Evaluation Roundtable 2017 Framing Paper

Learning in Responsive Grant-making

Key Terms

Responsive grant-making

A responsive grant maker is one whose leaning is to have grantees largely driving agendas. This includes accepting unsolicited proposals as well as having flexible project designs, proposal formats, and reporting. Typically, the foundation will define to some extent what is to be addressed, but allow significant latitude for how that issue will be tackled, taking the view that a funder's role is to support action in a particular area, or at the grassroots, rather than working towards any particular outcome, and placing a significant emphasis on the relationship between funder and funded partner.[1]

A learning organisation

The findings from the 2015 Evaluation Roundtable survey suggest foundations generally understand a 'learning organisation' as one which *'actively creates spaces and opportunities for knowledge and intelligence to inform and shape its day-to-day practices, as well as its future direction, and embeds these within its culture'.*[2]

Evaluation

'The systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and results of programs [or projects and initiatives] to make judgments about the program, improve or further develop program effectiveness, inform decisions about future programming, and/or increase understanding.'[3]

Strategic learning

'Using evaluation to help organizations or groups learn quickly from their work so they can learn from and adapt their strategies. It means integrating evaluation and evaluative thinking into strategic decision making and bringing timely data to the table for reflection and use. It means making evaluation a part of the intervention – embedding it so that it influences the process.'[4]

Our starting point

Drawing on learning from the two previous convenings of the Roundtable, the 2015 Roundtable Survey[5] and the 2016 workshop on *Improving Evaluation Design*[6], we can identify the following features of the Roundtable network in relation to learning in responsive grant-making:

1. A significant number of Roundtable members can be described as 'larger' (awarding grants totalling £1 million), 'responsive' grant makers (across all or some of their grant-making portfolios).

2. There is widespread appetite amongst the Roundtable network to apply the principles of 'strategic learning'.

3. However, while we know from the Roundtable Survey that trusts and foundations may be collecting and producing more data, there are profound concerns about the quality of data, as well as in relation to using and sharing it:

   - 85% of survey respondents stated that getting good data and the right mix of data was a challenge.

   - 45% said that they are not content with the way their organisation currently makes use of evaluative information.

   - Only 18% agreed that they have effective mechanisms for disseminating learning across the organisations. Reasons included a lack of time and space to reflect on evaluation findings, as well as the absence of systems or supporting cultures to capture and share knowledge.

4. The findings from the survey also suggest that a 'learning organisation' is one where evaluation, as an activity or practice – encompassing a broad range of activities – forms part of a much wider, reflective process. A learning organisation '*actively creates spaces and opportunities for knowledge and intelligence to inform and shape its day-to-day practices, as well as its future direction, and embeds these within its culture*'.[7]

5. For responsive grant makers, particularly those without more tightly bound programme/initiative strategies, we can see that there is a particular challenge: how to make the most of the data available, when that data is being gathered or offered from quite diverse settings and contexts. This is less to do with the practicalities of commissioning various types of evaluation[8] and more to do with the deeper question of organisational learning.

6. The project-by-project or organisation-by-organisation focus that is often a feature of responsive grant-making can reduce the coherence of a funder's portfolio and limit the ability to discern overall outcomes from grant-making and generalise (or learn) from experience. Without a *proactive* strategy and a set of target outcomes, there are fewer big questions

around which more focused learning (and thus data collection) can be hung. As part of that, the relationship with grantees is critical:

'*Responsiveness should not be just a passive philosophical stance – "the partner always knows best" – but rather be characterized by dialogue, willingness to learn, and an ability to observe and to identify and correct assumptions. Agendas should be explicit but flexible, **with room for adjustment based on learning.**'*[9]

7.   Linked to this, organisational learning can be particularly challenging for foundations as their boundaries are porous, meaning their learning is, in part, dependent on that of their 'funded partners' (i.e. grantees). These may be resource-poor organisations who struggle to find the time, money and expertise to collect meaningful data and reflect, and who are often faced with multiple and competing demands from different funders who want to collect different types of data, explore different evaluative questions, or test different approaches. Grantee/grant maker power dynamics and incentives to look always like a high performer in a competitive funding environment also affect ability and willingness to generate and share learning.

8.   Finally, learning activity in foundations generally has at least one of three intended uses: to promote accountability, identify impact or support strategic learning.[10] These three uses are distinct but related and can be difficult to manage simultaneously. Furthermore, the operating environment for foundations, and the organisations that they collaborate with and fund, continues to be characterised by complexity and change. This requires 'continuous transition', with a premium on being able to learn and adapt to new and shifting sets of circumstances,[11] and to evaluate what is working – and crucially what is not – to make informed decisions about where and how to invest time and resources.

Building on these starting points, we draw insights from literature on 'organisational learning', 'the learning organisation' and 'strategic learning' to help improve our understanding of learning in grant-making. From this range of literature, we have highlighted four areas which we think form the building blocks of a learning organisation: culture, leadership, learning processes and knowledge management. These are briefly described below.

Key themes from the literature

Introduction

Becoming a learning organisation is a process which unfolds over time through a combination of organisational attitudes, commitments and management processes. Learning organisations are good at systematically posing and answering meaningful questions that have implications for their work, as well as adjusting resources and actions to reflect new knowledge and insight.[12] Implementation can be complicated and demands significant

commitment, resources and time, but ultimately, if done well, insights from learning activities materialise in changes to practice and behaviour and improved outcomes.

While all organisations learn to a greater or lesser extent, what really distinguishes a learning organisation is the ability to continually learn and transform in a way that moves beyond 'single loop learning' to 'double loop learning' (Fig.1).[13] Single loop learning is the attempt to solve a problem without varying the method or questioning the original goal. In contrast, double loop learning focuses on examining and testing an organisation's underlying assumptions about the nature of the problem and the leverage points for change ('governing variables').[14] Double loop learning can be seen as critical to helping organisations make informed decisions in rapidly changing and often uncertain contexts.
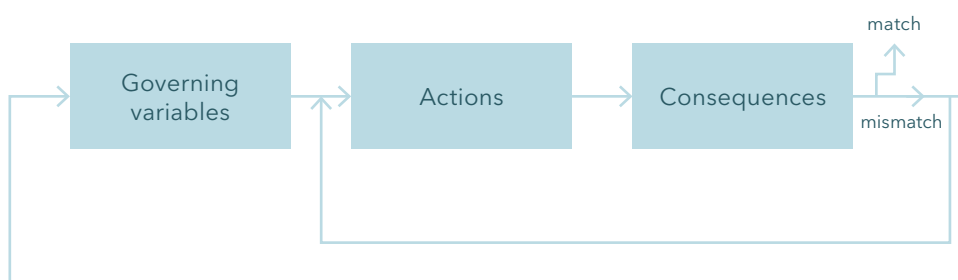

Figure 1 Single and Double Loop Learning (Argyris 1999)

The benefits of paying continuous attention to being a learning organisation include: greater flexibility and responsiveness to inevitable internal and external change; stronger working relationships and connections between colleagues and with partners; increased time and space for reflection to support collaboration, creativity and experimentation; better information flows which disseminate good practice; new ideas and power over decision-making throughout an organisation and across networks.[15]

A foundation's ability to achieve desired results depends, in part, on the learning of grantees, as well as its internal operations and own capacity to learn at multiple levels. With this in mind, we highlight several themes which emerge around organisational learning from across a number of disciplines, as well literature on 'strategic learning' which sheds light more specifically on what organisational learning means in a philanthropic context.

Culture

A foundation's culture is central to establishing an environment conducive to learning both inside and outside an organisation. Culture refers to more than just the way things are done in organisations:

'It involves the articulation and consistent, long-term promotion of the values, norms, and daily behaviors that allow people, organizations, and communities to align their actions in a disciplined way that contributes to progress.'[16]

Culture can be one of the most challenging aspects of organisational learning. It is largely invisible to those embedded within it, making it difficult to identify drivers or to pro-actively change it.[17] Collaboration and partnership; commitment to diversity, equality and inclusion; respect and humility; responsiveness; transparency and trust; and curiosity are important attributes which support a learning culture within and between organisations.

Leadership

Leaders play a key role in establishing cultures which support or hinder learning.[18] Leadership styles that show a sincere commitment to learning and adaptation are more likely to create a learning culture. Modelling behaviours which demonstrate understanding of an issue and how new learning may have altered thinking can signal valued practices to staff. This can also be said for the funder/grantee relationship. Funders who model adaptive behaviour, who are candid about how their thinking may have changed and why, or are clear about their own uncertainty, are more likely to elicit a degree of candour and reflection from grantees.

Learning processes

Learning processes and practices build reflection and sense-making, either in a regular cycle or in response to particular windows of opportunity or crises. Such practices might involve regular reflective staff meetings and project meetings, as well as groups who self-organise around a common interest and expert networks.[19]

Capturing tacit knowledge – the knowledge held in the minds of individuals or teams, or knowledge embedded in an organisation's processes and relationships – can be particularly challenging for organisations. Social processes which facilitate learning and motivate individuals to participate are required to ensure that knowledge which exists in the minds of individuals can be transmitted to groups, teams and networks.

Knowledge management

Capturing, using and sharing learning requires a range a systems and processes often referred to as 'knowledge management', which involves *'knowledge acquisition, creation, refinement, storage, transfer, sharing, and utilization'*.[20] Knowledge management aims to leverage and improve the organisation's knowledge assets to support knowledge practices and improve organisational behaviours, leading to better decisions and improved organisational performance. This is a rapidly evolving area and many organisations are now using social media or building more user controlled platforms such as Wikis and blogs, that bring with them even greater organisational transparency and give rise to more diverse perspectives in the organisational conversation.[21]

Questions to consider in preparation for the Roundtable

- What kinds of questions, data and systems are appropriate to support learning in a responsive grant-making context?

- How can organisations ensure they collect and use the most useful data?

- How to synthesise information coming from different sources, to produce a more rounded, holistic view of outcomes/change?

- To what extent do learning activities and practices need to be formalised and systematic?

- How can organisations overcome time constraints to create space for learning and ensure it is used strategically?

- How can the need for accountability through monitoring be balanced with ensuring enough space for grantees to learn and adapt?

- To what extent, and how, can grant makers facilitate learning and peer support amongst funded partners?

Endnotes

1   Adapted from Laugharn, P. (2008) 'Proactive vs. Responsive Philanthropy', *Alliance*, 13, 3

2   Adapted from IVAR (2015) *Evaluation within UK Trusts and Foundations,* London: IVAR

3   Patton, M. (2008) *Utilization*-focused *evaluation*, California: Sage Publications, 39

4   Coffman, J. and Beer, T. (2011) *Evaluation to support strategic learning: Principles and practice*s, Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation

5   IVAR (2015) *Evaluation within UK Trusts and Foundations*, London: IVAR

6   IVAR (2016) *Improving Evaluation Design*, London: IVAR

7   IVAR (2015) *Evaluation within UK Trusts and Foundations: Practice, use and challenges*, London: IVAR

8   An issue that was pursued in the follow-up to the September 2015 convening of the Roundtable through the production of *Improving Evaluation Design*

9   Laugharn, P. (2008) 'Proactive vs. Responsive Philanthropy', *Alliance*, 13, 3

10   IVAR (2013) *Turning a corner: Transition in the voluntary sector 2012–2013*, London: IVAR

11   IVAR (2014) *UK Evaluation Roundtable: Framing Paper*, London: IVAR

12   Garvin, D. (1993) 'Building a learning organisation' in *Harvard Business Review*, Jul-Aug; 71(4): 78–91

13   Thomas, K. and Allen, S. (2006) The learning organisation: a meta-analysis of themes in the literature in *The Learning Organisation* Vol.13 No.2

14   Argyris, C. (1991) 'Teaching smart people how to learn', *Harvard Business Review* Vol.4 No.2 https://hbr.org/1991/05/teaching-smart-people-how-to-learn

15   See for example Garvin, D. (1993) 'Building a learning organisation' in Harvard Business Review, Jul-Aug;71(4):78-91; Senge, P. (1990) *The Fifth Discipline*: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization, London: Random House

16   Celep, A., Brenner, S. and Mosher-Williams, R. (2016) Internal Culture, External Impact: How a Change Making Culture Positions Foundations to Achieve Transformational Change, 116

17   See for example Garavan, T. (1999) 'The learning organization: a review and evaluation' in *The Learning Organization*, 4, 1, 18–29, Emerald Insight

18   Williams, A. (2014) *Evaluation for Strategic Learning: Assessing Readiness and Results*, Centre for Evaluation Innovation

19   Williams, A. (2014) *Evaluation for Strategic Learning: Assessing Readiness and Result*s, Centre for Evaluation Innovation

20   King, W.R. (2009) Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning, Annals of Information Systems, 4, 3.

21   Dixon, N. (2010) The Three Eras of Knowledge Management, http://www.nancydixonblog.com/2010/08/the-three-eras-of-knowledge-management-summary.html