

STRATEGIC LEARNING

Evaluation for Strategic Learning: Assessing Readiness and Results



**Center for
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Introduction

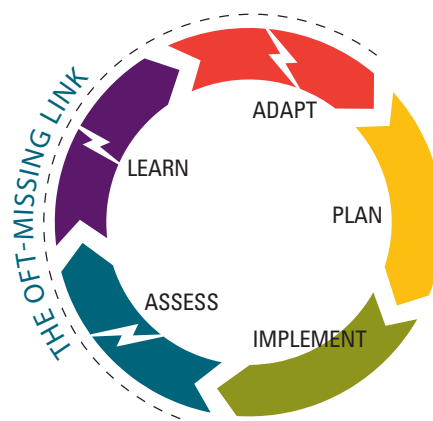
Foundations and nonprofit organizations that promote next-generation solutions to longstanding problems need to evaluate their efforts regularly and use the findings to adapt and improve their strategies. Although many social change organizations espouse learning and adaptation as part of their culture, actual efforts to use evaluation in this way often fall flat.

To fully realize the important lessons that can inform strategy, evaluations must be designed and timed to be in sync with strategy development and improvements. Opportunities for organizational learning and strategic improvement remain untapped when evaluation findings are not translated into the strategy-setting context. To reap the benefits of evaluation in terms of real learning and strategy adaptation, both evaluators and the organizations they work with must approach evaluation in a way that supports strategic learning.

Evaluation for strategic learning is the use of data and insights from a variety of information-gathering approaches—including evaluation—to inform decision-making about strategy. This approach to evaluation has a specific objective—improving strategy—in the same way that some evaluations aim to demonstrate impact. Different evaluation approaches, including developmental, formative, and summative evaluations, can be used for strategic learning.

Evaluation for strategic learning attempts to bridge the gap between evaluation and strategy. As Figure 1 shows, it intentionally links the elements of the strategy cycle most often missing—between implementation, adaptation, and the return back to planning. Evaluation for strategic learning aims to create these links by gathering data and other intelligence from a variety of sources, including evaluation, to embed learning into strategy development and implementation.¹

Figure 1. Common Broken Links in the Strategy Cycle



¹ Coffman, J., & Beer, T. (2011). *Evaluation to support strategic learning: Principles and practices*. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation. Lynn, J., & Stokes, K. (2012). *Strategic learning in practice: Tools to create the space and structure for learning*. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation.

Organizations can apply evaluation for strategic learning at any level, from a single project to an entire organization or network of organizations. The approach is particularly well suited for complex contexts where rapid adaptation and innovation are essential to success.

This brief explores organizational preparedness and situational suitability for evaluation that supports strategic learning. It also explores how to understand if this type of evaluation is working. The brief is based on literature review, expert interviews, and the author's own experiences. Short case examples at the end bring the ideas and concepts to life.

Readiness for Strategic Learning

Evaluation for strategic learning is not for every organization or for every situation. Making effective use of this approach requires choosing the right opportunities within organizations that are ready for it, even if “readiness” starts small and builds over time.

As described below, evaluation for strategic learning is more likely to produce actionable results when organizational readiness is coupled with the right situational opportunity. Without minimal starting points, this approach to evaluation can be a waste of time, and can even undermine future evaluation efforts and organizational learning.

Helpful Starting Points

Several starting points will help organizations use evaluation for strategic learning more quickly and effectively, even if these conditions exist only minimally at the beginning. Few organizations will have all of these conditions in place. In some cases, simply having the right conversations with the right people can catalyze learning readiness in one or more of the areas described below, particularly when early efforts quickly produce results that strengthen strategy and build an appetite for more ambitious work.

Organizational Readiness Screens

Helpful Starting Points

1. Authentic leadership commitment
2. A reason to improve strategy
3. The right evaluator
4. Adequate evaluation resources and flexibility to adapt to the unexpected
5. Data to inform strategy
6. A safe space for reflection
7. A seat at the strategy table and access to the right people
8. Realistic expectations around improvement

Also Important Over Time

9. A learning culture
10. Organizational infrastructure that supports learning

1. Authentic Leadership Commitment to Learning

To realize its full potential, evaluation for strategic learning requires sincere leadership commitment—beyond lip service—to learning and adaptation. This commitment should be demonstrated by an interest in learning combined with an ability to learn. Leaders, for example, should express curiosity about alternative perspectives on strategies or theories of change, acknowledge ambiguity, and respond to flawed strategies in a constructive rather than punitive manner. They should have humility around learning, especially when delivering tough messages and acknowledging mistakes or failures related to their own decisions and performance. Such leaders not only set examples, they tacitly give permission to learn from new information

and perspectives through their own behavior, by setting an example, and they view setbacks as opportunities for improvement. Ideally these leaders promote *accountability to learning and adaptation*, not solely accountability to results or to sticking to a rigid plan.

In some instances, evaluators can help to build leadership commitment and capacity for strategic learning, despite leadership's lack of prior experience or demonstrated commitment. This arrangement can, however, require levels of trust, communication, and even coaching that are beyond most evaluators' job descriptions, and this approach often requires a special set of skills and personality chemistry. It is therefore wise to have modest expectations around growing leadership capacity for strategic learning if it is not already present.

“Strategic philanthropy demands an environment where staff is accountable—not for being unequivocally right, but for learning, responding and improving. Only leadership can provide and support such an environment.”

—Patrizi, P., & Thompson, E.H. (2011b). *Necessary and not sufficient: The state of evaluation use in foundations*. Prepared for the Evaluation Roundtable.

2. A Reason to Improve Strategy

To take advantage of evaluation for strategic learning, organizations should have an incentive to improve.

This might mean understanding that their ability to achieve goals could be improved, or realizing that they are working on a “wicked problem” that requires continuous improvement and adaptation. Marilyn Darling of Fourth Quadrant Partners says “adults learn best when they need to—when they are facing a challenge or a new opportunity and want to give it their best.” Such catalysts could include an impasse in decisions around strategy, desire to improve results without a clear path for doing so, recognition that the same mistakes are being repeated, a change in context, or disappointing results. Put another way by a seasoned evaluator, “There needs to be some soul searching, almost a little bit of angst.”

This differs from situations where evaluations may be conducted to fulfill obligations or expectations of key stakeholders. Further, some organizations simply may not need evaluation oriented to ongoing strategic learning and adaptation. They may, for example, implement programs with underlying strategies that are stable and that have withstood the tests of time, leaving improvement opportunities more focused on tactics instead of strategy. In other cases, organizations might place a high priority on their reputation with certain constituencies who would not react well to strategy changes. Ultimately, the reason to improve strategy must be compelling enough to warrant investment of resources and leadership time in the evaluation.

3. The Right Evaluator

Individuals with a variety of titles and roles can lead a strategic learning evaluation. More important are the evaluator's skills, knowledge, and relationships. While external evaluators are the most common choice, other external consultants (e.g., coaches or organizational learning facilitators) and internal staff members also are possibilities. For shorthand, the person or group conducting the evaluation is referred to here as “the evaluator.”

Effective strategic learning evaluators must have both technical and adaptive skills. The evaluator first will need technical expertise to know which approaches and methods are suitable for the context and desired

evaluation outcomes. It is more likely that approaches used for developmental and formative evaluations will be suitable, but in some cases traditional impact evaluation approaches can be used to generate strategic learning.

Moreover, the evaluator must be a capable strategic thinker and advisor who can synthesize and present information in ways that are conducive to learning and relevant to strategy decisions. Even evaluators who are highly analytical can lack strategy expertise and communication skills.

Several soft skills also are essential, including excellent listening, communication, and facilitation skills. Systems thinking and nimbleness are desirable traits as well; some think these, too, are essential.

Experts hold different views on the extent to which an evaluator's content knowledge about the strategy is important. Many think content knowledge is very useful or essential and that without it the evaluator's learning curve can slow down the evaluation process or lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Others think content knowledge (and also existing relationships) can bias evaluators or prevent evaluators from offering important fresh ideas and perspectives. Most agree that, even if content knowledge is desirable, more important are the evaluator's skills and strategy acumen.

There are advantages and disadvantages to using internal versus external evaluators. In either case, it is important that the learning be owned by the stakeholders themselves, and that the evaluator is empowered and committed to helping the organization build a learning culture internally.

Internal staff (assuming they possess the desirable characteristics and relationships) already will be known and are more likely to have content knowledge. Some think internal evaluators are better able to help infuse learning into an organization on a continual and long-term basis. On the other hand, internal evaluators may be in an awkward or compromising position if they help to surface weaknesses, and potential conflicts of interest may arise. Not all internal staff have the desired relationships, trust, or authority to perform this role, and often internal evaluators are positioned to be separate from strategy. Having a staff person dedicated to this position also can be more costly than hiring outside the organization.

External evaluators typically are not subject to the same internal tensions and potential conflicts and, as a result, they generally can raise more difficult issues and push harder than internal staff. They also are more likely to bring new perspectives to bear. However, external evaluation may be more likely to shift responsibility for learning away from staff, fueling a perception that learning is disconnected from the "real work." It can

Finding the Right Strategic Learning Evaluator

Technical Skills

- Suitable and timely data collection and analysis
- Communication, framing, and translation
- Participatory sense-making and facilitation
- Political analysis
- Understanding of what constitutes strategy
- Evaluation capacity-building

Adaptive Skills

- Flexible and risk tolerant
- Curious and creative
- Comfort with ambiguity, uncertainty, and adaptation
- Capacity to understand unspoken organizational dynamics
- Able to sense and manage the balance between:
 - Evaluator and strategist
 - Not enough and too much feedback
 - Reflection and action

take time to develop relationships with external evaluators, and sometimes they may require more time to bring up to speed, depending on their existing knowledge. At times, external evaluation can cost more than evaluations staffed internally.

4. Adequate Evaluation Resources and Flexibility to Adapt to the Unexpected

Evaluation for strategic learning typically requires more “hands on” evaluator and staff time. Evaluators spend time not only analyzing information, but also meeting with stakeholders and observing or participating in strategy discussions. Key stakeholders spend time with the evaluator, and with one another. Ideally this includes decision-makers who may not otherwise be engaged in strategy development and adaptation, but who influence strategies through decisions on funding and priority setting.

No rule of thumb exists for creating a budget for an evaluation for strategic learning, but, although costs will vary, this type of evaluation may require more funds compared with other types. Some strategic learning evaluations are short term, while others continue for years as new strategies are identified, tested, and adapted. The process can identify previous “unknown unknowns” that influence strategy or catalyze deep conversations that have been avoided for years and can take time to resolve. The evaluation should be nimble and adaptable to new discoveries and changing circumstances.

After initial conversations, most seasoned strategic learning evaluators already have a keen sense for the resources needed to begin the work. At the same time, the best evaluators also know to expect the unexpected, and they know the evaluation will likely need to adapt over time. If possible, the plan and the budget should be flexible. Some organizations use retainer contracts with external strategic learning evaluators. Others identify a budget ceiling or “not to exceed” amount and then identify tasks as needed.

“Evaluators need the resources to be flexible and responsive. Plans can change. You cannot predict with full precision when an organization will need to know something about its strategy. Often, if they need something, they need it fast. It’s almost like you need to have an evaluator on a retainer.”

—Julia Coffman, Center for Evaluation Innovation

5. Data to Inform Strategy

An evaluation for strategic learning must provide data that informs learning. Data may be quantitative or qualitative and generated through the evaluation process or ongoing information collection systems. Some useful data can be generated in real time during the evaluation process, such as during debriefs after key events or group discussions on differing hypotheses for achieving desired outcomes. Regardless of the source, data must be timely and useful for informing important strategic questions and decisions.

6. A Safe Space for Humble and Constructive Reflection

Participants in an evaluation for strategic learning need to explore strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and barriers in a manner that supports intellectual and professional safety, regardless of what is uncovered. These “safe spaces” may be as simple as conversations over a few hours with the right people, or as extensive as structured meetings with ground rules for participation and confidentiality.

The main goal is to uncover and address the salient strategic issues, including tensions or risky topics that may have been holding back progress, while ensuring that conversations occur in a respectful manner. Often, the strategic learning evaluator facilitates these discussions.

When an organization has a history of negative consequences for failure and when staff do not feel comfortable disclosing when things are not working well, facilitators may create a safe space by starting smaller. Some evaluators, for example, build momentum and safety by focusing a new strategic learning evaluation on a strategy already known to be effective, where only minor improvements are needed.

“If an organization is open to strategic learning, it will be okay with not knowing some things and learning about unknowns. It will also be comfortable with the fact that some things will remain ambiguous.”

—Meg Long,
OMG Center for Collaborative Learning

7. A Seat at the Strategy Table and Access to the Right People

The strategic learning evaluator needs to be present at strategy meetings where interim results and feedback are discussed, to see how strategy development occurs in practice. Without this kind of access, the evaluator will be unable to interpret strategic content deeply or understand communication styles and influential nuance.

There is no substitute for being present during such discussions, even simply as an observer via phone. Debriefs later and notes taken during meetings are not the same. Whether the evaluator observes only or actually participates can be determined by the organization’s leadership, and experts hold a range of opinions on the extent to which an evaluator should participate in discussions, particularly with regard to sharing his or her own opinions on strategic direction. (A more conservative Socratic-style approach is to ask probing strategic questions and encourage others to discover their own opinions and draw their own conclusions.)

Similarly, the evaluator needs to have direct contact with decision-makers and others who have the greatest influence in strategy direction. Without direct access, evaluations can be productive only to a point and, in some cases, they can be a waste of time if the most influential parties, such as board members, and those most directly affected by the evaluation have not been consulted. Even if irreconcilable differences in perspectives emerge, the evaluation can still build a stronger mutual understanding, clarify the tradeoffs and potential consequences of certain decisions, and build confidence in the strategy setting process. In some circumstances, this might be one of the more important and unique roles the evaluator plays.

8. Realistic Expectations Around Improvement

Learning and adaptation take time, and when these take place in the context of organizational culture change, they can take longer. Moreover, adaptation of strategy usually involves some level of risk-taking and trial and error; immediate improvements in outcomes are rare.

In fact, once an evaluation surfaces issues that need to be addressed, and particularly if creative approaches are needed to improve strategies, performance may appear to be weaker in the short run. Things can appear

to get worse before they get better, in part due to unveiling a weakness that may have been present for some time. Efforts to address complex system problems are likely to require more routine adaptation of strategy to be effective, and the demand for learning may not dissipate. These can be hard pills to swallow for organizations under pressure to deliver results quickly.

“A lot about learning can’t be taught. It can’t be reduced to tools and frameworks, even if these can help. The important thing is to build a culture that drives people to learn from their work every day—that’s what will get you where you need to go.”

—Roberto Cremonini, *GivingData*

Setting realistic expectations, encouraging patience, and expecting the unexpected will help to lay the groundwork for a more satisfying evaluation experience. Those involved in the evaluation, particularly funders and other decision-makers, will benefit in the long run if they have patience and can tolerate uncertainty.

Organizational Characteristics That Are Important in the Long Term

9. A Learning Culture

The presence of an embedded and sustained learning culture makes strategic learning both easier and more productive. A learning culture is one that constructively responds to new information, adapts based on experience with both successes and failures, and becomes stronger and more effective over time. A learning culture is largely created and reinforced by leaders, as described above, and is supported by organizational processes and incentives, as described below. It requires time to nurture and grow.

A learning culture will foster:

- Staff members who are deeply inquisitive and who ask strategic questions
- Interest in new information and alternative viewpoints
- Safety around open communication and difficult feedback
- The ability to successfully navigate conflict
- Acceptance of uncertainty
- The acknowledgement that plans, no matter how well designed, will likely need to change as circumstances evolve
- Tolerance for risk and disappointment, with permission to fail
- Reward for smart innovation and improvement over time
- Accountability to learning and smart adaptation—not only to success, achievement of specific targets, or adherence to existing plans

10. Organizational Infrastructure that Supports Learning

The long-term goal is to build learning into ongoing strategy work, rather than relying on one-off strategic learning evaluations. Building this capacity requires support systems that actively promote, facilitate, and reward the learning culture’s development. Examples include routine meetings where strategy-relevant information is reflected on, including progress and setbacks, lessons, changes in context, and changes to assumptions or hypotheses.

Organizations can have learning support systems at several levels, including leadership (e.g., coaching), cross-program strategy, and cross-project strategy. Although these mechanisms are unlikely to be present at all levels, it is important that they are present at the senior levels that oversee the program, project, or other unit that is undergoing the learning-and-adaptation process. The results of even the best strategic learning evaluations can be quashed if there is no support from above.

Creating such organizational structures requires building trust in the learning process all the way up the organizational chain of command.

This can be at odds with pressures to spend as little time as possible discussing content with senior leaders—focusing only on the results absent the learning associated with them. Leaders can help to remedy this gap by asking questions such as “what have we learned?” before “what did we accomplish?” Another good practice is to ensure that data-driven indicators and dashboards always are accompanied by contextual information that supports strategic learning, such as short narratives about how programs are adapting in light of new information and experience.

“When relationships are frayed or trust is broken, it is easy to shift into ‘gotcha’ mode. Trust and a sense of mutual accountability are critical to establishing a dynamic that fosters shared learning and a real appetite to adjust or totally rework strategies based on learning.”

—Kate Wolford, McKnight Foundation

Evaluating Strategic Learning

Strategic learning evaluations are useful only if they improve decision-making around strategy. How can we tell if this is happening? This section first provides context for decisions about whether to invest in this kind of assessment. It also offers questions to explore related to whether the strategic learning evaluation is making a difference, along with ideas on useful tools and approaches for gauging the difference.

Putting the Assessment in Context

First, consider the pros and cons of evaluating the evaluation. Understanding whether strategic learning is happening and whether strategies are improving as a result is not as simple as it seems. The following considerations should be weighed before deciding how much effort to invest.

- *Learning is ultimately a personal experience that is difficult to gauge objectively or universally.* Although learning can and does occur within an organizational context and evaluation for strategic learning aims to infuse learning into the thinking and practices of groups, learning inherently starts and ends with individuals. It is a personal experience, which makes gauging the occurrence, depth, and root influences behind learning difficult at best. Given that the strategic learning process and its benefits are likely to be highly individualized and qualitative, participants’ perceptions and personal experiences are the basic indicators of whether the evaluation is making a difference.
- *Evidence of learning to action can be difficult to observe.* Ideally, evaluation for strategic learning supports improved decisions about strategy that are action-oriented, clear, and identifiable. However, in some cases an evaluation may instead lead to shifts in perspective or awareness. Such evaluation also could reinforce or validate past decisions. These manifestations of strategic learning are not less valuable, but they may be harder to identify.

- *Perspective makes a difference when determining whether the evaluation is worthwhile.* A variety of stakeholders may be involved in the strategic learning process, including funders, organizational leaders, program staff, grantees, direct service providers, advocates, and evaluators. Those who gain the most from this approach to evaluation, and those most familiar with the strategies in question, may not be the same as those who ultimately determine whether the evaluation is worthwhile. For instance, funders or organizational leaders may decide whether to continue the evaluation based on their own perceptions, even though program staff were the most engaged in the learning. Evaluators and others involved may be able to help bridge perception gaps when they arise, but they cannot always be prevented.
- *It is important to “right size” formal assessments.* The effort to gauge whether the evaluation is making a difference should be proportional to how important it is to make this assessment. The more objective, measurable, data-driven, and rigorous the assessment, the more time and energy it will require. Ideally, an assessment would start prior to the strategic learning evaluation launch (to identify conditions prior to the evaluation), continue during its implementation (to support midcourse corrections), and then continue after the evaluation is completed (to understand influence). But this kind of comprehensive assessment does not make sense in most cases. The most practical scenario for most organizations is a one-time assessment toward the end of the evaluation or after the evaluation is complete.

Questions and Topics

This section offers questions to explore when determining whether a strategic learning evaluation has made a difference. Questions in the box use a “yes/no” format to avoid leading questions, such as “how has the evaluation influenced (XYZ)?,” which already presumes the evaluation has had an influence. The idea is to continue with follow-up questions such as “If so, how and why?” or “If not, why not?”

Questions are written as if they would be used toward the end of an evaluation. However, they can be adapted for pre-post inquiries as well as for any data collection instrument, such as multiple-choice surveys or focus groups.

The first question on organizational readiness is important because *the onus for utilizing the evaluation is on the organization, not on the evaluator.* Again, even the best evaluators cannot make a difference if the organization is not ready and willing to adapt strategies based on what is learned.

Example Tools and Approaches

Most of the recommended tools and approaches for assessing a strategic evaluation’s influence are for gathering feedback on the evaluation itself, rather than gathering information about changes in strategy results. Organizations can reasonably expect that a strategic learning evaluation ultimately will improve the ability of a strategy to achieve results. While this should occur, there are no guarantees that it *will* occur, even with the most effective strategic learning evaluations. Changes in ultimate outcomes typically are a function of many influences, and attributing these changes to any particular influence is difficult in most evaluation contexts.

Evaluation feedback should be shared with those most closely involved with the evaluation, other decision-makers who have a stake in it, and the evaluator. This feedback can help to reinforce the learning that has taken place and to identify areas for further improvement.

Example Questions for Gauging a Strategic Learning Evaluation's Influence

1. *Is the organization prepared to utilize the evaluation?*
2. Are the evaluation reports/products in demand?
3. Is the information generated from the evaluation being used?
4. Has the evaluation supported constructive dialogue around strategy-related mistakes, disappointments, and failures?
5. Have strategy discussions at high-level meetings changed for the better?
6. Has the evaluation affected the process of making strategy decisions?
7. Has the theory of change or equivalent (e.g., outcome map) changed as a result of the evaluation?
8. Has the evaluation helped to strengthen strategies?
9. Has the evaluation been worth the time and effort put into it?
10. Has the evaluation provided the benefits hoped for by those who initiated it?
11. Are the evaluation's lessons and influence integrated into ongoing organizational processes and culture?
12. Over time, have strategies strengthened as a result of the evaluation led to improved influence or results?

Conclusion

Evaluation for strategic learning can mean the difference between bland, static strategies and targeted, effective strategies that adapt to changing circumstances. This approach to evaluation works best for those who start off on the right foot by having some basic conditions in place and who understand the process often is unpredictable and time consuming.

Despite its limitations, evaluation for strategic learning is an emerging discipline and will continue to evolve. In the coming years, strategic evaluation practitioners, participants, and users will undoubtedly gain new insights, develop new tools, and learn from experience in ways that further build the capacity of the field to benefit from this approach.

Approaches for Gathering Input on the Influence of Evaluation for Strategic Learning

APPROACH	PROS	CONS
<p>Change Logs/Journals Tracks changes in decisions, assumptions, hypotheses, strategies, etc. <i>(Level of Effort: Low-Medium)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documents change, particularly on things that often are not identified or remembered well in hindsight. • Creates a mechanism to reflect on timing of, and influences behind, change. • Can be used as evidence of evaluation influence if a compelling case can be made using the log and other sources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes a fair amount of time if tracking details of each discussion and shift, although simple logs take less time. • Is not often possible to discern the cause (evaluation or other) of any particular shift or change.
<p>Group Discussions Among Stakeholders and Evaluator Solicits direct feedback in a group setting. <i>(Level of Effort: Low)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps individuals to learn from and be emboldened by others' feedback. • Can build a sense of group ownership and trust in learning. • Solidifies cultural or institutional shifts (particularly if feedback is positive.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can stifle an individual's confidence in expressing his or her own perceptions as a result of "groupthink" and power dynamics. • Full candor may be less likely. • Offers less time for individuals to express their own thoughts.
<p>Individual Discussions Among Stakeholders and Evaluator Solicits direct feedback in one-on-one discussions. <i>(Level of Effort: Medium)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes room for personalized, in-depth discussions. • Facilitates candid feedback if stakeholders have a trusting relationship with the evaluator. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loses the benefits of hearing from others and strengthening organizational culture as a group • Can make it less likely for some to provide candid feedback directly.
<p>Strategic Learning Debriefs Presents data or discusses events in a short (one- to three-hour) facilitated process. (Variations on this approach include after-action Reviews and strategic learning circles.) <i>(Level of Effort: Low)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results in quick recognition of shifts in thinking or strategies. • Encourages staff to own the research and results. • Directly ties data, reflection, and changes to strategy or other actions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipates quick learning, but often learning takes time. • Requires effective facilitation and depends on ensuring the right context for the debrief. • Does not provide longer-term tracking of learning unless designed to do so over multiple events/a longer period.
<p>Surveys Collects data through paper or Web surveys. <i>(Level of Effort: Variable)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for anonymity, which can enhance candor. • Can be quick and easy to develop and to complete. • Is adaptable to many contexts. • Results in easily identifiable and reportable findings. • Supports quantitative analysis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be time consuming to develop, complete, and analyze. • Loses the context, nuance, and tone of feedback gained from in-person discussions. • Offers of anonymity may hinder ability to interpret feedback.
<p>Focus Groups Facilitated discussions with stakeholders (usually six to 12 per group) to obtain in-depth information on perceptions, insights, attitudes, experiences, or beliefs. <i>(Level of Effort: Medium)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be quick and relatively easy to set up. • Offers insight that may be more difficult to gather through other data collection methods. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is susceptible to facilitator bias. • Risks discussion that is dominated or sidetracked by a few individuals. • Does not provide information at an individual level. • Is not representative of other groups.
<p>Independent Analysis A separate, independent analysis of the strength and rigor of the evaluation. <i>(Level of Effort: High)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides a more independent and objective perspective. • Is relatively rigorous and therefore defensible to decision-makers and others who have not directly benefitted from or experienced the evaluation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be redundant with the strategic learning evaluation. • Can increase the work burden and take more time. • May take a few cycles of strategy process to discern changes and connect them to the evaluation. • Finding the right evaluator can be difficult.

CASE Evaluation of the David and Lucile Packard Foundation Preschool Program

Based on Parker, S. (2011). *Teaching case: Evaluation of the David and Lucile Packard Foundation's Preschool for California's Children Grantmaking Program*. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation.

In 2003, the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) began working with the David and Lucile Packard Foundation's Children, Families, and Communities (CFC) program to evaluate its 10-year grantmaking program, Preschool for California's Children. Achieving the program's goal of high-quality preschool for the children in California who need it most required changes in state policy and advocacy to achieve those changes. Because the Foundation knew that its advocacy strategy would need adjustments over time, the evaluation's main purpose was to support the Foundation's strategic learning and to help it and its grantees to adapt their approach as needed.

During the first few years, evaluators experimented with various methods to inform strategy, such as bellwether interviews and champion tracking. By the time the Foundation undertook a five-year review of its program, evaluators had developed deep program expertise and strategic insight. As put by Lois Salisbury, then CFC director, the evaluators "understood the strengths and weaknesses of where the issues sat. They had an ear for the dynamics. They knew the story and could pick up the threads that otherwise just might pass you by."

Strategic Learning Tools

- Bellwether interviews
- Champion tracking
- Rapid-response research

HFRP submitted a midcourse review report covering the progress made by the program and areas for improvement, including a recommendation that Packard adjust its program goal to be more targeted. The evaluators were present during several discussions among the trustees and were asked to share their thoughts and insights.

Packard staff said the evaluation report informed the direction of the preschool program. The Board of Trustees reauthorized the program for another five years and made many strategy adjustments that mirrored HFRP's recommendations. "The HFRP involvement came at a very pivotal time and really helped to inform our thinking around the midcourse review. We ended up making a dramatic change [adjusting the goal to be more targeted]." Packard staff reflected that evaluators' contribution to the midcourse review is one of the strongest examples of how this approach to evaluation can help in strategic learning.

Over the following years, HFRP continued to work with the preschool program, trying new ways to inform the rapidly evolving program strategy. Evaluators used several tools, including rapid-response assessments that informed near-term strategic decisions. The preschool program came to the end of its second five-year cycle in 2013, as did the 10-year engagement of the evaluation team. In 2013, evaluators worked with CFC staff to develop a plan for Packard's monitoring, learning, and evaluation for the next incarnation of the CFC program—a plan that was informed by 10 years of experience and designed to keep the momentum of strategic learning going.

CASE Spark Policy Institute Strategic Learning Model

Spark Policy Institute uses a model for strategic learning that makes real-time and data-driven learning accessible to organizations at all levels of readiness and capacity. The model integrates and applies new information, including evaluation data, into strategy planning and implementation. To date, the strategic learning model has been implemented at different levels—for single strategies, for whole organizations, and for multiple-organization collaboratives.

A recent example is coaching provided to The Colorado Trust and its 14 coalition partners as part of Project Health Colorado. Concurrent with an impact evaluation also conducted by Spark, the Spark team coached grantee organizations to develop and implement strategic learning as part of their projects. Spark facilitated a meeting with each grantee to generate theories of change that aligned across the different grant strategies and with the funder's overall vision. In the Spark model, theories of change are roadmaps that have a series of destinations along the way—specific outcomes—that are staged, allowing organizations to monitor their progress and adjust strategies accordingly.

Strategic Learning Tools

- Theory of change
- Intense period debriefs
- Strategic learning debriefs

Once each grantee had a theory of change, Spark worked with grantees to identify the places where engaging in real-time learning could lead to strategy improvements. Grantees collected many types of data using diverse approaches, including structured observations of volunteers, meeting reflections, call-to-action cards, and more traditional surveys and focus groups. Many grantees did this without evaluation staff or contractors.

Spark coached grantees in how to use the information to steadily inform their strategies and tactics using a mix of intense period debriefs and more comprehensive strategic learning debriefs. The strategic learning process also leveraged the results of a rigorous impact evaluation, drawing on the learning from the evaluation as part of the debriefing process. Embedding the rigorous impact evaluation into a fully developed learning culture proved highly effective. After six months implementing the strategic learning model, supported by four hours of coaching per month, 11 of the 14 organizations had made significant changes to their strategies in response to strategic learning.

Another firm, Cohen Research & Evaluation, conducted an evaluation of the strategic learning model across two grantee sites at the end of a three-year funding period. The evaluation found the two organizations had adopted strategic learning in different but meaningful ways. Staff members were able to articulate specific points where strategic learning informed their strategies, as well as the broader impact strategic learning had on their work and their organizations. As one grantee put it, “What strategic learning helped us do is focus and fine-tune those skills in a way that will have a lasting impact in our organization and the populations we work with...It refined our technique as organizers in a way that I don't think we expected.”

When Research & Evaluation is conducting an ongoing evaluation to support strategic learning for a foundation piloting a social innovation to improve health-related social and behavioral norms among residents in low-income housing. The foundation's model identifies, empowers, and supports "natural leaders" to serve as "community health advocates." The advocates are encouraged to improve their own health behaviors; to serve as role models and healthy living facilitators for others; and to spark systems changes within both the housing environment and neighboring institutions that support healthy behaviors.

The strategic learning team consists of the evaluator, foundation staff, project leader, and three advocate leaders. Early on, the evaluator facilitated a series of sessions grounded in the evaluation technique appreciative inquiry to clarify and document the group's underlying assumptions about its model and to develop a theory of change. The evaluator now:

Strategic Learning Tools

- **Conducts ongoing data collection on discrete project development issues.** For example, independent inquiries explore participant change, community perceptions of advocates, and project reach. Frequent short and informal reports enable the project leader to regularly learn about and apply evaluation findings.
- **Leads "evaluation and strategy learning circles."** Convened quarterly, each learning circle focuses on one strategic question identified collaboratively in advance by the project leader and evaluator. Data relevant to the strategic question are collected through both internal mechanisms and by the evaluator. The evaluator synthesizes findings and sends them in advance. In the learning circle, the group delves into the strategic implications. Facilitation strategies encourage participation and ownership by all attendees. The evaluator captures action items and sends a summary memo to the group afterward.
- **Reviews project outcomes.** Each learning circle includes a review of findings relevant to theory of change outcomes. The evaluator also leads an annual theory of change "refresh" session, which features group discussion of lessons learned and a reconsideration of the theory's underlying assumptions and outcomes.

Real-time findings guide project development that ranges from rethinking outcomes to identifying new training and funding needs. The process has resulted in numerous changes. For example, one set of project participant interviews surfaced a lack of clarity about project expectations. The discussion about this finding revealed a need to clearly communicate these expectations, as well as the need for staff members to revisit their own understanding.

CASE Evaluation of the Ashoka Canada First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Learning Initiative

Based on Wilson, D., & Coates, T. (2013). *The road to the summit: Inspiring approaches to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Learning Initiative*. Final Report on the Developmental Evaluation.

A bold experiment in social innovation, this Canadian initiative had the goal of seeking, sharing, and co-creating ideas and solutions in the field of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learning. Conceptualized in 2009 and launched in 2011, the initiative brought together diverse stakeholders to organize a national online Ashoka Changemaker's competition and summit where innovators in Aboriginal education could share ideas, learn from one another, and engage with funders.

As the initiative attracted more partners, and group members began to recognize the complexity of both the relationships and the work, they sought timely and real-time learning through developmental evaluation. The steering committee invited Dan Wilson from the Ontario Trillium Foundation to conduct a developmental evaluation and join the steering committee. The committee also invited Tracy Coates, an independent evaluator, to support the developmental evaluation and bring an Aboriginal perspective to the project. Tracy and Dan understood the value and challenges of working with a complex group, the processes and relationships that contributed to project outcomes, and the applicability of a developmental evaluation in such a dynamic and complex environment.

Strategic Learning Tools

- Developmental evaluation
- Emergent learning

The developmental evaluation was implemented in 2011 and 2012 using mixed methods, including interviews, focus groups, and surveys. As part of the effort, the Emergent Learning² technique was used with the steering committee during a midpoint review to share stories and reflect on what transpired and what the group would try to do going forward.

While some steering committee members found the developmental evaluation “mysterious” and at times burdensome, many said the evaluators were very helpful, particularly in surfacing and resolving underlying tensions and challenges that were becoming obstacles to good relations and quality results. The watershed moment was the Emergent Learning midpoint review, which helped steering committee members to discuss and engage in an authentic way around the complexities of collaborating together in a multi-cultural context. This was important for the group's well-being and for identifying clear strategies that could be applied immediately to improve processes, relationships, and results.

² Emergent Learning is a methodology for peer learning developed by Marilyn Darling of Signet Research & Consulting and Fourth Quadrant Partners. For more information, visit www.emergentlearning.com.

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