

# Learning in Philanthropy

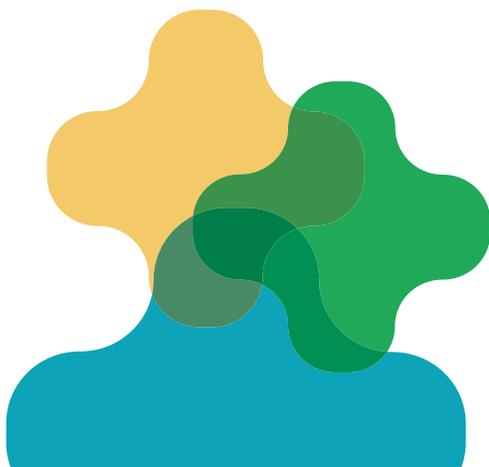
**A GUIDEBOOK**



GRANTMAKERS FOR  
EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS

## About GEO

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations exists to help grantmakers turn their desire to improve into real progress. That is the power of the GEO community. With more than 7,000 grantmakers across the globe, we work together to lift up the grantmaking practices that matter most to nonprofits and that truly improve philanthropy. There is no shortage of advice out there for grantmakers working to improve. There is also no shortage of hurdles to making change. Since 1997, GEO has provided opportunities for grantmakers to come together to share knowledge and inspire each other to act. GEO members find value in making strong connections to address mutual challenges and in navigating the same journey to improve. Working together, we have cut through the noise to identify the core smarter grantmaking approaches that enable transformational change. We have designed conferences focused on solving of-the-moment challenges, regular opportunities for peer learning, and publications that lift up best practices and examples from peers. As a result, GEO drives grantmakers' progress for more effective change.



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# Introduction

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Grantmakers support nonprofits and communities as they take on tough issues, from improving educational opportunities for students to strengthening civic engagement to achieving more equitable health outcomes for people and communities, and more. Adding to the challenge, this work is happening at a time when public policies, technologies and economic conditions are in a state of constant change, and many of the communities we serve may be experiencing a higher degree of uncertainty and concern about what the future holds. Solutions we think will work today may not be as relevant in the future.

In order to make lasting progress toward the goals we share with our nonprofit and community partners, we have to be learning all the time. We need to know what is happening in the communities where we want to have an impact. We need to know how change is affecting the ability of our partners to do their work and reach their goals. We need to know what others – including nonprofits, community members, other funders, government and business partners, and researchers – are learning about how to achieve the changes we want to see.

When grantmakers focus on learning for improvement, we use evaluation and learning to generate information and insights that will help us better understand both how we're doing in our work and how to improve. A focus on taking action based on what we learn ensures that we are engaged in strategic or applied learning. Our learning should be tied directly to the strategies we are pursuing and the decisions we are making.

## About This Publication

Over the years, GEO has published a variety of resources on learning and evaluation in philanthropy. GEO also hosts a biennial Learning Conference and has organized webinars, communities of practice, and other opportunities for grantmakers to “learn about learning” and share perspectives on challenges, opportunities and promising approaches.

Today, GEO continues to hear from members about how they and their organizations are wrestling with fundamental questions and concepts related to learning, such as these:

- What’s the best way to set up the learning function in our organization?
- How can we get our staff and board engaged in and excited about learning?
- How can we learn with communities and nonprofits?
- How can we do a better job connecting learning and evaluation to strategy?
- What are the best ways to share learning with others so it drives real awareness and action?
- How can we support staff, board and others to learn?

With this publication, GEO hopes to create a resource that helps grantmakers answer these and other questions while embedding learning more deeply into the day-to-day work and cultures of our organizations. This publication draws from GEO’s Learning Conferences, previous GEO learning and evaluation publications, insights from members of GEO’s Strategic Learners Network, knowledge from others in the field, and in-depth interviews with grantmakers and evaluation practitioners.

This is not a comprehensive guide to creating a learning foundation. Rather, it is intended as an orienting publication for staff and board members that highlights key concepts, how to get started, and how others in the field are thinking about





Community and family leaders gathered at Marguerite Casey Foundation's National Convening in the Washington, D.C. area to celebrate their work, their communities, and their power.

*Photo Credit: Marguerite Casey Foundation*

and addressing important issues around learning. GEO's hope is that this publication provides a solid basis for thinking and talking about the next steps in your organization's learning work. The publication draws on GEO's past work as well as a series of recent interviews with a diverse assortment of grantmakers about their learning practices and perspectives. It is our hope that every reader will find something of value that makes you think about learning in a different way.

## Philanthropy's Evolving View of Learning

When GEO first set out to assess the role of learning and evaluation in philanthropy, we stated that evaluation is “about improvement, not just proof.”<sup>1</sup> The same applies to learning in general. In other words, learning is about advancing our knowledge and understanding of what’s working, what’s not, and how to improve performance over time.

This view aligns with the Center for Evaluation Innovation’s definition of *strategic learning*:

*“Strategic learning occurs when organizations or groups use evaluation and evaluative thinking to learn in real time and adapt their strategies to the changing circumstances around them. Strategic learning makes evaluation a part of a strategy’s development and implementation – embedding it so that it influences the process.”<sup>2</sup>*



First 5 LA staff gather for the Impactapalooza event.  
*Photo Credit: First 5 LA*

<sup>1</sup>Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and Council on Foundations, “Evaluation in Philanthropy: Perspectives from the Field,” 2009. Available at <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/689>.

<sup>2</sup>Julia Coffman and Tanya Beer, “Evaluation to Support Strategic Learning: Principles and Practices,” Center for Evaluation Innovation, 2011, 1. Available at <https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/evaluation-to-support-strategic-learning-principles-and-practices>.



*Photo Credit: The Kresge Foundation*

This definition implies that we must support people in our organizations to develop a “learning” or “growth” mindset – one in which we do our work with the understanding that our intelligence is always developing and evolving, and in which we believe that challenges and failures actually help us improve. Psychologist Carol Dweck contrasts such an attitude with a “fixed mindset,” a belief that our intelligence is fixed and that challenges and failure are to be avoided because they reveal our limitations.<sup>3</sup>

Many grantmakers believe their public mission and nonprofit tax status obligate them to learn. Viewed in this way, learning helps grantmakers meet our public-purpose obligations by ensuring that lessons from our work are understood, collected, shared and used to improve future efforts. Learning also promotes mutual accountability, forcing us to reflect on how our practices and procedures influence nonprofit and community results.

But the main reason to embrace learning is that increased knowledge and perspective about how best to address the problems we want to help solve will contribute to greater social impact.

<sup>3</sup>Carol Dweck, “What Is Mindset.” Accessed October 9, 2018. Available at <https://mindsetonline.com/whatisit/about/index.html>.



The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta invited local nonprofits to participate in Catchafire, an online skills-based platform for short-term, virtual, skills-based volunteer projects.  
*Photo Credit: Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta*

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## Assessing the Field

GEO's research and ongoing conversations with members suggest that grantmakers are making the connection between learning and improvement in a variety of ways. Some are using evaluation and learning as the basis for wholesale changes in grantmaking strategy. Others are working with nonprofits and communities to sharpen their understanding of community challenges and priorities so they can help shape better, co-created solutions. Still more are investing in real-time monitoring of programs to allow for adjustments and course corrections along the way.

In GEO's 2017 field study, an impressive number of respondents (85 percent) stated that their organization's culture supports ongoing learning and improvement.<sup>4</sup>

Dig a little deeper into the data, however, and you see that grantmakers continue to use learning and evaluation primarily for internal purposes. In other words, we often use the information and data we collect for purposes of accountability – such as to report to our boards – but far less often do we share them with others or use them to improve our own programs. The survey findings suggest that many grantmakers still view evaluation as an accountability exercise, with the main audiences for evaluation limited to the board and staff of our own organizations.

When asked what they had done with their evaluation results during the previous two years, 90 percent of grantmakers answered that they had reported to their boards on grants, compared with 61 percent that had planned or revised programs and 45 percent that had reported to nonprofits and other stakeholders.

Furthermore, evaluation is still mainly a one-way street for nonprofits. The flow of information primarily goes from nonprofits to grantmakers, but unfortunately it is still relatively rare for funders to share with nonprofits and communities what we are learning.

*Connecting learning and improvement requires us to think differently about how we gather, make meaning of and share data, knowledge, information and insights relevant to our work. This publication provides guidance, examples and inspiration so that grantmakers can evaluate and learn in ways that will get better results for our organizations and our nonprofit and community partners.*

<sup>4</sup>Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, "Is Grantmaking Getting Smarter?," 2017. Available at <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/968>.

# Part One

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# Building a Learning Organization

Let's start with the fundamental question: What are we talking about when we talk about learning?

While different grantmakers will have different ideas about what learning means to them, GEO's focus is on the learning that happens within and between our organizations and our partners, leading to more progress toward our missions. Learning, therefore, is not an event. You cannot put it on your calendar. Rather, it is a continuous process. It is about creating a culture of learning and fostering an organizationwide commitment to supporting the capacity of people to reflect on their work in a way that helps them achieve more.

In GEO's conversations with members and other grantmakers, we find that people are interested in learning for a variety of reasons:

### **Analyzing and building shared knowledge of an issue**

Grantmakers often adopt a learning focus because we want to help build a better understanding among staff, board, nonprofits, community members and other partners about a specific topic. The goal is to learn more about a problem or challenge we want to address through our work, and to use that new understanding to help shape better solutions. For many grantmakers, the process involves tapping into a variety of perspectives on issues, including those of people and communities whose lives are directly impacted by our work and whose voices have historically (and sometimes intentionally) been left out of these conversations.

### **Developing new strategies or initiatives**

Some grantmakers embrace learning as a way to help shape new strategies or initiatives. Instead of conceiving and designing a program or grantmaking strategy behind closed doors, the goal is to seek input from others, bring people together to brainstorm the best ideas, and test possible approaches. By learning in this way, we can help ensure that a program or activity reflects a genuine understanding of what's happening on the ground and how diverse stakeholders believe we can have lasting impact.

### **Assessing current activities to identify the path forward**

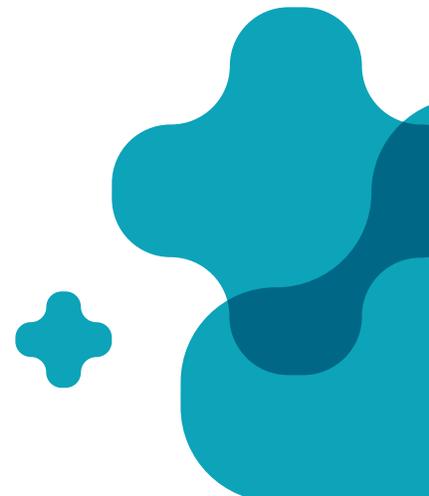
Many grantmakers are committed to learning from ongoing work as it progresses rather than waiting for a formal, after-the-fact evaluation report. In these cases, we use learning activities to assess how a program or initiative is faring so that we can make decisions in real time. By gathering ongoing feedback and hearing guidance and ideas from people and organizations that are directly affected by a program or initiative, we are better positioned to understand its impact as well as needed changes.

### **Assessing outcomes from completed projects**

In addition to evaluating current activities, many grantmakers seek to get better at learning because we want to assess the outcomes of completed projects or grants. The goal here isn't solely to show where we succeeded and where we fell short. Rather, it's to work with partners to discover lessons that we can apply to our ongoing (or future) work together. Questions guiding such dialogues may include these: Did this work truly move the needle for people, communities and issues? Where did we succeed or fail, and why? And what does this tell us about how to achieve better outcomes in the future?

Often, of course, grantmakers' learning activities serve multiple purposes. For example, we and our partners may want to analyze a topic or issue at the same time that we are developing a new strategy – so we can be sure the strategy is a smart response to what's actually happening on the ground. Similarly, we may want to assess a completed project in the context of developing a new or different program – so we can be sure that our present work reflects lessons we have learned in the past.

Regardless of why we and our organizations are embarking on a learning journey, the desire to learn will force us to address several basic questions about how we build learning into the fabric of our organizations' day-to-day work, including these:





*Photo Credit: The Colorado Health Foundation*

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**How do we build a learning culture?**

**How do we staff the learning function?**

**How do we connect learning and evaluation?**

**How do we make sure equity is core to our learning work?**

In the remainder of this section, we address each of these questions in turn.

## Grantmaker Story: Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies

Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies has adopted an approach to learning and evaluation designed to ensure that learning is embedded in the organization's culture and day-to-day practice. The grantmaker's "3D" model starts with the *deliverable* (e.g., a report, memo or PowerPoint) resulting from an evaluation or learning activity. To ensure that the deliverable doesn't sit on a shelf (or get lost on the intranet or people's hard drives), the grantmaker brings staff, nonprofits and others together for a *discussion* of the information and data, in the hope that this back-and-forth will generate insights and "ahas" for the future. Next, the model provides a pathway to making *decisions* about future work. "A lot of times, people get a deliverable and they think they are done. But we are trying to create a loop where people are regularly coming together to make meaning of what we are learning so our continuing work is genuinely informed by it," said Ted Chen, director of evaluation and organizational learning with the grantmaker.

## How do we build a learning culture?

Grantmakers increasingly are coming to understand that culture matters and that a strong organizational culture inside foundations is critical for effective philanthropy. GEO defines *culture* as the collective behaviors and underlying assumptions of an organization.

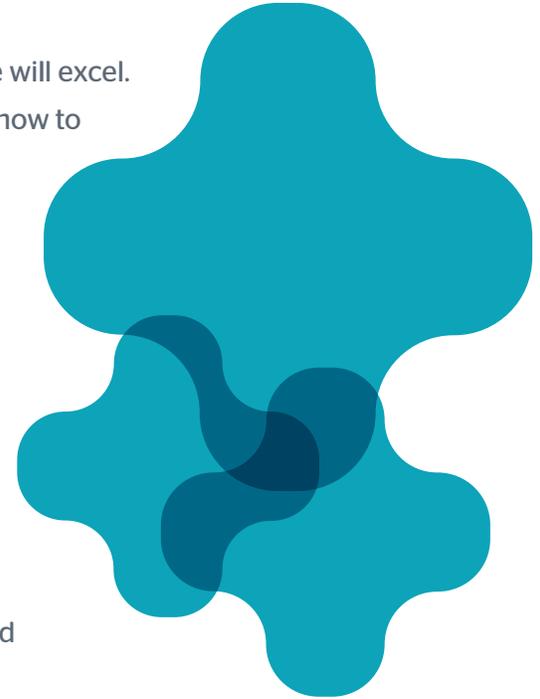
Every grantmaker will need to decide for itself what kind of organizational culture will best support achieving its mission. However, in *Shaping Culture through Key Moments*, GEO points out some of the core attributes of foundation culture that grantmakers and nonprofits believe are important for effective philanthropy. One of them is "curiosity and learning," which means creating an organizational culture that prioritizes learning for improvement as staff and board regularly assess their performance, embrace failure and explore how to do better.

## Creating a Learning Organization

Peter Senge's best-selling book, *The Fifth Discipline*, popularized the concept of "the learning organization." Senge defined *learning organizations* as "organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together." Senge argued that in situations of rapid

change, only organizations that are flexible, adaptive and productive will excel. To cultivate these qualities, he said, organizations need to “discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels.”<sup>5</sup>

Grantmakers and nonprofits working to build a learning culture often emphasize *evaluative thinking* – that is, the capacity for and habit of using evaluation skills throughout the various aspects of people’s work. These skills include identifying assumptions, asking substantive questions, determining what kind of information is needed to answer the questions, and collecting and reflecting on this information to make informed decisions. A guide from the Bruner Foundation notes that evaluative thinking is “an approach that fully integrates systematic questioning, data, and action into an organization’s work practices.”<sup>6</sup>



For grantmakers, building a learning organization may require a deep examination of longtime approaches to learning and evaluation in philanthropy – for example, viewing evaluation solely as a monitoring tool to ensure that nonprofits are doing what they promise or that a specific program area at a foundation is meeting its goals. Rather, the journey to creating a true learning culture means making an organizationwide commitment to learning. It’s a journey that starts when we create supportive structures for advancing knowledge and understanding among our staff and board, nonprofits, communities and other partners about what’s working, what’s not, and how to improve overall performance over time.

To create a learning culture, we have to build people’s skills for learning (through approaches such as *reflective practices*<sup>7</sup>) while strengthening the organizational infrastructure (including data and technology systems) that supports learning. We also need to apply a learning lens to the way we organize board and staff meetings, nonprofit convenings and other community events, and the way we handle core functions from communications to grant reporting.

<sup>5</sup>Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, United States, 2016), 4.

<sup>6</sup>Anita Baker and Beth Bruner, “Integrating Evaluative Capacity into Organizational Practice.” Bruner Foundation, 2012, 1. Available at [http://www.evaluativethinking.org/docs/Integ\\_Eval\\_Capacity\\_Final.pdf](http://www.evaluativethinking.org/docs/Integ_Eval_Capacity_Final.pdf).

<sup>7</sup>The Giving Practice, “Philanthropy’s Reflective Practices.” Accessed November 8, 2018. <http://www.reflectivepractices.org>.

## Core Components of Foundations That Learn

Building a learning organization means weaving learning into the fabric of what we do every day and shifting the focus of our learning work so it is about improvement, not proof. Researchers at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago identified seven core components of foundations that prioritize learning:<sup>8</sup>

1

**A clear and concrete value proposition.** We know what it means to learn and how learning will contribute to our work and the achievement of our goals. This value proposition should be communicated to board and staff to ensure buy-in.

2

**An internal structure aligned with learning.** We create organizational structures that promote and encourage learning within the organization.

3

**Leadership committed to learning.** Board, executive and staff leaders embrace learning and embed it in their own work.

4

**A learning partnership with grantees and communities.** We create the conditions for learning and sharing with nonprofits and community partners.

5

**A learning partnership with foundation peers.** We form partnerships and networks for learning, while exploring other opportunities to learn from (and with) each other through collaboration.

6

**A commitment to share with the broader field.** We share what we learn so that others can apply our lessons.

7

**An investment in a broad and usable knowledge base.** We produce learning that is accessible, that answers common questions and that can be applied by practitioners in the field.

<sup>8</sup>Ralph Hamilton, Prue Brown, Robert Chaskin, Leila Fiester, Harold Richman, Aaron Sojourner, and Josh Weber, "Learning for Community Change: Core Components of Foundations That Learn." Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2005. Available at <http://racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/hamilton.pdf>.

## Action Steps:

### Understand where – and how – learning happens in your organization

A critical step to transforming our cultures so they support and encourage strategic learning is to recognize that learning in philanthropy must happen at multiple levels:

- Within our grantmaking organizations – learning from experience and sharing learning with staff and board for improvement
- Across grantmaking organizations – sharing successes, failures and challenges so our colleagues don't end up reinventing the wheel
- In partnership with nonprofits and communities – building open and honest relationships based on shared goals and a shared commitment to change

By assessing the degree to which learning is happening right now across each of these dimensions, we can identify opportunities for building a stronger learning culture.

### Make a commitment from the top

Over the years, GEO's work has returned again and again to the importance of leadership in building organizational cultures that contribute to philanthropic effectiveness. Building a culture that supports learning is no different. It requires a commitment to learning on the part of board and staff leaders, plus a pledge to dedicate time, resources and space for staff and nonprofits to assess and learn from their work. Leaders can make clear how learning connects to organizational values and then make sure to act in accordance with those values.

## Grantmaker Story: Stuart Foundation

As part of its efforts to become a learning organization, the Stuart Foundation is focused on building the capacity of all staff to be "learning leaders." In 2015, the grantmaker launched an 18-month program of training and coaching for staff, based on the theories and work of Daniel Kim, an organizational consultant and author specializing in individual and organizational learning. Through all-staff sessions, group reading assignments, quarterly retreats, one-on-one coaching and other activities, the 18-member staff explored tools and strategies for strengthening core learning skills. Following this initial round of activities, the foundation began to develop systems for orienting new staff to its learning culture while also providing regular "refresher" content for all staff. "Culture change like this can be hard. It requires real commitment from your leadership and board, along with constant tending," said Koua Jacklyn Franz, former director at the foundation. Despite the challenges, Franz said the staff are now on the same page about the importance of learning to the foundation's work. Recently, the foundation has taken steps to expose its nonprofit partners to the same learning principles and tools that guide its staff. In 2018, it sponsored teams of 25 or more nonprofits to participate in the Society for Organizational Learning's Systems Leadership Institute. So far, 80 percent of its grantee partners have participated in the institute.

### **Anchor learning in your mission and strategy**

Learning happens when people see a clear connection to results – that is, when they understand that learning will increase the impact we and our partners are able to make on priority issues. Therefore grantmakers should frame learning as an integral part of their mission, helping staff, nonprofits, community members and others understand that the organization’s knowledge and learning can be as important as its money in delivering social returns.

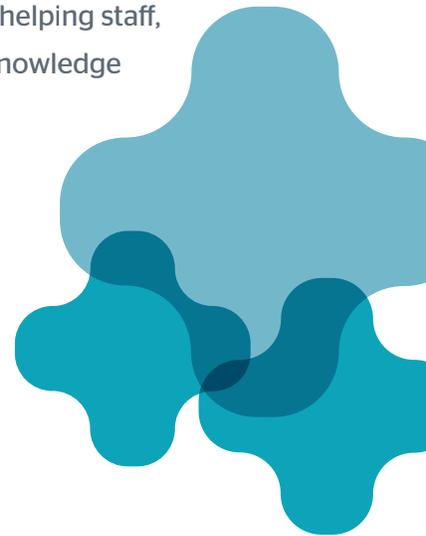
### **Anchor learning in current practice**

For many grantmakers and nonprofits, one of the main barriers to becoming a learning organization is the perception that learning is an add-on activity that will take too much time and money. Grantmakers should therefore resist the temptation to add new layers of work or technology to what the staff and board are already doing. From grants management systems to staff meetings and nonprofit convenings to foundation intranets and communications, grantmakers already have many systems and processes in place that can support learning.

By identifying these activities and exploring how to enhance their role in accelerating learning, grantmakers can build broader acceptance for this work while laying the groundwork for a stepped-up commitment among their boards and staff. To ensure that everyone has time to make learning an ongoing priority, grantmakers should try to ground learning in the way people work every day.

### **Build staff capacity for learning**

A true learning culture is one in which all staff are engaged in learning on a regular basis. But learning in a way that drives better performance and higher impact isn’t a skill people are born with; it’s also not generally taught in schools. Building staff skills and capacity for strategic learning is critical to building a learning culture. Staff members need support and training in how to frame good learning questions; how to engage nonprofits, community members and other partners in shared learning; how to analyze data and information; how to communicate learning results; how to use learning to drive strategy; and how to translate research findings for different audiences, among other priorities. Grantmakers often turn to consultants, coaches and outside training opportunities to help staff develop these skills. But don’t think you have to invest big sums to get started on your organization’s skill-building work. Sometimes it’s as simple as organizing a series of “lunch-and-learn” sessions with experts, peers from other organizations, and community representatives who can help staff members understand the power of learning and how to get started.





GEO's 2018 National Conference  
Photo Credit: Carolina Kroon

### Create incentives for learning

Some grantmakers have made it part of staff members' job descriptions to be visible and accessible to colleagues and nonprofits, serving as a resource for the broader community. Others create professional development objectives and/or learning goals for staff; revise their performance measures to reward learning and sharing of information and knowledge with nonprofits; and create incentives for staff to engage in learning, such as staff development accounts. Still others build time and space for learning into regular staff meetings. Creating incentives like these signals that staff won't be assessed solely on standard transactional measures related to the organization's grantmaking but also on how they are using learning to improve on what they do.

### Remove barriers to learning

At the same time that we are thinking about incentives for learning, it's also important to look at disincentives in our current cultures that might inhibit learning – for example, asking staff too early in a process about program or grant outcomes; overemphasizing data on outputs versus outcomes and impact; or simply overburdening staff with so many transactional, bureaucratic responsibilities that they don't have time to learn. When we remove these and other barriers to learning, we are taking an important step on the path to becoming a learning organization.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Smarter Grantmaking Playbook: What is a Learning Organization?** by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/674>

**Learning for Community Change: Core Components of Foundations that Learn** by Ralph Hamilton et al.  
<http://racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/hamilton.pdf>

**Strategic Learning in Practice: Tools to Create the Space and Structure for Learning** by Jewlya Lynn and the Center for Evaluation Innovation  
<https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/strategic-learning-in-practice-tools-to-create-the-space-structure-for-learning>

**Philanthropy's Reflective Practices**  
<http://www.reflectivepractices.org>

**The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization** by Peter Senge

**Shifting Mindsets: Questions That Lead to Results** by Marilee Adams and the University of Pennsylvania Wharton Executive Education  
<https://executiveeducation.wharton.upenn.edu/thought-leadership/wharton-at-work/2012/08/shifting-mindsets>

**Cricket Island Foundation: A Case Study of a Small Foundation's Impact Assessment** by Anna Pond, Seema Shah and Elizabeth Sak  
[http://www.cricketisland.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Cricket-Island-Foundation\\_-A-Case-Study-of-a-Small-Foundations-I.pdf](http://www.cricketisland.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Cricket-Island-Foundation_-A-Case-Study-of-a-Small-Foundations-I.pdf)

**How Shortcuts Cut Us Short: Cognitive Traps in Philanthropic Decision Making** by Center for Evaluation Innovation  
<https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/how-shortcuts-cut-us-short-cognitive-traps-in-philanthropic-decision-making>

## Grantmaker Story: Democracy Fund

As Democracy Fund launched its work, its staff were curious about how other organizations staffed learning and evaluation. According to Donata Secondo, former manager of learning and strategy with the grantmaker, they saw two basic models: one in which learning and staff sit in a leadership office and use evaluation to drive accountability, and another in which learning is a “purely consultative and decentralized function.” Democracy Fund ended up settling on what Secondo called a “hybrid approach.” Srik Gopal, vice president of strategy and program, works to ensure that the organization is using learning to drive strategy and impact. Meanwhile, Secondo and another staff member, Liz Ruedy, director of evaluation and learning, support the program team and other staff to embed learning into their daily work. “We feel we have found a good balance between making sure learning is a priority for the whole organization and making sure our content experts are in control of learning and decisions,” Secondo said.

## How do we staff the learning function?

As noted in the previous section, building a learning culture in our organizations requires a clear commitment from the top, with board and staff leaders signaling that learning is a priority. At the same time, however, it’s important to anchor the learning function in an individual or a team that can facilitate and support organizationwide learning.

GEO’s research and interviews have tracked a gradual evolution in the way grantmakers staff learning and evaluation in their organizations. Until recently, grantmakers generally assigned responsibilities for evaluation and organizational learning to staff charged with human resources, communications and/or information technology. As evaluation became more of a priority for the field in the last decade, grantmakers began to hire dedicated evaluation staff. Today, grantmakers are adding organizational learning to the responsibilities of evaluation or program staff, or hiring dedicated learning staff to help create a broader learning culture in the organization.

Research by the Center for Evaluation Innovation and The Center for Effective Philanthropy affirms what GEO has found. In a review of foundation evaluation practices, researchers found that more and more foundations are explicit about assigning the responsibility for learning to one staff member. The review also found that as philanthropy increasingly embraces learning as a priority, grantmakers are expanding the role of evaluation staff to explicitly include organizational learning.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Ellie Buteau and Julia Coffman, “Benchmarking Foundation Evaluation Practices.” The Center for Effective Philanthropy and Center for Evaluation Innovation, 2016. Available at <http://research.cep.org/benchmarking-foundation-evaluation-practices>.



The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta invited local nonprofits to participate in Catchafire, an online skills-based platform for short-term, virtual, skills-based volunteer projects.

*Photo Credit: Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta*

“What we are seeing is that foundations now are viewing the learning function as living in a particular individual or set of people,” said Tanya Beer, associate director of the Center for Evaluation Innovation. In addition to evaluation and learning, these staff members tend to take on a range of related tasks, from preparing information for the board to conducting grantee surveys to preparing annual reports and more.

Of course, many foundations, in particular smaller ones, may not have the resources to designate one person as solely responsible for organizational learning. At the Raikes Foundation in Seattle, Executive Director Erin Kahn has worked with staff to create systems that enable the whole team to reflect with the organization’s co-founders on what they are learning from their engagement with nonprofit partners working in the areas of education and youth homelessness. “We have not made learning a segregated role on the staff because it’s an expectation we’ve built into everyone’s role,” Kahn said. For more on the Raikes Foundation’s approach to learning, see page 70.

## The Challenges of Having a “Learning Person”

Grantmakers’ embrace of learning, and their growing tendency to make it the responsibility of specific staff members, is a positive development for the field because it shows an understanding of the importance of learning in driving strategy. However, grantmakers should be aware of the challenges associated with encapsulating the learning function in a particular individual or team. First off, building a learning culture in our organizations means helping people understand that learning is *everyone’s responsibility*. Rather than carrying the weight for all learning in our organizations, learning and evaluation staff should focus on supporting others to weave learning into their day-to-day work. This relationship between learning and evaluation staff and other stakeholders requires being clear about roles and responsibilities for different learning and evaluation processes.

“We believe that evaluation and learning is a part of everyone’s job, and my role has been to help embed evaluation and learning into the practice and culture of our organization.”



**Ted Chen**  
Director of Evaluation  
and Organizational  
Learning, Margaret A.  
Cargill Philanthropies

When Ted Chen joined Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies as director of evaluation and organizational learning, staff were excited to have new evaluation resources available to them. “I was pleased about the enthusiastic response for evaluation, but we did not want to implement a centralized evaluation function,” Chen said. “Rather, we believe that evaluation and learning is a part of everyone’s job, and my role has been to help embed evaluation and learning into the practice and culture of our organization.”

A second challenge, depending on how we situate learning staff in our organizations, is that they can be a step (or two) removed from our work with nonprofits and communities. Program staff in most of our organizations hold the primary responsibility for interacting with nonprofits and other partners – and those interactions are where a huge amount of learning takes place. Therefore, it’s crucial to ensure that program staff have the incentives, the support and the capacity to capture and share what they are learning, and that they are working hand in hand with learning staff to make sure our organizations are using learning to drive strategy.

The bottom line: Grantmakers should avoid delegating to one person or team all of the responsibilities for building and sustaining a culture that values evaluation for learning. Strategic learning is everyone's responsibility.

## Core Responsibilities of Learning Staff

Staff members who are responsible for learning can engage in a wide range of activities to advance strategic learning in our organizations:

- Working with staff, board members and community stakeholders to define and prioritize the learning questions the organization wants to answer
- Working with program staff and external evaluators to evaluate program-level and initiative-level results and draw lessons for future work
- Working with the CEO and other staff to develop systems and processes for fostering a learning culture among the board
- Developing systems and processes for assessing and supporting the capacity of nonprofits and community members to learn from their ongoing work
- Creating and maintaining an intranet and other systems whereby staff and board members share evaluation findings and other resources, raise questions for others to consider, and engage in online discussions of various issues

### Grantmaker Story: Fairfield County's Community Foundation

Fairfield County's Community Foundation recently reframed a senior staff position to signal its commitment to becoming more of a learning organization. The position, vice president of innovation and strategic learning, is held by longtime foundation staff member Karen R. Brown. In her new role, Brown focuses on ensuring that the foundation's work is informed by outside perspectives and trends in the fields of philanthropy and community change. "There is always a tendency for foundations to become too insular in their focus," Brown said. "We want to pick up our heads and look around and keep track of what others are doing and learning." Brown's day-to-day work includes summarizing and sharing key reports and external resources with the foundation staff; organizing lunch-and-learns, webinars, and other events for staff and nonprofits on up-and-coming topics; and making sure the grantmaker is playing an active role in learning networks that are critical to its work (such as CFLeads and the Community Foundation Opportunity Network).

- 
- Creating recurring opportunities for staff to discuss what they're learning in the course of their work during staff meetings, lunch-and-learn seminars and other events
  - Creating systems and/or processes for capturing and managing knowledge and information generated by the foundation's work, so that it is permanently accessible even if staff with valuable knowledge leave the organization
  - Working with program and communications staff to develop strategies, activities and deliverables for sharing learning with key audiences via the foundation website, reports, presentations, webinars, convenings and so on
  - Developing streamlined systems for grant applications and reporting that help the staff and board develop a better understanding of nonprofit progress (without placing new burdens on applicants and nonprofits)
  - Evaluating staff members' performance based at least in part on how they are contributing to the organization's knowledge and understanding of how to grow its impact over time

## Action Steps:

### **Anchor the learning function in a staff member or team**

To make sure learning is an organizationwide priority, many grantmakers assign lead responsibility for learning to a specific staff member or team. This individual or team can assume responsibility for a variety of learning activities (see page 23) while working to build an organizational culture in which everyone is learning all the time. In assigning staff members to manage the learning function, grantmakers should define their priority responsibilities to focus on activities that will best support the organization's learning goals and needs.

### **Make the distinction between learning and HR roles and responsibilities**

As noted above, some grantmakers traditionally made organizational learning a focus for human resources staff. But the work of building a learning organization (while it may include professional development for staff) embraces a variety of activities beyond the usual scope of HR. Relying too much on HR staff to oversee strategic learning, or asking learning staff to take on too many HR responsibilities, is likely to backfire, as these staff members can easily get spread too thin.



The final convening and presentation of projects for the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving's Building Evaluation Capacity, class of 2017.  
Photo Credit: The Bruner Foundation

### Connect learning staff to strategy development

Learning happens when people see a clear connection to results – that is, when they understand that learning will increase the impact we and our partners are able to make on priority issues. Therefore grantmakers should frame learning as an integral part of their mission, helping staff, nonprofits, community members and others understand that the organization's knowledge and learning can be as important as its money in delivering social returns.

### Make sure learning staff are connected across the organization

An isolated learning staff cannot effectively promote organizationwide learning. Learning staff should be highly visible in the organization, working closely with program, communications and other staff members on a day-to-day basis.

### Help all staff understand that learning is everyone's responsibility

Hiring a person who is nominally responsible for organizational learning should not let others off the hook for advancing their own learning. Make sure all staff and board members know that learning is everyone's responsibility and that the learning staff is there to support others to learn.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

***Benchmarking Foundation Evaluation Practices*** by The Center for Effective Philanthropy and the Center for Evaluation Innovation  
<http://research.cep.org/benchmarking-foundation-evaluation-practices>

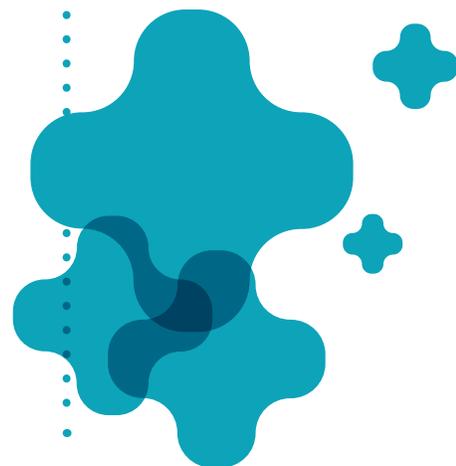
***Being the Change*** by FSG  
<https://www.fsg.org/publications/being-change>

***Building Capacity to Measure and Manage Performance*** by Bridgespan  
<https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/performance-measurement/building-capacity-to-measure-and-manage-performanc#.VtX-6fkrJp8>

***How Do You Measure Up? Finding Fit Between Foundations and Their Evaluation Functions*** by Julia Coffman and Tanya Beer  
<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1325&context=tfr>

***Evaluation Principles and Practices: An Internal Working Paper*** by Fay Twersky and Karen Lindblom, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation  
<https://hewlett.org/library/evaluation-principles-and-practices>

***Chief Learning Officer magazine***,  
<https://www.chieflearningofficer.com>



## How do we connect learning and evaluation?

Evaluation is core to learning because it provides a path to unlocking knowledge and insights that can make our work more effective. When done right, evaluation helps us better understand what works; what types of support have the greatest impact; and what we can do to continue improving our grants, programs and partnerships.

The term *evaluation* can refer to many different activities, including data collection and analysis, information gathering, and research about grantmaker-supported efforts. GEO's emphasis is on evaluation that drives learning and delivers better results for nonprofit organizations and entire communities.

### Evolving Views of Evaluation

Until relatively recently, many grantmakers tended to view evaluation as an accountability mechanism or a way to gauge the outcomes of a specific grant or initiative. But the truth is, we and our partners usually aren't able to make definitive judgments about cause and effect, largely because we often focus our grantmaking on complex problems that don't lend themselves to easy answers. Furthermore, many grants are simply too small and short term to allow grantmakers to attribute directly to our investments any results that nonprofits are achieving.

In addition, some grantmakers have viewed evaluation as something that only outside professionals do, an activity that takes place in its own sphere, largely beyond the scope of the grantmaker's day-to-day operations.

Looking through the lens of strategic learning, however, offers a different view of evaluation. Rather than an accountability exercise, it becomes a powerful tool for improvement. And rather than a function "outside" an organization, evaluation is a part of every staff and board member's job. It enhances the capacity of grantmakers and nonprofits – as well as governments and communities – to understand and solve problems more effectively.





GEO's 2018 National Conference.

Photo Credit: Carolina Kroon

Understanding evaluation in this way transforms it from a discrete, one-time function (i.e., assessing whether or not a specific initiative was a success) to a process that is happening all the time. It is also a process that involves many people working together to identify what's working and how to improve. Evaluation expert Michael Quinn Patton uses the term *developmental evaluation* to refer to a team-based process that engages evaluators, grantmakers and nonprofits in an ongoing, rather than one-time, assessment of the work being done. The goal is to use information and data collected in real time to inform decision-making and continuous improvement.<sup>10</sup>

Most recently, some evaluation practitioners, grantmakers and nonprofits are seeking to shift the evaluation paradigm to make evaluation a tool for and of equity. According to the Equitable Evaluation Initiative, this means thinking critically “about all aspects of the evaluative process – the questions we ask, the methods we use, the teams we assemble, and the ways we support the use of data and sense-making around findings.”<sup>11</sup> For more on equitable evaluation, see “How Do We Make Sure Equity Is Core to Our Learning Work?” on page 33.

<sup>10</sup>Cited in Better Evaluation, “Developmental Evaluation. Accessed November 8, 2018. [https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/developmental\\_evaluation](https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/developmental_evaluation).

<sup>11</sup>Luminare Group, Center for Evaluation Innovation, and Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy, “Equitable Evaluation Project: Framing Paper,” July 2017, 1. Available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BzIHFJNSW5yY3dGaGNOMTdISEk/view>.

## Defining the Purpose of Evaluation

In the 2009 publication *Evaluation in Philanthropy*, GEO and the Council on Foundations described five emerging views of evaluation:<sup>12</sup>

1

**It's about improvement, not just proof.** Evaluation is not solely about tracking the results of past investments; it is also about learning how to do a better job of achieving the goals we share with nonprofits and other partners.

2

**It's about contribution, not attribution.** Evaluation is a way to learn about the range of factors that can affect progress on complex issues and to consider how a specific intervention may or may not contribute to change.

3

**It's about learning with others, not alone.** Board, executive and staff leaders embrace learning and embed it in their own work.

4

**It's about going beyond the individual grant.** Evaluation is a tool for improving foundationwide performance and for clarifying (and adjusting, if necessary) a grantmaker's mission, goals and objectives.

5

**It's about embracing failure.** Evaluation can help grantmakers learn from mistakes by capturing lessons about what happened and why, and how we and our partners can achieve more in the future.

### Questions to Guide Evaluation Planning

As we think about evaluating our work, grantmakers can ask a set of foundational questions to guide our planning.

- **WHY:** What is the purpose of this evaluation? Who is its intended audience? What are its intended uses? What values shape our approach to evaluation?
- **WHAT:** What do we want to learn? How much and what types of information will we need to collect (and from whom) in order to fulfill the purpose of our evaluation? How will we apply this learning?
- **WHO:** How will we involve the appropriate stakeholders at all stages of the evaluation, from planning to implementation, meaning-making and action? With whom will we share findings, and how?
- **HOW:** Who will collect, analyze and make meaning of the necessary data? What is our capacity? What is the capacity of our nonprofit and community partners? How can we leverage existing resources, infrastructures and capacity to assist in evaluation?

<sup>12</sup>Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and Council on Foundations, "Evaluation in Philanthropy: Perspectives from the Field."

## The Challenges of Evaluating Effectively

Many grantmakers agree that an increased focus on evaluation can help us tease out insights about our impact and how we and our partners can continue to do better. However, despite significant investments in evaluation in recent years, philanthropy continues to struggle to measure its work. Among the biggest challenges is that grantmakers are not always certain about where to start. Some foundations aren't clear or specific enough about what their goals are, and therefore how to evaluate what progress they are making. Staff and board members may be unsure what information they need to know to make better decisions, what it takes to build a culture that values and supports evaluation, and what systems and infrastructure they need to develop.

Adding to the challenge is the fact that evaluating effectively can require substantial time and investment. In 2016, The Center for Effective Philanthropy and the Center for Evaluation Innovation asked grantmakers about the challenges program staff face in using information collected during or resulting from evaluation work. Remarkably, 91 percent of respondents named program staff's time as a barrier. Other barriers mentioned by half or more of respondents were program staff's level of comfort in interpreting and using data (71 percent) and program staff's attitudes toward evaluation (50 percent).<sup>13</sup>



### Grantmaker Story: The Pew Charitable Trusts

"Evaluation-driven learning" is a priority for The Pew Charitable Trusts, according to Lester Baxter, vice president of strategy with the public charity. With an in-house evaluation team of 3.5 full-time employees, every two years the organization conducts a thorough review of the evaluation priorities in each of its work areas. "The signal we want to send to programs is that evaluation is a routine part of how Pew goes about its work," Baxter said. "It is not a flag that your project is in trouble or a signal to dust off your resume. We evaluate work that is strong and work we know to be struggling." On the front end of an evaluation, the evaluation staff work closely with programs and outside evaluators to identify core questions and design the evaluation. While an evaluation is still in progress, the evaluators hold an interim briefing to explore what data and insights are rising to the top and to ask what additional evidence might be needed.

<sup>13</sup> Buteau and Coffman, "Benchmarking Foundation Evaluation Practices."

## Grantmaker Story: John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

The work of the MacArthur Foundation is organized around five “big bets” on issues from climate change to criminal justice, plus two “enduring commitments” to investing in the city of Chicago and in efforts to strengthen independent journalism and media. For each of these program areas, the foundation has a core team of program, evaluation, communications and grants management staff. The team works collaboratively with an evaluation and learning partner to develop an evaluation framework. In particular, members of the team work with an external evaluation consultant to further articulate their theory of change, identify progress indicators, establish baseline measures, and monitor progress made and lessons learned. “Our goal is to bring a sense of rigor and objectivity to the work on a continuing basis,” said Maurice Samuels, senior evaluation officer with the grantmaker. Given that the foundation’s work addresses complex, multifaceted issues, Samuels said its evaluation efforts are focused on contribution rather than attribution. “We know we are not the only people working on these issues, and also that there are other forces at work to influence what happens, so our focus is on following a set of measures over time to stay on top of changes in the field,” he said.

## Action Steps:

### Determine the right evaluation questions to ask (and consider who gets to define them)

Evaluating effectively starts with a thoughtful assessment of what exactly we need to know in order to improve our work. For example, rather than just asking nonprofits “What did you learn?” at the end of grant reports, we should consider what questions will help us and our partners identify areas for improvement. We should consider who has the opportunity to shape the questions being asked – evaluators and grantmaking boards/staffs alone, or nonprofits, community members and others? The story on The Colorado Health Foundation’s evaluation and learning questions (page 31) offers some ideas for good evaluation questions.

### Don’t measure what you won’t use

Good evaluation systems depend on clear and reliable indicators. But grantmakers should be careful not to overdo it when it comes to developing metrics to assess our performance and that of our nonprofit partners. As Lynn Taliento, Jonathan Law and Laura Callanan of McKinsey and Company wrote in the introduction to *Leap of Reason* by Mario Morino, co-founder of Venture Philanthropy Partners, this can be difficult for grantmakers: “Funders are notorious for requiring overly rigorous assessments. The result is a misallocation of resources and unnecessary headaches for the nonprofit. We’ve observed that the right level of rigor is the result of an open dialogue between nonprofits and their funders. By getting clarity on a program’s strategic and assessment objectives, they can determine the level of rigor that’s required.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Lynn Taliento, Jonathan Law and Laura Callanan, “Introduction,” *Leap of Reason: Managing to Outcomes in an Era of Scarcity*, by Mario Morino (Washington, DC: Venture Philanthropy Partners, 2011), xix-xx. Available at <https://leapofreason.org/get-the-books/leap-of-reason/get-leap-of-reason/>.



GEO's 2018 National Conference  
Photo Credit: Carolina Kroon

### Identify the right strategies and systems to support evaluation

Successful evaluation is founded on strong systems for capturing and disseminating data and information. This means having the people, processes and technology in place to make evaluation an ongoing priority. Most organizations will at some point turn to technology tools to enable them to gather better data and information about their work. But in reality, the technology should follow a foundation's decision on what to measure and how. In addition, grantmakers should consider who the key audiences are for our evaluation results and how best to share findings with them. If the intent of evaluation and learning is to improve practice, we need to ensure that our evaluation findings reach people and organizations whose work can benefit from what we are learning. This often means engaging communications staff in crafting effective dissemination plans, as well as considering how to communicate effectively – and in culturally competent ways – with diverse audiences. For more on sharing our evaluation and learning results, see page 62.

## Grantmaker Story: The Colorado Health Foundation

The Colorado Health Foundation asks a simple set of before-and-after questions, based on the work of Fourth Quadrant Partners, for evaluation and learning. The grantmaker's "before-action review" questions include these:

- What are our intended results?
- What will that look like?
- What challenges might we encounter?
- What have we learned from similar situations?
- What will make us successful this time?

The foundation subsequently asks a series of "after-action review" questions to help guide conversations about what it and its partners have learned:

- What were our intended results?
- What were our actual results?
- What caused these results?
- What will we sustain or improve?
- When is our next opportunity to test what we have learned?

Kelci Price, senior director of learning and evaluation with the foundation, shared, "At the core, the before- and after-action reviews allow you to say what was intended [and] what actually happened, examine why you got those results, and think about what you should do the same or differently next time."

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Four Essentials for Evaluation** by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/four-essentials-for-evaluation-681>

**Equitable Evaluation Project Framing Paper** by Luminare Group, The Center for Evaluation Innovation and Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy  
<https://www.equitableeval.org/ee-framework>

**Leap of Reason: Managing to Outcomes in an Era of Scarcity** by Mario Morino  
<https://leapofreason.org/get-the-books/leap-of-reason/get-leap-of-reason/>

**Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use** by Michael Quinn Patton

**Developmental Evaluation** by Better Evaluation  
[https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/developmental\\_evaluation](https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/developmental_evaluation)

**Evaluating Community Change: A Framework for Grantmakers** by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/evaluating-community-change-a-framework-for-grantmakers-728>

**Evaluation in Philanthropy: Perspectives from the Field** by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and Council on Foundations  
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/evaluation-in-philanthropy-perspectives-from-the-field-689>

**The 4QP Emergent Learning Platform** by Fourth Quadrant Partners  
<http://www.4qpartners.com/4qp-el-platform.html>

## Know your capacity – and nonprofits’ too

The infrastructure and systems that grantmakers employ for evaluation will depend on the resources and capacity available to do this work. Capacity, in this case, can mean everything from staff time and in-house evaluation expertise to information technology systems and organizational budgets. Grantmakers should take steps to assess and strengthen organizational structures that support evaluation – including who is responsible for what, what skills are in place among the staff to support effective evaluation, and what outside support might be needed from consultants. In addition to conducting this analysis on our own organizations, we should support nonprofits to do the same so we can identify opportunities to leverage existing strengths as well as build new capacities. For more information on building capacity to support learning and evaluation, see page 53.

## Build on what you already do and have learned

One of the main barriers to making evaluation a priority for many grantmakers and nonprofits is the perception that this is an add-on activity and will take too much time and money. In some cases, prioritizing evaluation and learning is a matter of figuring out how to apply what we have previously learned. Grantmakers should resist the temptation to add new layers of work or technology to what the staff and board are already used to and doing. By identifying systems and processes already in place and exploring how to enhance their role in advancing evaluation, grantmakers can build broader acceptance for this work while laying the groundwork for a stepped-up commitment to evaluation and learning among board and staff.

## How do we make sure equity is core to our learning work?

Building on a long history of work by social justice groups, philanthropy is showing a burgeoning interest in equity, although grantmakers define their commitments to equity in many different ways. This shift reflects the understanding that grantmakers can achieve our vision for individuals and communities only to the extent that we address the historic, emerging, dynamic and collective forces at work to deny rights and opportunities to people of color and others most impacted by systems of power and oppression (for grantmakers, this frequently involves people of color and indigenous people, LGBT people, people with disabilities and women). It also reflects a recognition that grantmakers inherently work from a position of privilege, and that the dominant institutions and systems in our society were built to advantage some but not all. Using our position of privilege to address racial and other forms of inequity is the bedrock of effective grantmaking.

But what does an emphasis on equity mean for grantmakers' learning and evaluation activities and strategies? Many grantmakers across the United States are beginning to wrestle with this critical question.

### Connecting Equity and Learning

Learning, by definition, is about gaining knowledge, from an array of sources, that can help us understand the world around us. When grantmakers keep turning to the “same old”

#### Grantmaker Story: W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Huilan Krenn, director of learning and impact with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, says she gained a new appreciation of learning with a racial equity lens when she and her colleagues were working with Native American communities in New Mexico to define what it means for children to be successful. The foundation started the process by drafting several indicators to present to community members and nonprofits for discussion; they included standard measures of academic success, such as kindergarten readiness and third-grade reading scores. In dialogues with community members, however, the foundation staff heard that participants had a broader picture of success for young people that includes awareness and knowledge of cultural traditions and rituals, and mastery of indigenous language. “School success is necessary, but it is not sufficient when it comes to authentically defining children’s success,” she said. Based on the community inputs, the foundation subsequently broadened its frame for creating success.



Photo Credit: The Annie E. Casey Foundation

How do we make sure equity is core to our learning work?

sources of knowledge and information, and the same ways of collecting information, we limit our ability to truly see what’s happening in the communities we care about. We also close our eyes to the full range of solutions to the challenges we are working with our nonprofit partners to address.

Connecting learning and equity means thinking deeply about our past and current practices related to learning and evaluation, and about the extent to which our work is informed by – and more important, driven by – the viewpoints of communities and populations whose voices have been historically left out of philanthropy. Are we continuing to learn, make decisions and develop strategies behind closed doors and with blinders? And how much does our learning and evaluation work reinforce the imbalances of power in our society – for example, by making evaluation just one more thing that happens to communities rather than *with* and *for* them?

Strategies that are not directly informed and guided by the priorities and the challenges facing marginalized communities will be less effective than they could be because they don’t fully reflect the knowledge and experience of those communities. This gap in understanding ultimately leads

to broken relationships, community disengagement, and ineffective or failed programs. In the face of this reality, some grantmakers are embracing new approaches to learning and evaluation aimed at increasing participation from those who

“*Real engagement of communities means you have to slow down and take your time, but I am convinced it’s going to lead to better overall results.*”



**Kimberly Spring**  
Director of Research and  
Evaluation, The Annie E.  
Casey Foundation

are most affected by the problems we are trying to solve, with a focus on communities of color. The goal of this work is to ensure that these communities are playing an active role in articulating and analyzing problems, and identifying solutions that will enable them to thrive.

Lesley Grady, senior vice president of the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta, shared that the foundation recently embarked on a new strategic planning process that includes an explicit look at how to embed equity more deeply into its day-to-day work. The process is raising many questions about the grantmaker’s learning and evaluation activity. “We’re looking at how we engage residents and communities of color in ways that allow them to express their real needs and how they want us to engage them.

## Grantmaker Story: The Annie E. Casey Foundation

For The Annie E. Casey Foundation, embracing equitable evaluation means thinking differently about how to make sure the grantmaker’s research and evaluation activities reflect the interests and knowledge of communities where it invests. Recently, the grantmaker has been experimenting with new, more inclusive approaches to evaluation and learning in its work in East Baltimore, in a set of neighborhoods that have been a longtime focus for the foundation. The focus of this work is to partner with residents to ensure that reliable and relevant data are available and accessible to residents and other community stakeholders for community change efforts. Currently, the foundation is working with a group of resident advisers to identify community priorities, research questions and more. “One of the things that is both wonderful and tough about this work is that real engagement of communities means you have to slow down and take your time, but I am convinced it’s going to lead to better overall results,” said Kimberly Spring, director of research and evaluation with the foundation.

We're also looking at how we engage donors in our education work so they aren't just hearing from 'experts' but also from students and parents," she said. "For us, equity is about the experience you have with donors and communities, and whether you are surfacing the actual needs and perspectives of the community."

*“For us, equity is about the experience you have with donors and communities, and whether you are surfacing the actual needs and perspectives of the community.”*



**Lesley Grady**  
Senior Vice President of  
Community, Community  
Foundation for  
Greater Atlanta

Other grantmakers echoed Grady's focus on listening to the voices of people and communities of color. "Equity really comes down to thinking about how you are learning, and being conscious of how every decision you make can both include and exclude people and communities," said Liz Ruedy, director of evaluation with Democracy Fund.

## An Evolving Dialogue in Philanthropy

In GEO's recent conversations with members, questions about learning and equity have prompted very different responses from different interviewees. Some grantmakers are engaged in deep thinking and action on issues of equity, while others are just starting to take up the question.

When it comes to learning and equity, a small but growing number of foundations have embarked on determined efforts to bring an equity lens to their learning and evaluation work and to use evaluation as a tool for advancing equity. These grantmakers have been thinking about how their approach to evaluation would need to change in order to incorporate equity. They consider things

like evaluation methods and approaches (What "counts" as data, evidence and rigor? Who interprets the data? Who shapes learning agendas and defines methodologies? Who defines success?), and assumptions about evaluator neutrality or objectivity. They often also focus on who is involved in their evaluation work by making sure that communities (versus experts and elites) have a voice and a say in the foundation's learning and evaluation activity and by trying to diversify the pool of consultants who conduct their evaluations.



GEO's 2018 National Conference

Photo Credit: Carolina Kroon

## Evaluation and Equity in Philanthropy

GEO is partnering with the Equitable Evaluation Initiative<sup>15</sup> to advance thinking and practice among grantmakers on equitable evaluation. These conversations come at a time when the evaluation field is exploring its relationship to equity, as these examples illustrate:

- The American Evaluation Association (AEA) has given some purposeful attention to the topic through, for example, adopting a Cultural Competence Statement in 2013 and focusing its 2014 annual conference on the theme *Visionary Evaluation for a Sustainable, Equitable Future*. In 2018, the AEA updated its guiding principles for members, noting that “Evaluators strive to contribute to the common good and advancement of an equitable and just society.”<sup>16</sup> This work involves making efforts to address evaluation’s potential risks of exacerbating historical disadvantage or inequity, to promote equitable access to information, and to mitigate bias and power imbalances.
- There is a growing practice of evaluation approaches, such as participatory and empowerment evaluation, that explicitly account for the power imbalances and inequities that conventional evaluation approaches can reinforce.
- The increasing use of systems thinking in evaluation is helping evaluators understand how to identify and evaluate changes related to the systemic drivers of inequity.
- Fellowship and internship programs, such as the AEA’s Graduate Education Diversity Internship Program<sup>17</sup> and The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Leaders in Equitable Evaluation and Diversity,<sup>18</sup> are aiming to increase the diversity of the evaluation field itself.

<sup>15</sup>Luminare Group, Center for Evaluation Innovation, and Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy, “Equitable Evaluation Project: Framing Paper.”

<sup>16</sup>American Evaluation Association, “American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles for Evaluators,” August 2018, <https://www.eval.org/p/cm/ld/fid=51>.

<sup>17</sup>American Evaluation Association, “AEA Graduate Education Diversity Internship (GEDI).” Accessed November 8, 2018, <https://www.eval.org/gedi>.

<sup>18</sup>The Annie E. Casey Foundation, “Leaders in Equitable Evaluation and Diversity.” Accessed November 8, 2018, <https://www.aecf.org/work/research-and-policy/research-and-evaluation/leaders-in-equitable-evaluation-and-diversity-lead/>.

“We want to know what it means to bring your full identity to this work, and how that relates to your definition of success.”



**Chera Reid**  
Director of strategic learning, research and evaluation, The Kresge Foundation

Some grantmakers, such as The Annie E. Casey Foundation (see sidebar on page 35) and The Kresge Foundation, are working to embrace the principles of equitable evaluation. Chera Reid, The Kresge Foundation’s director of learning, research and evaluation, said the grantmaker recently has applied these principles to several evaluation efforts, including an analysis of its support for food-oriented development in communities across the country. In addition to exploring how the initiative is yielding concrete results for participating communities (such as neighborhood revitalization), the evaluation of the initiative will include a determined effort to explore the experiences of the local residents leading the work. “We want to know what it means to bring your full identity to this work, and how that relates to your definition of success,” Reid said.

## Action Steps:

### Apply a learning lens to your organization’s practices and perspectives on equity, diversity and inclusion

In “Grantmaking with a Racial Equity Lens,” GrantCraft and the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity reminds the field that learning and evaluation can be used to explore the degree to which our grantmaking is a true reflection of our commitments to equity, diversity and inclusion. “Many grantmakers take time to analyze patterns in their own past and current grantmaking,” the authors write.<sup>19</sup> They cite examples of grantmakers’ assessing the racial makeup of nonprofit staffs and boards, as well as the number of nonprofits led by people of color. Grantmakers are exploring how many grants go to groups led by people of color that are engaged in advocacy versus services, and whether there are differences in the sizes of grants going to organizations led by people of color and white people. Other grantmakers are going even deeper in their analysis. They are considering how learning and evaluation can reveal not just outcome disparities but also structural and systemic drivers of inequity. These analyses should subsequently inform discussions among staffs and boards – and with nonprofits and community members – about changes we can make to bring more equity, diversity and inclusion to our grantmaking.

<sup>19</sup>Julie Quiroz-Martinez, Lori Villarosa, and Anne Mackinnon, “Grantmaking with a Racial Equity Lens.” GrantCraft and Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, 2007. Available at <https://grantcraft.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/12/equity.pdf>.



GEO's 2018 National Conference  
 Photo Credit: Carolina Kroon

### Take a hard look at *how* you learn

As noted above, real learning happens when we broaden our horizons and take in information and insights from a broader range of sources. Starting individually, we can apply an equity lens to where we get the information we rely on to do our work. Are we primarily relying on academic and “insider” information from thought leaders in our fields to inform our world view? Conversely, how much are we engaged in conversations, reading and other activities that highlight the perspectives and experiences of communities that are the focus of our organizations’ work and investments? Similarly, we can work with staff and board members in our organizations to assess and inventory our collective learning sources, and to explore solutions for broadening how we learn, and with whom. What assumptions are we making about learning approaches and strategies? How does our learning reflect and operationalize our values and/or commitments around diversity, equity and inclusion? Consider how your learning not only reflects but can advance equity.

### Consider the time and resources needed to learn with an equity lens — and fund them

Bridging learning and equity can require added investment and more time. To foster deep nonprofit and community participation, for example, grantmakers may need to build in time and resources for focus groups, community convenings, door-to-door surveys and other activities. Similarly, grantmakers often provide stipends and other payments to community representatives participating in and leading these kinds of activities. All of these activities rest on grantmakers’



Members of the Community Foundation’s Spark Opportunity Giving Circle have made a multiyear financial commitment to increasing opportunity for residents of Thomasville Heights, a community in southeast Atlanta. Here they gather in Thomasville to meet with residents and community leaders. *Photo Credit: Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta*

developing stronger, more trusting relationships with nonprofits and community members over time. To counter the potential of grantmakers’ learning and evaluation efforts to be extractive in nature, we need both to engage communities as active partners over the long term, and to make sure we are giving people something tangible in exchange for their time and participation, including monetary compensation as appropriate.

### **Think about how you talk about evaluation**

Some grantmakers have observed that the language and jargon we often use when we talk about learning and evaluation can be off-putting for many communities. “Learning effectively means creating comfortable situations that encourage people to share and to be part of the conversation,” said Donata Secondo, former manager of learning and strategy with Democracy Fund. “But all too often, I think we talk about evaluation in ways that drive people away, and we ask questions that put people off.” Think about how you talk about learning and evaluation, both internally and with nonprofits and communities. Help community members see that evaluation, when done well, makes

How do we make sure equity is core to our learning work?

it possible to see and address disparities. Consider ways to frame evaluation in terms that help others understand how it can help them, and all of us, achieve the progress we want.

### Explicitly talk about equitable evaluation

The evaluation field is beginning to take a serious look at what it means to practice equitable evaluation. While a growing number of resources exist for grantmakers seeking to do the same, the field is still in the early stages of grappling with what equitable evaluation means and how to go about changing our evaluation orthodoxies to be more equitable. One way to start exploring equitable evaluation is to share some of these resources with our boards, staffs and nonprofit partners, and to initiate conversations about what equitable evaluation means for our work.

### Evaluate your evaluators

Just as foundations are taking different approaches in their work on equity, so too are evaluators. Evaluators may have diverse teams, for example, but still fail to use culturally competent practices. Others may use culturally competent evaluation practices but pay little attention to evaluating the systemic drivers of inequities. Still others may examine systemic drivers but fail to include affected communities in defining the focus or the approach to evaluation, or in interpreting and making meaning of data. The field does not yet have a consistent understanding of common standards of practice around what equitable evaluation practice might look like. Some grantmakers are responding to this gap by working with evaluators to understand and act on the principles of equitable evaluation. Talk to your evaluation partners about how they are thinking about equity – and if they are not, consider supporting their learning and networking on this topic or expanding your list to include other evaluators who view their work through an equity lens.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

*Equitable Evaluation Initiative*  
<https://www.equitableeval.org>

*What's Race Got to Do With It? Equity and Philanthropic Evaluation Practice*  
 by Jara Dean-Coffey  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1098214018778533>

*Participatory Evaluation*  
 by Better Evaluation  
[https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/participatory\\_evaluation](https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/participatory_evaluation)

*Center for Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment*  
<https://crea.education.illinois.edu>

*Grantmaking with a Racial Equity Lens*  
 by GrantCraft and the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity  
<http://www.grantcraft.org/assets/content/resources/equity.pdf>

# Part Two

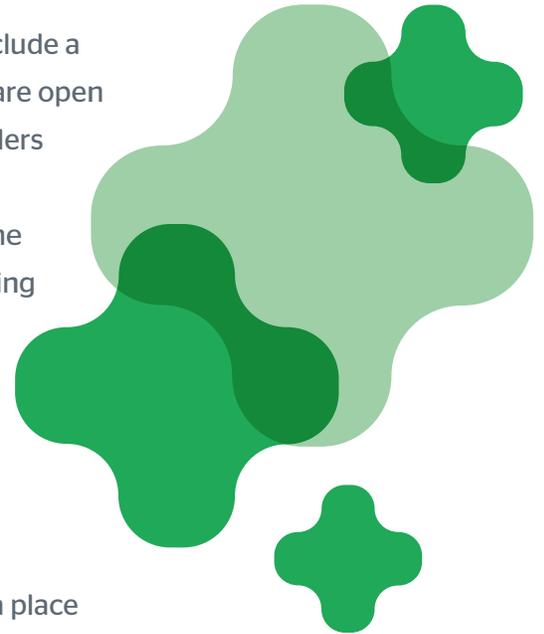
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# Collaborating For Learning

Some grantmakers may view learning and evaluation as activities they undertake solely inside the walls of their organizations. The focus in these instances is on internal improvement – getting strategies right; ensuring that grants and grant programs are on track to achieve goals; or making sure the board and staff are informed and up-to-date on the latest developments in grant areas, the latest innovations in philanthropy, or the latest news relevant to the communities and the issues at the heart of the mission.

But doing all of this work in isolation keeps our organizations and our people from tapping the real power of strategic learning. When we stay in our offices and boardrooms, we are missing out on crucial information from others, including community members who can share their perspectives and insights about how they are experiencing urgent issues and problems. And when we hold onto the knowledge we are gaining through our learning activities and don't share it with the outside world, we are depriving nonprofits, philanthropic colleagues and other partners of information and insights that could be useful to them as they work to advance their missions.

As noted on page 16, core components of foundations that learn include a commitment to learning partnerships. True learning organizations are open to others' ideas and create opportunities for partners and stakeholders to share their insights and perspectives. These organizations also create systems and structures for sharing what we are learning in the course of our daily work. More and more grantmakers are recognizing the value of collaborating with others in their evaluation and learning activities. Further insight for collaborating on learning and evaluation can be found in GEO's publication *Learning Together: Actionable Approaches for Grantmakers*.



Collaborating for learning means bringing a network mindset to an organization's evaluation and learning activities. It means creating a place at the table for nonprofits, community members and others when our organizations are developing or reviewing program strategies. It means making the necessary investments to strengthen the capacity of our nonprofit and community partners to learn. Last but not least, it means creating an expectation that program staff members will engage in open relationships with nonprofits, communities and other partners to support and enhance learning.

Partnerships can advance a grantmaker's learning and evaluation work while at the same time potentially reducing the costs of these activities as we and our partners work together to develop more efficient systems for gathering and sharing data, information and insights. This section answers three basic questions:

**How do we learn with others?**

**How do we strengthen the capacity of nonprofit partners and communities to learn?**

**How do we share what we are learning?**

## How do we learn with others?

Learning with others increases the likelihood that we are gaining the knowledge we need to be effective. It also makes it easier to ensure that we are learning in a way that drives improvement. With more people, more organizations and more sectors at the table learning together, information and insights can be applied more quickly and in more places to improve outcomes on the ground.

### Who Are Our Learning Partners?

Grantmakers' learning partners can include nonprofits, fellow funders, community members, community leaders, government and private-sector partners, evaluators, consultants, and others who are interested in solving the same problems. Learning partners can vary depending on what we want to learn together and why. Through shared learning activities – for example, developing shared analysis or understanding of issues, collectively and collaboratively designing learning agendas, identifying learning goals, and making meaning of data and information – grantmakers can improve our own performance and impact as well as the performance and impact of our partners.

**Learning with Nonprofits.** Nonprofits are the most critical learning partner for grantmakers. Rather than imposing our own learning agendas on the nonprofits we support, our goal should be to understand and value nonprofit perspectives on how to leverage the power of learning. What do nonprofits need to know in order to strengthen their work? How are they learning from failure? What do they and their partners already have, and what do they need (e.g., more resources, training, technical assistance), in order to build their capacity to evaluate their work in ways that can contribute to learning and improved performance? How will nonprofits and other partners use evaluation findings to support planning and decision-making?

**Learning with Other Grantmakers.** Other grantmakers are another great source of learning, particularly when it comes to grantmaking strategies and practices that can help us be more effective. By learning with other funders, we develop a shared sense of how to work together to take on shared priorities. Key questions to cover with other grantmakers include these: What gaps in knowledge exist in the field? What are other funders learning from their grantmaking? How are they learning? How are evaluation and other learning practices set up to inform their work and the work of their nonprofit partners? What areas of overlap or possible learning collaboration are there among different funders?

## Grantmaker Story: Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland

When the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland was thinking recently about how to bolster its support for efforts to improve health in the city's Central neighborhood, it launched an asset-mapping initiative that engaged local residents. During convenings in the neighborhood, residents had an opportunity to offer guidance on strategies for and indicators of community health. Two residents also served on the steering committee for the design of the initiative. "We want to find new ways to authentically include resident voices as we think about our work, and this enabled us to approach the conversation differently," said Christine Mitton, director of knowledge and learning with the grantmaker.

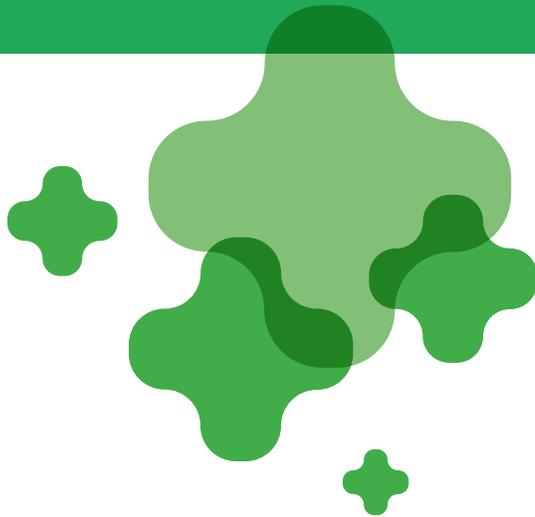


The Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland supports early childhood success and resident leadership through the Cleveland Central Promise Neighborhood.

*Photo Credit: Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland*

**Learning with Communities.** Grantmakers have a responsibility to learn with and from the communities where we do our work. Often, however, issues of power come into play as grantmakers set out to learn with communities. Communities have experienced grantmakers as driving the agenda and extracting information for only our own use. As a result, we should approach our learning work in communities with an eye to genuine partnership and longer-term engagement. Community members should be in the driver's seat in identifying key learning questions, and we should be sure to share data, information and insights in ways that support communities to take ownership of learning and to act on it.

How do we learn with others?



## Roles and Strategies for Learning Together

Grantmakers can play a number of roles in collaborative learning activities, and those roles, including the following, can overlap as the work unfolds:

- **Convener:** organizing meetings and events where collaborative learning happens
- **Facilitator:** determining how collaborative learning activities are resourced and run
- **Capacity builder:** providing funds and other support to boost the ability of nonprofits and community partners to collect, analyze and share information
- **Participant:** bringing questions and interests to the table during collective learning activities
- **Funder:** providing funds and nonmonetary support for collaborative learning activities carried out by nonprofits and partners

Similarly, grantmakers have an array of strategies and tactics available for evaluating and learning alongside nonprofits and others in the course of our work. Some grantmakers use surveys and focus groups to find out what important stakeholders are thinking, while others create “learning circles” that include nonprofit and community representatives as well as other grantmakers. Engaging partners and stakeholders in these and other ways on an ongoing basis can enhance impact through more open, honest conversations with nonprofits and communities about their progress, challenges and needs, while also providing a source of regular input and feedback to inform our organizations’ planning and decisions.

One way to think about how grantmakers can participate in and foster collaborative learning is to consider the value of learning communities in advancing shared understanding and collective action among diverse participants. A *learning community* is a group of people who share a common concern or question and want to deepen their understanding of possible approaches and solutions. Though known by other names, such as *communities of practice* or *learning networks*, these groups all focus on enabling participants to exchange knowledge, acquire new skills and change practice through their participation and their relationships with others in the group.

## Grantmaker Story: Wells Fargo Regional Foundation

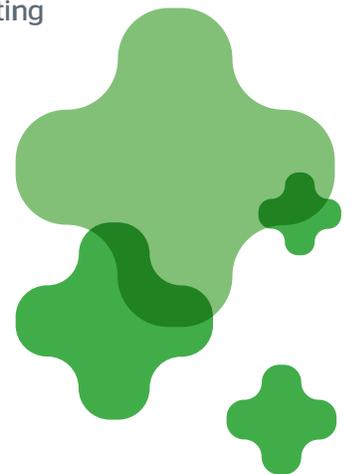
The Wells Fargo Regional Foundation works closely with nonprofit organizations in 50 communities in Delaware, New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania to develop and implement plans for long-term neighborhood revitalization. In each community, the foundation supports a lead nonprofit partner to design and conduct outreach activities, including rigorous resident surveys, stakeholder interviews and community meetings, aimed at identifying community priorities that will inform their planning. The foundation provides training, coaching and other support to strengthen the nonprofits' capacity for conducting the survey work in a systematic way so that it can also serve as a baseline for assessing long-term impact. For nonprofits that are selected for implementation grants, the foundation provides additional support to develop and implement evaluation plans. In other work to promote shared learning, the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation organizes an annual conference of its nonprofit partners to explore cross-cutting topics facing their communities. "This is about building the capacity of these communities to have good, solid data and to understand and use it to drive their revitalization strategies," said Lois Greco, senior vice president of evaluation.

How do we learn with others?

Learning communities are defined by three primary characteristics:

- Participants learn *in action* while grappling with real-life questions; their participation complements their day-to-day work and responsibilities.
- Participants learn *together*, generating collective wisdom as a group, thanks to peer exchange and based on the assumption that peers have something valuable to offer each other.
- Participants learn *on an ongoing basis and over time*, taking part for as long as they see value in participating.

As grantmakers, our organizations can be participants, organizers and/or supporters of learning communities that also include community members, nonprofit representatives, foundation colleagues and others. Regardless of the composition of the group, successful learning communities are the result of intentional design and investment to ensure that all participants are benefiting and that the experience is pointing the way to progress on the issues that brought everyone together. More information is found in GEO's *Learn and Let Learn* (see Additional Resources, page 51).





More than 400 grantee, community and family leaders gathered at Marguerite Casey Foundation's National Convening in the Washington, D.C. area to celebrate their work, their communities, and their power.

*Photo Credit: Marguerite Casey Foundation*

## Collaboration in Evaluation Design

A great place to start when setting out to learn alongside nonprofits and others is with evaluation design. Instead of answering the “what” and “why” questions (see page 28) about evaluation on our own, many grantmakers are engaging partners in up-front conversations and dialogue about the intended purpose of an evaluation so there is shared buy-in from the start.

Developing indicators and metrics should not be a closed-door exercise. Given that grantmakers are working in common cause with nonprofits, other funders and partners, it only makes sense to engage others in identifying indicators of progress toward shared goals. This means working alongside nonprofits and communities to identify useful evaluation measures as we all seek to learn from ongoing work. It also means providing nonprofits with better and more tailored support to do evaluation well (see page 53). By embracing participatory evaluation and building learning communities that involve staff, nonprofits and community members, grantmakers help ensure that evaluation meets the needs of everyone.

There's another good reason for engaging nonprofits and others in evaluation design. Attributing direct social impact to one grant or one program area is virtually impossible in most of the issue areas in which grantmakers work. By collaborating with others to identify and track indicators and outcomes, grantmakers can add up all the different factors that might or might not be influencing our ability to get the results we want. This analysis, in turn, can help advance learning among a broader group of partners about what's working and what's not.

## Values and Principles for Collaborative Learning

Learning with others increases the likelihood that our strategies are founded on a genuine, real-world understanding of the problems we want to solve through our grantmaking, as well as the best possible solutions. Four key values and principles contribute to the success of collaborative learning for grantmakers:

**Shared control and accountability.** When we learn together, we decide together about the practices, questions and principles that guide our work. For example, we work collectively to establish the guiding questions and evaluation processes rather than delivering them in a top-down approach. We enable our learning partners to hold us and each other accountable to answering the questions we set out to answer.

**Openness and flexibility.** All good partnerships require some give-and-take between partners. As grantmakers, we must set the tone of being open to multiple perspectives and make a commitment to being flexible if our learning partners decide to go in an unanticipated direction. These practices ensure that shared learning is useful to everyone involved.

**Partnership.** Shared learning works best when there is authentic partnership. This means actively engaging all participants and making sure no single individual or organization has the sole power to drive the agenda or identify takeaways. This partnership generally is not about one participant's or convener's gaining input from others; the goal is to make space for shared reflection and decision-making.

**Inclusivity.** We do not need to limit our shared learning partnerships to those with grantees or co-funders. When we open these partnerships up to engage other individuals, organizations, partners or community members, we tap into greater expertise and insights on how to approach the work.



## Action Steps:

### Prioritize it

Learning together cannot be a priority for foundation evaluation or program staff alone; everyone, including trustees and the CEO, needs to understand the importance of learning together and how it contributes to better outcomes for our organizations, our nonprofit partners, other partners and people in the communities we serve. It is only when collaborative learning becomes a part of the culture and day-to-day practice of a foundation, and when it is integrated from the beginning of a program or initiative, that staff give it the time and space it requires.

### Allocate the necessary resources

As noted above, real learning happens when we broaden our horizons and take in information and insights from a broader range of sources. Starting individually, we can apply an equity lens to where we get the information we rely on to do our work. Are we primarily relying on academic and “insider” information from thought leaders in our fields to inform our world view? Conversely, how much are we engaged in conversations, reading and other activities that highlight the perspectives and experiences of communities that are the focus of our organizations’ work and investments? Similarly, we can work with staff and board members in our organizations to assess and inventory our collective learning sources, and to explore solutions for broadening how we learn, and with whom. What assumptions are we making about learning approaches and strategies? How does our learning reflect and operationalize our values and/or commitments around diversity, equity and inclusion? Consider how your learning not only reflects but can advance equity.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

*Learning Together* by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/learning-together-actionable-approaches-for-grantmakers-682>

*Achieving Greater Impact by Starting with Learning* by Taylor Newberry Consulting  
<http://comm.eval.org/viewdocument/achieving-greater-impact-by-startin>

*Learn and Let Learn* by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/738>

*Facilitating Intentional Group Learning* by FSG  
<https://www.fsg.org/tools-and-resources/facilitating-intentional-group-learning>



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*Photo Credit: Carolina Kroon*

### **Build trust and relationships**

Collaborative learning requires a different level of trust and a new kind of relationship with nonprofits, communities and other partners, as well as with those in our own organizations. Learning together effectively requires open dialogue and candor among partners so they can explore issues together, admit what they do and do not know, air disagreements as well as agreements, and be honest about what is working and what is not. Strengthening relationships so they support this kind of candor and trust can take time. The process starts with reaching out to nonprofits, community members and other partners to explore shared learning goals; creating time and space for open dialogue; and ensuring that people understand from the get-go that they can share their knowledge and perspectives without being penalized in some way.

How do we learn with others?

## How do we strengthen the capacity of nonprofit partners and communities to learn?

For shared learning to succeed, grantmakers need to ensure that our nonprofit partners have the tools, resources, systems, skills and human capital needed to formulate and answer shared learning questions. We must prioritize these assets in our partners in the same way that we prioritize them within our own organizations. Research shows that nonprofits want more support from grantmakers to bolster their learning efforts. For example, in a recent study produced jointly by The Center for Evaluation Innovation and The Center for Effective Philanthropy, more than two-thirds of foundation staff said their organizations invest too little in improving nonprofit capacity for data collection and evaluation.<sup>20</sup>

So how can we recognize the learning already happening in nonprofit organizations and put these organizations in an even better position to learn from their work? One strategy is to help them incorporate evaluation and evaluative thinking into their basic organizational DNA. This kind of capacity building can help organizations continuously ask fruitful questions; collect, store and analyze relevant data; and develop the staffing, processes and culture that foster the routine use of data and learning to inform decisions. In addition to funding specific learning capacities such as staffing and data systems, grantmakers can offer continued support to keep evaluative capacity alive.

Some grantmakers have been ahead of the curve with their investments in this area. The Bruner Foundation, for example, has been supporting and studying evaluation capacity building for nearly 20 years. Its Rochester Effectiveness Partnership, which ran from 1996 through 2003, provided intensive, hands-on training and coaching about how to plan for, conduct and meaningfully use program evaluation. After this initiative ended, the foundation continued to develop evaluation materials with its longtime consultant and partner, Anita Baker. Baker and the foundation have



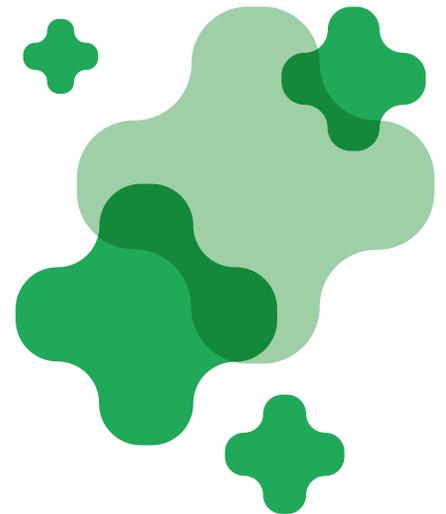
<sup>20</sup> Buteau and Coffman, "Benchmarking Foundation Evaluation Practices."



GEO's 2018 National Conference  
Photo Credit: Carolina Kroon

made these materials freely available to grantmakers and nonprofits on their websites, and passed them along to the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving so availability would continue.

Baker said the grantmaker views evaluation capacity as “the ability to *do* evaluation.” She pointed out that the Bruner Foundation’s capacity-building support is aimed at strengthening nonprofits’ ability to do five things: ask the right questions, determine the data they need to answer those questions, collect data using appropriate strategies, analyze collected data and summarize findings, and use and share those findings.



## Six Principles for Building Learning Capacity

Grantmakers can apply the following principles to partnering with nonprofits for stronger learning and evaluative capacity.

1

**Know yourself.** Grantmakers with experience investing in nonprofit capacity for learning say that success in this work starts with developing a better understanding of our own learning goals and capacities. To be a knowledgeable partner and resource for nonprofits, we need to make sure we have a learning and continuous improvement ethos (see Part One, “Building a Learning Organization”). In addition, when funders are clear about what we want to know and how we will use that information, we can be more streamlined in our work with nonprofits and avoid burdening them with requests for unnecessary data.

2

**Ensure nonprofit ownership.** For capacity-building efforts to be effective, nonprofits need to own the process. Nonprofits likely understand the benefits of learning and the value of devoting time and energy to this work, but they may face barriers that grantmakers can help remove. Asking our nonprofit partners about their strengths and challenges in this area is a good first step. Making sure that nonprofits can learn what they need to know for their own programs and at their own stage of development – rather than simply responding to grantmaker reporting requirements – is essential.

3

**Consider a combination of group learning and individualized support.** Some grantmakers combine group-based evaluation capacity building with one-on-one training and technical support for nonprofits. There are distinct advantages of both group learning and individualized support. Bringing nonprofits together to develop and implement evaluation plans, and to reflect on lessons that emerge, can be powerful. These convenings not only create a space for peer-to-peer learning but also foster a sense of community among nonprofits and encourage collaboration, which can be particularly valuable for organizations working in the same geographic or issue area.

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*Continued on page 56*

*Continued from page 55*



**Invest in organization-level change.** Although developing the knowledge and skills of staff members at nonprofit organizations is important, staff won't stay in their jobs forever. Recognizing this fact, some grantmakers and nonprofits look for ways to build capacity at the organizational (rather than individual) level. This strategy may involve developing new data systems, cleaning up or upgrading an existing system, or trying to institutionalize the strategic use of data and evaluation in management and programmatic decision-making.



**Start small and manage expectations.** Developing capacity to use and benefit from evaluation can be a daunting undertaking, both for nonprofit organizations and for grantmakers. Funders who are newer to this work are advised to start small – by selecting a nonprofit with whom you have a strong relationship, trying out an approach, requesting feedback and learning from the experience. In addition, we need to be realistic about what a capacity-building effort can achieve. Progress may be incremental, especially considering the stresses and competing priorities facing nonprofit leaders today. The key is to provide nonprofits with support while remembering that their staffs are often stretched.

Like grantmakers, nonprofits can build on learning capacity they already have in place. How are they currently sharing data with the community, or with board members or funders? How are they tracking the results of various programs? Grantmakers can help nonprofits strengthen these functions to support learning. Setting modest, achievable goals for improvements to evaluation capacity can increase the odds of a “win,” which funders and nonprofits can then build on.



**Think long term.** Evaluation capacity building works best when it happens over an extended time frame, within the context of a trusting, long-term relationship. The typical one-year grantmaking cycle is not sufficient for this type of work.

As part of this long-term vision for strengthening learning, grantmakers and nonprofits will likely have to wrestle with fieldwide issues that impact nonprofits' ability to use evaluation effectively. One of these issues is a lack of access to the data needed to track long-term outcomes. Information about educational outcomes or employment, for example, would be extremely useful for many organizations, but it can be very hard to obtain in many communities. Another challenge stems from the varied reporting requirements of different funders (both public and private). Grantmakers who invest in this work for the long haul may be able to advocate for better collaboration across institutions and systems, which can help address thorny fieldwide issues.

Building evaluation capacity provides nonprofits with tools they can use for years to come. By taking stock of our own goals and capacity; by identifying the questions and data that matter most to nonprofits and communities; by providing high-quality training and investing in new systems and processes; and by engaging in long-term, trusting partnerships, we can significantly enhance nonprofits' capacity to learn – which enhances our ability to learn as well, and makes for more effective and more resilient organizations.

### Data Check: Nonprofits and Evaluation

- According to Innovation Network, 92 percent of nonprofits evaluate. Further, 93 percent of nonprofits say reporting to funders is a primary purpose of evaluation, along with reporting to their board (94 percent) and planning/revising programs (91 percent).<sup>21</sup>
- Nonprofits agree that funders do not cover the cost of evaluation. The Nonprofit Finance Fund reported that 89 percent of nonprofits were asked to provide evaluation data to at least some of their funders, but 68 percent said their funders never or rarely cover the costs associated with measuring program outputs or outcomes.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Johanna Morariu, Veena Pankaj, Kat Athanasiades, and Deborah Grodzicki, "State of Evaluation 2016: Evaluation Practice and Capacity in the Nonprofit Sector." Innovation Network, a2016. Available at [https://www.innonet.org/media/2016-State\\_of\\_Evaluation.pdf](https://www.innonet.org/media/2016-State_of_Evaluation.pdf).

<sup>22</sup>Nonprofit Finance Fund, "State of the Nonprofit Sector: 2015 Survey." 2015. Available at <https://nff.org/sites/default/files/nff/docs/2015-survey-brochure.pdf>.

## Grantmaker Story: Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta

The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta recently created a “community intelligence team” to help ensure that the foundation and its partners are using learning and data to drive strategy. As part of the team’s work, it recently organized a series of hands-on learning opportunities for a group of donors interested in how to close the opportunity gap for residents of the Thomasville Heights neighborhood. After participating in meetings with residents and community leaders, as well as visiting with children in the neighborhood schools, donors are using what they’ve learned to guide their investments in the neighborhood. “It’s been a powerful learning experience in showing how you can be a catalyst and a partner for a community in our region where there is desperate need,” said Lesley Grady, senior vice president at the foundation. She added that the foundation is exploring opportunities for supporting other giving circles in similar ways.



Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta donors and staff learning about equity and opportunity in the region.

Photo Credit: Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta

## Engaging Communities in Learning

Building capacity for learning and evaluation shouldn’t stop with foundations and nonprofits; residents and communities are also key stakeholders. In its 2013 publication *Building Community Capacity for Participation in Evaluation*, GEO encouraged grantmakers to adopt the following strategies for bringing community members into evaluation and learning activities:<sup>23</sup>

- **Create value for community residents.** Find out what community members need to know, be clear on how you will use data and remain flexible.
- **Illuminate, don’t intimidate.** Use evaluators with facilitation skills and cultural competency, and prepare residents to participate in evaluation activities.

<sup>23</sup>“Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, *Building Community Capacity for Participation in Evaluation: Why It Matters and What Works*,” 2013. Available at <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/692>.

- **Tailor technical assistance and training.** Assess the readiness of community members, build their knowledge of evaluation and be realistic about the “dosage” of learning activities.
- **Support community capacity for learning.** Design tools with community learning and planning in mind, establish a community liaison, and loop back about findings.
- **Model transparency, accountability and consistency.** Take time to develop trust and openness, acknowledge power dynamics, be clear about your purpose, and communicate early and often.



The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta invited local nonprofits to participate in Catchafire, an online skills-based platform for short-term, virtual, skills-based volunteer projects.

*Photo Credit: Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta*

## Action Steps:

### Start the conversation

Grantmakers can send a signal to nonprofits about the importance of learning and evaluation, and about their commitment to supporting this work, simply by initiating conversations with nonprofit leaders and staff. Nonprofits are unlikely to tell a grantmaker, “Hey, we don’t have the ability to provide the data you just requested.” In most cases, grantmakers will have to start a dialogue with nonprofits about their existing evaluation and learning capacity and the kinds of support they would find helpful. Approaching these conversations with a spirit of genuine interest, openness and candor is important. Here are some questions grantmakers might consider asking:

- How do you define success? What does that look and feel like for your organization? Whose perspective(s) does this definition reflect? What information do you need in order to know if you’re on track to reach those goals?
- What have you learned from evaluative efforts to date? What was most useful? Why and how did you use it? What do you hope to learn through new evaluative efforts? What are the kinds of questions you want answers to, and if you had those answers, how would they inform your work?
- How do you seek feedback and input from nonprofits and community members you work with?
- What data do you currently collect and how? How do you use the data you collect? What kinds of data do other funders request?
- What are the biggest challenges you face around collecting and using data? What are your biggest strengths in this area, and how have you used them?
- Who on your staff “owns” evaluative activities? What are those activities?
- What kinds of support do you need (funding, consultants, training, etc.) to go the next step in your organization’s evaluative work?



## Focus on systems, skills and culture

Grantmakers are not the only ones who have to think about culture change as we work toward building learning organizations. Nonprofits do too. Nonprofit leaders may want coaching and consulting support to implement the changes needed to help turn their organizations into learning organizations, in addition to the support required to bolster staffing and systems.

## Fund it

Supporting nonprofits' capacity to learn from their work isn't just about helping them pay for fancy new data systems. Nor is it only about training nonprofit leaders and staff in effective evaluation and learning practices. It's about all of these things, and more. Without funding for these and other activities, nonprofits cannot make learning a priority and thus cannot embed it into their core organizational functions. Consider providing general operating support as well as dedicated support that will go directly to strengthening nonprofits' capacity to learn. Nonprofits can then use this support as they see fit to address their most urgent learning and evaluation needs.

## Don't make learning an added burden; make it mission critical

Grantmakers have a long and tumultuous history when it comes to nonprofits' learning and evaluation activities. Traditionally, we have asked for data and information without offering funding to generate it. As you set out to support nonprofits' capacity to learn from their work, try not to make it just one more requirement we are placing on these organizations. Rather, support their own learning and evaluation goals, and make sure that when you are asking for information and insights about their results, you are thinking about (and paying for) the time, staffing and other costs it takes to generate this information.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

***Building Community Capacity for Participation in Evaluation*** by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/692>

**Bruner Foundation Effectiveness Initiatives**  
<http://www.evaluativethinking.org>

***Open For Good: Knowledge Sharing to Strengthen Grantmaking*** by GrantCraft  
<https://foundationcenter.org/openforgood>

***State of Evaluation 2016*** by Innovation Network  
[https://www.innonet.org/media/2016-State\\_of\\_Evaluation.pdf](https://www.innonet.org/media/2016-State_of_Evaluation.pdf)

***Listen4Good*** by Fund for Shared Insight  
<https://www.fundforsharedinsight.org/listen4good>

***Learn and Let Learn*** by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/learn-and-let-learn-738>

***Collaborative Evaluation Approaches: A How-To Guide for Grantmakers*** by Andrew Taylor and Ben Liadsky  
<https://www.issuelab.org/resource/collaborative-evaluation-approaches-a-how-to-guide-for-grantmakers.html>

***Smarter Grantmaking Playbook: How Can We Help Our Grantees Strengthen Their Capacity for Evaluation?*** by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/649>

## Grantmaker Story: Marguerite Casey Foundation

Storytelling has been a staple of the communications and learning work of the Marguerite Casey Foundation since 2001. The foundation created *Equal Voice News*, a digital storytelling platform and magazine, which provides in-depth coverage of issues affecting low-income workers and families across the country. The communications team is staffed by veteran journalists who combine video, photo essays and print pieces to reveal the challenges facing low-income communities while shining a spotlight on solutions. “There is a deep belief in this organization in the power of storytelling and learning from families,” said Paul Nyhan, a former *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reporter and the storytelling and partnership manager with the foundation. Given the ongoing consolidation in the media industry, he pointed out that mainstream media organizations are increasingly ignoring local stories and urgent community issues. “We want to make sure these stories are part of the conversation,” Nyhan said.



More than 400 grantee, community and family leaders gathered at Marguerite Casey Foundation's National Convening in the Washington, D.C. area to celebrate their work, their communities, and their power.

*Photo Credit: Marguerite Casey Foundation*

## How do we share what we are learning?

As noted on page 9, GEO's research indicates that the majority of foundations continue to view internal audiences as the primary consumers of their evaluation and learning findings. But as partners and collaborators in broader networks and social movements, we should share what we're doing and learning as our work proceeds.

Grantmakers tend to share information about our work with an eye to accountability, transparency and, yes, public relations. Indeed, GEO's interviews with members regularly revealed that a major challenge to public sharing of relevant, actionable information about grantmakers' work is a sensitivity about how our organizations and our partners are portrayed. Grantmakers do not want to share information that might embarrass nonprofits or ourselves.

As tax-advantaged organizations, grantmakers tend to view the sharing of information as a way to demonstrate our commitment to fulfilling our “public-purpose” role in society. We want to show (via our annual reports, websites and other communications channels) that we are making smart and strategic investments, and that we and our partners are getting good results. These motives often lead us to communicate and share knowledge and information in a way that puts our organizations in the best possible light.

But if we want to advance learning for our organizations, our partners and entire fields, grantmakers need to embrace a different view of what it means to share knowledge and information. Instead of sharing in ways that make us look good, we should be sharing in ways that support and strengthen our organizations and others to be more effective – for example, by helping to shine a light on what works and what doesn’t as we and our partners undertake our work.

In its 2018 publication *Open for Good: Knowledge Sharing to Strengthen Grantmaking*, GrantCraft notes that sharing is key to grantmaker effectiveness: “Though the typical intent of knowledge sharing is to help others, what is often overlooked is that sharing knowledge beyond a foundation’s walls also can advance the effectiveness and impact within those walls. It can deepen internal reflection and learning, lead to new connections and ideas, and promote organizational credibility and influence.”<sup>24</sup>

Most learning-oriented foundations, according to researchers at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, “make an investment in producing usable knowledge for the philanthropic field.” Their leaders are “willing to work with other funders, practitioners and researchers to pursue common questions, pool resources, test shared hypotheses and find demonstrable answers.”<sup>25</sup>

## What True Sharing Looks Like

At a very basic level, sharing what we are learning means making evaluation results available to nonprofits, communities and other audiences. Beyond the basic level of uploading website posts, however, we need to make such information available in a format that is usable and meaningful to our stakeholders – which in turn requires considering how to communicate effectively, and in culturally competent ways, with diverse audiences. When we frame information in these ways, we combat the “extractive” nature of evaluation, through which grantmakers often demand information and data from nonprofits and communities without giving anything back.

<sup>24</sup> Clare Nolan, “Open for Good: Knowledge Sharing to Strengthen Grantmaking,” GrantCraft, 2018. Available at [http://www.grantcraft.org/assets/content/resources/OFG\\_GUIDE-FINAL.pdf](http://www.grantcraft.org/assets/content/resources/OFG_GUIDE-FINAL.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Hamilton et al., “Learning for Community Change.”

Sharing learning in a strategic way also means providing opportunities for staff, board members, nonprofits, communities and others to analyze data and information in order to develop a collective understanding of what it means for the work they are doing. Such analysis can happen in a variety of venues, such as informal conversations about evaluation findings, regular learning-focused meetings or ongoing peer learning circles. Grantmakers also are looking to share information with their boards and staff in ways that prompt meaningful reflection (versus just emailing everyone a PowerPoint or long report).

These types of practices help cultivate more open, honest conversations with nonprofits and communities about our progress, challenges and needs. Engaging with stakeholders in ongoing learning can broaden our understanding of the issues we are facing and how we can address them together.

## Connecting Learning and Communications

Learning and evaluation staff increasingly are working with communications staff to develop better strategies for sharing learning in meaningful ways. Grantmakers also are wrestling with how best to translate learning effectively to move practice. Simply putting out a report is not enough. Grantmakers should heed and apply the principles of effective communication strategy and knowledge transfer to help make sure that key audiences are able to act on the information we share. One such principle is breaking content into manageable “bites” and arranging them logically for the end user. Others include telling stories as a way to more effectively engage our audiences, and working with users to make meaning of findings rather than just presenting them with conclusions in a final document.

Grantmakers also should avoid the tendency to point out predictable and even cliché lessons as takeaways from our work, such as paeans to the “power of collaboration.” “Philanthropy has a bad habit of sharing repeated truisms instead of helping others see a better way forward,” said Tanya Beer of the Center for Evaluation Innovation. She said that the next frontier for strategic learning in philanthropy is how to think more robustly and substantively about sharing.

Last but not least, grantmakers need to be comfortable sharing failures (see page 75), or at least sharing what we’ve learned from investments and initiatives that did not live up to our initial hopes.



GEO's 2018 National Conference  
 Photo Credit: Carolina Kroon

## Action Steps:

### Assess how and why you share learning now

Sharing learning in a way that drives improvement requires grantmakers to think about our current approaches to sharing. What information and evaluation results do we share now? In what ways? With what audiences? Are we paying attention to what different audiences might need to know, and how best to communicate with them? What is our goal for sharing what we share? Are we doing it to advance learning, or solely because we want to show that we are doing good work and getting positive results? How do partners, nonprofits and communities perceive how, what and why we share?



GEO's 2018 National Conference  
Photo Credit: Carolina Kroon

### **Discuss what it means to share strategically**

Moving from current practices to a culture of sharing to advance learning will likely require discussions among program, communications, learning and evaluation staff, as well as board and staff leaders. During these conversations, engage people around the “why” of sharing evaluation and learning results. Try to build buy-in for an approach that prioritizes sharing in ways that will increase effectiveness for our organizations and others. Doing so means getting people comfortable with more transparency for our ongoing work, as well as more sharing of information that might not always put that work in the most positive light. Demonstrating the payoffs of this kind of sharing, including increased impact and more efficiency as we and our partners apply shared learning to implementing strategies that work (and not pursuing those that don't), is key to successfully adopting new ways of sharing. Additionally, discuss how sharing what you learn connects to organizational values, especially around concepts like integrity, trust, collaboration, partnership and community.

How do we share what we are learning?

## Create a team-based approach to sharing

Sharing learning requires effective communications. There is sometimes tension between staff who want to share what has been learned and those who want to share only good news. For grantmakers with learning, evaluation and communications staff, bringing these staff members together to strategize how best to share what we are learning can often lead to complementary messaging and approaches that are all in service of mission. Communications staff, for example, can help learning staff figure out how to share evaluation results or lessons from a funded initiative in ways that will spur engagement among key audiences. Communications staff also can identify the best channels and formats for sharing depending on the audiences we want to reach. Similarly, learning staff can help communications staff figure out how to identify the most substantive, impactful, transferable information for sharing instead of focusing solely on information that reflects well on our organizations and our partners.

## Track the results of sharing

Sharing learning is about more than simply putting out information and hoping people pick it up. As you begin to share more strategically, assess who is accessing your information, what they are doing with it, and whether it is useful and applicable to them. Learning staff should work with communications staff to monitor the use of information we share through Google analytics, surveys of and conversations with key audiences, and other means. When we know how and whether people are engaging with what we share, as well as how to make it more useful to them, we can continually improve our strategies for sharing.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

***Open for Good: Knowledge Sharing to Strengthen Grantmaking*** by GrantCraft  
<http://www.grantcraft.org/guides/open-for-good>

***Understanding & Sharing What Works: The State of Foundation Practice*** by The Center for Effective Philanthropy  
<https://cep.org/portfolio/understanding-sharing-what-works-the-state-of-foundation-practice>

***Four Essentials for Evaluation*** by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/681>

***Discussion Guide: Four Essentials for Evaluation*** by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/18>

***IssueLab***, a service of Foundation Center  
<https://www.issuelab.org/>

# Part Three

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# Taking Action on Learning

When grantmakers focus on learning for improvement, we use evaluation and learning to generate information and insights that will help us better understand both how we're doing in our work and how to improve. A focus on taking action based on what we learn ensures that we are engaged in strategic or applied learning.

In *Evaluation to Support Strategic Learning: Principles and Practices*, Julia Coffman and Tanya Beer of the Center for Evaluation Innovation outline nine strategic learning principles for grantmakers, among them the following: "Evaluation places a high value on use, and helps to support it. While the quality of data collection and design is crucial, the ultimate criterion for the success of a strategic learning evaluation approach is the extent to which the client uses the information generated through data collection and reflection to answer strategy-related questions.... Evaluation for strategic learning is necessarily utilization-focused, and is therefore always designed with unfailing commitment to actionable data."<sup>26</sup>

Strategic learning is not learning for the sake of learning. When we are engaged in strategic learning and evaluative thinking, our learning informs the strategies we pursue in our work. It helps us identify where we are failing or falling short of our goals so we can change course and do better.

In this section, we address two questions:

**How do we connect learning and strategy?**

**How do we learn from failure?**

<sup>26</sup>Coffman and Beer, "Evaluation to Support Strategic Learning."

## Grantmaker Story: Raikes Foundation

At the Raikes Foundation in Seattle, program staff are guided through an annual strategy review process in which they reflect on what the grantmaker set out to do in its overall strategy, what was accomplished in the last year in partnership with nonprofits and other funders, where the accomplishments fell short of the goals, and what was learned. “It’s about stepping up and out a level, and really digging into how things are progressing and what we are learning,” said the grantmaker’s executive director, Erin Kahn. Among the products of the process are a written memo, a color-coded (green-yellow-red) “scorecard” assessment of major strategy objectives and of each active grant, and a reflective discussion with the organization’s trustees. “We feel we have created a predictable, intensive and deep way to annually gauge what we are learning from our ongoing work and to help us shape goals for the future,” Kahn said.

## How do we connect learning and strategy?

Given the enormous challenges that grantmakers and our partners are working to address, learning has to be about more than producing reports and memos that few people actually read. Not only is this a waste of time and money, but it’s a missed opportunity as well. A lack of practical, actionable applications for evaluation and learning (and clear connections between learning and organizational values) can reduce enthusiasm and buy-in for this work among board and staff members, nonprofits, communities and other stakeholders.

A far better approach is to ensure that we are evaluating and learning with a purpose. If we never change behavior or shift course, we aren’t learning. The Center for Evaluation Innovation has identified five habits that organizations and their boards and staffs can build into their everyday routines to support learning. These habits include the asking the question “Now what?” as part of a learning process.<sup>27</sup> Such questioning forces us to consider how the insights we generate through our learning will be applied.

Viewed in this way, evaluation and learning in philanthropy have one goal: to inform and drive strategy so that we and our partners can achieve ever-improving results. Questions like the following guide this type of evaluation: What do we and our partners need to know and understand in order to do a better job? How can we ensure that our organization, its people and its partners are gaining the knowledge and understanding we need to improve performance on an ongoing basis?

<sup>27</sup>Julia Coffman, “5-A-Day: Learning by Force of Habit.” *Medium*, June 20, 2018, <https://medium.com/@jcoffman/5-a-day-learning-by-force-of-habit-6c890260acbf>.

## From Learning to Doing

GEO's interviews and research have surfaced many good examples of how learning and evaluation have shaped and/or contributed to shifts in strategy. Despite stories like this, the general sense from conversations with grantmakers is that we are still feeling our way to a better understanding of how learning and evaluation can and should drive strategy.

*“We think of knowledge as a public good. Our focus is on elevating learning as a strategy we use to have bigger impact.”*



**Daniela Pineda**  
Vice President for  
Integration and  
Learning, First 5 LA

One place to start is by identifying and defining some of the hypotheses we want to test about our work. Is our after-school initiative achieving its goal of improving student achievement? To what extent is the lack of quality child care in our community preventing parents from finding stable, family-supporting jobs? Does our rooftop garden program actually create more equitable access to fresh fruits and vegetables?

Alternatively, we and our partners may start a learning journey without a working hypothesis but with a shared interest in finding out more about a specific issue or

### Grantmaker Story: First 5 LA

First 5 LA was created in 1998 to invest Los Angeles County's funds from California's tobacco tax into early childhood programs. Since then, its grantmaking has totaled \$1.2 billion. From the start, First 5 LA was committed to learning in public about how best to improve the lives of children. Vice President for Integration and Learning Daniela Pineda oversees a team responsible for assessing the effectiveness of various interventions and programs supported by the grantmaker. In addition, program staff who are working on a project can co-design a reflective learning session with Pineda's team about past work and what the grantmaker and its partners can learn from it to drive strategy. The integration and learning team also develops learning agendas with staff, using a six-step process to fine tune exactly what First 5 LA and its partners want to learn from a specific program or piece of work. "We think of knowledge as a public good," Pineda said. "Our focus is on elevating learning as a strategy we use to have bigger impact."

## Grantmaker Story: Open Society Foundations

With offices in 40 countries, the Open Society Foundations has adopted a decentralized approach to strategies and operations, including learning. In the public health program, for example, Natalie Jaynes directs a team of two other staff members to facilitate and support staff learning. “The focus is on our decision-making as a grantmaker and how our decisions help or hinder results,” Jaynes said of the grantmaker’s approach to learning and evaluation. Every two years, Open Society Foundations programs conduct a “pulse check” aimed at refreshing program strategies. In addition, every four years, each program takes a deeper dive aimed at changing or “reviving” the strategy. Each of these processes is driven by portfolio reviews facilitated and supported by the learning and evaluation staff. “These portfolio reviews are 90-minute meetings where we ask what our ambitions at the start of the period were, what happened, and what we might have done differently knowing what we know now,” Jaynes said. The focus, she added, is always on identifying course corrections or tweaks aimed at improving results and decision-making.

How do we connect learning and strategy?

problem, and in turn what can be done about it. For example, what historical and structural factors created a housing crisis in our community, and how might we go beyond addressing only the symptoms toward understanding root causes? Or, what are the key pollutants in the river that runs through town, and what can be done to clean it up?

The consultants at FSG advise that grantmakers and their partners consider building a “strategic learning and evaluation system” into their work.<sup>28</sup> Such a system is founded on an “evaluation and learning vision” for the organization and agreed-upon strategies as depicted in a theory of change, along with outcomes and indicators. The result is an actionable plan to ensure that the organization is “asking the right questions in the right ways and at the right times,” said Hallie Preskill, managing director with FSG. Such a system also ensures that we are thinking strategically about how to use evaluation findings to inform decisions and action.

## Considering What’s Feasible

Of course, a grantmaker’s learning strategy will depend on the resources available to support an organizationwide focus on learning – including staff, finances, technology and more. In developing a learning strategy, grantmakers should therefore consider what’s feasible to achieve, while looking to outside partners to collaborate and create more “bang for the buck” for our strategies.

<sup>28</sup>Hallie Preskill and Katelyn Mack, “Building a Strategic Learning and Evaluation System for Your Organization.” Webinar, FSG, accessed November 30, 2018, <https://www.fsg.org/publications/building-strategic-learning-and-evaluation-system-your-organization#download-area>.



The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta invited local nonprofits to participate in Catchafire, an online skills-based platform for short-term, virtual, skills-based volunteer projects.

*Photo Credit: Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta*

Instead of approaching learning as a way to render definitive judgments about success or failure, grantmakers should consider pursuing a learning strategy and practices that deliver information and data about the range of factors that can affect progress on a given issue or problem. When a grantmaker and its partners are trying to bring change to complex systems such as public education or health care, learning can provide a platform for regularly reassessing how things are going, what's working and what isn't, and how to change or adapt approaches as we go along.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### **Evaluation for Strategic Learning: Assessing Readiness and Results**

by Anna Williams and the Center for Evaluation Innovation  
<https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/evaluation-for-strategic-learning-assessing-readiness-and-results>

### **Engaging Boards and Trustees in Strategic Learning: A Toolkit**

by FSG and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/engaging-boards-and-trustees-in-strategic-learning-a-toolkit-1196>

### **Learning for Results**

by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/learning-for-results-1151>

### **Building a Strategic Learning and Evaluation System for Your Organization**

by Hallie Preskill and Katelyn Mack, FSG  
<https://www.fsg.org/publications/building-strategic-learning-and-evaluation-system-your-organization#download-area>

### **5-A-Day: Learning by Force of Habit**

by Julia Coffman  
<https://medium.com/@jcoffman/5-a-day-learning-by-force-of-habit-6c890260acbf>

## Action Steps:

### **Know what you and your partners need to know (make sure your strategy drives your learning)**

Becoming a learning organization starts with a thoughtful assessment of the unique evaluation goals and needs of your organization and of the nonprofits and communities you support. More than anything else, such an assessment will be grounded in one question: What do your organization and its partners want to know more about *in order to advance your mission and strategies?*

### **Ask the “Now what?” question**

Any time you and your partners are engaged in learning, make sure the process includes opportunities for weighing what the data and insights you have gathered suggest about possible changes in strategies or priorities.

### **Create systems in which learning drives strategy**

Grantmakers and our partners should have regular opportunities to incorporate learning and evaluation results into the process of developing and refining strategies. Think about the time frames for strategy reviews that make the most sense for your organization and how to make learning and reflection core to the process.

### **Think collaboratively**

A grantmaker’s strategies should reflect more than just the learning generated inside our walls. To have real impact, our strategies also should reflect the learning and insights of people outside the organization – nonprofits, funding partners, community members and more. Make sure to include these stakeholders in your efforts to develop learning-informed strategies.

## How do we learn from failure?

Building a learning organization means creating systems that allow and support board members, staff, nonprofits and other partners to use data to assess performance – and to consider how always to do better. It also means embracing failure as an opportunity to learn and change course.

“We feel it’s important to be absolutely candid about what we do and do not accomplish because that’s the only way we can learn going forward.”



**Maurice Samuels**  
Senior Evaluation Officer,  
John D. and Catherine T.  
MacArthur Foundation

Failure can be a difficult topic for grantmakers. Indeed, GEO’s members regularly remind us that the rhetoric in philanthropy around embracing failure does not match the reality that failure makes people uncomfortable, and that when foundations do share their failures, they often share only the ones that are easiest to talk about. In The Center for Effective Philanthropy’s 2018 report *Understanding & Sharing What Works: The State of Foundation Practice*, more than one-third of grantmaker CEOs said one reason that foundations do not share more of what they know about what does and doesn’t work is that they are hesitant

### Grantmaker Story: John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation is committed to transparency when sharing evaluation results, whether those results reflect well on the grantmaker’s work or not. For example, when MacArthur was wrapping up work on a multiyear initiative focused on juvenile justice reform in four states, it issued a comprehensive evaluation that clearly identified the successes as well as the shortcomings of its strategies and tactics. On the positive side, the evaluation found that the Models for Change initiative contributed to systems reform by bringing people together and supporting the various forms of collaboration. However, the evaluation report clearly specified where the initiative “might have done better.” Among the areas where it fell short were showing insufficient appreciation for state-specific issues and contexts, initially limiting opportunities for district attorneys and law enforcement to be part of the discussions, and not embedding a more rigorous research and evaluation agenda into the initiative from the start. Maurice Samuels, senior evaluation officer with MacArthur, said the Models for Change report is typical of the foundation’s approach. “We feel it’s important to be absolutely candid about what we do and do not accomplish because that’s the only way we can learn going forward,” he said.

## Grantmaker Story: The Kresge Foundation

For more than a decade, The Kresge Foundation has supported individual artists working in Detroit through fellowships, special awards and other investments. Recently, the foundation began to hear feedback that its grantmaking was not reaching as wide and diverse an audience of local artists as it had hoped. After reviewing grant application data and talking with artists (both grantees and non-grantees) about how people learned about the foundation's grant awards, the grantmaker decided the feedback was spot-on. Now, The Kresge Foundation holds regular information sessions about its fellowships and grant awards in community and cultural centers throughout the area. The foundation also holds focused information sessions on topics such as how to submit a grant or fellowship application or how to build a solid portfolio of work. "This work is very much aligned with our Detroit team's overall emphasis on racial equity and how to engage more broadly with the community," said Chera Reid, director of strategic learning, research and evaluation with the foundation.

How do we learn from failure?

to share mistakes, failures, or programs or strategies that didn't work.<sup>29</sup> As one of GEO's interviewees with a large grantmaking organization told us, "There is a lot of sensitivity here about revealing issues or problems within the organization or among our project partners."

## Is "Failure" the Right Word?

Some grantmakers say the word *failure* is itself a problem. If learning or evaluation activities suggest that a specific program strategy is not working well or should be tweaked, is that a "failure"? Or is it merely an example of how grantmakers should always be testing our assumptions and striving for continuous improvement?

Calling something a failure suggests blaming and shaming, rather than focusing on the future and how to improve. Some grantmakers express concern about how nonprofits and other partners may feel exposed when a foundation talks publicly about failure. Liz Ruedy, director of evaluation with Democracy Fund, suggested that the conversation around failure could be reframed around the concepts of risk and "choicefulness." In other words, how can learning help drive grantmakers to make better choices for maximum impact?

Regardless of the words we use, GEO regularly hears from members that they want to create organizational cultures in which nonprofits and communities feel comfortable sharing their challenges and in which staff talk to colleagues, board members and nonprofits not just about the foundation's successes but also about what they can learn when things go wrong.

<sup>29</sup>Hallie Preskill and Katelyn Mack, "Building a Strategic Learning and Evaluation System for Your Organization." Webinar, FSG, accessed November 30, 2018, <https://www.fsg.org/publications/building-strategic-learning-and-evaluation-system-your-organization#download-area>.



Chera Reid, director of strategic learning, research and evaluation at Kresge, engages program staff at the foundation to discuss learning.

*Photo Credit: The Kresge Foundation*

## Changing Our Attitudes about Failure

Why is it important to talk about (and learn from) failure? Because things don't always play out in the ways we expect. In philanthropy, as in any other endeavor, we inevitably will encounter situations in which the results of our work do not match our hypotheses, hopes and dreams. However, foundations and nonprofits usually avoid talking about failure. Resources are spread too thin, and the job of strengthening communities or supporting children and families is too important, to allow people even to consider the possibility of falling short. In fact, nonprofits that are competing for scarce resources from philanthropy and government have little if any incentive to call attention to instances when their work has not achieved the intended results.

Talking about failure also can be a challenge in the context of philanthropy's emphasis on accountability, metrics and impact (for grantmakers and nonprofits alike). While the focus on measurable results is a positive development, it can also be a double-edged sword when carried to the extreme – for example, by “driving distortion” as people set out to avoid or cover up mistakes.

## Embracing Risk and Experimentation

Most grantmakers say they value transparency and want to learn from programs and initiatives that do not pan out as planned. The question, of course, is how best to accomplish transparency and learning. What can grantmakers do to create an environment in which falling short of goals is viewed as an opportunity to learn?

The answer is creating space for people and organizations to make mistakes in their work. One approach grantmakers can consider for changing our cultures around failure is to consider the scientific model and embrace experimentation as a core facet of our organizational cultures.

Philanthropy provides the research and development capital that nonprofits need to test new strategies for addressing social problems – strategies that, if successful, could be expanded and applied by others. But like scientific experiments, not every new strategy or approach can be a success, no matter how well it is vetted by grantmakers and our partners. Like any failed experiment, the failure of a grantmaking strategy or initiative can produce critical learning that will lead to better results in the future.

Therefore, we need to make it safe and acceptable for staff and nonprofits to discuss failure and mistakes without negative consequences. Using evaluation methods, we and our partners can put failed projects to good use by capturing lessons about what happened, why the project fell short of expectations and how to achieve different outcomes in the future.

## Remembering the Costs of Failure

The goal of the activities described in this section is not to “celebrate” failure. Nor should we embark on this work with a “gotcha” mentality of constantly pointing out where our work or the work of others has been deficient. Failure can have real costs for people, organizations and communities. Jobs, funding and reputations (individual and organizational) can be on the line. The focus should be on learning from failure so we can do better, and also on ensuring that we are not exposing people and organizations in the process.

## Action Steps:

### Have open conversations about increasing your risk tolerance

Grantmakers need to be willing to take risks and fail. At the very least, failure can spur learning and improvement by increasing our understanding of what doesn't work, and why – but only if we create a culture in which failures aren't swept under the rug but are viewed as opportunities for learning.

### Develop systems and processes for assessing failure

Understanding why things fail is as important as understanding why they succeed. Therefore grantmakers should have systems and processes in place to identify instances in which their work and the work of their nonprofit partners is not living up to early expectations, and to try to find out why.

### Don't point fingers

Learning from failure shouldn't be about singling out instances when specific staff members or nonprofit partners fell short. Grantmakers should help staff, nonprofits and other partners understand that we are all in this work together, we share the results (good and bad), and we share the responsibility of always learning to do better.

### Make sure learning from failure drives improvement

Embracing a philosophy of failure doesn't mean publishing a "warts-and-all" report of lessons learned, feeling good about being transparent, and then getting back to our work without really changing anything. As we and our partners own up to our mistakes and identify when and how our work fell short of goals, we must at the same time commit to trying to set things right in the future.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

***Getting the Best Possible Failures in Philanthropy*** by Jen Ford Reedy  
[https://ssir.org/articles/entry/getting\\_the\\_best\\_possible\\_failures\\_in\\_philanthropy](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/getting_the_best_possible_failures_in_philanthropy)

**Fail Forward Resources**  
<https://failforward.org/resources>

***Mistakes to Success: Learning and Adapting When Things Go Wrong*** by Robert Giloth and Colin Austin

***Smarter Grantmaking Playbook: How Can We Embrace a Learning for Improvement Mindset?*** by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/658>

***Evaluation in Philanthropy*** by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations  
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/689>

***Risk Management Toolkit*** by Open Road Alliance  
<https://openroadalliance.org/resource/toolkit/>

# Conclusion

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Despite the growth of our sector, many of the deep-seated problems that grantmakers and our nonprofit partners are working to solve have proven difficult to crack. This suggests it's time to consider new and improved ways of working, and new and improved strategies for tackling the toughest social problems.

Strategic learning helps grantmakers and our partners work smarter and get better results. We need to create cultures in which people reflect and learn, so that our organizations, our nonprofit partners and others can become more effective in achieving our goals. We need to consider how we will staff learning functions within our organizations and how we will consider equity in our learning and evaluation work. We must continue to use evaluation as a tool for learning.

In order to be successful in making these changes, we have to focus on the capacities required, both within our organizations and in our partners. We know that learning together helps us achieve more, so we should prioritize the skills and resources to make it possible. When we learn together, we also recognize that sharing what we have learned is important for our continued success. Our learning has the greatest impact when we are transparent and return that learning to the system.



The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta invited local nonprofits to participate in Catchafire, an online skills-based platform for short-term, virtual, skills-based volunteer projects.

*Photo Credit: Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta*

*As a foundation, the conditions we create – in the culture, in the office, in the type of meeting structure we put together, the people we have around the table – should be the focus if we want learning to be meaningful.”*



**Koua Jacklyn Franz**  
*Former Director in the Office of the President, Stuart Foundation*

Of course, if we are not able to connect what we have learned with our strategy, then we have missed a significant opportunity to improve. When we take the lessons that we have learned, from both our successful initiatives and those that failed to meet expectations, and draw insights to inform future work, we have come full circle on the learning cycle.

Learning provides grantmakers, nonprofits and communities with the information, the insights and the perspective we need to better understand the next steps on the path to solutions. As Koua Jacklyn Franz, formerly of the Stuart Foundation, shared, “Learning happens in all organizations. It’s natural, like how kids learn all the time, not just in school. Adults also have to realize that we’re all learners. As a foundation, the conditions we create – in the culture, in the office, in the type of meeting structure we put together, the people we have around the table – should be the focus if we want learning to be meaningful.”

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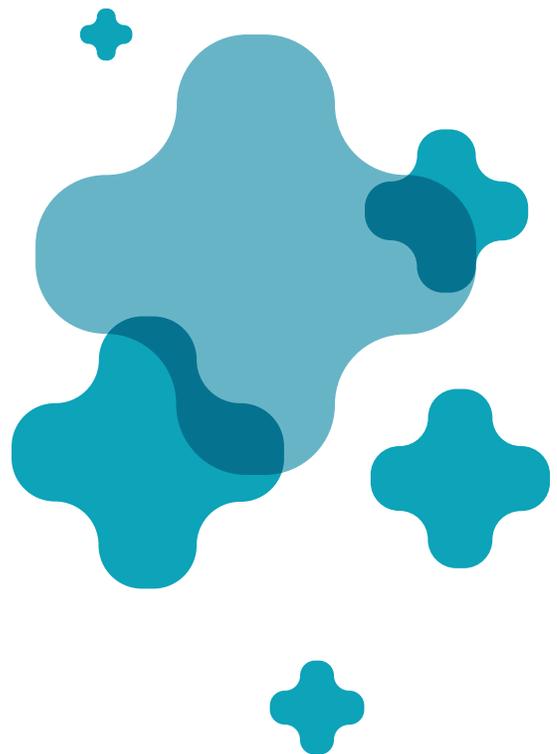
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