

Giving learning a seat at the board table

Evaluation Roundtable Convening

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GOOD INVESTMENT

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learn together

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Introduction

The theme of the 2022 Evaluation Roundtable Convening is **‘Giving learning a seat at the board table’**, with a particular focus on the implications for trustees, and their relationships with staff.

This builds on discussions within the Roundtable Community of Practice during the last 12 months. We have seen a growing appetite for Covid-19 to become a transformational moment, enabling the learning function within foundations to inform, support and underpin a more agile and collaborative approach to grant-making. At the time of writing, trusts and foundations remain in a period of transition. Learning has made significant gains over the last two years, with lighter, faster reporting and greater comfort with operating in uncertainty. However, new learning priorities and expectations are not yet clear, making it difficult for learning staff to determine *‘what systems for learning need to look like now’*. Also, critically, how to resist the *‘snap back into calcified, inflexible systems’*.

Traditional ways of collecting and reporting data have to evolve. This is creating some anxiety, especially when it comes to trustee expectations and the shift in roles required for working in an emergent and complex environment: *‘If you accept [that] the degree of uncertainty is relatively permanent, then your own expectations of what can be achieved through funding need to be framed in that different context’*. Changes in data collection and reporting require the shifting of certain expectations and roles, especially in relation to trustees: *‘There can be a tension between communicating what the board want and what you need as a team’*.

At board level, established habits around reporting and learning may no longer feel fit for purpose.

Concerns centre around:

Making the case for more diversity of data

‘We want to use the resources in the local area – and partners are producing stuff all the time. But none of it is quite what the board wants. We don’t want to go out and ask questions that we already know the answers to – so how do we collate all this informal learning into something that trustees recognise as valid?’

Achieving alignment about ‘what we can learn’

‘We’re not so much learning about outcomes, but about what can be accomplished. And that can be difficult with some trustees. So much of this does come back to the appetite of trustees to see stories of contribution and achievement as being valuable, useful and worthwhile’.

Learning staff have a central role to play here, translating and presenting data in a way that is useful for trustees, while at the same time encouraging them to spend less time looking at performance against projected outcomes and more time thinking about ‘so what and what now’. This is *‘not something that can be done by stealth’*, but rather by understanding trustees’ motivations and capacity, and what they want to learn about and why. It may also call for simple, honest discussion about the new realities: *‘Speaking truth to power and telling your trustees that, actually, the things they’re expecting from you are no longer possible or realistic’*.

Some learning staff feel that board meetings, where *‘certain formal decisions need to be made’*, are not the right place to start these conversations. Spaces where *‘trustees might be more relaxed or more open to hear new ideas’* need to be found. Others are trying to shift conversations by inviting funded organisations or topic experts into board meetings. Bringing in new voices has stimulated creative conversations that have helped bring work on the ground to life: *‘It suddenly had three dimensions’*. Hearing different perspectives also helps to identify powerful new questions and open new lines of inquiry.

From our Community of Practice conversations, as well as recent work with Carnegie UK Trust and The Robertson Trust, three things stand out as being essential for boards committed to putting learning at the heart of a foundation’s practice and decision-making.

1

Develop a shared understanding of what we mean by learning

This is especially important given the tendency of boards to default to a focus on narrow, quantifiable matters, and steer away from more open-ended, reflective conversations. When we talk about ‘learning’ at IVAR, we are talking about *the process of collecting and converting many types of data – formal evaluations, individual reflections, research, impact studies, statistics, qualitative and quantitative outcome data, case studies, structured surveys, partner feedback and more – into usable lessons and insights that will enable us to make intelligent and evidence-informed decisions about how to be more effective in a complex environment, and thus to make the best possible contribution. Good learning is not a product, or set of information: it is a transformation in thinking and action.*

2

Embrace the concept of ‘strategic learning’

This refers specifically to the learning process as it relates to the development and guidance of strategy, where a board and senior team review progress against aims, consider what has gone well and less well, and adjust the delivery of the strategy in the light of this intelligence. The commitment to a strategic learning approach is to ensure that *‘the lessons that emerge from evaluation and other data sources will be timely, actionable, and forward-looking, and that strategists will gain insights that will help them to make their next move in a way that increases their likelihood of success’*. Conventional oversight data provided to boards do not often fit this bill.

For trustees, the concept can help to reconcile concerns about a possible tension between ‘formal governance’ and ‘learning’ – a familiar tension, often predicated on two unhelpful notions. First, that learning is, somehow, a ‘nice to have’ luxury and, second, that governance is exclusively about oversight and monitoring. Recognising that the development and guidance of strategy is at the heart of a board’s governance function can help trustees adjust their focus towards strategic learning, enabling them and staff to approach complex work with a spirit of curiosity and adaptation.

3

Create new routines and conversations in board meetings

In many cases, board meeting conversations tend to default to more formal and rigid interactions that stifle the kind of curiosity and adaptation that can help trustees and staff to navigate difficult decisions together. For foundations to transition to ‘learning governance’ successfully, attention needs to be paid as to how expectations for fixed, overly simplified data (such as KPIs and metrics) incentivise a false impression of certainty and control. This routine can limit trust and prevent both staff and funded partners from sharing real challenges and insights with foundations. Instead, rewards and incentives need to be rebalanced to inspire candid, clear-eyed exploration of how decisions by foundations affect charities and the social issues that they are both seeking to address.

To enable this transformation, boards need to develop clarity about – and perhaps a separation between – ‘the oversight space’ and the ‘learning space’ (although, ideally, there is a virtuous circle created between the two). A more free-flowing and emergent space for learning helps trustees and staff to develop a shared understanding of how a foundation’s actions and resources can contribute more to social change and the health of the voluntary sector in the future. Meanwhile, sharper clarity about to what and to whom foundations are accountable – given their size and role as one of many actors working on social issues – can help boards better fulfil their oversight function.

Learning staff have varying degrees of access to and control over the information that is presented to the board and the conversations that happen around it. Many are in a responsive position – required to provide data to answer questions that trustees ask and that CEOs want to present, but they can work with senior staff to begin to make shifts. Others have the opportunity to shape and frame directly the types of information collected for board meetings, and even facilitate conversations with trustees about what the data mean for strategy. In either case, influencing trustees’ and staff’s shared understanding of what is meant by learning, re-orienting data and conversations to support strategic learning, and changing incentives to inspire exploration and adaptation at board meetings requires us to understand two things. First, the board’s existing ideas about its role in governance and accountability; second, its frustrations and hopes for learning and data. Our Roundtable Convening will help to develop that understanding, and identify levers for change that learning staff at any level can use to create a better learning relationship between trustees and staff.¹

¹ Coffman, J., & Beer, T. (2011). Evaluation to support strategic learning: Principles and practices. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES PROFILE

Ash Tree Foundation



ASH TREE
FOUNDATION

Goals and Motivations

The Ash Tree Foundation is one of the largest funders in the UK, working across a broad canvas of issues which reflect the founder's own breadth of interests. Trustees are attracted by energy and innovation. For many years, the Foundation made its decisions 'grant by grant', supporting organisations trying to puzzle out solutions to the most challenging problems. Trustees have become increasingly frustrated by not being able to 'get hold of' the collective impact of the many millions spent in this way. The most recent strategy marks a decisive shift in approach, aiming to position the Foundation as a catalyst for coordinated action that triggers larger-scale and more permanent changes in the issues it cares about. The Board is excited by this new direction of travel, but remains to be convinced that it is possible to develop meaningful indicators of progress.

Beliefs

Our role in social change

- If we think deeply about addressing root causes and systems levers, and then organise others around these solutions in a coordinated and complementary way, we can be a 'change maker' rather than just a 'grant maker'.
- We believe that challenge is an essential ingredient of good governance and expect to engage in robust debate at board meetings between each other and with the senior staff.

Foundation Facts

- Set up 60 years ago on the death of the benefactor
- Has moved over the years from a broad funding portfolio to a strategic focus on system change with goals in three key areas of interest: Stronger Communities, Climate Action and Investing in Young People
- The endowment supports spend of more than £45 million per annum
- Grants are usually made for three to five years for at least £50,000 per year
- Additional support is available from a 'funder plus' programme
- Grants are largely unrestricted and made against agreed outcomes that support the Foundation's system change goals

Trustee Facts

- Board of 15, mostly made up of high profile leaders, very successful in their careers in the public and private sectors
- Trustees have extensive experience on the boards of many other large not-for-profit organisations, public institutions, and corporate boards
- Board terms are limited to 12 years
- Trustees meet six times a year. All sit on at least one sub-committee
- The majority of grant approvals are delegated to a sub-committee of trustees and senior staff, or to senior staff alone

Accountability

- We are clear that ‘the buck stops with us’ and take our legal, ethical, and strategic responsibilities very seriously. Oversight and scrutiny sit at the heart of our role.
- We are accountable for ensuring staff deploy resources in a strategic way that contributes to meaningful systems-level changes.
- We do not have a strong public-facing role on behalf of the Foundation and very little direct contact with individual grantees. We trust the Chief Executive and her team to manage the organisation in line with the values we have approved and to make us aware of any concerns that need our attention.
- We support efforts to make the Foundation’s thinking more transparent and its processes less burdensome but do not need to be directly involved in their execution.

Learning and evaluation

- We are primarily interested in systems-level changes rather than grant-level outcomes.
- We understand that social change can be complex and messy but want to see both quantitative and qualitative evidence of progress against our strategic goals.
- We are not interested in proving that ‘our money delivered these outcomes’. However, we do need to make periodic judgements about what change is happening and whether our resources would be better used elsewhere to catalyse systemic change.

Board and Staff Dynamics

- In moving from a broad funding portfolio to a systems change approach, trustees have been unwilling to give up any of the original benefactor’s three areas of interest. Staff were relieved not to lose their individual areas and expertise under the new strategy but do feel thinly stretched in having to understand and report on progress across so many complex fields.

- Board meetings and sub-committees all have very full agendas and are managed at speed.
- Relationships with trustees are managed largely through the Chief Executive and her Deputy. Even members of the senior management team have little or no contact with trustees outside formal meetings.
- Structures and systems are still evolving to fit with the new focus and the process of change remains challenging.

Learning and Evaluation

The trustees’ spoken and unspoken frustrations and hopes around learning can be expressed in the following ways:

Frustrations and Pains

- We worry that ‘complexity’ may be a fashionable label that allows everyone to kick difficult questions of impact and value into the long grass.
- We are interested in firm answers and concrete evidence, not endless papers giving us information that we simply do not have time to absorb or comment on.
- We cannot simply ‘wait and see’ about impact. At some point, we have to be ready to remove our support from less productive areas and invest it where it has a better chance of achieving more.

Hopes and Desires

- We want to be able to understand and demonstrate the value and benefit of what we are doing and how we are doing it.
- We want to know that we are spending our money in ways that are most likely to produce large-scale change that improves lives.
- We want robust, well-presented evidence that helps us make informed judgements about the progress of the Foundation’s strategy and what our next steps should be.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES PROFILE

Bamboo Trust

Goals and Motivations

The trustees of The Bamboo Trust agree that business has an important contribution to make to community life and supporting people in need. Although careful to keep an appropriate level of independence from the Bamboo Insurance Company, maintaining a good and productive relationship with it is a priority for trustees. Trustees want their grants both to support good organisations which are making a difference to disadvantaged people and to nurture a culture of volunteering within the Company and in the community more widely.

All trustees live and/or work in one of the Trust's local areas. It is important to them that the people in their networks think highly of the work that the Trust supports. Opportunities for good publicity are high on their agenda and trustees regularly attend presentation ceremonies and other PR events where they enjoy meeting grantees, volunteers and beneficiaries.

Beliefs

Trustees have different professional backgrounds and experience and are not completely aligned in their spoken (or unspoken) beliefs. However, they see this as an asset to the Board, because of the respect they have for each other's expertise. Their common ground might be expressed in the following ways:

Our role in social change

- We want the communities we support to be 'a good place to live' for everyone.
- We want our funding to make a visible difference to people in these communities.
- Volunteering matters to us. We all volunteer in community activities and want to support and encourage others who volunteer.



BAMBOO TRUST

Foundation Facts

- Set up 20 years ago as an independent foundation by the Bamboo Insurance Company and funded on a profit share basis
- Geographical focus on the three areas where the Company has offices
- Interested in community services, encouraging volunteering and support for vulnerable people
- Approximately £1.5 million in annual grant-making
- £200,000 distributed in small grants to organisations where company employees volunteer
- The balance provides two-year grants of £10,000 per year
- Grants are usually for specific projects

Trustee Facts

- Ten board members: four senior staff of the Company, six professional people active in civic life in the areas where the Trust works (two from each)
- Board members serve for up to three terms of three years
- Trustees attend four board meetings each year and an annual board dinner followed by an awayday with the Executive Director and his small staff team
- There are few expectations of trustees outside these formal meetings, other than acting as ambassadors for the Trust

- We are drawn to small organisations with low overheads, that run community activities or provide practical services.

Accountability

- We are accountable under charity law for making sure that the Trust is well-managed and that our grants have impact.
- We feel a strong responsibility for promoting the contribution of the Bamboo Insurance Company, as our donor, and for protecting it from any bad publicity.
- We expect our staff team to manage relationships with grant seeking organisations in a fair, respectful, and efficient way.

Learning and evaluation

- We want robust facts and figures about the impact of our grants.
- We want to hear people's stories about how the Trust has helped that we can share with the Company and its staff.
- It makes sense that we step back every couple of years and think about what we should be doing differently.

Board and Staff Dynamics

- The relationship between the Board and the staff team is relatively formal. Only the Executive Director attends board meetings, but trustees and staff appreciate the opportunity to meet for more informal discussion at the annual awayday.
- While trustees feel they give the team a great deal of scope in 'managing the business', they take their oversight responsibilities very seriously. They expect the Executive Director to be on top of all the data, to present it clearly and to manage robust questioning well.
- Trustees want as much money as possible to go to grant-making and are very tight on overheads.
- Decisions on grants to support employee volunteering are delegated to the Executive Director. All other recommendations are

presented to the full Board for review and approval. The Chair manages the high volume of paperwork by focusing debate on applications identified as more risky or uncertain in outcome.

- Recommendations from staff not to fund can be a source of tension for trustees, as they know many of the organisations personally.
- Trustees complain that board papers are far too long and don't always give them what they need to make good decisions. Staff feel that, in practice, trustees cannot agree about what information they are ready to do without.

Learning and Evaluation

The trustees' spoken and unspoken frustrations and hopes around learning can be expressed in the following ways:

Frustrations and Pains

- Some trustees find the jargon around learning and evaluation unhelpful. It's hard for us to avoid talking at cross-purposes.
- Our Executive Director is great and knows what's needed. However, some of us worry that they overcomplicate things. How difficult can it really be to give us some robust numbers about the impact we are having?
- We spend so much time on reporting and grant-decisions that we have very little time to talk about what's going on in our local areas and the impact that our grants are having.

Hopes and Desires

- We want to know our money is making a difference.
- We want straightforward metrics to summarise the tangible impact our grants have had on people's lives.
- We want the Bamboo Insurance Company and its staff to be proud of their association with the Trust and feel good about the work that we support because of their efforts.

Fern Foundation

Goals and Motivations

The trustees of the Fern Foundation are motivated by a deep shared sense of moral imperative, collective responsibility, and humility. They feel fortunate to have resources and have a sense of obligation to redistribute them to those who need them without interfering in their agency and self-determination. Trustees hope to make a real difference to communities who are left out or disadvantaged by existing social systems.

As a very engaged Board, they believe their job is to enable leaders and organisations to follow their own vision and do their best work. Trustees gain energy and fulfilment from interacting with organisations directly, and from learning about the social issues that are closest to their hearts.

Beliefs

The Fern Foundation trustees share a set of spoken and unspoken beliefs that they might express in the following ways:

Our role in social change

- Expertise is held by people experiencing challenges or inequity most directly, and by the people doing the work on the ground with these communities.
- Social change cannot and should not be orchestrated from the centre with a “strategy” designed and held outside a community.
- We should fund organisations that share our values, have a strong vision for and deep connections to their community, are interested in strengthening their own capacity and then trust them to do good work.

Accountability

- We are accountable to each other for making sure that we spend our money in a way that expresses our shared values.



FERN FOUNDATION

Foundation Facts

- 100 years old
- Founded by a Quaker family with a deep belief in equality, community, and the “right sharing of the earth’s resources.”
- Generalist funder interested broadly in community-driven social justice and economic equality
- £11 million in annual grant-making
- 250 grantees, almost all multi-year
- £45,000 per annum average grant size
- Most grants are to mid-sized and smaller organisations, with some larger strategic projects
- Almost all grants are unrestricted general support grants

Trustee Facts

- Eleven board members: six family members and five trusted friends
- Board terms are unlimited and eight of 11 board members have served more than 10 years
- Trustees are very involved in grant-making
- Trustees have developed fairly deep content expertise in their areas of interest, as well as in the challenges faced by community organisations
- Trustees meet as a full group six times per annum for half a day

- We are accountable to grantees for ensuring that both our funding and staff support are truly useful and do not overburden or distract them.
- Grantees are accountable to their communities for the work they are doing – not to us. Routine reporting is very light: we trust grantees to come to us for help if they have any serious concerns.

Learning and evaluation

- Learning deeply about the context and needs of community organisations is critical to our ability to be effective – it’s how we evolve and stay useful.
- We are sensitive to how difficult social change is. We trust learning that comes from hands on experience, expertise and open relationships and are suspicious of tools and trends in philanthropy that claim to ‘measure success’ or give simple answers to complex questions.
- We often hear from organisations that predetermined, funder-imposed outcomes and performance measures are unhelpful and seen as an instrument of power and control.

Board and Staff Dynamics

- As family members and close friends, trustees know each other extremely well on a personal level, as well as in their capacity as trustees. Consequently, they have developed similar perspectives and assumptions over time. While this means they can jump quickly into deeper conversations, they often fall prey to “group think”.
- Trustees are directly involved in individual grant decisions. Almost all board conversations focus on whether new applicants are a good fit for the Foundation’s values, with the case for an applicant made by foundation staff who have done research about and had conversations with the applicant, sometimes together with an individual trustee. After grant approval, trustees pass on relationships with organisations to the staff, who are then

responsible for support and management, although some trustees do remain involved.

- Through their years with the Foundation, each trustee has developed their own expertise in a particular area of work about which they are most passionate, such as economic development, community action, food security, health and wellbeing, violence prevention, etc. Although Fern is a generalist foundation, individual trustees tend to connect to grantees within their preferred focus area, and their board colleagues defer to this in-house “expert” when the time comes to make decisions.

Learning and Evaluation

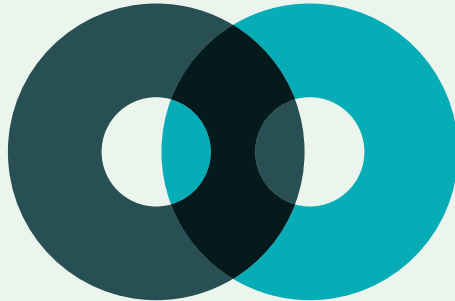
The trustees’ spoken and unspoken frustrations and hopes around learning can be expressed in the following ways:

Frustrations and Pains

- We’re worried about being too directive and asking too much of organisations we fund and being lured in by trendy philanthropic ideas, processes, and frameworks that put too much focus on the Foundation’s needs.
- We just don’t have the space and time to reflect as deeply as we want on issues, challenges, and whether our resources are having the effect we hope to have on community organisations.
- We keep experiencing learning conversations and materials or “data” that tell us things we already know through our relationships.

Hopes and Desires

- We want to understand how to make the best choices between potential grantees because there are so many good ones we could support.
- We want to know if we’re really helping communities we care about very deeply.
- We want truly candid reflections and feedback from grantees about challenges, needs, and experiences with our staff and processes.



For more information and resources, please visit:
<https://www.ivar.org.uk/learning-and-evaluation/>



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