

Driving continuous learning as a grant maker

Evidence review: A summary

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In partnership:



Institute for Voluntary
Action Research



About the review

In April 2019, Comic Relief commissioned the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) to undertake an evidence review to help it reflect on two questions:

- **What and how do other funders learn from their work, and how do they use this learning to improve?**
- **How do funders encourage and support a focus on ongoing learning in their relationships with grantees?**

Having undertaken the review, Comic Relief and IVAR felt there was useful learning for others working in trusts and foundations, particularly within evaluation or learning roles. It is based on a literature review and 11 telephone interviews with key informants.

The literature review focused on the topics of monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) in the context of philanthropy, as well as the idea of adaptive management. It included a range of sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, grey literature, organisational briefing papers and blogs. In total, just under 100 sources were explored.¹ Direct contact was made with Grantmaking for Effective Organizations and the Center for Evaluation Innovation, who kindly shared a number of internal and external documents related to the review questions. Several were also sought from the Center for Effective Philanthropy, and content from both the US and UK Evaluation Roundtables has been included where appropriate.²

Our sample of key informants comprised six independent funders and four infrastructure support organisations. They were selected to provide insights into how independent trusts and foundations think about – and respond to – topics and issues related to the two review questions and to understand the perspective of a selection of infrastructure/support organisations working in the MEL field. The majority of interviews were with individuals in a MEL role, so the perspectives of Chief Executives and Grant Managers or Officers are not included in this review.

Terminology

We use the terms ‘grantee’, ‘grant holder’ and ‘funded organisation’ interchangeably to refer to the organisations that UK trusts and foundations financially support.

¹ For a bibliography of literature sources, see Appendix One of the full report at www.ivar.org.uk/our-research/continuous-learning

² The Evaluation Roundtables are networks of foundation leaders in the UK and US and Canada aimed at improving evaluation and learning practices in foundations, for more information visit www.ivar.org.uk/get-support/the-evaluation-roundtable/

Foreword

Comic Relief has always had a strong focus on monitoring, evaluation and learning in the work that we fund and in our own practice. With the launch of our new strategy in 2018, this has been re-emphasised in our ambition to be a truly learning-led organisation and fund organisations that are similarly committed to continual learning and improvement. For the Evaluation and Learning team in Comic Relief, this has prompted a lot of thinking about what we actually mean by learning – about what, for whom, on whose terms and how – and how our processes and approaches can best align to this. To help inform our thinking we commissioned this report from the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) to see what other funders were doing around this.

This IVAR publication provides a range of valuable insights, practices, challenges and ways of thinking for funders. But it has also highlighted the emergent nature of much of this work in the sector; ‘learning’ has now become an almost ubiquitous word thrown about by many funders and charities and as a result has become increasingly vague in terms of what it actually means for a funder, for those they fund and, crucially, the relationship between the two.

For thinking about Comic Relief’s own internal learning processes, what has stuck out for me in this report is the importance of focus and clarity in organisational learning ambitions for a funder. Whether you have the relevant scale and focus to be ‘buying’ specific outcomes from your grantees, or whether you are more interested in supporting the organisations who work within your set of broader issue areas, better articulating the learning priorities that match your focus as a funder would help resolve a lot of the cross-purpose discussions about learning. It would also provide a clearer basis for that holy grail of funder collaboration. This report also highlights valuable examples of properly embedded day-to-day practices, values and leadership within funders to ensure learning is a shared, meaningful process as opposed to a set of ad hoc products produced by MEL ‘experts’.

In terms of supporting learning for those we fund, this report provides a useful challenge for us and other funders – if we are serious about supporting learning (as opposed to proving effectiveness in ‘our’ funded project), we need to think beyond indicators and outcomes and data collection methods. Indeed such a focus may simply atomise or destroy any coherence of learning across that organisation’s work as it struggles to juggle pockets of very different monitoring and evaluation practice. We instead need to consider those organisational cultures, capacities and processes that enable an organisation to value and use learning. Without those, a funder’s focus on ‘learning’ will simply put it alongside other things that organisations have to do to keep the funder happy. The report shows how the power dynamic of the grant maker/grantee relationship is critical here, and how what a funder wants to learn can lead to very different focuses in how ‘learning’ is approached and supported for funded organisations. So alignment of interests between a funder and those they fund is essential to really push forward learning

and adaptation at an organisational and sector level – whether that alignment is on very specific outcomes, or on the practice of being learning-led (and recognising that what you each want to learn might be different).

Finally, there is a useful note of caution that we are taking out of this report – these things take time! To do this right, and get to where we want to be, we are going to have to be patient, strategic and collaborative both internally and externally and we look forward to working with other funders and funded organisations on this exciting journey.

Jake Grout-Smith

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Authorship and acknowledgements

This summary has been written by Eliza Buckley, Richard Jenkins and Rebecca Moran.

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Summary

Continuous learning – grant-making's new frontier?

A shift is taking place in the UK funding world. Learning is emerging as a key element of contemporary grant-making. In 2019, we (IVAR) were commissioned by Comic Relief to review a range of evidence – and engage with other funders and infrastructure organisations – to explore two main questions:

- What and how do other funders learn from their work, and how do they use this learning to improve?
- How do funders encourage and support a focus on ongoing learning in their relationships with grantees?

The day-to-day practices we discovered are ahead of much available research we found through our literature review. To date, research has largely focused on measuring and demonstrating outcomes rather than on learning as a continuous, adaptive process.

What's driving the shift?

First, there seems to be a greater willingness among funders to question their own approach, challenge their biases and reflect on the counterfactual. This seems to come from a greater recognition that current accountability frameworks can force funded organisations into a box where they must prove their success rather than learn from the moments when things don't turn out as expected. And things often don't turn out as expected – not because organisations have 'failed', but because they are working in complex and uncertain environments where things are changing all the time. In these circumstances, success depends largely on the grantee's ability to adapt to those changes. So, **the second major driver for a new emphasis on continuous learning is recognition of the need to embrace ongoing adaptation.** In traditional grant-making, by the time the evaluation report is delivered, it's too late. As one interviewee explained: *'the application of learning to improve project implementation ... is at the heart of adaptation'*. Grant-makers are becoming more explicit about the focus of their learning in relation to the type of funder they are, the drivers/constraints they have and the capacity this requires.

If organisations need to adapt, and funding and funders need to change with them, what are the insights and practices that help, and what can funders do to ensure that learning (their own and that of funded organisations) is supported and not hindered? This is what we set out to find through this review.

Driving continuous learning in foundations

This review reinforces much of what we already know about organisational change – that it depends on leadership, that culture is key, that it takes a range of everyday practices to make aspiration a reality and that it requires resources. But insights also emerged that specifically apply to making the shift to continuous learning in grant-making organisations.

Leadership that shows curiosity and incentivises learning

If learning is a priority, things change at an organisational level because Chief Executives and Trustees are curious and incentivise this within their staff team. At the same time, learning is most effective when organisations are clear about what questions motivate them and it is embedded in strategy and practice. As one funder observed: *'honing in on some questions you want to answer is important ... otherwise, you could have a million different interesting questions'*. Generally, we found funders are interested in varying combinations of:

- How to set more realistic goals and outcomes for their learning
- Making more time for 'So what?' questions
- Understanding or gathering evidence about existing or emerging problems in society
- Ensuring their financial assets are used in the most useful way
- Enabling grantees to achieve outcomes

A funder's focus and purpose for learning will shape:

- The questions being asked
- The type of knowledge and data that is required and valued
- The methods used to collect and gather data
- The balance funders strike between prioritising their own learning needs with supporting grantees to learn
- Where in the decision-making process data and evidence is used
- The degree to which data is collated and shared, and with whom

Organisational culture that is compatible with, and provokes, reflection

Creating spaces for honest reflection and appraisal is important. So is embracing organisational norms and behaviours that build learning habits into an organisation's day-to-day routine and practices. We discovered that knowing what your organisation wants to learn about is crucial.

Acquiring new skills and capacity

There is no single way to arrange learning: it may need a team, a dedicated individual or it may be shared across an organisation. However, responsibility for learning is everyone's task. It needs time and space – at decision points, throughout the organisation and throughout the year. We found that, where there was a dedicated staff member or team, they needed both facilitation skills and an analytical ability to be able to frame

the right probing questions that would get people thinking while also *'...supporting the range of different parties to be able to unpack what is happening'*.

Valuing a range of information and knowledge gathering techniques and sources

If learning is continuous and embedded, grant makers need a range of information and knowledge-gathering techniques and sources to take the step back required to gain insight and perspective. Practitioners we spoke to underlined the importance of thinking critically about collecting, coding and storing data to be able to identify and respond to trends in grant-making practice and the implications they have on the organisations that are funded. Alongside knowledge management tools (databases, staff directories, blogs, intranets, learning logs and so on), many spoke of the huge value of taking into account the experience and intelligence acquired by Grants Managers through their relationships with grantees. Continuous learning means finding ways to ensure this tacit knowledge is valued and used.

The following practices were highlighted as useful catalysts for learning:

- Regular reviews, including ongoing 'learning conversations' and end-of-grant reviews
- Regular reflective periods, e.g. every six months
- Collective consideration of new evidence and research
- Board papers
- Publications to share data and findings

There was strong recognition that learning was evolutionary and incremental. It means making a commitment to ongoing shared reflection and being able to sit with emergent issues without rushing to conclusions.

Advice and reflections

1. Be clear about the purpose of learning within the organisation and how it will be used.
2. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.
3. It takes time to embed the conditions required to support organisational learning.
4. Learning takes time and is an iterative process.
5. Don't try to do too much too quickly and be aware of people's capacity to take on new information at any one time.
6. Effective learning is about being responsive to need – at times it may be messier, and more unstructured, than at others.
7. Review data coding and data storage systems regularly to minimise bias; balance the need to structure with allowing themes to emerge from data.

Encouraging and supporting grantees to learn

Perhaps one of the most radical consequences of the shift towards continuous learning is what it means for the relationship with grantees, as it raises the question of whether and how funders can resource grantees to learn, as well as how they structure the relationship in terms of everyday grant management practices and accountability. We took the opportunity to explore these questions and consider how evaluation and reporting practices will need to be reframed if, as our research suggests, there is a move from 'buying services' to 'supporting adaptation'.

Organisational capacity and culture

Practically, funders need to be realistic about grant holders' capacity to learn and their ability to influence this. Grant holders face the same issues as funders – such as organisational leadership and culture, internal capacity and capability and what systems and processes will support learning – as well as having to deal with the dynamics created by resource dependency.

Leadership and culture

Funders can boost organisations' capacity through funding, but they can't control culture, so there are important lessons about who funders choose to fund: *'if [learning] is not set as an organisational priority, it is going to go nowhere'*. On the other hand, faced with survival *'learning can feel like a luxury'* for hard-pressed organisations, and much of the information will be held by those 'doing the job' who may feel they don't have time to record it. Funders can help by not only resourcing organisations to collect information and data, but also ensuring they have the capacity to reflect and make use of it, and actively demonstrating that they value this. This may not mean creating lots of infrastructure. As one interviewee observed: *'a small organisation that doesn't have a lot of resource and doesn't call it [monitoring, evaluation and learning], is just [being] a reflective organisation'*.

Power dynamics

There is a risk that 'learning' becomes another thing that grant holders feel they need to demonstrate, and something that might create tension if it's not what other commissioners or funders are interested in. Funders need to be clear about whether they seek to support 'learning' for themselves or for the funded organisation. Having better recognised what their learning interests are, funders also need to recognise the implications this has on the learning relationships they can develop with organisations. Data-driven outcome learning across a cohort of grantees, for example, will look very different from a focus on learning how to support grantees' organisational capacity regardless of specific outcomes.

An important caution stems from the focus of the grant maker. Are funders genuinely concerned with the organisation and its capacity to learn or just

the project they are funding and 'proving' its success? In a market where many organisations are trying to differentiate themselves by offering a model that 'works', it can be difficult for them to feel safe enough to share with a funder that things have not turned out as expected, even when it's the sort of failure that leads to learning. Organisations need to question whether they need – or indeed, want – funders to support their learning. But there is also a significant onus on funders to genuinely demonstrate their commitment to learning, both in the tone they use and in the way they create and maintain trust to balance power dynamics. These aspects will be felt by the grant holder in the nature of the support offered and the way in which the funder manages the grant.

Offering support

As already mentioned, one way funders can support organisations' learning is by acknowledging that real learning requires more resource and time, and that it costs more than simply gathering and reporting monitoring data. It is also important to be realistic about the length of grants designed to support learning, particularly if the focus is on organisational capacity to learn rather than individual project learning. But the most significant shift that comes with a focus on learning is ensuring that the grant holder can change course if needed during the grant period.

We found that much current practice and thinking around 'funding plus' is relevant here – in particular, the offer of support to build grantee monitoring and evaluation capacity. A focus on learning also gives significance to 'funding plus' approaches that emphasise the health of an organisation as a whole: *'The best impact support links analysis to organisational culture and strategy ... building a wider culture of learning, rather than suggesting organisations can reach a perfect impact measurement destination'*.

Funders can also provide opportunities to share and facilitate learning. But this requires time, resource, careful facilitation and relinquishing their own agenda: *'If you're committed to learning [as a funder] you've got to recognise that it's not always going to be the stuff that you care about that people will want to learn about'*.

Reframing relationships and accountability

If the shift from demonstrating outcomes to continuously adapting to change is a key driver for learning, then current monitoring, evaluation and reporting systems will need to be reimaged. As one participant said: *'If we think progress reporting is helping organisations learn, it is not'*.

When learning is a central concern, 'accountability' means holding organisations accountable not just for how the money was spent, but for learning too. It means that, aside from the basic requirements of organisations demonstrating to funders and stakeholders that they are using money wisely, any information and data collected must support practice-based learning. We found that learning and accountability can be complementary goals. Relevant insights on aligned reporting include the need for funders to be mindful and proportionate in relation to the information they collect from organisations.

However, once learning is taken on board, funders need to rethink the meaning and measures of 'success' that lie at the heart of current accountability frameworks. So, instead of asking about what happened, they should ask how things went and what learning took place. While high-level outcomes may remain constant, other indicators and methods may need to change as the intervention is delivered.

Putting that into practice is not easy. It also places further emphasis on the importance of relationships that can take account of individual circumstances rather than trying to ensure all organisations fit into the same neat boxes. Relationships that focus on learning can be more intense and may not always be possible or appropriate. However, *'shifting the focus to prioritise learning questions ... can change the conversation to one that is more open, fluid and potentially, more honest'*.

It's important to note as well that this emphasis on the relationship means that funders must be prepared to be held accountable for using any information gathered for the purposes of improvement.

Mutuality

Our exploration of accountability in the context of learning raised the mutual nature of the grant holder/grant maker relationship in a new way. When both are learning, there is a greater recognition of equality in the relationship. Participants in our review also noted that, given the risk of power imbalances distorting grantee learning, it is important to discover and build on grantees' own learning needs, and find areas where their learning interests coincide, particularly around benefits for beneficiaries.

Advice and reflections

1. Develop relationships that are based on trust and mutual interest, and encourage honest and open dialogue.
2. Reframe accountability and learning within monitoring and evaluation frameworks and recognise that they are complementary objectives.
3. Give funding that creates space for strategic reflection and development as well as resource for monitoring and evaluation activity.
4. Develop a nuanced approach to learning relationships across a varied grants portfolio.
5. Use 'funding plus' mechanisms to invest in organisations.
6. Redesign reporting to encourage reflection and learning on both sides.
7. Create opportunities to share and facilitate learning between grantees and other stakeholders.

Final remarks

You can't make people learn. That is true both for foundations and those they fund. There is a shift among funders and commissioners from purchasing results to becoming backers of trusted partners who are intrinsically motivated to improve their own practice. We found that much of the way this is done is still in development. However, if this adjustment – from proving to improving – signals part of a wider change in mindset, then it is likely to mean an evolution in funders' own skills, as they share power with, and are held accountable by, those closest to the action. That has an impact on funders' decisions, not just about the organisations they fund but also the people they recruit as Grant Managers and Trustees, and on how they talk about themselves to stakeholders, regulatory bodies and the public. We'll continue to track and feedback changes, but we suspect that, over time, this might mean turning much of the current model on its head.

You can read the full report and see our source material at www.ivar.org.uk/our-research/continuous-learning



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