact evaluations typically involve the collection of baseline data for both an intervention group and a comparison or control group, as well as a second round of data collection after the intervention, sometimes even years later.

- USAID. (2009). **Glossary of Evaluation and Related Terms**.

MONITORING

Monitoring involves the systematic collection of data on specified indicators to provide management and key stakeholders of a program/initiative with indications of the extent of progress and achievement of objectives and progress against stated goals and objectives. Monitoring is generally about tracking progress against a set of metrics to determine “progress” at regular intervals (e.g., quarterly or annually). Monitoring is often done by program staff that gather data on agreed-upon metrics. Data are often quantitative.

- Adapted from University of Wisconsin – Extension. (2002). **Glossary of Common Evaluation Terms**.
- UNAIDS. (2008). **Glossary of Monitoring and Evaluation Terms**.

QUALITATIVE DATA

Qualitative data are evidence that is text based rather than numeric. Qualitative data result from interviews, observations, documents, video, photographs, and drawings. Qualitative data are not anecdotes—rather, when planned for and systematically collected, they constitute credible evidence. Qualitative data are typically analyzed using thematic and content analysis procedures.

- Adapted from Mathison, S. (Ed.). (2004). *Encyclopedia of Evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 345.

Tool #3: Strategic Learning Glossary

QUANTITATIVE DATA

Quantitative data generally refers to information that is represented in numerical form—that can be expressed as numbers, amounts, or degrees. Quantitative data can be analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics.

- Adapted from Mathison, S. (Ed.). (2004). *Encyclopedia of Evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. p. 351.

SUMMATIVE EVALUATION

Summative evaluations judge the overall merit, worth, and significance of a project. The term summative connotes a summit (important) or summing-up judgment. The focus is on judging whether a model is effective. Summative evaluations are used to inform decisions about whether to expand a model, replicate it elsewhere, and/or “take it to scale” (make it a statewide, region-wide, or national model).

- Patton, M. Q. (2014). **Evaluation Flash Cards: Embedding Evaluative Thinking in Organizational Culture**. St. Paul, MN: Otto Bremer Foundation.

UTILIZATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION

Utilization-focused evaluation is evaluation done for and with specific primary intended users for specific, intended uses. Utilization-focused evaluation begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use; therefore, evaluators should facilitate the evaluation process and design any evaluation with careful consideration for how everything that is done, from beginning to end, will affect use.

- Patton, M. Q. (2008). *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*. 4th Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, p. 37.

EVALUATION DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

ATTRIBUTION

Ascribing a causal link between observed changes and a specific intervention(s) or program, taking into account the effects of other interventions and possible confounding factors.

- USAID. (2009). **Glossary of Evaluation and Related Terms**.

BASELINE

Information collected before or at the start of a project or program that provides a basis for planning and/or assessing subsequent progress and impact.

- USAID. (2009). [Glossary of Evaluation and Related Terms](#).

BENCHMARK

A reference point or standard against which performance or achievements can be assessed.

- UNAIDS. (2008). [Glossary of Monitoring and Evaluation Terms](#).

CONTRIBUTION

The extent to which, how, and why, an intervention(s) or specific program has influenced and/or contributed to observed changes.

- USAID. (2009). [Glossary of Evaluation and Related Terms](#).

LOGIC MODEL

A systematic and visual way to present the perceived relationships among program resources, activities, and the changes or results you hope to achieve; logic models typically contain the following: resources or inputs, outputs, short-term outcomes, long-term outcomes, and the program goal.

- Centers for Disease Control. (September 2017). [Program Development and Evaluation](#).

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Measurable markers that suggest a certain condition or circumstance exists, or certain outcomes have been achieved; they provide information on progress made toward a particular goal, output, or outcome.

- Point K Learning Center. (2005). [Glossary: Nonprofit Planning & Evaluation](#).

RELIABILITY

Consistency or dependability of data with reference to the quality of the instruments, procedures, and data collection methods; data are reliable when the repeated use of the same instrument generates the same results.

- Adapted from USAID. (2009). [Glossary of Evaluation and Related Terms](#).

Tool #3: Strategic Learning Glossary

THEORY OF ACTION (TOA)

Explains how programs or other interventions are constructed to activate their theory of change. The theory of action explains the activities that will be undertaken and what level of success will be needed for each outcome to produce the final intended results.

- Funnell, S. & Rogers, P. (2011). *Purposeful Program Theory*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. pp. 31-32.

THEORY OF CHANGE (TOC)

Explains how a group of early and intermediate accomplishments sets the stage for producing long-range results; a TOC articulates the assumptions about the process through which change will occur and specifies the ways in which all of the required early and intermediate outcomes related to achieving the desired long-term change will be brought about and documented as they occur.

- Anderson, A. (2005). *The Community Builder's Approach to Theory of Change: A Practical Guide to Theory Development*. Washington, DC: Aspen Institute.

TRIANGULATION

The analysis of data from three or more sources obtained by different methods. Findings can be corroborated, and the weakness or bias of any of the methods or data sources can be compensated for by the strengths of another, thereby increasing the validity and reliability of the results.

- UNAIDS. (2008). **Glossary of Monitoring and Evaluation Terms**.

VALIDITY

The extent to which data measures what it purports to measure and the degree to which that data provides sufficient evidence for the conclusions made by an evaluation or research study.

- USAID. (2009). **Glossary of Evaluation and Related Terms**.

EQUITABLE SYSTEMS CHANGE

EQUITY

Just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.

- PolicyLink. (2015). **The Equity Manifesto**.

SYSTEM

An interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something (function or purpose).

- Meadows, D. H. (2009). *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*. London; Sterling, VA: Earthscan.

SYSTEMS CHANGE

An intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting the function or structure of an identified system with purposeful interventions. Systems change aims to bring about lasting change by altering underlying structures and supporting mechanisms that make the system operate in a particular way. These can include policies, routines, relationships, resources, power structures, and values.

- Harries, E., Wharton, R., & Abercrombie, R. (2015). **Systems change: A guide to what it is and how to do it**. London, UK: NPC.

SYSTEMS THINKING

The ability to see how organizational systems, sub-systems, and their parts interact with and influence each other, and how these systems create and contribute to specific problems.

- Adapted from Bullock, Robert. (2013). **Systems Thinking: How to Lead in Complex Environments**. Scontrino Powell, Inc.

Tool #3: Strategic Learning Glossary

Creating Shared Understanding of Key Terms

For boards and trustees to be advocates for strategic learning, it is important that they agree on the meanings of terms like strategic learning, equity, data, and systems. We think it can be helpful to have board members engage in an activity that helps them uncover assumptions, understandings, and differences of thought about some of the key concepts and terms (using the glossary provided in this paper). This would then support everyone “being on the same page” when talking about various topics related to these action imperatives.

Surfacing Mental Models Activity

The Strategic Learning Glossary provides definitions for several terms related to strategic learning ideas and practices. To reveal board members and trustees’ underlying mental models (understandings, perceptions, and attitudes), consider engaging your board in the following activity.

Option 1: Quick Share. Ask your board or trustees what comes to mind when they hear certain terms (e.g., evaluation, learning, outcomes, equity, systems). Go around the room and have each person share. Record their thoughts on flip chart paper. Use the discussion questions below to come to agreement about how the foundation will use these words/concepts going forward.

Option 2: Mental Model Drawings.¹² Distribute blank paper and markers/colored pencils. Ask your board or trustees to draw what comes to mind when they hear certain terms (e.g., evaluation, learning, outcomes, equity, systems). Give participants 5–7 minutes to complete their drawing; ask them to label their drawing with one or two words. Go around the room and have each person share. Record the labels on flip chart paper. Use the discussion questions below to come to agreement about how the foundation will use these words/concepts going forward.

Discussion Questions

- What were the similarities in what we shared? What were the differences?
- What does this mean for how we think about and practice strategic learning and evaluation at the foundation?
- How can we come to agreement about how we use these terms and what they mean?

¹² For more information on this facilitation technique, see: Preskill, H., Gutierrez, E., & Mack, K. (2017). **Facilitating Intentional Group Learning: A Practical Guide to 21 Learning Activities**. FSG.

Tool #4

Exploring What It Means To “Integrate an Equity Focus” into Our Work

Relevant Action Imperatives

4. *Value and request time for reflection and dialogue in pursuit of strategic learning during board/trustee meetings*
5. *Understand the importance of, and be explicit about, integrating an equity focus into the organization’s work*

Introduction

As with strategic learning, board members and trustees come in with different experiences and levels of comfort with talking about equity.¹³ Some board members may have spent a lot of time reflecting on equity and engaging in conversations about it, while others may agree with the ideas and concepts of equity but be relatively new to discussing them frankly and in a way that may challenge their beliefs. This reality can make it challenging to know how to begin a conversation about integrating a focus on equity into the organization’s work. The purpose of engaging in this conversation is not to suggest that any board members are not committed to equity and better outcomes for all people. Rather, the purpose is to make the implicit explicit—to collectively explore how well, and in what ways, equity is embedded in the organization’s work, and to identify ways or areas in which to focus more intently on equity. You can use the activities below to engage boards and trustees in a conversation about equity and philanthropy, and then use the discussion questions about this action imperative to talk specifically about equity in the context of your organization’s work.

Opening the Equity Conversation Activities

1. Understanding Equity as Justice Activity: “Charity is commendable, but justice is transformational,” wrote Dorian Burton and Brian Barnes of the need to shift philanthropy from focusing on charity to a justice-minded approach. In addition to authoring an article¹⁴ in the

13 There are many definitions for equity. We suggest **PolicyLink’s** definition: “Just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.”

14 Burton, D., & Barnes, B. (2017). **Shifting Philanthropy From Charity to Justice**. *Stanford Social Innovation Review* online.

Tool #4: What Does "Integrate an Equity Focus" Mean?

Stanford Social Innovation Review on this topic, Burton and Barnes recorded a podcast¹⁵ that you can ask your board members or trustees to read and listen to as pre-work before a board session where you intend to discuss equity. Board members can listen to the podcast before reading the article or vice versa, but they should complete both. Considering these concepts on their own time before discussing them as a group will allow board members to come prepared with thoughts on how the ideas raised apply to your organization's work. You can use the discussion questions related to equity (on pages 23 and 77) to guide your conversations.

You may want to mention that participants may have strong reactions to the questions Burton and Barnes raise—their ideas and questions are meant to challenge themselves and others. Issues of justice, equity, and fairness can be emotionally charged, and having our beliefs, practices, and behaviors challenged is not easy—but it is important work to undertake. In addition to thinking about what Burton and Barnes have to say, board members should reflect on anything deeper that might be causing their reaction and be ready to discuss these as a group.

2. Centering Equity in Evaluation Activity: Just as grantmakers and the philanthropic community are becoming more aware of the need to integrate an equity focus into their work, evaluators are similarly exploring what equity means and how to center it in evaluation efforts. Philanthropic organizations committed to working towards equity through their grantmaking must also consider how their evaluation activities consider and focus on equity. In their 2017 framing paper, the Equitable Evaluation Initiative (EEI) writes, "Foundations who commit to a focus on equity but fail to consider how their evaluation approaches might need to shift are at risk of limiting or impeding their efforts and ultimately their success."¹⁶

Provide your board members with pages three and four of EEI's framing paper, which include nine grantmaker "evaluation orthodoxies." These orthodoxies are common ideas, beliefs, or practices related to evaluation that have important implications for equity work, including potentially reinforcing inequities. Ask participants to read through the list of orthodoxies and, as a group, choose a few to discuss. Focus your discussion on how much these orthodoxies are at play within the organization and what might need to shift to take a more equitable approach to learning and evaluation.

15 Barnes, B. & Burton, D. (2017). **Shifting Philanthropy to a Justice-Minded Approach**. *Stanford Social Innovation Review* online.

16 Equitable Evaluation Initiative. (July 2017). **Equitable Evaluation Framing Paper**.

Tool #5

Systems Change Primer

Relevant Action Imperatives

5. *Understand the importance of, and be explicit about, integrating an equity focus into the organization's work*
6. *Understand the nature of systems change and complexity and how this relates to the organization's work*

Introduction

Systems change has received much attention in recent years as grantmakers have increasingly set out to change underlying conditions that hold the most systemic challenges in place.¹⁷ To help facilitate conversations about systems change, we offer the following brief overview of how systems change is defined, frameworks to help you think about systems change, and sources for more information. This primer is only a snapshot of the many resources available; our intent is to provide some basic concepts and practices as a jumping off point.

Applying a Systems Change Framework Activity

One way to engage boards and trustees in a conversation about systems is to develop a brief overview of what systems change and systems thinking entail, using three to five PowerPoint slides. Choose one of the systems change frameworks below and invite a program officer to describe to the board how an initiative or cluster of grants are working to effect changes in the system(s), using the framework to walk them through the example. The purpose of the presentation would be to make explicit how and where the initiative is intervening in the system, the expected and hoped-for outcomes, and ways in which evaluation will inform learning about when, where, and how the system is shifting. The presentation could help boards and trustees understand the complexity of the systems in which the grantmaker is working, as well as the time dimension of systems change. It will also help them see the distinction between contribution and attribution, as well as how the grantmaker may play a role in systems change.

¹⁷ Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). **The Water of Systems Change**. FSG.

Tool #5: Systems Change Primer

The program officer could also lead board members through an actor mapping exercise to help illustrate how the organization is situated within the system.¹⁸

Definitions

System

- A system is an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something (function or purpose).—Donella Meadows¹⁹
- A complex adaptive system is a group of interdependent agents that interact in unpredictable ways, such that they form system-wide patterns. Those patterns, in turn, influence the subsequent behavior of the agents in the system.—Kevin Dooley²⁰

Examples of Systems

- A community food system is a food system in which food production, processing, distribution, and consumption are integrated to enhance the environmental, economic, social, and nutritional health of a particular place.
- A public health system is made up of neighborhood organizations, schools, nursing homes, fire, doctors, hospitals, EMS, elected officials, mental health, faith-based organizations, public health agency, civic groups, and more.
- An early childhood system often includes people/organizations focused on workforce and professional development, funding and sustainability, communications and public awareness, leadership and governance, planning and policy development, early childhood data system, and early childhood programs and services.

Systems Change

Systems change is an intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting the function or structure of an identified system with purposeful interventions. It is a journey that can require a radical change in people's attitudes as well as in the ways people work. Systems change aims to create lasting change by altering underlying structures and supporting mechanisms that make the system operate in a particular way. These can include policies, routines, relationships, resources, power structures, and values.²¹

18 For more information on this facilitation technique, see: Preskill, H., Gutierrez, E., & Mack, K. (2017). **Facilitating Intentional Group Learning: A Practical Guide to 21 Learning Activities**. FSG.

19 Meadows, D. H. (2009). *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*. London; Sterling, VA: Earthscan.

20 Human Systems Dynamics Institute. (2016). **Human Systems Dynamics Glossary**.

21 Harries, E., Wharton, R., & Abercrombie, R. (2015). **Systems change: a guide to what it is and how to do it**. London, UK: NPC.

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking is defined as the ability to see how organizational systems, sub-systems, and their parts interact with and influence each other, and how these systems create and contribute to specific problems.²²

Frameworks for Systems Change

Several frameworks exist for helping organizations think about systems change. We share two below, as a starting point for thinking about how systems change affects strategy design, implementation discussions, and assessing progress. Both frameworks provide a way to reflect on and identify key characteristics of the system the grantmaker is trying to influence through its work.

1. Beverly Parsons and Huilan Krenn's PCI framework²³ shares a way of thinking about critical system components, dimensions of the larger system, and actions that communities can take.

The "P's" in the framework designate five critical components of a system:

People: individuals' behaviors, attitudes, perceptions, and values;

Power: allocation, distribution, and ownership of resources (e.g., financial, positional);

Programs: interventions designed and implemented for systemic change or to achieve specified outcomes for designated groups;

Practices: patterns of individuals' behaviors formed and reinforced over time; and

Policies: regulations, legislation, and rules within and across multiple levels and domains (e.g., institutional, local, state, national).

The three "C's" of the PCI framework designate the dimensions of the larger systems that encompass the five "P's":

Content: the substance of the five "P's";

Connectivity: linkages, interfaces, and interactions among the five "P's"; and

Context: the environment, background, and situational dynamics where the "P's" or "C's" are exhibited.

²² Adapted from Bullock, R. (2013). **Systems Thinking: How to Lead in Complex Environments**. Scontrino Powell, Inc.

²³ Parsons, B. A. & Krenn, H. (2018). **PCI: A Reflective Evaluation Framework for Systems Change**, *The Foundation Review*, 10(1), Article 7.

Tool #5: Systems Change Primer

The four “I’s” set forth actions that communities can take—and evaluate—to achieve the purpose or goal of systemic change:

Improve: Better a system through changes in targeted “P’s” or “C’s.” For example, the purpose could be better program design or delivery; better implementation of effective or promising practices; more equitable power distribution; more conditions in the community that are conducive to stimulating changes in people’s attitudes; and/or better connections between policy and practice.

Inform: Raise the visibility of the likely lever(s) of a systemic change so that they can be more effectively used by those who become informed. For example, an informative community action could stimulate valuable insights from community constituencies that inform and influence policymakers to take actions that help ensure equitable constituency-centered policy implementation.

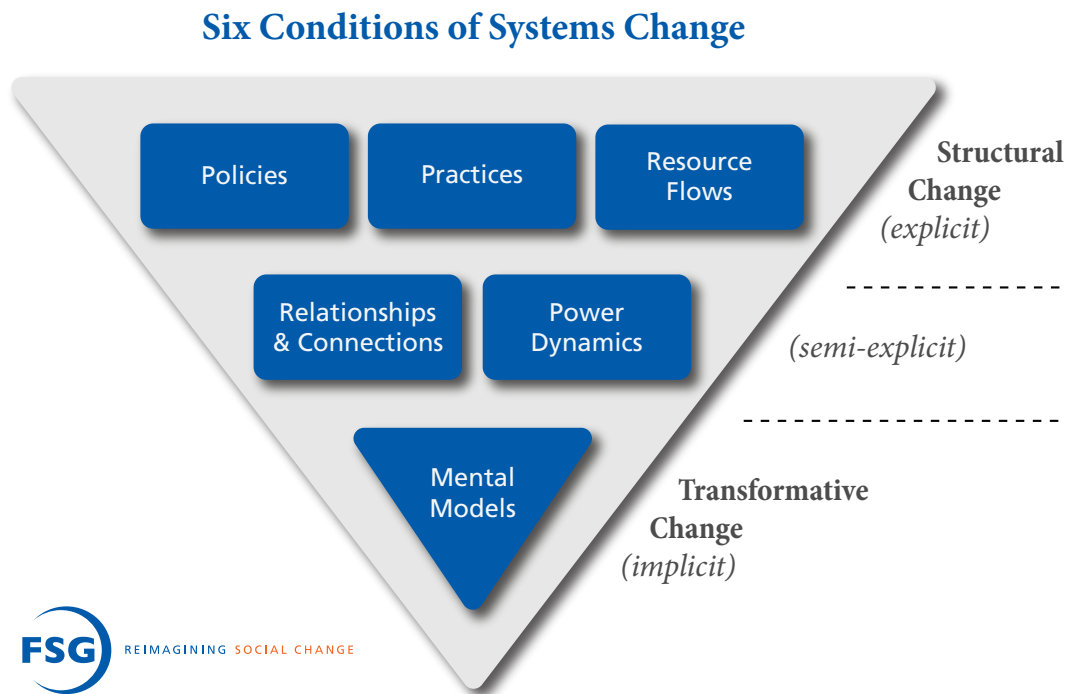
Influence: Mobilize factors to enable a systemic effect. For example, the goal of system change could be indirect but powerful shifts of resource allocation to ensure equity. This “I,” unlike others, might be intangible, but it is one of the most potent objectives. Lifting it up in the evaluation framework could help clarify the overall goal and possibly also identify or mobilize the most relevant lever(s) of change.

Impact: Produce the effect of a systemic change. This “I” tends to be longer term, resulting from the other “I’s” or from the “P’s” and “C’s.”



Source: Adapted from Parsons, B. A. & Krenn, H. (2018). **PCI: A Reflective Evaluation Framework for Systems Change**, *The Foundation Review*, 10(1), Article 7.

2. In **The Water of Systems Change**,²⁴ John Kania, Mark Kramer, and Peter Senge describe six conditions of systems change.



1. Policies: Government, institutional and organizational rules, regulations, and priorities that guide the entity's own and others' actions.

2. Practices: Espoused activities of institutions, coalitions, networks, and other entities targeted to improving social and environmental progress. Also, within the entity, the procedures, guidelines, or informal shared habits that comprise their work.

3. Resource Flows: How money, people, knowledge, information, and other assets such as infrastructure are allocated and distributed.

²⁴ Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018) **The Water of Systems Change**. FSG.

Tool #5: Systems Change Primer

4. Relationships and Connections: Quality of connections and communication occurring among actors in the system, especially among those with differing histories and viewpoints.

5. Power Dynamics: The distribution of decision-making power, authority, and both formal and informal influence among individuals and organizations.

6. Mental Models: Habits of thought—deeply held beliefs and assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we talk.

Systems Change Resources

Many resources exist to learn more about systems change; we offer a few to get started.

Introductory/High-Level

- Aronson, D. (1996-8). Overview of Systems Thinking. Thinking Page.
- Harries, E., Wharton, R., & Abercrombie, R. (2015). **Systems change: A guide to what it is and how to do it.** London, UK: NPC.
- Lannon, C. (Ed.). (2008). *A Beginner's Guide to Systems Thinking.* Pegasus Communications, Inc.
- Management Assistance Group and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. (2016). **Systems Grantmaking Resource Guide.**
- Meadows, D. H. (2009). *Thinking in Systems: A Primer.* London; Sterling, VA: Earthscan.
- Williams, B. & van't Hof, S. (2014). *Wicked Solutions: A systems approach to complex problems.* Self-published.

Evaluating systems change initiatives

- Coffman, J. (2007). **A Framework for Evaluating Systems Initiatives.** BUILD Initiative.
- Coffman, J. & Reed, E. (2009). **Unique Methods in Advocacy Evaluation.** The California Endowment.
- Hargreaves, M. (2010). *Evaluating System Change: A Planning Guide.* Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.
- Latham, N. (2014). *A Practical Guide to Evaluating Systems Change in a Human Services System Context.* Learning for Action.
- Preskill, H., Gopal, S., Mack, K., & Cook, J. (2015). **Evaluating Complexity.** FSG.

Practical examples of systems change initiatives

- Battle Creek Example in Stroh, D.P. & Goodman, M. (2007). **Systemic Approach to Ending Homelessness**. Applied Systems Thinking Journal: Topical Issues, Article 4, October 7, 2007.
- California Endowment Example in Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). **The Water of Systems Change**. FSG.
- Milstein, D., Madden, S., Chahine, T. (2018). **Tackling Youth Substance Abuse on Staten Island: A Collective Impact Project**. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University T. H. Chan School of Public Health.
- Various examples listed on the **NIH website**.

Tool #6

Using Your Theory of Change To Develop Strategic Learning Questions

Relevant Action Imperative

2. *Develop and use strategic learning questions to guide decisions and actions*

Introduction

Strategic learning questions highlight what is important to know; they serve as guardrails for moving the grantmaker's strategy forward, and they elicit information to inform that journey. One way to ground questions in the grantmaker's strategy is to use your organization's theory of change (TOC) as a starting point. A TOC is often a visual depiction of how your work leads to the changes you seek, and serves as a great artifact for boards and trustees to reflect on, react to, and identify questions it raises for measuring progress and impact.²⁵

What Are Strategic Learning Questions?

Strategic learning questions focus and guide the majority of your organization's research, monitoring, evaluation, and learning activities. These are the overarching questions that serve as guideposts for understanding what your organization is achieving, in what ways, and with what kinds of resources. Future monitoring, research, and evaluations should be grounded in and help inform the answers to the strategic learning questions.²⁶

Strategic learning questions should be:²⁷

- ✓ **Applicable** to where you are in the strategy development or implementation process
- ✓ **Answerable** in a reasonable timeframe
- ✓ **Actionable** so that it can inform your strategic decision-making (real-time or in the future)

Strategic learning questions can be used for multiple purposes, including to:

²⁵ For more information on creating a theory of change, see call out box on the following page.

²⁶ Preskill, H. & Mack, K. (2013). **Building a Strategic Learning and Evaluation System for Your Organization**. FSG.

²⁷ Adapted from **USAID's Learning Lab**. (2017).

If your organization does not yet have a theory of change, check out these useful resources for creating one:

From ORS Impact—Getting Started: A Self-Directed Guide to Outcome Map Development

http://orsimpact.com/DirectoryAttachments/132018_25506_981_Getting-Started-Guide-FINAL-10-7-14.pdf

From NPC—Creating Your Theory of Change: NPC’s Practical Guide

<https://www.thinknpc.org/publications/creating-your-theory-of-change/>

From the Aspen Institute—Theory of Change as a Tool for Strategic Planning

<https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Theory-of-Change-Tool-for-Strategic-Planning-Report-on-Early-Experiences.pdf>

- Fill knowledge gaps/enhance understanding of context
“What local-level policy changes are effective in addressing [x issue]?”
- Examine assumptions
“Is it possible to make progress on [x issue] without [y condition]?”
“Is there any evidence that [x behavior] has [y effect]?”
- Provide feedback on the effectiveness of initiative design or implementation of tactics/approaches
“What are we learning about effective ways of mobilizing key stakeholders?”
“What are we learning about how to shift the public narrative on [x issue]?”
- Provide feedback on progress toward interim outcomes
“To what extent and why (or why not) is progress being made toward [x interim outcome]?”
- Assess impact
“To what extent and in what ways has the initiative contributed towards its ultimate goal(s)?”
“What unanticipated positive or negative consequences did the initiative have? Why?”

Tool #6: Using Your TOC to Develop Strategic Learning Questions

Learning Activity—Using a Theory of Change to Develop Strategic Learning Questions

Note—Developing strategic learning questions may not be appropriate for all boards or trustees, as these may be the responsibility of program teams. The activity works well for smaller boards that are more engaged in program work or programmatic decision making. For larger boards, the activity might be more appropriate for a subset of board members, for example, the program, evaluation, or grants committee.

Welcome/Framing (10 minutes)

- Share an overview of your organization's theory of change; it will be helpful to have either handouts of the visual or a poster-size print hanging on the wall.
- Share overview of what strategic learning questions are and what makes a good question.
- Hand out post-it notes (each pair should have one post-it note pad).

Activity: Think, Pair, Share²⁸ (20 minutes)

- **5 minutes: Think**—Ask participants to write down three to four questions they have about the theory of change.
- **10 minutes: Pair**—Ask participants to find a person next to them and share their set of questions; add more as necessary.
- **5 minutes: Share**—Ask participants to place their post-it notes up on the TOC posted on the wall, on the wall itself, or on a table; encourage them to place their question next to similar questions.

Facilitated Discussion (30 minutes)

- How can we group our questions? Can we organize the questions by themes?
- For which areas of the theory of change do we have the most questions?
- Are there types of questions that we haven't asked about, but should (e.g., our impact, our assumptions)?
- Are there areas of the theory of change that we haven't asked about, but should?

²⁸ For more information on this facilitation technique, see: Preskill, H., Gutierrez, E., & Mack, K. (2017). **Facilitating Intentional Group Learning: A Practical Guide to 21 Learning Activities**. FSG.

Tool #6: Using Your TOC to Develop Strategic Learning Questions

Prioritize (20 minutes)

- Hand out stickers/dots or share another way to mark questions (e.g., with a star); a general rule for the number of dots to use is the number of questions divided by three, plus one $[(n/3) + 1]$.
- Prompt: Place your dots next to the questions that you think are most important to answer this year.
- Review list—circle the top-voted questions; ask individuals if they want to make the case for questions that didn't get many votes, but that they think are important.

Wrap Up (10 minutes)

- Share next steps and process to finalize questions.

Tool #7

What Types of Data and Evidence Do We Need?

Relevant Action Imperative

3. Value and consume different kinds, levels, and presentations of data

Introduction

What type of evidence do you need to have confidence in the decisions you are asked to make? Grantmakers constantly grapple with this question, and often default to quantitative data or dashboards to make sense of the results of their grantmaking activities. However, grantmakers have at their disposal many different kinds of evaluation approaches and data collection methods, some of which are more appropriate in certain situations. To prompt discussion with your boards and trustees, consider sharing an article or blog in advance of an upcoming board meeting, then devoting time during the meeting for discussion. We have included a number of relevant articles below.

Activity

- Pick a topic.
- Pick an article or blog and include in the board's pre-read materials.
- Spend 20–30 minutes at the next board meeting discussing the article and its implications for your foundation.

What counts as evidence?

- In a 2016 article, *Reconsidering Evidence: What It Means and How We Use It*, Lisabeth Schorr challenges us to think more expansively about evidence as we strive to understand the world of today and to improve the world of tomorrow.²⁹
- In a 2014 blog, *Rethinking the E Word*, Katherina Rosqueta offers a new way of thinking about evidence, which includes academic research, field experience, and informed opinion.³⁰

29 Schorr, L. (2016). **Reconsidering Evidence: What it Means and How We Use It**. *Stanford Social Innovation Review* online.

30 Rosqueta, K. (2014). **Rethinking the E Word**. *Stanford Social Innovation Review* online.

Tool #7: What Types of Data and Evidence Do We Need?

- In a 2014 blog, *Strategic Philanthropy and the Risk of Certainty*, Fay Twersky offers a distinction between “certaintists” and “meaning seekers” and challenges us to think about how our mental models drive what we ask for in terms of evidence.³¹

Discussion questions:

- What kind of data do you find to be most trustworthy? Numbers or stories? Why?
- How important is it to understand a program’s context to understand its impact? What about the context do we need to know more about?

What data do we need?

- In a 2014 blog post, “Developing a Culture of Knowledge Management,” Brad Smith posits that foundations need three types of data: transactional, contextual, and impact.³²
- In a 2018 blog post, “What Type of Data Should My Nonprofit or Foundation Collect?,” Alexandra Pittman offers tips on how to optimize data collection.³³

Discussion questions:

- What has been the most useful data shared with the Board this year? Why was it particularly effective?
- What other kinds of data would you like to have to inform your decision-making?

When do we need to measure impact?

- In a 2018 article, Mary Kay Gugerty and Dean Karlan made a provocative suggestion: “impact evaluation is not always the right choice.”³⁴
- In a 2014 blog post, “Measuring Impact isn’t for Everyone,” Gugerty and Karlan tee up a discussion on whether measuring impact is the right choice for all situations.³⁵

31 Twersky, F. (2014). **Strategic Philanthropy and the Risk of Certainty**. *Stanford Social Innovation Review* online.

32 Smith, B. (2014). **Developing a Culture of Knowledge Management**. *Stanford Social Innovation Review* online.

33 Pittman, A. (2018). **What Type of Data Should My Nonprofit or Foundation Collect?** *Philanthropy News Digest*.

34 Gugerty, M. & Karlan, D. (2018). **Ten Reasons Not to Measure Impact—and What to Do Instead**. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Volume 16, No. 3.

35 Gugerty, M. K. & Karlan, D. (2014). **Measuring Impact isn’t for Everyone**. *Stanford Social Innovation Review* online.

Tool #7: What Types of Data and Evidence Do We Need?

Discussion questions:

- How interested are we in proving that our funding led to a certain set of changes (e.g., knowing that we caused something to happen, versus contributed to it)? Is it reasonable to think that impact can be solely attributed to our funding? How can we demonstrate that our funding contributed to changes, and are we comfortable with that?
- For which of our programs or initiatives would impact evaluation be appropriate? What other forms of evaluation might we deploy to understand our impact?
- Are we willing to invest the resources required for a quality impact evaluation?

Tool #8

What Does It Mean to Be Accountable in Philanthropy?

Relevant Action Imperative

1. *Understand the necessity of and advocate for strategic learning*

Introduction

Being an advocate for strategic learning means understanding that an organization can be committed to both learning and accountability at the same time—they aren't mutually exclusive propositions. In fact, the two concepts are symbiotic. "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. They need each other. Understanding effectiveness requires both."³⁶

It is important for boards and trustees to understand what it means for the grantmaker to be accountable and which kinds of accountability are most relevant to its interests.

³⁶ Guijt, I. (2010). **Exploding the Myth of Incompatibility Between Accountability and Learning**. In Ubels, J., Acquaye-Baddoo, N. A., & Fowler, A. Capacity Development in Practice.

Tool #8: What Does It Mean to Be Accountable in Philanthropy?

Different Kinds of Accountability—Which Are Relevant for Our Organization?

Type of Accountability	Description
Compliance-checking and financial accountability	focused on performing an external controlling function
Managerial accountability	which is based on an obligation to observe principles of sound management and requires sending information upward, toward a board or funding agencies
Mutual accountability	in which multiple groups or entities agree to be held responsible to commitments made to one another—values, aspirations, and social relations form the glue
Representative accountability	when referring to the obligations of representatives to constituents
Social accountability	in which ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations hold public officials and servants accountable through civic engagement (e.g., demonstrations, protests, advocacy campaigns, investigative journalism, and public interest lawsuits) ³⁷
Strategic accountability focused on performing an internal controlling function	the extent to which individuals and organizations act as effectively as possible; this type of accountability is about feeling committed to one's ideas and strategies as well as to the internal mission (rather than, or in addition to, funders or other stakeholders)

³⁷ Malena, C., Forster, R., & Singh, J. (2004). **Social accountability: An introduction to the concept and emerging practice** (English). Social development papers; no. 76. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Tool #8: What Does It Mean to Be Accountable in Philanthropy?

Learning Activity—What? So What? Now What?³⁸

Facilitation guidelines:

- Share handout (above).
- Ask board members to silently review the content and to jot down any reactions to the content as they read.
- In groups of three to four, they are to respond to the following questions:

What?—What did this make you think about regarding the board’s accountability as well as accountability for the organization? What questions does it raise for you?

- Participants silently reflect for a minute.
- They then discuss responses in their small groups. (5–10 minutes)

So What?—Based on your conversations, and your own personal views, what implications might there be for the board’s role and the role of the grantmaker in the field?

- Participants silently reflect for a minute.
- They then discuss responses in their small groups. (5–10 minutes)

Now What?—Based on your conversations and your own experiences, are there any action steps you, as a board, or the leadership or staff might take to implement the kinds of accountability you believe are most important for the grantmaker? What role might learning play?

- Participants silently reflect for a minute.
- They then discuss responses in their small groups. (5–10 minutes)

Large group debrief (10 minutes)

- As a result of these conversations, to what extent or how have your views on accountability changed regarding the grantmaker and the board’s roles?
- Are there any priority action steps the board or others in the organization might take because of the conversations?

³⁸ For more information on this facilitation technique, see: Preskill, H., Gutierrez, E., & Mack, K. (2017). **Facilitating Intentional Group Learning: A Practical Guide to 21 Learning Activities**. FSG.

Tool #9

Full List of Discussion Questions

Relevant Action Imperative

All

Facilitation Activities

We offer a set of discussion questions for each action imperative, and hope that these questions will stimulate thoughtful, learning-oriented conversations. The following are a few ways you can facilitate a conversation using any of these questions.

- Choose one of the questions to pose to the board, and ask board members and trustees to take a couple of minutes to write down their answer. The process of writing down their answers will provide space for them to reflect, instead of speaking off the cuff. After they have finished writing, ask for volunteers or call on certain members to share their ideas.
- Choose a few questions, either from one action imperative or a few, and write one question each on a piece of flip chart paper; post the flip chart pages on walls around the room. Invite board members and trustees to go up to each of the questions (flip chart pages), and write down their thoughts, reactions, opinions, and ideas. They may add on to or comment on others' contributions, but it is important to do this silently (this activity is often referred to as a "Chalk Talk"³⁹). They are to visit and reflect on each of the questions posted around the room. This activity could be 15–30 minutes, depending on the number of questions. When finished, the facilitator would go to each of the questions, read out the written comments, and ask for the group's thoughts and reactions. They could do this as a large group, in pairs, or small groups. If there are implications or next steps desired and identified, capture these on additional flipchart paper.
- Divide board members or trustees into small groups to discuss a specific question you have chosen. Provide them some context for why this particular question is important, and how much time they will have for their conversation. You might ask one person in each group to summarize the group's discussion when reporting out to the larger group.

³⁹ For more information on this facilitation technique, see: Preskill, H., Gutierrez, E., & Mack, K. (2017). **Facilitating Intentional Group Learning: A Practical Guide to 21 Learning Activities**. FSG.

Tool #9: Full List of Discussion Questions

- Choose a question for discussion. Ask the board members or trustees to get into pairs; one person is first the listener, the other the speaker. The speaker gives their opinion and/or experiences relative to the chosen question. The listener may ask follow-up questions, but withholds their own opinions until their turn. After two to four minutes, the speaker and listener swap roles. If desired, for the full group debrief, each person tells their partner's response to the question to the group (this honors their voice, and makes them feel heard). If this is not desired, then volunteers could be asked to share their pairs' responses to the questions.

Discussion Questions by Action Imperative

Action Imperative	Questions for Boards and Trustees to Consider
<p>1. Understand the necessity of and advocate for strategic learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a board, how do we learn about what is going well and what needs to be changed regarding our organization's strategy, grants, and role in the field? • What is our board's common frame for talking about strategic learning? How do we define key terms related to evaluation? • What does it look like for the organization to be accountable to our mission? What does it look like for the organization to be accountable to grantees and the communities we serve? What might we need to stop doing to better hold our organization accountable to ourselves, grantees, and to learning? • What is the information we as a board need to hold this organization accountable to our mission and to make good decisions? How is learning related to the organization's underlying values, principles, and mission? • What kinds of board decisions or actions should data and experiences inform? • How open and comfortable are we as a board discussing things that have not worked (e.g., missteps, failures) among ourselves, as well as those things that have gone well (successes)? How would we describe our risk tolerance? Why might this be the case? (Note: This question is first focused on internal conversations, but could be expanded to consider how comfortable the board/trustees are with sharing failures with the field). • How can we support the staff's efforts to engage in continuous learning and adaptation? How can we support the efforts of our nonprofit and community partners?

Tool #9: Full List of Discussion Questions

<p>2. Develop and use strategic learning questions to guide decisions and actions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the questions we as a board keep asking ourselves about the work? What questions have we not asked but should be asking? • What do we as a board need to learn about how well our organization's strategy is being implemented, as well as its progress, effects, and impact? • How will our organization know whether we are successful in the short and long term? • How open are we as a board to learning the answers to these questions? • Whose perspectives are included or left out of our questions?
<p>3. Value and consume different kinds, levels, and presentations of data</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of information, and from whom, do we as a board find most useful to our discussions and decision-making processes (e.g., metrics, stories, quotes, examples, site visits)? What are the benefits of including these data and the tradeoffs of not collecting them or excluding them? Whose points of view are included? Whose are excluded? • What level of quality and accuracy of information do we as a board need to make good decisions? • How useful is the information our board is receiving in its current format? What could be different? • What capacity for information/data can we as board members reasonably consume? What levels of detail are most useful for us? • How can we make sure we are not burdening the staff and our nonprofit partners by asking them to collect and supply data and information that isn't being used? • What more do we need to learn about different types of data, their relevance to our work, and how to make sense of them to inform our decisions?
<p>4. Value and request time for reflection and dialogue in pursuit of strategic learning during board/trustee meetings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can we recall a time when we engaged in true reflection as a board, and had a great conversation that helped us support our organization more effectively? What did we do and how did we accomplish that? What should we try again? • How might we find time in our packed board agendas to reflect on what is being learned from grantees and others about our work? • How could we change the ways we spend our time together in board meetings so that there are more opportunities to develop deeper understanding about the progress, effects, and impact of our work? • What skills would we need to build, or what supports would we need, in order to be more comfortable with reflective types of activities?

Tool #9: Full List of Discussion Questions

<p>5. Understand the importance of, and be explicit about, integrating an equity focus into the organization's work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent and in what ways is our organization committed to a more equitable future? Are we focusing on particular subpopulations (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ableness, religion, age, geography, class)? If not, why not? • Are the data our board looks at to inform our decision making disaggregated to show the impacts on subpopulations? If not, what are the implications for the types and sources of data our grantees collect and report? • How are we ensuring that the voices of the people who are most affected by the problems our work aims to solve are represented, both in our work and in our learning and evaluation efforts? Are there ways for us to get closer to these communities and community members? • What opportunities might we have to better align our work with our commitment(s) to a more equitable future? • How can learning and evaluation help our organization understand whether we are making progress towards our equity goals? How do we keep the organization accountable and moving forward in our commitment? • In what ways can we use learning and evaluation to understand historical contexts and systemic drivers of inequities, uncover potential conscious or unconscious biases, and identify targeted strategies that might more effectively address the issues we are focusing on? • How might learning and evaluation help us understand and address power dynamics to improve the ways in which our organization learns from community partners and grantees?
<p>6. Understand the nature of systems change and complexity and how this relates to the organization's work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the kinds of changes our organization is seeking to effect, and in what system(s)? How and when do we expect to see change? • To what extent is the work we are supporting complex? Why is it complex? What does this mean for how we do our work and understand its impact? • How do we understand our organization's place within the systems in which we work? What does our relative place in the system(s) mean for how we are seeking to intervene or create change? • How comfortable are we with accepting the fact that our work contributes to change rather than being the sole factor effecting change? • How can we make sure we are considering equity as we are working for systems change and social impact?

Tool #10

Practices from Your Peers for Engaging Boards in Strategic Learning

Relevant Action Imperatives

All

Introduction

Grantmaker CEOs, evaluation directors, and board members shared with us several practices they have used for engaging boards and trustees in strategic learning. The five examples below are ideas from peer grantmakers for learning opportunities and methods of sharing information with board members, as well as other stakeholders. These examples are a jumping-off point that we hope will serve both as practices you can try implementing and as inspiration for creating your own practices that match the context you work in.

Expert Talks

I try to bring in an expert⁴⁰ to talk about some subject, whether it's technology and education, or something in homelessness, or something in leadership and ethics. So it's continually putting someone, an expert from the field, in front of [the board] and then reinforcing that with materials I can find to send along to them and continue dialogue.

Diana Spencer—Executive Director
The William C. McGowan Charitable Trust

Webinars

I have a series of four webinars that we're doing... My goal is to always have people, trustees, answering questions with the same language. There's been a time when if someone said, 'What is your work in homelessness like?' you might have gotten seven or eight different answers. The goal is for everyone to be one unified board and to be able to answer the questions, to have a really clear understanding about who we are, what we're trying to do, and how we believe we can get there.

Diana Spencer—Executive Director
The William C. McGowan Charitable Trust

⁴⁰ We encourage you to think expansively about who might be considered an expert. In addition to people with credentials (e.g., PhDs), people close to the work, members of affected communities, and people with relevant lived experiences also bring a valuable perspective.

Monthly e-newsletters

One of the wonderful things about being able to send out monthly e-newsletter updates, as we did at Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky, was that readers could click on a link for more information about the headline news. So if all they wanted to know was that seven out of 10 projects were implementing according to schedule, and three were experiencing challenges, that's fine. But if they wanted to dig down in what the challenges were and how projects were addressing them, and what we learned, they could get that too.

Susan Zepeda—Trustee
Community Foundation of Louisville

Articles, Blogs, Reports

We share learning resources with the board quarterly. I ask staff to suggest articles and other resources that they think are important for the board to read. We focus on resources that will really build on what they already receive about our grantmaking portfolio and initiatives, including evaluation-related resources.

Kim Ammann Howard—Director of Impact Assessment and Learning
The James Irvine Foundation

Short “Lessons Learned” Summaries

We extract lessons learned from grantee reports and offer those up for the committees as they consider a sizable renewal grant to a given organization. They're color coded, and they, at a glance, can provide people with insight into the extent to which targets were met or not, as well as some context around that.

Marc Holley—Strategy, Learning, and Evaluation Director
Walton Family Foundation



Appendix A: Interviewees

Kim Ammann Howard

*Director of Impact Assessment and Learning
The James Irvine Foundation*

Tanya Beer

*Associate Director
Center for Evaluation Innovation*

Yvonne Belanger

*Director of Learning and Evaluation
Barr Foundation*

Hanh Cao Yu

*Chief Learning Officer
The California Endowment*

Isaac Castillo

*Director of Outcomes, Assessment, and Learning
Venture Philanthropy Partners*

Shawn Ginwright

*Board Member
The California Endowment*

Marc Holley

*Strategy, Learning, and Evaluation Director
Walton Family Foundation*

Tom Kelly

Vice President of Knowledge, Evaluation, and Learning, Hawaii Community Foundation

Donald Kimelman

*Board Member
William Penn Foundation*

Subarna Mathes

*Strategy and Evaluation Officer
The Ford Foundation*

Christine McCabe

*Executive Director
College Spark Washington*

Karla Miller

*Program Director
Northwest Area Foundation*

Christine Mitton

*Director, Knowledge and Learning
Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland*

Chera Reid

Director of Strategic Learning, Research, and Evaluation, The Kresge Foundation

Dianne Riter

Senior Director, Strategy, Communications, and Evaluation, Arcora—The Foundation of Delta Dental of Washington

Bess Rothenberg

*Senior Director of Strategy and Learning
The Ford Foundation*

Daniel Silverman

*Vice President for Strategic Services
The James Irvine Foundation*

Diana Spencer

*Executive Director
The William C. McGowan Charitable Fund*

Darren Walker

*President
The Ford Foundation*

Kevin Walker

*President and CEO
Northwest Area Foundation*

Susan Zepeda

*Trustee
Community Foundation of Louisville*

FSG and GEO interviewed these individuals between January and August 2018 to inform this paper, case studies, and tools. We greatly appreciate their time, thoughtfulness, and candor, and each individual interviewed shaped the insights and content of this product.

Appendix B: Advisory Group Members



Kim Ammann Howard

*Director of Impact Assessment and Learning
The James Irvine Foundation*

Yvonne Belanger

*Director of Learning and Evaluation
Barr Foundation*

Isaac Castillo

*Director of Outcomes Assessment and Learning
Venture Philanthropy Partners*

Anne Cullen Puente

*Program Director, Learning Integration
The John E. Fetzer Institute*

Srik Gopal

*Vice President of Strategy, Learning, and Impact
Democracy Fund*

Marc Holley

*Strategy, Learning, and Evaluation Director
Walton Family Foundation*

Christine Mitton

*Director, Knowledge and Learning
Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland*

Emily Nguyen

*Director of Research and Evaluation
Omaha Community Foundation*

Chera Reid

*Director of Strategic Learning, Research, and
Evaluation
The Kresge Foundation*

Dianne Riter

*Senior Director, Strategy, Communications, and
Evaluation, Arcora—The Foundation of Delta
Dental of Washington*

Nisha Sachdev

*Senior Director, Evaluation
The Bainum Family Foundation*

Susan Zepeda

*Trustee
Community Foundation of Louisville*

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Barr Foundation's mission is to invest in human, natural, and creative potential, serving as thoughtful stewards and catalysts. As stewards, Barr nurtures and enhances vital community assets. As catalysts, the Foundation cultivates and advances the breakthrough ideas that will shape our collective future. Barr focuses on achieving impact as a constructive partner, willing to exercise leadership. Barr is one of the largest private foundations in New England with assets of more than \$1.7 billion and a 2018 grantmaking budget of \$85 million.

The James Irvine Foundation is a private, nonprofit grantmaking foundation dedicated to expanding opportunity for the people of California. Since 1937, the Foundation has provided more than \$1.6 billion in grants to over 3,600 nonprofit organizations across the state. The guiding principle in all our grantmaking is to expand opportunity, and in 2016 we announced a specific focus of expanding economic and political opportunity for California families and young adults that are working but struggling with poverty.

The Kresge Foundation is a \$3.5 billion private, national foundation that works to expand opportunities in America's cities through grantmaking and social investing in arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services, and community development in Detroit. In 2016, the Board of Trustees approved 474 grants totaling \$141.5 million, and made 14 social investment commitments totaling \$50.8 million.

Walton Family Foundation is, at its core, a family-led foundation. The children and grandchildren of our founders, Sam and Helen Walton, lead the foundation and create access to opportunity for people and communities. We work in three areas: improving K-12 education, protecting rivers and oceans and the communities they support, and investing in our home region of Northwest Arkansas and the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta. In 2017, the foundation awarded more than \$535 million in grants in support of these initiatives.

About FSG

FSG is a mission-driven consulting firm supporting leaders in creating large-scale, lasting social change. Through strategy, evaluation, and research we help many types of actors—individually and collectively—make progress against the world’s toughest problems.

Our teams work across all sectors by partnering with leading foundations, businesses, nonprofits, and governments in every region of the globe. We seek to reimagine social change by identifying ways to maximize the impact of existing resources, amplifying the work of others to help advance knowledge and practice, and inspiring change agents around the world to achieve greater impact.

As part of our nonprofit mission, FSG also directly supports learning communities, such as the Collective Impact Forum, Shared Value Initiative, and Talent Rewire to provide the tools and relationships that change agents need to be successful.

Learn more about FSG at www.fsg.org.

About GEO

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) exists to help grantmakers turn their desire to improve into real progress. That’s the power of the GEO community. With more than 7,000 grantmakers across the globe, we work together to lift up the grantmaking practices that matter most to nonprofits and that truly improve philanthropy.

Learn more about GEO at www.geofunders.org.





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