

# Q2

## How can we help each other learn?

### **WHAT IT MEANS AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR USEFUL EVALUATION**

Succeeding at evaluation has a lot to do with being willing to listen even when the messages lead you to challenge your assumptions about your work. One of ONN's principles for good evaluation practice is reciprocal respect. This question is designed to get people thinking of evaluation as a collaboration between partners rather than a situation where one group sends data to another. In a subtle way, it may highlight power imbalances by sending the message that funders should be willing to help grant recipients learn. Sometimes, nonprofits get frustrated with evaluation because they feel as if they are expected to answer questions that are beyond their capacity to answer.

### **HOW TO ASK IT**

The idea behind this question is to try to identify the positive contributions that each partner (primarily the nonprofit and the funder, but there may be other important partners in some situations) can make to the other's learning and to highlight the fact that groups need to work together to succeed. At the same time, this question may give people permission to say that they don't feel that they can meet all of their partner's learning needs. This question involves reflecting on the points of intersection of stakeholders with a particular focus on how each group is important to achievement of the other's goals.



## Q2 HOW CAN WE HELP EACH OTHER LEARN?

**Here are some suggestions for other questions to ask should you need further probes to get to the information you are looking for:**

Where do our learning goals overlap?

Which of your goals are things you can't accomplish without help from others? Without help from us specifically?

How do we demonstrate accountability? To each other?

What are the consequences if we fail to meet expectations?

Does our shared interest have to do with:

The populations we serve?

The outcomes we hope to achieve?

The approaches or strategies we use in our work?

The advocacy work we want to do?

Our physical location or connection to a specific neighbourhood or community?

Our shared funding source?

Something else?



### **WHEN AND WHERE TO ASK IT**

This is a great question to ask in situations where past evaluation work has been heavily focused on accountability and there has been little discussion of how the data translates into learning or action. It is also a good question to use when there is an imbalance of power or size between the two organizations. This question may be less useful in situations where the parties don't need or want a close partnership.

This can be a helpful question at the end of an evaluation process, when a nonprofit is considering how best to synthesize evaluation results for a funder. When you have a lot of data, it isn't always easy to distill the key messages and this question can help you clarify what is most salient for a particular audience.



**KEEP in MIND**

### **CHALLENGES THAT MIGHT COME UP**

#### **POWER DIFFERENCES**

Power differences are a big challenge when planning evaluation and this question is designed in part to explore these differences. If you are a small nonprofit meeting with a large funder about your evaluation, you may be completely dependent on that funder for achieving your goals or even for continued survival. The funder, on the other hand, may see itself as having little need for a partnership with you. However, the very fact that it is sitting down to talk with you about evaluation suggests that it has some interest in the information you might gather.

Identifying some strong shared goals or interests and using them as a point of reference during evaluation planning can often be a very powerful strategy for building relationships.

#### **IDENTIFYING SHARED INTERESTS**

If it proves challenging to identify areas of shared interest or shared goals, it is sometimes helpful to pick something more general as a focus (e.g. "we both have an interest in serving this neighbourhood" or "we both have questions that need answers about this program").

If there are very serious challenges in identifying any shared interest, it may be best to put the evaluation conversation on hold until these differences can be better understood.

Sometimes, when you know the other group well, there can be a lot of subtext in this kind of conversation. What people say about shared interest on paper may not reflect how they act in practice. Interpersonal dynamics or ideological differences may seep into the discussion as well.

One way to get past defensiveness or small "p" politics is to try to get more concrete and specific about learning goals. For example, if a funder were to say that their main learning goal is to make sure you are doing what you said you would do, you may want to ask them how they will use that answer once they have it or what challenges they have faced in monitoring grants in the past.



### **THE FOLLOWING TWO ONN RESOURCES MAY BE USEFUL AT THIS STAGE:**

**Unpacking Nonprofit Evaluation: Who is taking the risks and who is making the decisions?**

**Principles to Help Us Get to Useful Evaluation**

URL <http://theonnc.ca/our-work/our-structures/evaluation>