

Let's Make Evaluation Work

A Planning Guide for Foundation Trustees

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WHAT KEEPS EVALUATION FROM WORKING?

Four basic issues tend to hamper evaluation intentions or actions, according to foundation trustees, CEOs and evaluation experts interviewed by FSG Social Impact Advisors. This tool identifies these issues, offers example solutions and encourages foundations to commit to actions that enhance evaluation.

Informed by the trustee self-assessment and dialogue, use this tool to identify next steps for your foundation's growth as a learning organization.

ISSUE 1:

There Isn't Enough Time to Discuss Evaluation Results

REAL SOLUTIONS	STEPS TO CONSIDER
<p>Focus on strategy. “Our new board chair’s mantra is that the board should spend its time doing things that only the board can do. Staff can do grants, figure out the grantees and the budget. The board should spend time on strategy and investment outcomes, thinking big thoughts, and less time on the specifics of the grants. If you focus too much on individual grants, you’ve eaten up all the time at the board meetings.” <i>– Mark Smith, CEO, California HealthCare Foundation</i></p> <p>Dig deep. “We just made a major step forward to hold fewer but longer board meetings. We changed to only three meetings per year, but they now last a day and a half. To do that the board had to agree to increase the president’s authority to approve grants between meetings. Now the president has the authority to make grants up to 25 percent of the budget. Up until now, board meetings were consumed by going over grants. One of the major motivations in moving to this format was to really dig into the data from the evaluations, understand them deeply, and document the lessons. In the past, the meeting might allow at maximum an hour and a half for evaluation discussions. Now, we can spend a whole morning or afternoon.” <i>– Stephen Heintz, President, Rockefeller Brothers Fund</i></p> <p>Set aside an extra hour. “We have a Performance Measurement Committee: Two to three of the Foundation’s senior management meet with the trustees for at least an hour before each board meeting to go over evaluation in depth. We devote a specific portion of the meetings to an analysis of how well our program sites are doing based on the performance measures we’ve identified, and then we discuss what the Foundation is doing to help sites to meet those needs.” <i>– Tony Cipollone, Senior Advisor/ Vice President for Assessment & Advocacy, The Annie E. Casey Foundation</i></p>	<div data-bbox="812 384 1485 898"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Set aside one board meeting or retreat per year to reflect on strategy and evaluation results. <input type="checkbox"/> Restructure regular board meetings, using a consent agenda to approve more routine grants in advance and decreasing grant-approval time during the meeting. Free up time for learning from the progress of past and current grants. <input type="checkbox"/> Form a board subcommittee to delve deeply into evaluation and report back a summary of key findings at full board meetings. <input type="checkbox"/> Redefine the board’s role: Instead of making decisions on all grants, it focuses on the most significant funding commitments and sets foundation and program strategy. <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ </div> <div data-bbox="812 947 1485 982"> <p>TAKE ACTION</p> </div> <div data-bbox="857 1031 1365 1094"> <p><i>Make notes on plans you want to pursue to address this issue.</i></p> </div>

ISSUE 2:

Evaluation Results Are Not Actionable

REAL SOLUTIONS	STEPS TO CONSIDER
<p>Get to the point quickly. “We’re very performance oriented. When we report to the board, we keep the evaluation results from the evaluator concise — four pages, without jargon. The program officer is allowed a two-page response, e.g., “This is how I’m going to change my strategy, or this is why I shouldn’t.” Then we act on the information. We zero-base budget the program areas every year, and reallocate grant funds based on performance. We allocate more grant dollars to program teams that delivered results successfully in the past. Evaluation matters only if decisions are going to be based on it.”</p> <p>– <i>Rebecca Rimel, President and CEO, The Pew Charitable Trusts</i></p> <p>Be clear about what you are measuring from the start. “It is important to set the right milestones, use evaluation as a design criterion, and think about it at the outset of the process. If you know where you are going, what objective the grant or program is trying to achieve, it’s much easier to think about measuring. Often, people don’t know what impact they are trying to achieve, and so they are inclined to measure everything. Then, you end up with a huge data set that is hard to analyze and interpret.”</p> <p>– <i>Stuart Davidson, Trustee, Acumen Fund, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, REDF and Woodcock Foundation</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Plan for evaluation before you approve a grant. Engage board members early on in specifying the intended outcomes and agreeing on the evaluation process to ensure that their questions are answered by the evaluation process. <input type="checkbox"/> Anticipate key decision points. Match the timing of evaluation information to board decisions. Will evaluation data be known before the grant is up for renewal? <input type="checkbox"/> Cultivate a pragmatic attitude toward data collection. Rigorous studies that prove the impact attributable to a foundation grant are costly and time consuming. Consider other kinds of data to inform the board along the way. Discuss which kinds of information would be “reliable enough” to support a decision. <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure that recommended actions accompany every evaluation presented to the board, e.g., an increase in funding or a change in strategy — and then act on them. <input type="checkbox"/> Create a learning agenda: Identify what we need to learn to test our assumptions and how we will collect and analyze the information in order to get desired answers. <input type="checkbox"/> Hold an evaluation-focused retreat where board members learn about the nuances of evaluating social impact, explore the use of qualitative and quantitative data, and help set high-level priorities for evaluation at the foundation. <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____
	<p>TAKE ACTION</p> <p><i>Make notes on plans you want to pursue to address this issue.</i></p>

ISSUE 3:

Information Isn't Presented in a Format That is Helpful for Trustees

REAL SOLUTIONS	STEPS TO CONSIDER
<p>Tailor presentation and timing for ease of use. “The board gets an electronic monthly briefing, along with friends of the Foundation. It’s a way of managing and smoothing the information flow so that busy people can digest it. For the board meetings, the consent docket includes Results Reports summarizing each board-approved project after all related grants have closed. It has the verbatim language of the grant when it was approved, what happened with it after approval and then a section on lessons and implications for the Foundation going forward.” <i>–Mark Smith, CEO, California HealthCare Foundation</i></p> <p>Play to the audience. “If you’ve got an audience of business people, you need to understand how they like to receive data. For example, for the business-oriented trustees of a foundation I previously worked with, we created “stock reports.” The reports had all the information you would have on a business you invested in: charts of trends, risk profiles, profiles of the management team and so forth. It is important to understand your audience and provide them data in a way that they can understand it, digest it and use it.” <i>–Fay Twersky, Director of Impact Planning & Improvement, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation</i></p> <p>Invite a critical eye. “We started hiring investigative reporters to look at our major programs and just tell what they find. It’s another way of being transparent. A reporter’s skill is to find what happened and write it in a way that people want to read it, as opposed to something written for academics. In one case, the reporter found out things that we had never thought about. Now, we can make corrections. It helps keep us focused on what is happening and what to do about it.” <i>–Alberto Ibarguen, President and CEO, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Distill evaluation results into a short summary highlighting the findings relevant to trustees; use language appropriate to their backgrounds. <input type="checkbox"/> At the board meeting, encourage a dialogue between the evaluator and program staff; encourage the board to direct questions to both parties. <input type="checkbox"/> Layer information. Provide brief summaries or dashboards for all trustees, and guide those who want to delve deeper to more in-depth information. <input type="checkbox"/> Invest in communications. Hire communications experts to repackage evaluation data to reach different audiences, such as trustees, policymakers, other funders or the media. Different audiences absorb information in different ways. <input type="checkbox"/> Hire expert narrators, such as storytellers or journalists to gather evaluation information or summarize evaluation reports. <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ <p>TAKE ACTION</p> <p><i>Make notes on plans you want to pursue to address this issue.</i></p>

ISSUE 4:

Trustees Don't See Value in Evaluation

REAL SOLUTIONS	STEPS TO CONSIDER
<p>Bring trustees along. “Integrating evaluation into our work means changing the way we work as a foundation, and we need to bring our trustees along. For example, we’ve taken trustees on site visits and we talked to them about how to use data. We use dashboards in our materials so they can see progress on our initiatives. We rarely discuss individual grants — although that information is available to them. We discuss with them how this contributes to the success of the overall strategy, and how it helps us get to the goal of improving the lives of children in Detroit.” <i>–Carol Goss, President and CEO, The Skillman Foundation</i></p> <p>Find the right frame. “Boards are composed of folk for whom return on investment is an important consideration. The key question is how this is measured. Hence, staff members are playing a role in the education of their trustees. The trustees don’t get educated in three- to five-year intervals, they get educated all along the way.” <i>–Dr. Kent McGuire, Trustee, Wachovia Regional Foundation and California HealthCare Foundation</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Develop an evaluation plan for the foundation. Describe the role of evaluation in organizational learning and its potential to help the foundation reach its mission: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clarify what evaluation is and is not. - Develop a common understanding of evaluation’s purpose. - Determine how the foundation will use evaluation internally, e.g., to inform strategy, make budget allocation decisions, improve processes or learn about impact. <input type="checkbox"/> Create the foundation’s own evaluation educational materials, including concrete examples. Share these with current and incoming board members. <input type="checkbox"/> Invite outside speakers to a board meeting, including trustees or CEOs from other foundations or a panel of evaluation experts, to discuss how foundations are using evaluation. <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure that learning from and about evaluation is embedded into evaluation processes. <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____
	<p>TAKE ACTION</p> <p><i>Make notes on plans you want to pursue to address this issue.</i></p>