

Achieving Greater Impact by Starting with Learning

How grantmakers can enable learning relationships at the grant application stage

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Achieving Greater Impact by Starting with Learning

When grantmakers ask the organizations they fund about their evaluation plans, they are typically motivated by a desire to achieve the greatest impact possible through their investment. They often hope to help the organizations they fund to do the same. However, these conversations sometimes veer off track, especially when nonprofits feel pressure to produce evaluation results that align with funders' preconceived ideas. Evaluation can turn into a tool for accountability and risk management rather than a tool for learning. One way to prevent this dynamic from developing is to make sure that grantmakers and grant recipients talk with one another about *why* they are interested in evaluating a particular project before they get into discussions of *what* should be measured and *how* data collection tools should be used.

This guide explores strategies that grantmakers can use to lay the groundwork for meaningful evaluation by focusing on learning rather than measurement early in the grant application process. We begin by defining what a learning culture or learning organization means and why it is important. Then, we discuss some of the key elements of learning organizations. Lastly, we outline some principles for grantmakers to help guide the development of a learning relationship with future grant recipients.

An organization may design an elegant and comprehensive evaluation system (...) but if it lacks a learning culture, the system will have little to no effect in making evaluation strategic and useful. Evaluation, at its core, is a means for learning, adapting, and changing. Organizations need to support a culture of risk taking, trust, tolerance for failure, and curiosity if they are truly going to benefit from evaluation efforts.¹

Background

The role of learning in grantmaking

Communities are dynamic, evolving, multi-layered networks, fueled by people and relationships as well as ideas and evidence. Consequently, efforts to address societal issues are unlikely to succeed if they are based on rigid, mechanistic strategies. Success requires the capacity to respond to changing circumstances in an organic way, and so ongoing learning and adaptation are essential. Increasingly, grantmakers working in [public benefit nonprofits](#) are taking this principle to heart. They are prioritizing ongoing learning, and in the process they are becoming convenors, capacity builders, facilitators, and social researchers as well as social investors and fundraisers.

Some have suggested that the very theory of what it means to be a charitable foundation is in flux.² Many grantmakers are seeking to develop more collaborative working relationships that are less focused on accountability and control and more concerned with shared learning. Instead of setting firm investment priorities or intended outcomes and then seeking out grant recipients who align, grantmakers are working with potential grant recipients to negotiate priorities that work for all partners. While some key evaluation questions may be clear at the outset, others may emerge over time as projects unfold.

Working in this new way means that grantmakers are drawing on research and evidence differently. Rather than expecting academic research or evaluation findings to provide the *right answers* about who to fund or how to act, grantmakers are realizing that data needs to be sought out, contextualized, discussed, and shared with others in considered, flexible ways. Instead of functioning as the central authority in the evaluation and learning process, grantmakers are beginning to function more as one node of many in a dynamic, non-hierarchical learning network.³

In this document, we unpack how grantmakers often begin their relationships with grant recipients. Drawing from the literature on learning cultures and organizational learning as well as a number of key informant interviews with grantmakers and experts in learning, we explore the ways in which grantmakers can start new relationships on the right foot by becoming more skilled at cultivating a strong focus on shared learning.

Why is organizational learning important?

Organizational learning is a hallmark of flexible, responsive, and impactful organizations, whether grantmakers or nonprofits. Although informal feedback and adaptation goes on all the time, few organizations actively plan for learning or make time to ensure it takes place in thoughtful, useful ways.

”

No-one would deny the importance of learning to our development as individuals and yet we often find it difficult to apply our understanding of learning to our work together in NGOs. In some ways the importance of learning to NGOs seems obvious and yet we are surrounded by evidence of how organisations find it difficult to translate understanding into practical action.⁴

”

While many grantmakers recognize that the measurement of outcomes requires specialized expertise and dedicated resources, they don't always acknowledge that the same is true for the work of learning from evaluation. In an article written by some of the founders of the [Evaluation Roundtable](#), Patrizi, Thompson, et al. argue that foundations need to get better at connecting learning to strategy:

” To be good at strategy, foundations need to be good at learning. However, foundations have not “cracked the nut” of how to learn about, adapt, and improve strategy in ways commensurate with their potential to meet their strategic aims. While learning is important for strategic success in most circumstances, it becomes essential when foundations engage in the complex environments characterizing much of what they support under the mantle of strategic philanthropy. In fact, in these circumstances, learning is strategy.⁵ ”

For the same reasons that farmers must know a lot about the soil into which they plant their seeds, grantmakers interested in evaluating the impact of their investments must develop a deep understanding of organizational learning culture.

Why the grant application process is central to learning for grantmakers

For grantmakers who want to focus on shared learning, the grant application stage offers an early opportunity to learn from their potential grant recipients about the work they do, the issues in their community as they hear them, and the culture of their organization.

Beginning this process may mean unlearning old habits about the role of measurement and evaluation. In traditional grant application processes, measurement is often discussed, but questions tend to focus on accountability and risk management. Often, discussions revolve around ensuring program sustainability, clarifying how money will be spent, and what will be measured. While these may be important topics to discuss, they are not questions that set the stage for learning. This traditional approach in turn helps to shape the narrative and signals to nonprofits that learning is low on the priority list – if on it at all.

A couple of recent surveys of both nonprofits and grantmakers reflect this current state of affairs on learning. In 2011, only 40% of nonprofits surveyed believed that their processes were effective for encouraging learning.⁶ Similarly, a 2017 survey found that only 52% of grantmakers believed that their culture was maximizing effectiveness.⁷

Starting the conversation with a potential grant recipient by focusing on measurement sometimes sets up a relationship that is risk averse. Vu Le of Nonprofit AF captures much of this feeling in one of his [blog posts](#):

When we refer to the grant application process, we are referring to any number of steps that may include:

- A formal grant application
- A site visit
- Informal email correspondence and phone conversations (whether before, during, or after an application deadline)
- A one-on-one meeting between the grant recipient and grantmaker
- An information session to learn more about a grantmaker or grant opportunity
- Soliciting information about the grant applicant from other partners such as other grantmakers or organizations



How will you evaluate this program? Because we have little funding for a formal process with an external evaluator, we will have Edward, our social work practicum student, design a self-report survey. At the beginning and end of the program, we'll administer the survey. We'll put in lots of numbers and percentages to make it look impressive. This is not very rigorous or valid, due to selection bias, self-report bias, confounding variables, and a host of other issues, but it should be enough to convince you that we have good evaluation data. Please send money so we can buy Edward a cake.



Research tells us that evaluation can be a great way to promote learning and action, but only when certain conditions exist, such as a strong sense of shared purpose, buy-in from staff, trust, and a willingness to discuss failure.⁸ When evaluation design is discussed in the context of a grant application process that is focused on accountability and risk management there is a risk that measurement work will be viewed more as a bureaucratic obligation than as an exciting opportunity for learning.

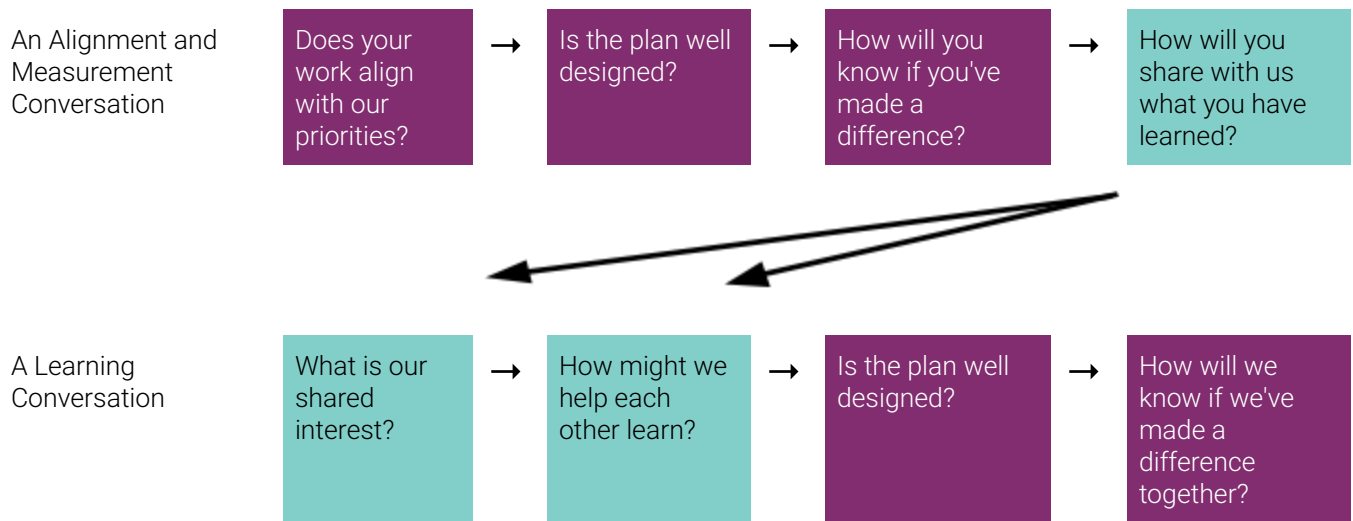
One of the reasons that it can be hard to leave these old habits behind is that they lend the application process a very clear, linear, and rational structure. While a learning conversation is likely to be richer and more interesting for both parties, it is also likely to be less structured and more complex. It may not be easy to develop clear criteria for how to manage a conversation like this one. Cultivating a culture focused on learning together requires good research and evaluation skills, but it also requires skill in facilitation, knowledge mobilization, partnership development, and collaborative planning. This may be one of the reasons why the increase in measurement work by grantmakers hasn't always translated into a better understanding of impact.

By contrast, an emphasis on developing learning relationships early on can have great value for grantmakers as it may ultimately lead to supporting organizations that are highly effective. This in turn may lead to greater long-term success as both the grant recipient and the grantmaker learn together and share in their goals and development of next steps.

Summary

It can take time to understand the complexities and nuances of a learning culture, and to develop the new skills required to create and sustain learning relationships. This process may require a grantmaker to invest additional resources (both time and money) and get better at internal reflection. Engaging with applicants and grant recipients in this way requires a willingness to share control over the planning process and the learning agenda, and this can lead to uncertainty and risk. It also requires unlearning some bad habits (such as treating measurement and evaluation as accountability mechanisms rather than opportunities for shared learning). Working in this new way isn't always easy and may require patience and iteration.

MOVING LEARNING TO THE BEGINNING OF THE CONVERSATION WITH A GRANT RECIPIENT



Culture

Elements of learning organizations

Organizations that have strong learning cultures tend to have structures and processes in place designed to encourage learning and leaders who explicitly promote and value it. There is also an emphasis on a culture that values intuitive, informal learning, and continuous improvement. Lastly, these organizations tend to have clear, specific, and intentional learning goals.

Definitions

Organizational culture is a term that lacks a single clear definition, but it is sometimes characterized as “a shared and learned world of experiences, meanings, values, and understandings that inform people and that are expressed, reproduced, and communicated partly in symbolic form,” and also partly in functional and practical actions.⁹

A **learning culture** can similarly be described in many ways. For instance, consider the following definition (more definitions can be found in Appendix A):



A learning culture exists when an organization uses reflection, feedback, and sharing of knowledge as part of its day-to-day operations. It involves continual learning from members’ experiences and applying that learning to improve. Learning cultures take organizations beyond an emphasis on program-focused outcomes to more systemic and organization wide focus on sustainability and effectiveness. It is about moving from data to information to knowledge.¹⁰



The Urban Institute suggests that learning organizations “use data to examine failures and weaknesses to make programmatic and operational changes.”¹¹ Other definitions focus on the degree to which learning has become a continuous process, embedded in the day-to-day habits of the organization, or on underlying values like trust and humility.¹² Most reference some of the key practical conditions or elements necessary to create a learning organization such as: time for reflection; strong leadership; and a willingness to admit failure among others.

According to Choi, “Most of organizational learning belongs to single-loop learning, in which individuals, groups, or organizations modify their actions through tactical adjustments. **Double-loop learning** is higher-order learning capable of shifting more fundamental strategies by questioning old values, assumptions, and policies.”¹³

In essence, double-loop learning is what organizations that strive for a strong learning culture seek to implement. This type of learning goes beyond, for example, the adjustments an individual staff member may make, to include the systems, processes, and policies that organizations put in place to facilitate the discussion and analysis of information for the purpose of making adjustments as necessary in service of achieving their missions.

To illustrate this, Schilling and Kluge (1999) present Crossan, et al's '4I' model for the Organizational Learning process¹⁴ that connects the individual, group, and organizational levels of learning:

- **Intuiting:** This process of developing new insights and ideas based on personal experience is located within the individual
- **Interpreting:** In this step, the individual explains their insights through words and/or actions to themselves and – more importantly – to others
- **Integrating:** This step takes place at the group level where a shared understanding among individuals and groups is achieved which allows for coherent, collective action within the organization
- **Institutionalizing:** Finally, shared understanding is implemented in systems, structures, procedures, rules, and strategies, thereby becoming independent of its individual or group origins, and guides organizational action

Key elements

Organizational culture and identity are expressed in symbolic ways as well as in practical actions and can vary across different organizations and even units within an organization. As a result, trying to operationalize the defining elements of what it means to have a learning culture can be challenging. For instance, ensuring learning from failure is an important action, but admitting failure may also involve risk. Creating an environment where it is safe to admit and learn from mistakes may require a number of steps and there may not be a linear path to get there. Winkler and Fyffe describe a few of the obstacles that organizations need to consider when trying to create a learning culture:

” Cultivating a learning culture may be a fundamental change for an organization, requiring a combination of strategies to encourage and enhance data use across all staff levels. Because organizational cultures vary and are multidimensional, one strategy can yield different results as department cultures may respond differently. Nonprofit leaders and managers may have to adjust their approach when dealing with different groups within the organization. Whether the goal is to focus internally to improve operations or externally to enhance service delivery and programs, organizations must foster environments where data are viewed as a vehicle for ongoing learning, and staff have the tools and space to apply and share what they learn.¹⁵ ”

In FSG's [Building a Strategic Learning and Evaluation System for Your Organization](#), the authors note that developing an organizational strategy for learning and evaluation is critical for making evidence-informed decisions. As part of this strategy, understanding and fostering a strong internal learning culture is fundamental. The guide also highlights five key learning processes and offers suggestions for activities for each. The five key learning processes¹⁶:

- Engaging in reflection
- Engaging to dialogue
- Asking questions

- Identifying and challenging values
- Seeking feedback

A learning organization may prioritize not only providing funding for professional development, but also opportunities for staff to share their professional development experiences with others, or the encouragement of staff to pursue any logical follow up opportunities. Without those elements, the sharing of knowledge, and the willingness to question assumptions, iterate, and respond to emerging issues will be missed.¹⁷

Several authors have suggested models for identifying the key elements of a learning culture. A strong commitment to learning from organizational leadership, demonstrated through behaviour, is often identified as one key element.

A commitment to learning is also evident in the organization's formal structures. Descriptions of key roles make it clear who is responsible for various elements of the learning process, and communication networks are set up to encourage learning. Milway and Saxton, in one of the few studies focused on nonprofits and learning, developed the following framework for describing organizational learning in the sector.

FOUR ELEMENTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING¹⁸

Leaders are committed to organizational learning:
 - Clear vision and goals for organizational learning
 - Champions and role models

Supportive Leaders

Culture of Continuous Improvements

Culture values organizational learning:
 - Aligned beliefs and values
 - Reinforcing incentives
 - Commitment to measurement of results

Organizational learning processes are embedded into daily workflows:
 - Defined processes to set learning agenda and capture, distill, apply, and share knowledge
 - Technology platforms

Intuitive Knowledge Processes

Defined Learning Structure

Organizational structure is aligned to support organizational learning:
 - Defined roles and responsibilities for capturing, distilling, applying, and sharing knowledge
 - Networks and coordination

In a study of nonprofits by [The Bridgespan Group](#), three gaps that prevented nonprofits from realizing the full potential of learning organizations were identified:

- **Setting and communicating goals.** Fewer than two-thirds defined compelling learning goals
- **Creating incentives.** Only half created incentives for staff to capture and share knowledge
- **Developing effective processes.** Only 40% believed their processes were effective for encouraging learning

While defining learning culture in the abstract isn't easy, building learning organizations within one's own organization doesn't have to be complicated. At the Ontario Nonprofit Network's 2017 Nonprofit Driven Conference, a session was organized that allowed a diverse group of nonprofit representatives to collectively share what they considered to be the [minimum requirements](#) for having a strong learning culture. The ideas below were identified in less than one hour and required minimal instruction from facilitators.

Elements of learning organizations (as identified at Nonprofit Driven 2017)

- Have an inclusive, intentional, and transparent learning environment. This means expanding the definition of who our organization is. Learning isn't only about our own team or organization
- Collaborate. We have to reach outside our organization and create networks with similar groups
- Non-judgemental. Need to be mindful of how people learn
- Ensure follow up. Evaluate, embed, and share the learning
- Plan and identify leaders. Make sure leaders offer support to staff
- Identify realistic learning goals that are connected to the mission of the organization
- Have a belief in the potential for improvement
- Language we use is important
- Don't ignore mistakes

Indeed, in many cases, the real challenge may be convincing staff that they are already doing some form of learning.

Another key element of learning organizations is that learning is intentional. It requires mindful attention to what is (or is not) being learned and the barriers to learning. It also requires putting in place actions or policies to better enable learning, leadership, and buy-in from staff. The *Emergent Learning* framework developed by Darling, Guber, et al. focuses on how to make learning more visible and accessible to a wider range of stakeholders.



From an Emergent Learning perspective, a group has learned only when people are conscious of their thinking, notice their results, reflect on those results, change their thinking and actions – and when their new thinking and actions produce better results, even as circumstances change. What emerges, as people experiment in small ways to solve immediate problems and compare their results, are ideas and solutions that no single expert could have designed in advance and which continue to evolve without external direction because of the agency that has been created within the community.¹⁹



Learning also happens in interaction, particularly when that interaction includes people from outside one's own team. This makes intuitive sense. Interacting directly with people with different experiences and points of view is likely to lead to new insights more quickly than talking only with one's co-workers *about* people and issues in the broader community. Lang reviewed research showing that innovative ideas often emerge from small teams of people made up of individuals with very different kinds of expertise who do not know each other well and are tasked with solving a very specific problem.²⁰ Harwood & Creighton found that impactful organizations are often those that are "turned outward;" highly attuned to emerging issues in their community, well connected to other organizations in other sectors, and willing to adapt their practices in order to achieve greater impact if needed.²¹

Assessing learning cultures

Many authors have created checklists or assessment tools designed to help organizations develop a better understanding of the elements of a learning culture (Appendix C lists several examples). Each offers good suggestions and insights that can facilitate the development of learning organizations. Given that building a learning culture is so context dependent, it is not surprising that each of these resources reflects the specific circumstances or audiences for which it was designed. Some assessment tools focus mainly on high-level principles or values such as the importance of learning from failure rather than tactical or operational suggestions. Others are designed with a particular context in mind such as an assumption of readiness to embrace organizational learning. Still others incorporate elements of a learning culture while focusing primarily on evaluation capacity or employee satisfaction.

For grantmakers and nonprofits, these definitions, tools, and resources should be seen as valuable sources of knowledge, advice, and strategies for contributing to developing a learning culture. The literature on organizational culture and learning is rich with ideas about how to build an organization that is dynamic, evolving, rewarding for the people involved, and impactful. Although it may not offer a recipe for success, spending some time with this literature underscores the potential benefit, should grantmakers and other nonprofit leaders seek to become more mindful about the process of organizational learning culture.

Organizational learning and evaluation

According to a 2016 report by the Innovation Network, in the United States, a majority of nonprofits surveyed agreed that evaluation is a critical component of learning. For example, 94% reported evaluation as important for learning whether original objectives were achieved, while 91% reported evaluation as important for learning about outcomes.²² Cousins, et al., note that "evaluation may reasonably be thought of as an organizational learning system."²³ Moreover, when done well, the use of data in an evaluation process can lead to "data valuing" more broadly within organizations as organizational decision-makers begin to see its benefits.²⁴

Key informant interviews

What are some of the factors that affect organizational learning?

"Leadership drives the question of what we should be learning about. It's not a trivial question. It gets less attention than it deserves. Lots of organizations gather data or go through strong learning processes, but it's often not grounded in why a particular question is useful vs. another question that could have been pursued."

~ Evaluation consultant

Many grantmakers make efforts to build the evaluation capacity of grant recipients. Ultimately, the goal of evaluation capacity building (ECB) is to ensure that “findings are used for decision-making and action on a regular basis.”²⁵ According to GEO, 77% of participating grantmakers offer capacity-building support around evaluation and learning.²⁶

In practice, however, ECB work has often focused more on strengthening internal organizational evaluation practices than on making sure those practices align well with the larger culture of the community served and the history of the relationship between the organization and that community.²⁷ In part, ECB has focused more on measurement than on learning as a result of broader funding shifts in government and philanthropy towards stronger accountability based on defined targets or technical criteria.²⁸ As noted by Britton:

“ The constant pressure for NGOs to demonstrate results generates an understandable concern about publicising or even sharing lessons learned from programme experience. The reluctance to be open about learning may be particularly strong where a programme has not achieved what was promised in funding applications for fear of the repercussions that may result.”²⁹

As a result of these kinds of pressures, many people in the nonprofit sector associate evaluation with the completion of surveys and the production of reports.

Michael Quinn Patton writes about the readiness of organizations to do evaluation as a key determinant of whether an evaluation will be a success. “A common problem in introducing evaluation into organizations has been doing too much (ie, large scale efforts and universal mandates) before the capacity was sufficient to support useful evaluation.”³⁰ Patton identifies “inadequate or underdeveloped learning-oriented culture” as one of the key barriers to nurturing evaluation.³¹

Summary

Organizational culture is expressed in symbols, principles, and processes as well as practical structures and behaviours. Consequently, it is difficult to develop a single straightforward definition of a learning culture or a foolproof set of strategies for promoting a learning culture. That said, the literature does consistently emphasize the importance of elements like leadership, intentionality, and interaction. Working to develop a culture that values learning is seen by leading evaluation authors as a crucial first step to building an organization’s evaluation capacity.

Key insights about the elements of learning organizations

- **Learning is a habit.** Organizations build a focus on learning into their routine practices. They consciously invite and reward learning.
- **Learning goals are clear.** Organizations know what they want to learn and why that is important.
- **Deep questions get asked.** Organizations ask questions about their values and assumptions, not just questions about program tactics.
- **The organization is ready to act on what it learns.** Organizations are prepared for the implications of what they learn. They are willing and able to alter their practices.
- **Learning is inclusive and engages partners.** Organizations engage their external partners in the learning process.
- **Leadership drives organizational learning.** Executive directors, CEOs, presidents, and senior managers play an important role in leading by example and in creating space and encouraging learning in others.

Key informant interviews

How do you distinguish organizational learning from evaluation?

"It's possible that an organization has the core fundamentals in place to be a learning organization, but it may not have the funding or expertise to have a really strong evaluation culture in place. There are lots of good reasons why an organization may not have evaluation expertise. Evaluation is part of learning, but if it stands on its own, you're not getting the value — just number crunching. It's through iteration, failure, etc. that leads to learning. Sometimes nonprofits have the learning part down, but don't have the evaluation support."

~ Nonprofit

Key informant interviews

How do you distinguish organizational learning from evaluation?

"It's not a hard line between the two. The professional community of evaluation is mostly composed of people who are independent and trying to get past the self-reporting bias. Learning or collective learning is about moving toward a collective goal or purpose. Evaluation is always going to have to come from previous empirical evidence, but learning doesn't necessarily have to be. It could be emotional, it could be contextual, or relationship-based for example."

~ Evaluation consultant

Principles

Principles to guide the development of a learning relationship

Grantmakers have been deploying evaluation techniques like outcomes planning and measurement for some time, but these efforts haven't always led to meaningful learning for grantmaker or grant recipient. Part of the reason for this disconnect may be the fact that these techniques have not been embedded in a strong and deep "theory of the foundation" that prioritizes ongoing learning and responsiveness to changing contexts.³² An interaction that begins with a focus on shared learning is very different from one focused narrowly on measurement.

In this section, we present six principles to guide the development of a learning relationship. In brief, they are:

- **Model a culture of learning.** As a grantmaker, demonstrate your own commitment to learning from the process of communication with applicants by sharing information about your own learning culture.
- **Learn in partnership.** Learning requires reaching outside one's comfort zone and listening to others. It requires developing a different kind of relationship with grant recipients.
- **Understand an applicant's approach to learning.** Organizations learn in a wide range of ways. Their capacity to learn may be inhibited by a range of external factors and their approach may change over time as they grow.
- **Plan for learning.** Identify up front what each party hopes to learn, but also acknowledge that learning is, by nature, iterative and can include unexpected results. This can set the stage for more honest conversations going forward, help form trust between the parties, and clarify alignment.
- **Reward learning.** Make it clear from the beginning that a commitment to learning will be valued in the decision-making process and in managing the grant on an ongoing basis. This can also help to reduce the reporting burden on potential and future grant recipients and encourage discussion of what really matters.
- **Balance flexibility and fairness.** Since culture is a dynamic phenomenon and learning often arises in unexpected ways, the process of interaction and reporting will need to be adjustable to make sense for the conditions and context that each grant recipient is operating under. Cultivating a learning culture necessarily involves surrendering some control over the process and acknowledging mistakes. It is important that all stakeholders are comfortable with this shift and that they are supported to manage it.

Model a culture of learning

Grantmakers interested in learning need to be transparent about their own culture to build trust with their grant recipients. As Raynor notes, learning is “real work” that requires demonstrating an authentic intent to learn. The literature makes clear that it can take significant time (some estimate as many as five years) for an organization to develop a strong learning culture.³³ This can mean that grantmakers looking to create a learning culture in a context of limited resources and time may see learning as a *nice to have* or a long-term strategy rather than something that — like other elements of nonprofit work — requires prioritization and budgeting.³⁴

Like their grant recipients, grantmakers have goals and aspirations as well as timelines and constraints. How they define their own learning culture to support meeting those goals while dealing with those timelines and constraints goes a long way towards whether they will be able to effectively identify and support learning in grant recipients.

The Collective Impact Forum resource [Advancing Funders’ Openness Practices: Lessons for the Field from the Collective Impact Funder Action Lab](#) highlights eight case studies of funders who have worked to develop their “openness”. Funder openness is defined as the process by which funders:

- Share their goals and strategies
- Share how they make decisions and measure progress
- Listen and engage in dialogue with others
- Make space for co-creation that builds more community buy-in
- Act on feedback they hear from current and potential grantees and the community
- Share what they themselves have learned
- Promote sharing between funders and grantees (funder-to-funder, grantee-to-grantee, funder-to-grantee)

This resource highlights many opportunities that funders can use to model learning at the grant application stage and beyond. Grantmakers interested in promoting learning in their interactions with applicants need to continually demonstrate that they themselves have made learning a priority and that they expect the same from grant recipients.

Developing and modeling a culture of learning may require staff at grantmaking organizations to develop new skills. According to a 2017 report by The Center for Effective Philanthropy, there is a strong desire by grant officers to understand and support their grant recipients. For instance, 98% of grant officer respondents said that “having strong relationships with grantees is important for achieving my foundation’s goals.”³⁵ However, only 53% said that they had the knowledge necessary to help the grantees they work with assess the results of their work.³⁶ Moreover, 60% of respondents said that if they had more time, they would spend it “learning more about and/or developing relationships with the grantees they support.”³⁷

When focusing on an organization’s learning culture, the challenge is getting a set of criteria in place so that grant officers can use the information they already gather and apply it in a way that is as fair as possible. For this reason, grant officers may need specific training or support to become more aware of

the many aspects of organizational learning and how they might manifest themselves in particular contexts such as on a grant application, in a meeting, during on a phone call.

It is also important to note that within a grantmaking organization, different people may interact with grant recipients at different times. Particularly in larger organizations, program officers, evaluation staff, and executives may all have some responsibilities with regard to engagement. Yet, there can be tensions in outlooks, relationships, and philosophies within a grantmaker about the place and role of evaluation. Greenwald cites a former foundation CEO who noted this tension:

“ Program staff see [evaluation] as a distraction. They are action people and so are grantees – sure that what they’re working on is going to be a good thing... From this perspective, the whole idea of evaluation in a formal sense is disruptive. From another angle, program directors are not interested in having results that show their investment in staff and [grant] money was not effective. [Program directors] are passionate and didn’t think what they did could or needed to be measured.³⁸ ”

Learn in partnership

Learning happens in interaction and not in isolation so building relationships that maximize the potential for learning is key. At the grant application stage, this means embracing a dynamic, collaborative, and flexible partnership that focuses on modeling, understanding, developing, planning, and rewarding learning. This point is especially important for grantmakers because their work focuses to a large degree on building the capacity of other organizations to take action and achieve impact.

This interaction often evolves through time, before and after the formal application process. Some grantmakers interact with potential grant recipients informally on an ongoing basis. Some invite questions from and discussion with potential grant recipients during the proposal development process. These are all opportunities to cultivate a focus on learning. It may also suggest that in order to help other organizations learn, grantmakers themselves need to develop their own internal capacity.

At the same time, grantmakers often use grant applications to gather information and try to get a sense of how things are going. However, this may not work so well when trying to capture learnings of a particular project – let alone an organization – through point-in-time applications. In other words, the lifecycle of organizations and programs and how they operate may not always align with the questions, timelines, and methods for gathering information used by grantmakers. This is not intended as a criticism of grant applications or grantmakers. Indeed, these serve a purpose and are used for good reason to help grantmakers make informed and fair decisions. Nonetheless, when trying to get at organizational learning, applications can only show so much.

EXAMPLE:

Learning can happen at different times

Consider the following hypothetical example. An organization has a program to help prevent bullying in schools. Many schools participate in the program. They are based in different kinds of communities, and are geographically spread out. They all have slightly different schedules for when they run their anti-bullying programming. As part of their learning and evaluation about how that program is working, the organization may have quarterly meetings with teachers and principals of all the schools. Internally, the organization may also have monthly check-ins with their own staff members who are based at different schools. There might also be specific internal dates for larger discussions about how the organization is communicating with stakeholders, sharing information, and so forth. Altogether, there might be multiple points of learning that are occurring. Some may be planned and others unplanned. Different combinations of stakeholders may take part at different times. There may be no central repository for the insights gained through these various processes.

Now consider a scenario in which this organization has a chance to apply to a foundation for further funding to expand the program to additional schools. The foundation may be interested in understanding the culture within the applicant organization and making sure that they are set up to capture the learnings that are likely to emerge.

Here is where things can potentially get tricky for the foundation to fully understand the organization's learning culture. For instance:

- At the grant application stage, there may not be sufficient space for the grant recipient to explain their process
- In a phone conversation to discuss the grant application, the emphasis may be on how to correctly and quickly fill in the required information for which there may be easy answers, but avoided are topics that require more focus and understanding
- During a potential site visit, an organization may invite foundation staff members to sit in on a meeting. At this meeting, some honest and difficult conversations might take place between the grant recipient and the schools about the progress of the program. This may be seen negatively by the foundation staff member, but is actually a positive for the organization that has taken pains to make sure that safe space for honest conversation has been created

In short, grantmakers interested in learning in partnership with their future grant recipients will need to be aware of these situations and take to heart the notion that learning can happen at different points in time that may only be uncovered through continued interaction.

Understand an applicant's approach to learning

The literature reviewed in previous sections makes it clear that there is no single recipe for building a culture of learning. What works in a small nonprofit organization may not work in a large, complex organization. Factors like the mission of the organization, its recent history and its leadership style may mean that some approaches to critical reflection and learning are more effective than others.

In a paper focused on training nonprofits around monitoring and evaluation, Chaplowe lists 14 principles³⁹ for adult learning that should be taken into account to ensure that the training meets the needs of the target organizations. A few of those principles:

- **Establish a safe and respectful climate.** Adults learn better when they feel safe and respected
- **Respond to the “need to know.”** Adults prefer to know *what*, *why*, and *how* they are learning
- **Provide a structured yet flexible progression.** Adults prefer learning that is well organized
- **Empower with genuine participation.** Adults want to share full responsibility for their learning
- **Incorporate past experience.** Adults prefer learning that builds upon their prior experience

Similarly, grantmakers interested in developing learning partnerships need to make space for varied learning styles.

Grantmakers rely on a number of different methods — both formal and informal — to better understand the culture of a grant applicant. Appendix D offers some suggestions on ways to identify some of the knowledge you may already have about a potential grant recipient.

In larger organizations, different departments or units may have slightly different cultures. Therefore, it may not make sense for a grantmaker to try to understand the entire organization's culture; instead, it may make more sense to think about a particular department or unit.

The Peery Foundation has a “[grantee-centric philanthropy](#)” approach. This means seeking to understand and empathize with nonprofit leaders. The foundation defines five core ways to be grantee-centric:

- Build internal culture
- Do the homework
- Give what's most effective
- Provide additional support
- Stay accountable

Each practice offers suggestions for practical actions grantmakers can take. For instance, the fifth core practice (“stay accountable”) offers good ideas on how grantmakers can be responsive and create space for learning to take place, including by setting expectations so grant recipients “know that you want to be accountable to them. Establish the expectation that you are interested in input and ideas.”⁴⁰ Another suggestion is to regularly seek input, both directly and anonymously, and to discuss the feedback internally as a team.⁴¹

ONN's resource **Learning Together: Five Important Discussion Questions to Make Evaluation Useful** is designed to help articulate more clearly what stakeholders want to get out of an evaluation and what concerns each partner may have about the process. It is also intended as a conversation starter and is a means to open up a dialogue on a subject area that can be complex and difficult. It can be a useful tool for grantmakers and nonprofits to use to find ways to learn together, and to help create transparency around goals and expectations.

Plan for learning

Learning happens when there is intentionality; clear, shared, and focused learning goals. As one key informant put it: “We [grantmakers] need to focus on learning and not just on accountability. We need to model good practices that we want our partners to pick up.” It is important to remember that learning goals are distinct from project goals or intended program outcomes and instead articulate how you intend to use certain information gathered. Developing common learning goals involves exploring the degree to which a particular partnership has the potential to generate useful insights.

Imagine a grantmaker that has very clear investment priorities that are unpacked into concrete, measurable outcomes that it expects grant recipients to measure. Perhaps, for example, their focus is on helping young adults transition from school to employment, and they seek out grant recipients capable of making a measurable impact on job search skills, career planning skills, and connections between students and employers.

This grantmaker may receive proposals from a number of different organizations, each with equally strong potential to achieve measurable change in one or more of these outcomes. However, these proposals may vary widely in their potential to generate useful learning. One may be scaling up a tried-and-true model, while another may be proposing something highly experimental. One may have strong, long-standing connections to private sector employers who are poised to play an active role in the project, while another may only be beginning to cultivate these kinds of relationships. One program may be delivered by established professionals, while another intends to have the program guided by an advisory committee made up of recent graduates.

None of these differences are bad. However, some scenarios may align more strongly than others with the grantmaker’s own learning goals. Perhaps, for example, this grantmaker has been hoping to cultivate stronger private sector partnerships itself. Understanding why applicants have made these choices is important. This is why seeking out alignment in learning goals and processes as well as alignment in intended outcomes is important.

Before meeting with a potential grant recipient or reviewing a grant application, it is helpful to reflect on what you know and still want to know and to think ahead to how you might create a good learning relationship. This can include asking yourself a few simple questions, such as:

- What do I already know about this grant applicant?
- Has this grant applicant previously submitted an application to us? If so, what can be learned from that application?
- What are my organization’s learning goals and where is there alignment?
- What follow-up questions (if needed) could I ask to get a sense of the applicant’s learning priorities?
- What kind of feedback am I able to provide to the grant applicant on their proposed or submitted application?

When planning for learning, it is also important to remember that some organizations are better equipped to communicate with you about their learning goals. Smaller organizations without full-time grant writing

staff, for example, may not be as skilled in using the language you are used to. It may be necessary to plan for additional processes to fully understand an organization's learning priorities. This may include:

- Reviewing the language you are sharing publicly about your processes and ensuring it is clear
- Getting external feedback on the applicant or application from members of the community
- Arranging for a site visit or meeting to better understand the applicant and the work they do if writing is not their strong suit

Developing a formal learning and evaluation plan is one tactic that can be helpful to consider to help insights surface. A learning and evaluation plan that is designed to maximize learning may be more complex than one built to fulfill accountability requirements. It may include more qualitative data and more discussion around interpretation of findings. It is important, before beginning a dialogue about learning relationships, to make sure that the approach you are suggesting aligns with the resources available for evaluation. Evaluation capacity-building work may need to be expanded to focus on planning for evaluation and learning from evaluation findings.

One grantmaker that has developed a formal learning plan is [USAID](#). Its *learning agenda* includes:

- A set of broad questions that address critical knowledge gaps and will enable new kinds of action once answered
- Associated learning activities to generate answers to these questions. These activities include more formal activities such as research, evaluation, or literature reviews and less formal techniques such as "pause and reflect" sessions or portfolio reviews
- A plan for specific learning products tailored to specific audiences and designed with specific usage and application in mind⁴²

It is important to remember that a learning plan isn't simply about gathering and analyzing data. It is also about building processes and relationships that foster trust and mutual understanding. USAID says "a learning agenda can also be a useful process through which to collaborate with peers and colleagues, fill gaps in knowledge and generate new evidence that we can then use to adapt our work."

The grant application stage is only the start of a longer process, and some of the most useful learnings are completely unexpected. However, chance favours the prepared mind, so understanding and building a learning relationship through

The Lyle S. Hallman Foundation, based in Kitchener, Ontario, has a philosophy of "engaged philanthropy." The foundation encourages organizations that are interested in applying for funding to get in touch prior to submitting a formal application:

"We will often work with an organization to develop and refine a proposal that is a priority for our foundation. A meeting with one of our staff also provides an opportunity to discuss whether the proposal meets our criteria before an applicant invests significant time and resources in completing a full proposal."

In addition, the foundation also holds regular information sessions in advance of an open application period to provide an opportunity for potential applicants to learn more about its granting programs and philosophy. Prior to approval, a site visit may take place to provide the foundation with an opportunity to see a program "in action" and input from external advisors, experts and other funders will also be considered. This information, along with a financial analysis, are considered collectively before a grant is made.

ongoing support and feedback is important. If learning is to be authentic and a priority then grantmakers may need to work with their grant recipients to define common learning goals and how those might be supported. It also means that grantmakers need to be prepared to know that while they will have some insights from the grant application process, they will not know everything.

Reward learning

Most organizations are set up in a hierarchical way, wherein responsibility for big decisions rest with senior leaders who seek input from junior staff. Organizations, by design, have an interest in minimizing unnecessary risk and maintaining stability. As such, it is never easy to create an organizational culture that encourages staff to provide honest feedback, especially when that feedback is negative. This reality can create challenges for organizations interested in building a culture of learning.

In a similar way, when evaluation is used by a grantmaker as an accountability mechanism, grant recipients often don't feel that they can openly share negative evaluation findings about lessons learned, unexpected challenges faced, or outcomes not achieved. Yet, these kinds of evaluation findings are often the richest sources of learning. Therefore, a grantmaker must be able to demonstrate to the applicant how they intend to create a safe space for sharing and discussing lessons learned.

There are a number of ways that grantmakers can reward learning and it is important to explain these strategies at the application stage. Some actively seek out frank reflections on challenges faced and lessons learned. The [Atkinson Foundation](#), for example, asks grant recipients to submit periodic reflective blog posts about what they are learning. Other grantmakers host learning events, at which past grant recipients share their experiences with newer recipients. These strategies, which are focused on stories and examples, rather than systematic evaluation data, also help to reduce the time and energy required by nonprofits to become active participants in the learning conversation. Some grantmakers seek to create safe spaces for learning by appointing independent third parties to facilitate reflective meetings or coordinate evaluation efforts.

Good (2018) has developed a quick [one-pager](#) designed to help groups communicate effectively about failure. Even at the grant application stage, reflecting on past challenges or on the potential for challenges to arise in the planned project can be a good way to set the stage for learning. When encouraging others to share their stories of failure, it is important to ask them what they need to feel safe, and to respond with curiosity and appreciation. It is also important to avoid judgement and to resist the temptation to problem solve or minimize the teller's emotional response by saying things like *it can't be that bad*. Preserving sufficient time to talk through failure and looking for root causes can also be helpful.

Key informant interviews

Do you feel like you are getting honest answers when you ask questions like 'what have you learned?'

"We get safe answers I think. And that is human nature. Trust has a lot to do with it. This requires a change in behaviour on the applicant's side but also on the funder's side. We as a funder say we are interested in learning organizations, but if we don't support them through that process they won't believe what we are saying. We need to be very transparent."

~ Grantmaker

Balance flexibility and fairness

Building a relationship with applicants that is focused on learning requires a willingness on the part of grantmakers to enter into more open-ended conversations with them. In other words, grantmakers should seek to “minimize the number of rules or expectations imposed on grant recipients, in order to maximize their freedom of movement” and “allow grantees the freedom to bring their own best thinking to how to achieve their shared goal.”⁴³

However, a grantmaker that faces pressure to demonstrate that its granting decisions have been impartial and transparent may face challenges if it shifts towards a more flexible and interactive style of cultivating relationships with potential grant recipients. A recent blog post from the Center for Effective Philanthropy highlights this issue:

“ Making change is an art and it requires working with others. Simply put, philanthropists often have a difficult time taking the risk of letting go of control. It’s easy to understand why. There is so much pressure on philanthropists today. Everyone wants a “clear return on investment,” after all. The press is often watching. No one wants to waste money or look foolish. Unfortunately, in response to these pressures, philanthropists too often tighten the reins to try to control the uncertainties, rather than empowering a capable leader to exercise judgment in navigating the uncertainties as they arise.”⁴⁴

Grantmakers must find the right balance between flexibility (which encourages learning) and fairness (which ensures transparency and accountability). Finding that balance involves a number of elements, including:

- Spending time reviewing how information about learning goals and plans will be documented and used in decision making.
- Consulting with other stakeholder groups (such as donors or other grantmakers) about their learning goals, in order to ensure that they are considered alongside the input of applicants when making decisions.
- Acknowledging that learning is an ongoing process and that it may not be possible to be as focused and intentional as one may wish at the application stage.

At the same time, standardization does have its benefits and can help to make the process more transparent and less time-intensive. Some grantmakers, recognizing this, have developed different granting streams to address this. For example, a grantmaker providing one-year funding may not care so much about learning and therefore the expected relationship with the grant recipient requires less investment. As it concerns the grant application stage, this may mean a more simplified set of questions or processes that an applicant is required to address to apply for funding.

Thinking ahead, this early flexibility can be considered part of a longer term effort to help build the kind of trust needed to have a long-term learning relationship. [The Whitman Institute](#), in conversation with the Center for Effective Philanthropy, highlights what this might look like beyond the grant application stage:



We don't take a "one-size-fits-all" approach to reporting. It varies according to the particular relationship we have with an individual grantee, including how long we have been supporting them, how often we are in communication (it can vary from year to year), and whether we are making a one-time grant or not. The through line is that the focus is on learning and being a supportive partner. Unless our grantees tell us otherwise, we assume our funds are used to pay staff and keep the lights on.⁴⁵



In situations where decisions about large investments may be made, the level of scrutiny placed on those connecting with potential applications, reviewing applications, and making recommendations may be intense. Shifting towards a focus on learning, rather than a focus on alignment and measurement, may make the process appear less objective and more risky.

Even so, it is possible for grantmakers to develop transparent and fair guidelines for managing themselves while seeking to build learning relationships, and for taking this kind of information into account when making granting decisions. The table below offers some suggestions.

Key informant interviews

What are some of the barriers you see in terms of developing a learning relationship?

"One of the things I think about in terms of a challenge, if we were to ask these questions more focused on learning, how then do we report back? We have to think about the purpose of why we're asking this information. What are we going to do with that information? It sounds like that information would be more for our own purposes unless we could make the argument that learning organizations are better for the community. Otherwise, the community doesn't care. There are two types of information: 1. For use internally for making own decisions; and 2. For reporting back to the community."

~ Grantmaker

Key informant interviews

What are some of the barriers you see in terms of developing a learning relationship?

I think what is most challenging for funders will also be the same for nonprofits: consistency and understanding the process. I can see some nonprofits not appreciating the time it takes to build relationships, allow for site visits and conversations and just want to fill out the @\$& application. Time is a huge barrier for nonprofits these days. It's a transition from transactional to transformational relationships that both sides would need to embrace. I think there is also something to be said about the need for proportionality in terms of the grant size or length and the information required.

~ Nonprofit

COMPARING APPROACHES TO CONNECTING WITH GRANT APPLICANTS

How do you know if you have done a good job of connecting with grant applicants? How do you demonstrate that you have managed the risks well?

Criteria under a traditional approach	Criteria under an approach focused on learning
There is strong alignment with our investment priorities.	There is potential for a strong working relationship. There are clear, intentional, and shared learning goals.
There is good potential for the project to achieve predetermined outcomes (or, at least, to report on degree of success in achieving those outcomes).	There is good potential for the project to generate important new learnings to advance these goals, which may take the form of evidence of impact but may also focus on other questions.
The project plan is well developed. The proposed work seems doable within the timeframe and budget.	The proposed work seems doable within the timeframe and budget, and flexible enough to evolve over time. The project plan includes processes and mechanisms designed to maximize the potential for learning.

Key informant interviews

How much do you feel you know about your grant recipients?

What makes this hard is line of sight. You know what you know based on the information people are willing to give you. I need a lot of information about something to feel informed. We get information from organizations and that is what we have to go on. I don't believe you can know what you need to know on paper. We do site visits and other things to help with this. I still don't feel like we know enough about these organizations. Even if you asked five people within our own organization about what they know about a grant recipient, you might get five different answers.

~ Grantmaker

Summary

The principles in this section point to a central message: Grantmakers should start with learning rather than measurement. Nonprofits (including some grantmakers) are influenced by what they perceive to be of interest to their funders. Grant applications that prioritize typical evaluation questions, those in teal in the diagram below, can lead to nonprofits interpreting that what matters most is being able to answer questions on measurement and accountability. While the teal questions are important and do serve a purpose, they can send the wrong signal when asked at the beginning of a relationship. Shifting the focus to prioritize learning questions, those in purple, can change the conversation to one that is more open, fluid, and, potentially, more honest. Ideally, the grant application stage would be an entry point for the grant recipient and the grantmaker to begin a relationship that was more focused on learning. Ultimately, the types of questions that get asked and even the way in which they are asked can have implications for the type of information that a grantmaker expects will emerge. For instance, the teal questions below are low risk, accountability focused, and transactional. If they get asked early in the conversation, they may set a tone for what is to follow.

Outcomes-based planning and measurement work is much more likely to lead to action if it is undertaken by an organization that prioritizes learning. This is especially true in the nonprofit world where traditional, linear evaluation models often can't keep pace with the speed and complexity of change. In the introduction, we observed that grantmakers understand this principle, but are only beginning to develop the skills and strategies that they will need to make cultivation of learning a strong strategic focus of their role. Achieving this goal often requires a deep re-think of how grantmakers and applicants interact with one another and the development of a new set of skills. In this section, we have tried to identify key principles that can act as points of reference in this complex, transformative journey.

LEARNING QUESTIONS VS MEASUREMENT QUESTIONS IN A GRANT APPLICATION

Learning-oriented questions	Outcomes and measurement-oriented questions
Why are you proposing this project? What are some of your organization's learning goals?	
Before >	What are your outcome objectives?
Why do you see us as a good partner? How can we help each other learn?	
Before >	How do you align with our investment priorities?
What do you hope to learn? How will you make use of evidence when making decisions?	
Before >	What are your evaluation questions?
What do you expect to be the challenges? How will you know if you are on track? What would count as success?	
Before >	What are your benchmarks or targets?
How often do staff meet to talk or reflect on project/program progress? In what ways does your organization document and share information?	
Before >	What indicators and methods will you use?

Final thoughts

Start the conversation with learning

Grantmakers who are seeking to leverage their assets to make progress or change on large-scale issues such as human rights, poverty, or climate change rely on the nonprofits they fund to get the work done on the ground. However, it is often difficult to really understand who these nonprofits are, how they work, and whether they share the same goals. The grant application stage has traditionally been the place to try to begin to get answers to these questions. At the same time, it is during this stage that grantmakers can be prone to asking questions that in fact focus more on accountability or are simply not appropriate to be asked at this point in time. As a result, the grantmaker-grant recipient relationship starts down a road that may not enable honest conversations, trust, or understanding.

In some respects, there will always be a certain intangible feeling towards learning. As such, grantmakers need a variety of strategies for gathering information about learning organizations as well as internal understanding of how their own learning cultures inform their decision making. Most importantly, grantmakers will need to approach their relationship with their grant recipients in a different way if they are interested in truly learning and sharing with them. It may require getting out of comfort zones and being flexible in the practices and policies that are employed. Using the grant application process is therefore crucially important to starting that reciprocal learning relationship.

In the next phase of our work, a key focus will be on developing and testing practical tools and resources to enable grantmakers and nonprofits to engage in a relationship that is centred on learning.

Appendix A

Some “learning culture” definitions

<p>A resource guide for Head Start programs: Moving beyond a culture of compliance to a culture of continuous improvement Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services</p>	<p>“A culture of continuous improvement is generally synonymous with learning culture or continuous inquiry. The term “continuous” suggests a cycle or a feedback loop that repeatedly challenges individuals to consider what is working and what can be done differently to improve or achieve better results. This process of inquiry is continuous rather than episodic. Individuals in continuous improvement cultures are always asking questions and seeking answers to those questions. Organizations actively pursuing a culture of continuous improvement create a safe space for staff and stakeholders to ask, reflect, and think more creatively about solutions. Foremost, the organization must cultivate a sense of trust throughout the agency. Those in executive and management roles must model a curious yet humble spirit.”</p>
<p>What’s a Learning Culture & Why Does it Matter to Your Nonprofit? Center for Nonprofit Excellence</p>	<p>“A learning culture exists when an organization uses reflection, feedback, and sharing of knowledge as part of its day-to-day operations. It involves continual learning from members’ experiences and applying that learning to improve. Learning cultures take organizations beyond an emphasis on program-focused outcomes to more systemic and organization wide focus on sustainability and effectiveness. It is about moving from data to information to knowledge.”</p>
<p>Strategies for Cultivating an Organizational Learning Culture Urban Institute</p>	<p>“A learning culture moves beyond compliance by encouraging nonprofits to develop self-correcting mechanisms and internal practices that Further, a learning culture minimizes barriers to data and knowledge and rewards and encourages data-driven practices, making learning and continuous improvement the rule, not the exception.”</p>
<p>Testing a Measure of Organizational Learning Capacity and Readiness for Transformational Change in Human Services Journal of Prevention & Intervention in Community</p>	<p>“Organizational learning capacity can be understood as the level of investment an organization makes in (1) aligning its vision and values with its structural systems and practices, both internal and external to the organization; and (2) promoting a culture of staff learning and development that includes (a) open communication systems and practices, (b) exploration, information-seeking, and learning, (c) staff empowerment, (d) support for professional development throughout the organization.”</p>

<p>Creating a Learning Culture for the Improvement of Your Organization Training Industry</p>	<p>“A learning culture is a collection of organizational conventions, values, practices and processes. These conventions encourage employees and organizations to develop knowledge and competence. An organization with a learning culture encourages continuous learning and believes that systems influence each other. Since constant learning elevates an individual as a worker and as a person, it opens opportunities for the establishment to transform continuously for the better.”</p>
<p>Developing a Learning Culture in Nonprofit Organizations: Need for a Learning Culture Stephen J. Gill</p>	<p>“Organizational learning is the process of forming and applying collective knowledge to problems and needs. It is learning that helps the organization continually improve, achieve goals, and attain new possibilities. It is learning that taps into employee aspirations, fueling commitment and creating the energy to change.”</p>
<p>The Challenge of Organizational Learning Katie Smith-Milway & Amy Saxton</p>	<p>Organizational learning: “The intentional practice of collecting information, reflecting on it, and sharing the findings, to improve the performance of an organization.”</p>
<p>Organisational Learning in NGOs: Creating the Motive, Means and Opportunity Bruce Britton</p>	<p>Organizational learning: “Individual and collective learning in an organisational context that contributes to changed organisational behaviour.”</p>
<p>A Multidisciplinary Model of Evaluation Capacity Building Preskill & Boyle, 2008</p>	<p>Organizational learning capacity: “the extent to which and the ways in which the organization’s leadership values learning and evaluation, creates a culture of inquiry, has the necessary systems and structures for engaging in evaluation practice, and provides communication channels and opportunities to access and disseminate evaluation information.”</p>
<p>Barriers to organizational learning: An integration of theory and research Schilling and Kluge</p>	<p>“...(A)n organizationally regulated collective learning process in which individual and group-based learning experiences concerning the improvement of organizational performance and/or goals are transferred into organizational routines, processes and structures, which in turn affect the future learning activities of the organization’s members.”</p>

Appendix B

Example of a grantmaker using the term “learning organization”

The Knight Foundation has begun to use the term “learning organization.” It has done so in an effort to go beyond “surfacing insights from past and present work, but to also encompass the ability and judgment to identify addressable challenges, formulate smart bets, and then rigorously interrogate and scrutinize those bets and the contours of the problems they are meant to attack.” In essence, while the foundation recognizes monitoring and evaluation as important, there remains a gap in terms of gaining clarity on the problem or challenge that its “smart bet” intends to address. More specifically, the Knight Foundation tries to support the development of learning organizations in three areas:

- **Context.** Invest in research to provide a clear understanding of the field they are trying to impact
- **Discussion.** Create space for staff, grantees, and other partners to have open conversations
- **Impact.** Work with grantees and partners to assess and share effectiveness of foundation’s efforts

Appendix C

A few existing tools and resources

Self-assessments	
Getting your organization ready to do evaluation - Part 2 Superu	A self-assessment questionnaire focused on the context that shapes your organization, the organization itself, and the people/individuals who make up the organization. The questionnaire is designed to be completed by all relevant staff for the purposes of having a conversation afterward about the results.
The Learning Organization Survey Harvard Business Review	A self-assessment survey for employees within an organization focused on personal perceptions of organizational culture.
Learning Self-assessment for foundations Alliance Magazine	A short article that offers a few questions for foundations to consider that learning and sharing foundations might do.
Learning Assessment Map (See appendix) Lorraine S. Nemeth	Designed to identify patterns of everyday learning in an organization. It is focused mainly on individuals providing answers in a self-assessment survey.
The Readiness for Organizational Learning and Evaluation Instrument FSG	This instrument is designed to help an organization determine its level of readiness for implementing organizational learning and evaluation practices and processes that support it.
Evaluation capacity diagnostic tool Informing Change	Designed to help organizations assess their readiness to take on many types of evaluation activities. It captures information on organizational context and the evaluation experience of staff and can be used in various ways.
Evaluation Capacity Assessment Instrument (ECAI) Taylor-Ritzler, Suarez-Balcazar, et al.	The 68-item measure assesses participants' perceptions of individual and organizational predictors of two evaluation capacity outcomes: mainstreaming and use of evaluation findings.
Utilization-Focused Evaluation Checklist Michael Quinn Patton	This checklist is for evaluators to assess and build evaluation readiness in organizations.

Resource guides	
<p>Inspiring Impact: The Code of Good Impact Practice NCVO</p>	<p>The Code of Good Impact Practice provides guidelines for focusing on impact. It sets out a cycle of impact practice and a series of principles to follow. Each principle includes a brief description of how your impact practice would look if you were applying the principle, an explanation of why it is important and some ideas about how to implement it.</p>
<p>Facilitating Intentional Group Learning: A Practical guide to 21 Learning Activities FSG</p>	<p>From quick 20-minute activities to multi-hour gatherings, this guide provides detailed instructions on how to conduct high-energy, inclusive, and productive experiences. It includes tools, resources, and case studies related to funders practicing openness.</p>
<p>Advancing Funders' Openness Practices: Lessons for the Field from the Collective Impact Funder Action Learning Lab Collective Impact Forum</p>	<p>This report goes deeply into five learning themes: building trust, listening before acting, increasing transparency, building capacity for community engagement, and sustaining openness practices.</p>
<p>Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) Toolkit USAID Learning Lab</p>	<p>A set of questions related to the work that an agency conducts that, when answered, enables the agency to work more effectively and efficiently, particularly pertaining to evaluation, evidence, and decision-making.</p>
<p>A resource guide for Head Start programs: Moving beyond a culture of compliance to a culture of continuous improvement US Department of Health and Human Services</p>	<p>Focused on US Head Start agencies, this guide offers advice on how to better understand and work with data, create a culture of learning, and increase the ability to identify gaps, and continuously improve programs.</p>
<p>Developing a Culture of Evaluation Community Literacy of Ontario</p>	<p>This project combines a variety of innovative consultation mechanisms and online training opportunities to help Ontario's non-profit organizations learn about the value of creating a culture of evaluation and how to foster this in their own organizations.</p>
<p>Learning Together: Five Important Discussion Questions to Make Evaluation Useful Ontario Nonprofit Network</p>	<p>This guide is meant to help you articulate more clearly what you want to get out of an evaluation and what concerns you may have about the process. It is a means to open up a dialogue with your stakeholders in a subject area that can be complex and difficult.</p>
<p>Collaborative Evaluation Approaches: A How-To Guide for Grantmakers Ontario Nonprofit Network</p>	<p>This guide is to provide grantmakers who support the nonprofit sector with practical guidance about how to take a more collaborative approach to evaluation.</p>

Appendix D

Identifying internal knowledge about grant applicants

Regardless of how many boxes can be filled out, the emphasis should be on recognizing that the grant application alone is only one source of knowledge.

What do you know about the grant applicant's learning culture based on...

Past grant applications	
Past formal progress reports	
Email or phone conversations with grant applicant staff or board members related to their application or project	
Events, professional development opportunities, or networking engagements we've organized or facilitated	
Site visits	
Informal conversations with other grantmakers, partners, or service users/clients	
Informal conversations with grant applicant staff or board members (such as at events or meetings)	
The grant applicant's website	

Appendix E

Examples of nonprofits intentionally developing a learning culture

Latin American Youth Center

The [Latin American Youth Center](#), Learning and Evaluation Division, based in Washington, DC, has developed a short document that outlines how a nonprofit could build a learning culture over five years. Step 1/Year 1 focuses on developing consistent data-gathering of demographic information such as a standardized form that can be used throughout the organization when working with clients or service users. Step 2/Year 2 focuses on gathering service information so that staff can better monitor and adjust their service. It is only in Step 3/Year 3 that the focus moves toward program- or service-level outcomes. Step 4/Year 4 focuses on organizational outcomes, while Step 5/Year 5 focuses on reviewing problem areas and developing more sophisticated methods.⁴⁶

While this guideline may not be applicable in all situations there are two takeaways to keep in mind from a process point of view. The first, is acknowledging that it takes time to build a learning culture and that the level of evaluation sophistication is equal to the readiness of the organization to do it. In other words, starting conversations about outcomes when the organization may not have consistent data about the people it serves could be the wrong starting point. Second, developing a learning culture requires deliberate and thoughtful planning. In this case, a five-year plan was developed with clear steps identified. However, the Latin American Youth Center also identified a number of “techniques for motivating staff to become more data-driven”⁴⁷. Staff could:

- Emphasize the importance of data collection in terms of service recipients
- Recognize (and be honest about) potential challenges with staff
- Provide examples of reports that staff may find useful
- Use internal advocates (other staff/peers) to talk about the benefit of the process
- Provide information and reports as quickly as possible to skeptical staff – and in a non-judgmental way
- Use information and reports to improve programming

Pillar Nonprofit Network

[Pillar Nonprofit Network](#), based in London, Ontario, is an organization that has intentionally thought a lot about learning. Learning takes places between people, organizations, and communities. There are formal professional development opportunities for staff such as the ability to attend conferences and workshops and participate in programs such as a social innovation residency. Staff can also be seconded to other organizations and are encouraged to sit on boards and committees. At staff meetings, sharing and learning from failure is encouraged and part of the agenda. Sharing failures or lessons learned is also embedded in the reports the executive director shares with her board using the language of “what are the challenges that are keeping me up at night”. The organization has worked to create a culture – on a limited budget – that encourages learning. As an example, one creative way the organization does this is

through an informal book club. Additionally, side chats, finding a mentor, and team-building are encouraged and supported by the organization. The focus is to get staff to take a step back from the “doing” and allow for some reflection. Moreover, the organization has thought about its work environment and how that might facilitate learning. For instance, flexible work arrangements such as the ability to work different schedules as well as to work away from the office from time to time have helped to contribute to a strong learning culture.

Externally, the organization also learns from its member organizations and, similarly, the peer-to-peer learning opportunity is one of the main reasons why organizations join Pillar. Through workshops, conferences, and online tools members are regularly engaged and encouraged to share and exchange ideas.

About this work

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Research for this work was carried out over several months from the fall of 2017 into spring of 2018. The authors reviewed a number of sources including academic journals, grantmaker websites, blogs, and reports. In addition, nine key informant interviews that included representatives of both Canadian and American nonprofits and philanthropic organizations as well as evaluation consultants were conducted by phone. Lastly, one in-person focus group comprising representatives from 15 American grantmakers was also completed.

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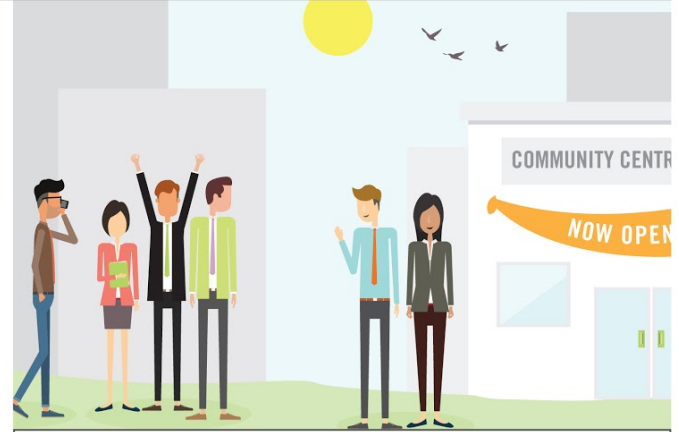
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WHEN EVALUATION IS FOCUSED ON LEARNING



Open & Clear Communication, Trust, and Collaboration



Meaningful Outcomes

WHEN EVALUATION IS FOCUSED SOLELY ON ACCOUNTABILITY



Unclear Expectations, Miscommunication, and Frustration



Missed Opportunities