



# Planning for Monitoring, Learning, and Evaluation

AT SMALL- TO MEDIUM-SIZED FOUNDATIONS

A Review



Produced for the Oak Foundation  
By Cascadia Consulting Group, Inc.



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# CONTENTS

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<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>1</b>
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<b>FORMALIZING MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING PLANS AND PRACTICES</b>	<b>3</b>
Principles	

---

<b>MONITORING</b>	<b>4</b>
Metrics / Indicators: What data to collect?	
Data collection	

---

<b>EVALUATION</b>	<b>6</b>
Funding dedicated to evaluation	
Staffing for evaluation functions	
Number and frequency of evaluations	
Evaluating sub-granting organizations	

---

<b>LEARNING</b>	<b>10</b>
Using data for adaptive management	
Capturing and sharing lessons	

---

<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>12</b>
-------------------	-----------

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<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>13</b>
-------------------	-----------

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**his report is based on findings from desktop research and interviews with selected foundations conducted between April and June 2016. It was developed to give the Oak Foundation a sense of how other foundations are tackling monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) questions, and to show a range of options for Oak to consider as it develops its own MEL Plan. This summary of findings was developed for public distribution, anticipating that it may be useful for other donors.

Key trends that emerged from the interviews and desktop research included the following:

- 1. Foundations are spending more resources and putting more staff time into evaluation than they did in the past.** Staff at smaller foundations tend to spend more time on individual grant evaluations, while staff at larger foundations tend to spend more time on assessments of broad program areas and on learning processes. While many foundations do not have consistent systems for tracking evaluation spending, some are deciding it would be useful to capture that information more methodically.
- 2. Less attention has been put on learning to-date, but recognition of the importance of purposeful learning is growing quickly.** Many foundations are hoping to improve upon their learning processes, but finding that it is not easy. It often requires an internal cultural shift and testing a variety of approaches. In contrast, foundations tend to have fairly clear processes and standards for monitoring and evaluation. Foundations that do have explicit learning efforts remain more focused on internal learning rather than communicating and sharing lessons externally. Foundations tend to be more transparent with external audiences about their grant-making processes, goals, and strategies, and less transparent about how they assess performance or their lessons learned. That said, both grantees and foundations are recognizing that sharing more lessons externally would be beneficial.
- 3. Foundations are exploring appropriate and useful ways to evaluate work done through sub-granting organizations.** Some are focusing on building the internal monitoring and evaluation capacity of those organizations. It would be useful for donors to coordinate approaches to evaluate work done through sub-granting organizations, which can allow for pooled resources and avoid putting an extra burden on the sub-grantor.

## Emerging best practices

- 1. Lay out a set of explicit principles to guide monitoring, evaluation, and learning practices across the foundation or across the program.** Other foundations' guiding principles often emphasize the need to ensure that findings are actionable and integrated into ongoing decision-making. They are also likely to address the intended roles of grantees and third-party evaluators.
- 2. Base the evaluation framework on the concept of testing a strategy or hypothesis.** This may also be called a theory of change or a rationale.
- 3. Plan out evaluations very early in strategy development.** Early MEL planning helps with budgeting, ensuring that the right baseline information is collected, and clarifying assumptions and hypotheses that could be tested to facilitate adaptive management. At some foundations, Trustees or board members review the proposed evaluation plan before approving a program or grant investment.
- 4. Streamline indicators and monitoring efforts.** Make sure that staff and grantees only measure things that are expected to directly apply to decision-making about strategy or future investments. Data collection can be time- and resource-intensive. More data is not necessarily better. Indicators should be strategically chosen.
- 5. Use third-party evaluators for most or all evaluations.** Third-party evaluators provide additional capacity and are critical for ensuring objectivity. Having foundation staff engaged along the way is also important to provide data inputs and to make sure the evaluation will ultimately be useful to inform foundation decision-making.
- 6. Review in-house staff skills and consider building capacity through internal trainings or by forming an external advisory committee.** External advisory committees can be permanent—to assist with all foundation or program evaluations—or they can be ad-hoc committees created for specific evaluations where additional expertise or peer review would be helpful. They advise on evaluation scopes and questions, and do not replace third-party evaluators who undertake the actual work of evaluation. Forming and managing an external advisory committee does take some resources and staff time.
- 7. Consider instituting new practices to ensure that data and evaluation findings are used for adaptive management.** For example, think about setting aside regular reflection time (as part of existing meetings or special events), ensuring that Trustees communicate the importance of learning to the organization, incorporating related metrics into staff performance evaluations, and expanding the audience for evaluation findings by pulling out lessons that are broadly applicable across programs.
- 8. Involve foundation communications staff early in conversations about sharing findings and lessons externally.** Communications staff have a key role to play. Monitoring, evaluation, and learning work does not have to fall only to program officers or dedicated M&E staff.

# FORMALIZING MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING PLANS AND PRACTICES

**F**oundations have documented their monitoring, evaluation, and learning practices and policies to varying degrees. Some of the documents are intended for purely internal use, while others help communicate policies and priorities to grantees and other external audiences.

For example:

- The David and Lucile Packard Foundation used to have a 137-page Standards document on strategy development and M&E, and now has a 4-page guidance document. Program officers are encouraged to create a plan that is right-sized for the project and that works for them.<sup>[1]</sup>
- The Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) distributed a “Monitoring and Evaluation Principles and Practices for Partners” document that has a checklist of quality control measures.<sup>[2]</sup>
- The W.K. Kellogg Foundation has an Evaluation Handbook intended to encourage and aid grantees in conducting their own evaluations.<sup>[3]</sup>
- The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has an Evaluation Principles and Practices document that aims to make evaluation practices more consistent, clarify staff roles and available support, and accelerate the design of meaningful evaluations.<sup>[4]</sup>

The Hewlett Foundation also includes language about evaluation in agreements with grantees so that they are aware that the foundation may choose to commission an evaluation that examines the work undertaken with grant funds. Typically, these evaluations include multiple grantees working toward similar goals. Then, if Hewlett does plan an evaluation that includes the grant, the foundation communicates the proposed evaluation questions and approach to the grantee in greater detail, along with any plans to share the findings from that evaluation so that others may learn from the foundation’s successes and failures.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Principles

Some foundations have laid out explicit principles that guide their monitoring, evaluation, and learning approaches. The principles often address questions like the following:

- What is the motivation for pursuing evaluation and learning? Is the foundation evaluating for proof/accountability or for learning/program improvement, or both?<sup>[6]</sup>
- How are monitoring, evaluation, and learning efforts integrated into strategy design or grant-making decisions?
- How should grantees be involved? Who else needs to be involved? Is it important to minimize the burden on partners, staff, or grantees?
- Does the foundation feel it is critical to use third party evaluators?
- How important is it to share findings with external audiences?

# MONITORING

## Metrics / Indicators: What data to collect?

Several foundations are taking steps to avoid over-measuring and to ensure that indicators are carefully selected based on their anticipated direct usefulness for learning or applicability to decision-making.

Packard, for example, emphasizes that staff shouldn't try to measure everything, but rather focus on areas where assumptions are uncertain, there are doubts about strategy, or there are big cost differences between potential strategies.<sup>[6]</sup> CIFF is trying to take a hard cost-benefit approach to monitoring (and evaluation)—if program officers don't know who will use the information, there's no reason to monitor it.<sup>[7]</sup> CIFF grants used to have dozens of indicators each, but they are now focusing in on fewer, more meaningful indicators, using the theory of change to guide which indicators are most meaningful.<sup>[7]</sup>

One level up from individual grants, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation asks each grant-making team to identify three strategic objectives, and no more than three measures for each objective.<sup>[8]</sup>

The Wallace Foundation used to have a comprehensive scorecard, but they found that it actually provided too much detail to be clear or actionable.<sup>[9]</sup> They decided to be more selective in terms of topics covered and data selected, and they began to display progress against targets using speedometer-like gauges and short summaries of key findings.<sup>[9]</sup>

The Nature Conservancy's Africa region has a more extensive list of indicators (over 100) because they want to be able to do impact evaluations and capture unexpected impacts.<sup>[10]</sup> They have found that the additional staff time and cost associated with collecting extra data—beyond what may be required for a performance evaluation requested by a funder—is minimal, and can pay off if it makes an impact evaluation possible.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Data collection

A sample of data collection methods is listed in the text box. It is important to consciously consider how the foundation will use the data collected to make decisions, and eliminate data collection activities or grant report questions that will take time without resulting in directly useful information.

Foundations use a range of methods to collect data. These include:

- Surveys to measure attitude change.<sup>[11]</sup>
- Individual or group interviews.
- Content analysis of media publications, ordinances, or legislation.<sup>[11]</sup>
- Site visits or phone calls.
- Observation.
- Written questionnaires.
- Knowledge or achievement tests; pre- and post-tests.<sup>[3][11]</sup>
- Focus groups with key informants who have directly observed changes in community attitudes or behaviors.<sup>[11]</sup>
- Periodic feedback forums facilitated by a neutral party where project participants provide feedback on activities.<sup>[44]</sup>
- Technologies like DHIS2 and Magpi. Data collectors can use mobile phones online or offline to collect data in the field and then send it up to the foundation.

Some of these methods may lend themselves better to ongoing monitoring, and others to informing specific evaluations.

It could be practical to collect data at different times for different reasons, including convenience, the presence of key staff and grantees, or optimal timing to inform specific decisions. For example, data collection could be timed to occur:

- At the conclusion of a grant year.
- Biannually, annually, quarterly, or monthly.
- During events or meetings.
- During key events and critical moments.<sup>[11]</sup>
- Prior to known reporting and planning times (e.g., start of annual planning and budgeting process).<sup>[12]</sup>
- During moments that are important for reflecting on and refining a strategy (e.g., an election, the end of a pilot project, or a juncture in an experimental part of the strategy).<sup>[12]</sup>

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation notes that it may be helpful to create a timeline over the first couple of years of a strategy in order align activities, internal reporting timelines, and data collection timelines.<sup>[12]</sup>

### Dashboards

Some foundations use dashboards to house collected data and make it accessible for staff. Dashboards may include data on:

- Internal operations, with metrics to track efficiency in grant-making.
- Program spending (what has been allocated versus what was budgeted).<sup>[13]</sup>
- Grant highlights and indicators of program impact.

One of the critiques of using dashboards for tracking program impact is that the format encourages oversimplification.<sup>[13]</sup> On the other hand, it can be a good visual way to provide information to board members or trustees, and it can show impacts at a glance rather than using lots of text.

The European Climate Foundation launched an online platform for Planning, Assessment and monitoring, Reporting and Learning (PARL) in 2014. One goal was to harmonize approaches and language used for planning and monitoring by different teams.<sup>[14]</sup> Among other things, PARL captures indicators, scores, progress, and key lessons. ECF found that to make the platform useful, it was important to invest time in ensuring consistency in information inputs, and quality of indicators and progress statements.<sup>[14]</sup>

Other foundations that have dashboards include the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation, Lumina Foundation, James Irvine Foundation, and Marguerite Casey Foundation.<sup>[15]</sup>

## EVALUATION

The reason for an evaluation informs the methodology, timing, and spending. As the Annie E. Casey Foundation has said, “foundations may implement evaluation to monitor grantee performance, to inform strategy development and improvement, to build knowledge across a given field, to build capacity to address particular issues, to strengthen and expand support for a policy or social change goal, or a combination of these. All of these decisions will shape a foundation’s evaluation practice.”<sup>[11]</sup>

### Funding dedicated to evaluation

The trend is for foundations to spend more on evaluation than they have in the past. In a 2013 benchmarking report, 50 percent of the 31 foundations that were surveyed said that their evaluation investments had increased during the previous two years relative to grant-making, and 30 percent said their evaluation investments had stayed the same.<sup>[13]</sup>

See Table 1 for data on how much some foundations spend on evaluation. Note that most foundations lack consistent systems for tracking evaluation spending, so benchmarking data isn’t always perfectly accurate.

Most funding data relates specifically to evaluation, not to monitoring or learning. However, in planning an annual budget, it can be helpful to include costs associated with learning processes (e.g., retreats and communications) as well as evaluations.<sup>[19]</sup> Other expenses that are often not included in these figures are those associated with building the capacity of grantees to generate and use monitoring data.<sup>[7]</sup>

**Table 1.** Percentages of foundation program budgets spent on evaluation.

Foundation	Funding for evaluation	Source
<b>Conventional Wisdom</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5-10% of programmatic budget.</li> </ul>	[16]
<b>Average</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.7% of programmatic dollars (2010).</li> <li>Larger foundations spend a smaller percentage of their budgets on evaluation because the costs don’t rise proportionally with program costs).</li> <li>0.7- 7.5% of program spending (2014).</li> <li>Median spending on formal evaluation is 2% of a grant-making budget</li> <li>Many foundations spend less than 1%.</li> </ul>	[17] [16] [18] [19] [1]
<b>Irvine</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5-12% percent of program costs.</li> </ul>	[20]
<b>Kellogg</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5-7% of a project’s total budget.</li> </ul>	[3]
<b>CIFF</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6% on third party evaluations (3% in the climate program and 10% in other programs, because of differences in evaluation types. No set rule; spending reflects CIFF’s “fit-for-purpose” approach.)</li> </ul>	[7]
<b>Hewlett</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>0.7-1.2% of programmatic dollars between 2011 and 2014 (they can also spend administrative funds).</li> <li>Aiming to increase to 2% and improve systems for tracking evaluation expenditures.</li> </ul>	[17] [21]

## Staffing for evaluation functions

As with budgetary resources, the average number of staff dedicated to evaluation has also tended to increase in recent years, particularly for medium-sized and large foundations. Foundations had an average of 3 full-time employees for monitoring and evaluation in 2009; this increased to 4.2 in 2012.<sup>[13]</sup> The majority (three-quarters) of foundations who responded to a study by The Foundation Review had at least one full-time employee dedicated to evaluation-related activities.<sup>[13]</sup> See Table 2 for more information on how foundations are staffing MEL efforts.

For supporting learning, relevant responsibilities could be carried out by human resources, communications, or IT staff, rather than a dedicated learning officer.<sup>[23]</sup>

### Evaluation advisory committees

Some foundations have external evaluation advisory committees. As of early 2012, this included the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the

Skillman Foundation.<sup>[24]</sup> Typically, these committees meet 1-4 times per year and have 4-8 members; committee members are compensated for their time.<sup>[24]</sup> Some committees advise on evaluation across the foundation on an ongoing basis, and others are ad-hoc committees focused on specific initiatives. Most committees are organized and run by foundation staff, while some are managed by consultants.<sup>[24]</sup>

Hewlett has used an evaluation advisory committee on some of its evaluations and found it to be very helpful. An added benefit was that the committee included people who might provide follow-on funding for the grantees that were being evaluated.<sup>[5]</sup> Evaluation advisory committees can be useful as a sounding board, and for providing peer review of the evaluation design and product—especially for foundations with few internal M&E staff—and for filling knowledge gaps in specific content areas.<sup>[24]</sup> These committees can help build the credibility of evaluation findings and boost foundation confidence.<sup>[24]</sup> On the other hand, committees increase expenses and require staff time to attend meetings.

**Table 2.** Sample foundation staffing patterns for M&E.

Foundation	Funding for evaluation	Source
<b>Average</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>5.3% of full-time equivalents (FTEs) for smaller (&lt;\$50M) foundations</b>, which also had the greatest variation (0.8% to 13.8%).</li> <li>• <b>5.7% of FTEs for medium-sized (\$50-200M) foundations.</b></li> <li>• <b>4.2% of FTEs for large (&gt;\$200M) foundations</b>, where the number of M&amp;E staff grew from 5 to 10 FTEs between 2010 and 2012.</li> </ul>	[22] [16]
<b>CIFF</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>CIFF has embedded Evidence, Measurement and Evaluation (EME) people into each team.</b> The embedded model helps ensure that evidence is incorporated into the investment design and that evaluation is incorporated through the program lifecycle. They work collaboratively but also have ways to protect independence: for example, final decisions on what to evaluate rest with those EME staff and the EME director.</li> </ul>	[7]
<b>Hewlett</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hired an evaluation officer in 2013 to provide technical assistance to programs. Each program is still responsible for commissioning their own evaluations; they may decide to make each program officer responsible for their own evaluations, or to designate a team member to lead evaluation efforts.</li> <li>• <b>Program officers spend 5-20% of their time designing and managing evaluations</b> and deciding how to use the results. They are expected to be managing one significant evaluation at any given time.</li> </ul>	[17] [4]
<b>Robert Wood Johnson</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>23 of the ~300 staff (over 7%) are in their Research, Evaluation, and Learning Department;</b> those staff members spend 70% of their time on centralized M&amp;E work and 30% on program-specific M&amp;E activities.</li> </ul>	[16]

## Number and frequency of evaluations

There seems to be agreement in the field that foundations don't have to evaluate everything. One reason is that some things have already been evaluated by another donor or organization.<sup>[7]</sup> Another reason is that evaluating everything can be an unnecessary burden for foundation staff and grantees. With limited resources, many also believe it is better to do a few in-depth, high-quality evaluations instead of a large quantity of evaluations.<sup>[13]</sup>

Hewlett applies criteria to make decisions about where to prioritize the use of evaluation funds; these criteria include opportunities for learning, any urgency to make course corrections or future funding decisions, the potential for strategic or reputational risk, size of investment (as proxy for importance), and expectations of a positive expected return from dollars invested in an evaluation.<sup>[4]</sup> Packard suggests asking whether the foundation will really use

all of what is in the evaluation plan, and how they will use collected data to make concrete decisions.<sup>[6]</sup>

Another trend is trying to routinely plan for evaluations from the initiation of a new grant or strategy, in order to budget sufficient resources, collect necessary baseline data, and develop thoughtful evaluation questions that relate to the original theory of change. Table 3 summarizes practices from four foundations.

Many of the foundations studied emphasize the importance of third-party evaluations. Rockefeller, for example, states that “third-party evaluations tend to be clearer, more accurate, and more revealing than those conducted by untrained staff” while also acknowledging that they can be expensive. Table 4 summarizes views from selected other foundations.

**Table 3.** Sample foundation practices for the timing and number of evaluations.

Foundation	Standard Practice	Source
<b>Packard</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develops a draft evaluation plan with associated costs while the strategy is being designed. Program officers decide at the outset where in the life of the strategy they will likely need to dig deeper.</li> </ul>	[6] [1]
<b>CIFF</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asks the sector team for an investment memo that includes an evidence review (sustainability, likelihood of success) completed by EME staff based on the program's theory of change. They also define key evaluation questions based on who needs to know what and when. If it is a new program, the evaluation plan may change later on. A grant that is testing something may warrant a more rigorous impact evaluation, whereas other evaluations might focus on process and learning.</li> </ul>	[7]
<b>Hewlett</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategically chooses what to evaluate and what not to evaluate.</li> <li>Teams plan for evaluation as strategies are developed, in order to clarify what success will look like and ensure that good baseline data can be collected.</li> <li>Most evaluations look at a strategy rather than a single grant, are generally timed for the mid-point and conclusion, and are intended to generate lessons useful for multiple stakeholders both inside and outside the Foundation. Across the life of a strategy, there are annual progress reports and every-other-year formal grant evaluations to inform possible course corrections. Outside reviewers evaluate overall progress at the end of the seven years covered by the strategic plan.</li> </ul>	[5] [4] [25] [17]
<b>Babcock</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Operates on a ten-year planning horizon. Projects and portfolios have been subject to a formal, rigorous mid-course (five-year) review, which involves adding up results and determining what has been learned about the strategy and what needs to be tweaked in the approach. These longer cycles have been useful for evaluating and adapting overall strategies; however, they also use shorter-term learning cycles to adapt work with individual grantees.</li> </ul>	[26] [27]

**Table 4.** Use of third-party evaluations by a sample of foundations.

Foundation	Perspectives on third party evaluations	Source
<b>St. David's Foundation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses third party evaluators and provides guidance on selecting evaluators.</li> </ul>	[28]
<b>Cargill</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses consultants for an independent third party view and extra capacity. The M&amp;E team meets with the consultants weekly and the interaction is highly collaborative.</li> </ul>	[16]
<b>Walton</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluations use publicly available data and in-house capacity where possible and appropriate, but some do require commissioned research or external evaluators.</li> </ul>	[29]
<b>CIFF</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Over 80% of CIFF investments are independently evaluated.</li> <li>Where possible, CIFF opens these external evaluations up to competition.</li> </ul>	[2] [30]
<b>Hewlett</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Defines evaluation to mean specifically third party evaluation. When they commission an evaluation it's because they want third party feedback.</li> <li>In contrast, monitoring activities are typically done internally.</li> </ul>	[5] [4]
<b>Babcock</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An outside professional consultant was used for the 10-year assessment. Data is provided by foundation staff.</li> </ul>	[26]

## Evaluating sub-granting organizations

Evaluating sub-granting mechanisms can take several angles:

- Evaluating the impact of the sub-grants.
- Evaluating the added value of the intermediary.<sup>[4]</sup>
- Evaluating how the intermediary's performance compares to that of other intermediaries.<sup>[4]</sup>

Hewlett and CIFF have both been thinking about approaches to evaluating sub-granting or re-granting organizations. Hewlett considers that “because we are delegating to these intermediaries what might be considered our stewardship role, we have an even greater responsibility to evaluate their efforts.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Foundations can work in partnership with the sub-granting organizations to conduct the evaluations. For example, for one evaluation that involved several sub-granting organizations, Hewlett sent a proposed plan (with questions, intended audience, and timeline) to the intermediaries to provide feedback.<sup>[5]</sup> Hewlett did the Request for Proposals (RFP) to hire an evaluator, and then asked the evaluator to work with the intermediaries and provide tailored reports for each in addition to the public report.<sup>[5]</sup>

Another complementary route is to help support the development of M&E systems within sub-granting organizations.<sup>[7]</sup> CIFF, for example, prioritizes helping ECF be able to report and use data and evidence themselves (e.g., for reporting to their own Board or senior management) and secondarily to report to donors like CIFF.<sup>[7]</sup> Even when intermediaries have strong internal M&E capabilities, some evaluations should still be managed by the donors and undertaken by external evaluators, depending on the scope and focus.<sup>[4]</sup>

When multiple funders support the same sub-granting organization, it is useful for the funders to coordinate efforts to evaluate—and/or build the evaluation capacity—of that organization and its sub-grantees.<sup>[7]</sup> That can reduce the burden on the sub-granting organization and make more efficient use of donors' evaluation resources.

# LEARNING

## Using data for adaptive management

Learning efforts have multiple goals in the context of foundations. They can include understanding progress, identifying problems, being able to make adjustments in a timely manner, and making increasingly well-informed investments in future grant cycles. Foundations have typically spent less time on learning compared to monitoring and evaluation. In a 2013 benchmarking study, only large foundations said more than 10 percent of evaluation staff time was spent on learning activities.<sup>[13]</sup>

It can take a cultural shift and high-level leadership to make learning more of a focus. One source suggested holding discussions with both staff and board members about how to strengthen learning practices so that they improve the work of the organization and its grantees.<sup>[23]</sup> It is also rare for managers to consider the effective use of evaluation findings when assessing staff performance.<sup>[13]</sup> A 2012 study by the Center for Evaluation Innovation found that the biggest challenges that program staff face in effectively using evaluations to inform their work are limited time and heavy workloads (67%), timeliness of data (47%), and the culture/attitude about evaluation (31%).<sup>[22]</sup> Other challenges mentioned included cost, limited capacity for data and evaluation use, differences in capacity and interest among staff, and lack of clarity on strategies, outcomes, or indicators.<sup>[22]</sup>

To address the barriers that impede using data for adaptive management, foundations are trying out process improvements such as:

- Setting aside regular reflection time.
- Using evaluation approaches and writing scopes to ensure that data is returned quickly.<sup>[13]</sup>
- Building staff members' evaluation capacity.
- Explicitly and consistently integrating data collection and analysis as a core, ongoing part of program design and implementation.<sup>[3]</sup>
- Ensuring that those who will be in a position to use the evaluation results are involved early in the process of planning and undertaking the evaluation.<sup>[31]</sup>

## Capturing and sharing lessons

Generating useful learning for adaptive management requires a thoughtful approach to both capturing findings and effectively sharing those findings with a range of audiences.

In capturing lessons, it is important to make sure that grantees feel comfortable communicating their mistakes or perceived failures without fearing loss of the grant.<sup>[32]</sup> The Skillman Foundation addresses this by sitting down with grantees to review data that has been collected and talk about where there seems to be progress and where there doesn't, and then to make action commitments that could improve outcomes.<sup>[33]</sup>

### Sample methods for capturing lessons:

- Develop specific questions to make learning a focus during site visits.<sup>[33]</sup>
- Create a password-protected website for sharing documents and data.<sup>[33]</sup>
- Create a community discussion board for posting questions and insights.<sup>[33]</sup>
- Use consultants to conduct interviews and focus groups and prepare quarterly learning memos for discussion at staff meetings.<sup>[33]</sup>
- Collect feedback from intended beneficiaries through surveys, focus groups, or workshops.<sup>[18]</sup>
- Identify the grantees with which the foundation has a particularly trusting relationship, and test learning approaches with them.<sup>[33]</sup>

### Internal sharing

Table 5 lists a sample of approaches used by five foundations to share lessons internally.

**Table 5.** Sample mechanisms used to share lessons internally within foundations.

Foundation	Standard Practice	Source
<b>Packard</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program teams <b>work together on a holistic review</b> of the last 12 months.</li> <li>• For a 2014 <b>Strategy and Learning Week</b>, staff designed sessions to share lessons, discuss emerging questions, and talk about cross-cutting issues.</li> <li>• Some teams have <b>quarterly meetings to share learnings</b>; these meetings include partners and consultants.</li> </ul>	[34] [12] [1]
<b>CIFF</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>May start doing an annual evaluation report for the Board</b>, with key findings across the portfolio.</li> <li>• <b>One day every quarter is dedicated</b> for senior leaders to review the portfolio and discuss performance and lessons learned, with a focus on investments with updated evaluations or those facing decision milestones.</li> </ul>	[7] [2]
<b>Hewlett</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Holds six in-town weeks per year with two days focused on cross-program learning</b>, where staff dig into issue areas; sessions sometimes also include external speakers and grantees. Program and administrative department representatives go on yearlong rotations to help develop the themes with the organizational learning officer. The Hewlett president emphasizes how important it is for all staff to attend.</li> <li>• <b>Speakers (grantees, other external speakers, or program and administrative staff) come in once or twice a month at lunchtime</b> to talk about an issue area or provide an update on a strategy. Presentations are posted on the intranet.</li> <li>• <b>Has considered setting up a cross-foundation Evaluation Community of Practice</b> (with rotating or standing members).</li> </ul>	[5] [4]
<b>California Wellness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sponsors an <b>annual learning and evaluation conference</b> for all organizations with active grants from the foundation.</li> </ul>	[33]
<b>Babcock</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Every board meeting includes a learning session</b> on a specific topic; grantees are often invited to participate.</li> </ul>	[27]

### External sharing

Sources listed many reasons to share project information and evaluation results externally, including attracting further support for follow-on work and helping to improve the performance of those projects and organizations.<sup>[3]</sup> Still, many foundations remain more focused on internal learning than external communications. Only 38 percent of foundations surveyed for a Grantmakers for Effective Organizations report cited external purposes as being “very important” in their formal evaluations; this rate had gone up over time among the smallest organizations but was unchanged among medium-sized and large ones.<sup>[35]</sup>

A 2016 report from the Center for Effective Philanthropy indicated that foundations tend to be more transparent about their grant-making processes and their goals and strategies, and less transparent about how they assess performance or their lessons learned, even though they think it would be beneficial to do so.<sup>[36]</sup> Only 5 percent of foundations surveyed share lessons they have learned from projects that have not succeeded.<sup>[36]</sup> Some of the reasons cited for having limited transparency are limited staff time, Board caution about sharing information, concerns about information being misunderstood, a fear of putting grantees at risk, or concerns that sharing honest information about program challenges could hurt grantees’ ability to get funds from other donors.<sup>[36]</sup>

When trying to increase transparency, confidentiality considerations remain critical; for example, findings may be sensitive if grantees are working on issues that are not aligned with government policy in their countries. Hewlett has a policy of sharing evaluation results so that others may learn, but making principled exceptions on a case-by-case basis.<sup>[4]</sup> Similarly, CIFF has a “do no harm” approach that takes precedence over transparency of evaluation findings—particularly for advocacy programs—but otherwise makes an effort to share evaluation results and data widely.<sup>[7]</sup> If there are sensitivities, they may only publish parts of the report, or do a separate external-facing piece.<sup>[7]</sup>

Some question the effectiveness of sharing lessons through a foundation website. The Center for Effective Philanthropy notes that “statistical analyses show that providing more information on foundation websites does not correlate with grantees’ perceptions of their funders’ level of transparency.”<sup>[36]</sup> Hewlett puts some of their evaluations on their website but agrees that it may not be the ideal way of fully “sharing”; they are looking back at past evaluations to see what was shared, when, and how.<sup>[5]</sup>

Early findings can be shared with a smaller group of advisors, stakeholders, or foundation communications staff to brainstorm ways to share the evaluation results more broadly.

#### Ways to share lessons internally:

- Devote time at staff meetings to reflect on evaluation topics.
- Have team retreats that focus on learning.
- Build and use a knowledge management system or dashboard.
- Hold facilitated strategic learning debriefs.<sup>[37]</sup>
- Have weekly discussions with the third party evaluation team.<sup>[3]</sup>
- Schedule an internal debrief at the end of each evaluation.<sup>[4]</sup>
- Host brown bag discussions when grantees or experts come to town.
- Do an annual evaluation report for Board and program directors with key findings from across portfolio from the year – things that are broadly relevant and not program-specific.<sup>[7]</sup>

#### Ways to share lessons externally:

- Put learning topics on the agenda at funder meetings or events.
- Host roundtable research discussions.
- Put information on the foundation website.
- Use social media.
- Host webinars.
- Publish newsletters or post videos.
- Do presentations (jointly between program and evaluation teams) at conferences.

## CONCLUSION

**T**his review highlights a few key trends. First, foundations are spending more resources and putting more staff time into evaluation than they did in the past, and making more of an effort to systematically track evaluation spending. Second, foundations are exploring appropriate and useful ways to evaluate work done through sub-granting organizations, including by partnering with those organizations to evaluate sub-grantees, or by helping to build the internal M&E capacity of those intermediaries. Third, while less attention has been put on learning to date, recognition of the importance of purposeful learning is growing quickly. More advances have been made in internal learning than in sharing lessons with external audiences.

The following are emerging best practices to support effective monitoring, evaluation, and learning in foundations:

### PLANNING FOR MEL

Lay out a set of explicit principles to guide monitoring, evaluation, and learning practices across the foundation or across the program. Base evaluation frameworks on the concept of testing a strategy or hypothesis, and plan out evaluations very early in strategy development.

### MONITORING

Streamline indicators and monitoring efforts, and ensure that all data that is collected is collected for a clear purpose.

### EVALUATION

Review in-house staff skills needed for managing evaluation processes, and consider building capacity through internal trainings or by forming an external advisory committee. Use third-party evaluators for most or all evaluations to help ensure objectivity.

### LEARNING

Consider instituting new practices and procedures to ensure that data and evaluation findings are consistently used for adaptive management. Involve foundation communications staff early in conversations about sharing findings and lessons externally.

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