

COLLABORATIVE EVALUATION APPROACHES

A HOW-TO GUIDE FOR GRANTMAKERS



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This guide is a complementary resource to the Ontario Nonprofit Network's (ONN) **Sector Driven Evaluation Strategy** initiative to create a more enabling ecosystem for evaluation in the nonprofit sector.

The authors wish to acknowledge the support of the Ignite Foundation for making this guide possible.



AUTHORS

Andrew Taylor is co-owner of Taylor Newberry Consulting, a Guelph-based firm that specializes in developing research and evaluation solutions for public sector organizations. He is also ONN's Resident Evaluation Expert.

Ben Liadsky was ONN's Evaluation Program Associate and project lead for the Sector Driven Evaluation Strategy from 2015 to 2017.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	5	Developing indicators and data collection methods	19
Purpose	5	Challenges	19
Different approaches to evaluation design	6	Tips and strategies	20
		<i>Developing indicators</i>	
		<i>Population-level indicators</i>	
		<i>Program-level indicators</i>	
		<i>Data collection methods</i>	
1	SETTING THE STAGE	Data collection processes and procedures	22
	Why are you doing evaluation?	Tips and strategies	22
	Challenges	<i>Improving communication</i>	
	Tips and strategies	Grant reporting	22
	Building a culture of learning within your organization	Challenges	22
	Challenges	Tips and strategies	23
	Tips and strategies	<i>Improving reporting forms</i>	
	<i>Look at your communication process</i>	<i>Making better use of data from reporting forms</i>	
	<i>Identify evaluation champions</i>	<i>Creative alternatives to reporting forms</i>	
	Checking your skillsets	Supporting grantees to engage in evaluation	25
	Building a culture of transparency and trust	Challenges	25
	Challenges	Tips and strategies	26
	Tips and strategies	<i>Resources and templates</i>	
	Summary	<i>Workshops and coaching</i>	
		<i>Financial support</i>	
		<i>Active participation</i>	
		<i>Streamlining reports</i>	
		<i>Teaching by example</i>	
		<i>Providing feedback</i>	
2	WORKING WITH YOUR OWN GRANTEES		
	Developing high-level evaluation frameworks		14
	Tips and strategies		15
	Developing grant applications		16
	Challenges		17
	Tips and strategies		17

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Analysing evaluation data	28
Challenges	28
Tips and strategies	28
Sharing evaluation findings or learnings	29
Challenges	29
Tips and strategies	30
<i>Plan for use</i>	
<i>Use stories alongside quantitative data</i>	
Summary	31
3 WORKING WITH OTHER GRANTMAKERS	
Tips and strategies	32
CONCLUSION	34
Appendix A. Evaluation feedback letter template from a grantmaker to a grantee	35
Appendix B. Organizations & Examples	37
Glossary	39
Works cited	41
Endnotes	42

INTRODUCTION

Grantmakers are increasingly interested in measuring the impact of their investments through evaluation. Grantees that undertake a formal evaluation process generate learnings and insights that inform the grantmaker's investment of its funds. Evaluation is the key that unlocks learning about a project's impact on the community. It tells stakeholders whether the grantmaker is moving the bar on its mission. Critical governance questions are answered about how wisely and effectively the grantmaker is investing its funds. And for those grantmakers tackling big societal issues, evaluation unbundles their complexity and provides insights into the interventions that will have the greatest impact.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this guide is to provide grantmakers who support the nonprofit sector with practical guidance about how to take a more collaborative approach to evaluation. When we use the term grantmaker, we are referring to non-governmental funders that provide financial support to nonprofit groups including United Ways, corporate, public, and private foundations. More specifically, this guide will help grantmaker staff and board to:

- Make the case for why working collaboratively on evaluation is an important investment of time and resources
- Build a learning culture, which is a cornerstone to successful collaboration
- Identify the intent of evaluations so that design is driven by a clear purpose and to enhance engagement with stakeholders
- Work collaboratively with grantees and other community stakeholders to identify metrics and measurements that matter
- Create grantee reporting systems and processes that are streamlined and responsive and generate useful information
- Build the evaluation capacity of nonprofit organizations to generate better data and learning and improve performance and impacts
- Share the results of evaluation so that it provides valuable insights to internal grantmaker stakeholders as well as grantees, partners, and the community

Grantmakers face unique challenges when it comes to evaluation because much of their work involves building the capacity of other organizations to make a difference. Grantmakers want to invest in an evidence-based, strategic, and impactful way, but they rely heavily on the efforts of grant recipients in order to succeed. There are a number of ways to handle this challenge.

These two resources outline the importance of collaboration more generally and are additional sources for tips, ideas, and examples.

- GrantCraft's **Funder Collaboratives: Why and How Funders Work Together**
- Grantmakers for Effective Organization's **Building Collaboration: From the Inside Out**

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO EVALUATION DESIGN

Table 1. Top-down vs. bottom-up approaches to evaluation design

	⬇️ TOP DOWN	⬆️ BOTTOM UP
Description	Grantmakers design the evaluation methodology themselves.	Grantmakers allow individual grant recipients to design an evaluation that makes the most sense in their context.
Benefits	Ensures that outcomes are measured consistently and rigorously. Clear and simple.	Gives grant recipients flexibility. Greater likelihood that an evaluation will be seen as useful for the grantee.
Challenges	Can be difficult to design an approach that works well for grant recipients that vary in size, approach, cultural context, or other factors. Grant recipients may end up spending a lot of resources in order to satisfy grantmaker requirements, but that may not translate into useful learning about their own strategic priorities. Grantmakers may have to deal with evaluation data that varies greatly in quality and quantity depending on whether the grant recipient has the resources or views the evaluation as useful to them.	Can be difficult for grantmakers to synthesize any overarching messages from diverse evaluation reports. Smaller grant recipients may not have the capacity to develop a good evaluation design on their own.

Of course, many grantmakers develop approaches that lie somewhere between these two poles, for example, by creating high-level standardized evaluation frameworks but allowing flexibility in how these frameworks are applied in specific settings. Even so, most of the evaluation approaches traditionally used by grantmakers in Ontario share one limitation in common: They have tended to focus on ensuring that grant recipients carry out the technical aspects of measurement and reporting, but they have not placed much emphasis on ongoing engagement with grantees about the evaluation process.

In other words, they have not sought to build collaborative evaluation relationships. This is an important distinction.

DEFINING COLLABORATIVE EVALUATION

Collaborative evaluation involves grantmakers and grant recipients investing time and working together to develop or implement an evaluation approach that addresses questions that matter to both groups, and is much more likely to produce useful results. Grantmakers for Effective Organization's (GEO) **Learning Together: Actionable Approaches for Grantmakers** notes:

“To make lasting progress on the issues we care about, we have to be learning with others all the time. We have to know what is happening in the communities where we want to have an impact. We have to know how change is affecting the ability of our grantees to do their work and reach their goals. We have to know what others are learning — including other funders, nonprofits, government and business partners, and researchers — about what works to get to the results we want. We cannot know any of this if we are learning on our own and if we are not supporting our grantees' and partners' learning.”¹

Collaborative approaches to evaluation may not be equally useful in all situations. They require a commitment to investing time in communication and dialogue. They also require a willingness to share some degree of control over the process and the results. If a grantmaker tends to make investments in a very specific and narrow impact area, or in an area where evaluation practices are already well developed and widely shared, there may be less need for collaboration on evaluation frameworks.

Collaborative approaches can be more challenging if:

- You are working with a very diverse group of grantees working on different kinds of projects with different intended outcomes
- You are working with grantees that have limited internal evaluation capacity (because they are very small or inexperienced)
- You are providing grants to highly exploratory or innovative projects that will require intensive and highly customized approaches to evaluation

A collaborative approach to evaluation can take different forms. It can mean working together actively and intensively at all stages of the evaluation process, from planning through identification of indicators and data collection methods, right through to sharing evaluation findings. However, there are also cases where a bit of collaboration can be inserted midway through an otherwise traditional “top-down” or “bottom-up” evaluation process. For example, a grantmaker may choose to bring grantees together to talk about their evaluation findings, even though they did not collaborate while carrying out those evaluation efforts. Sometimes, an evaluation process can set the stage for future collaboration with grantees, even if it is not itself intensively collaborative. In this guide, we will try to explore all these pathways to increased collaborative evaluation.

This guide is divided into three sections. These three sections are intended to walk you through the potential areas of collaboration, as well as offer up cautions to consider, along with tips, tools, and examples along the way.



**Setting
the stage**



**Working with your
own grantees**



**Working with
other grantmakers**

1

Setting the stage

Working internally for collaborative approaches to evaluation

WHY ARE YOU DOING EVALUATION?

Evaluation only becomes meaningful when it is used towards achieving something worthwhile. If your organization is clear and specific on what it hopes to achieve through evaluation, it will be easier to get grantees and other partners on board. In other words, success in collaborative evaluation begins with clearly articulated goals.

For example, your primary evaluation purpose may simply be to keep track of whether grant funds are being managed and used in a responsible manner, consistent with the original agreement. In that case, your approach to evaluation may focus mostly on getting grantees to track outputs like the number of people served or the number of events held. This kind of evaluation may not require intensive collaboration with grantees. However, the data generated through this output-focused approach may not be very useful if your purpose changes. For example, if you try to use this data to show the impact of your investments to donors, it may not work well. Grantees may not find attendance counts very useful in addressing their own internal evaluation purposes.

When clarifying your evaluation purposes, it can be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

► *ONN's Sector Driven Evaluation Strategy explores this issue in more detail.*

- **Who is your primary audience?** If your primary audience is grantees, you may want a very flexible approach that generates findings quickly and draws on stories and examples. If your primary audience is donors, you may need to create a somewhat less flexible approach that uses consistent methods across projects.
- **What do you want the audience to do with evaluation findings?** Once you share your evaluation findings with your donors, for example, do you want them to feel a stronger emotional connection to your organization? Do you want them to tell friends about you and help promote your organization? Do you want them to increase donations? Thinking about action is a good way to refine the purpose of your evaluation.
- **What is being evaluated?** If your focus is on evaluating one specific project, evaluation may look different than if you are interested in evaluating the functioning of a grantee organization or a cluster of organizations. In some cases, your core purpose may be to evaluate your own performance as a funder in your dealings with a grantee. Each of these purposes suggests a different evaluation approach.

- **Are you interested in monitoring or learning?** Sometimes, the purpose of evaluation is simply to monitor a project to make sure it is being managed well and is moving along as planned. Evaluation can be a way for a grantmaker to show due diligence in its use of funds. However, this kind of evaluation work, with its focus on accountability, doesn't leave a lot of room for people to talk about the challenges they are facing or the lessons they are learning. It isn't going to address deep questions or challenge assumptions. If your purpose is to provoke learning and new action, a very different type of evaluation may be needed.



CHALLENGES

If you aim at nothing, you'll probably hit it. That old saying applies to setting the stage for evaluation. Often, organizations will run into problems in their efforts to evaluate because their purpose was never made clear. Vague purpose statements like those in Table 2 (below) are common.

Table 2. Focusing evaluation purpose statements

VAGUE PURPOSE STATEMENTS	PROBES TO CLARIFY
We are evaluating to demonstrate impact.	Whose impact? On what? For what audience? Why are we demonstrating impact?
We are evaluating because it is a good management practice.	What do you mean by evaluation? How will this particular project help to improve our management?
We are evaluating to fulfill a requirement imposed by our board, the government, or another external source.	What are their purposes? How can evaluation strengthen our relationship with them?



TIPS AND STRATEGIES

Sometimes, a good way to clarify your purpose is to reflect on the limitations of the evaluation approach you are using now. The questions in the left-hand column of Table 3 are a good place to start. If you get stuck on any of these questions, you may need to think more about why it is that you want to collaborate in the first place. Remember, the purpose of collaboration should be to help further your mission.²

It can also be helpful to consider the emotional reactions to a proposed evaluation purpose, as well as the intellectual ones. A great evaluation purpose gets people excited. They say things like, "I've always wanted to know that!" or "It's about time we talked about that!" or "My team has a lot of great ideas for that question!" If people agree with your purpose but don't seem enthusiastic, it may be worth working on it more.

Even if your evaluation work is already under way, it can be helpful to review and update your purpose. There is always room for improvement, so it's useful to take a look back from time to time and review how things are going. Naming this truth in the early stages of planning for your next cycle of evaluation can help to set the right tone and give people permission to call for course corrections later on. The questions in the right hand column of Table 3 can be helpful in the planning stages.

Table 3. How's your evaluation approach working for you now?

QUESTIONS	RATIONALE
<p>Are you happy with how your evaluation processes and systems work right now?</p> <p>When was the last time you used information from these processes and systems? How did you use it?</p>	<p>Reflecting on your current evaluation processes is a good way to pinpoint your reasons for improving those systems. It can also be useful to remind yourself about the practical challenges involved in evaluation, which can help avoid getting too ambitious with your new evaluation frameworks.</p>
<p>Do you feel you have the type of evidence needed to inform your decision making?</p> <p>What is it that you don't know? What do you need to know in order to act differently?</p> <p>What assumptions do you need to test?</p> <p>Imagine you have an evaluation report that fully addresses this purpose you've just chosen. What are you going to do first?</p>	<p>This can help to distinguish evaluation purposes that are just intellectually interesting from those that are truly important to the future of your work.</p>

BUILDING A CULTURE OF LEARNING WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION

We have all had the experience of working on a big report only to have it sit on the shelf. Often when this happens in evaluation work, the problem has little to do with the quality of the evaluation itself. It has more to do with the culture of the organization that commissioned the evaluation. When preparing for evaluation work, it is worth thinking about the degree to which your organization is ready to learn from evaluation or how it engages with new information.

Evaluations are much more likely to lead to action in organizations that are already in the habit of reflecting on their work, learning from mistakes, and adapting their practice in an ongoing way. Some of the characteristics of learning organizations are as follows:

- There are clear learning goals — often publicly communicated
- Staff are offered supports and rewards for learning
- Time and space is set aside to reflect, discuss, test, and iterate
- There is strong leadership that prioritizes and communicates learning objectives
- There is a willingness to share and learn from failures
- The team has the ongoing training and the tools they need to gather and analyze various kinds of information
- There are clear connections to evidence or data in decision-making processes

CHALLENGES

Organizational culture is not an easy thing to examine and understand, especially for those who work within that culture. It can take several years (some estimate as many as five years) for an organization to develop a strong learning culture.³ Moreover, all organizations have their own internal cultures and, therefore, no one solution or path will work for all organizations in terms of developing a learning culture.

One of the challenges that can arise along the way is confusion between developing individual learning and organizational learning. While supporting individual staff through professional development opportunities is important, to become a learning organization there must be many more conditions in place (as noted in the list above). Without those conditions, the sharing of knowledge and the willingness to question assumptions, iterate, and respond to emerging issues, among other things, will be missed.

When an organization is in transition, or working with limited resources, it can be very difficult to find the time and energy to reflect and learn. Grantmakers typically operate in complex, rapidly changing environments where many different kinds of information are coming in all the time. It can be challenging to prioritize learning objectives. Grantmakers often rely on other organizations, including their grantees, for on-the-ground intelligence about community needs or trends. They are sometimes a layer removed from the changes happening on the ground, and this can make it difficult to be responsive to grantees without being overbearing.

TIPS AND STRATEGIES

There are many different ways to create a culture that promotes learning.

Look at your communication process

For example, the **Generative Relationships STAR** is a “liberating structures” facilitation technique that prompts members of a team to better understand how they work together and how they can become more generative.

Identify evaluation champions

According to the Innovation Network’s **State of Evaluation 2016 survey**, 50% of grantmakers who responded felt that their program staff’s attitude towards evaluation was a barrier to improved evaluation.⁴ Start your evaluation design process by having a conversation with interested staff members at your organization. It is helpful to prepare for these conversations by developing a clear, honest summary of the purpose of the proposed evaluation work, how much time it is going to take, and who is going to do what. That way, you will be ready to respond to questions or concerns. Consider asking questions like these:

- Have you been involved in evaluation projects in the past? How did they go? What was good about them and what was frustrating? Would you be willing to share those insights with other staff?
- How could evaluation help you in your work? How might it create new stress or new tasks for you to do?
- What would make evaluation more useful to you?
- What would help to make it less time consuming or stressful?

This process may help you to identify allies that can help to promote a culture of learning and evaluation. It may also help to identify skeptics.

CHECKING YOUR SKILLSETS

When considering a collaborative approach to evaluation, keep in mind that working collaboratively requires a particular skillset. Depending on your context, your staff team may need knowledge of facilitation techniques or be comfortable acting as a **network weaver** to relay information to appropriate stakeholders. They may also require familiarity with collaborative technology as well as more general skills such as strong interpersonal, communication, and organization skills. Some staff may also need to provide additional support and help to facilitate connections and provide support when questions arise.

Preparing for a more collaborative approach includes being deliberate about how the approach will impact staff. Here are a couple of questions to consider:

- **Are staff already collaborative?**

Some staff may already be quite collaborative by default and little change may be needed. Others may need training or support to help them to be full participants.

- **Do we have the right job descriptions or position on staff to facilitate collaboration?**

In some cases, a new position may need to be created whose primary function is to support the collaboration. A starting point may be to look at existing job descriptions and identify where this new approach fits and how much of a staff member's time should be allocated to the collaboration.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF TRANSPARENCY AND TRUST

A collaborative approach to evaluation only makes sense in a context where you have strong, trusting relationships with grantees. Before embarking on collaborative evaluation, reflect on the state of your relationship with grantees or potential grantees. If you don't know your grantee organizations well or if there is a history of difficult interactions, it is important to address these issues before attempting to collaborate on evaluation. Building a culture of transparency and trust with your grantees and other partners means rewarding risk and innovation but also allowing for mistakes. Depending on your context, it may also be important to consider the state of your relationship with other grantmakers, donors, or government entities.

CHALLENGES

Nonprofits often struggle to find the resources they need to deliver on their mission. Consequently, their interactions with potential grantmakers are important to them and they are keen to engage strategically. Grantmakers have the power to make decisions that affect the sustainability and success of nonprofits. This power imbalance can colour the relationship between nonprofits and grantmakers and make it difficult to have the kind of frank and honest conversations that set the stage for good collaborative evaluation. It can even make it difficult for grantmakers to get honest feedback on their own processes.





TIPS AND STRATEGIES

Sometimes, taking steps to improve communication with grantees can yield significant benefits for grantmakers regardless of whether these efforts set the stage for evaluation. Key principles include active listening and a willingness to be upfront about your own motivations for wanting to collaborate. There are any number of simple ways to do this. For example, many grantmakers now host informal Q&A sessions for potential grantees and publish clear, detailed explanations of their process for reviewing grants and making funding decisions. Some host end-of-grant feedback sessions.

SETTING THE STAGE: SUMMARY

Evaluation can be a time-consuming and expensive process. Taking the time to set the stage for success can increase the yield from your evaluation investment. The evaluation process is most useful when it is applied to a specific, clear, and important purpose, when people inside your own organization are prepared to learn, and when you have cultivated strong, trusting relationships with the groups whose insight and feedback you need.

Table 4. Is the stage set for collaborative evaluation in your organization?

	NOT AT ALL			VERY MUCH	
We have a clear, focused reason for doing evaluation more collaboratively.	1	2	3	4	5
People within our organization are excited about this work.	1	2	3	4	5
People within our organization have the skills necessary to undertake evaluation	1	2	3	4	5
Our organization is ready to learn from this evaluation.	1	2	3	4	5
We have strong relationships with our grantees and other partners based on a mutual understanding of each other's needs and goals and are comfortable having open and honest conversations.	1	2	3	4	5

2

Working with your own grantees

Making each stage of the evaluation process more collaborative

Collaborative evaluation can involve working with several different kinds of partners, including other funders. However, collaborating with your own grantees is perhaps the simplest and most common form of collaborative evaluation. While this section focuses on collaboration of this kind, many of the tips included here can apply to more complex partnerships.

Undertaking evaluation in a collaborative spirit does not necessarily mean that you have to undertake a large, complex project or work hand-in-hand with grantees at every step of the process. There are many simple and practical ways to move your evaluation process in a more collaborative direction. This section of our guide walks through each phase of the evaluation process, from planning and designing methods, through to data collection, analysis, and reporting.

DEVELOPING HIGH-LEVEL EVALUATION FRAMEWORKS

An evaluation framework normally includes the following elements:

- A set of intended outcomes (sometimes called by other names, such as impact areas, objectives, or priorities)
- A set of high-level questions the evaluation will address
- A clear statement of the intended users and uses of the evaluation
- An overview of the methods to be used, along with a consideration of the costs, the ethical risks, and the technological requirements of those methods
- An explanation of roles, timelines, and deliverables

These same elements exist whether the evaluation framework is focused on a single, simple program, an organization, or a more complex cluster of programs or investments.

An evaluation framework is the key reference document in any evaluation project. It is designed to keep evaluation on track as it unfolds.

TIPS AND STRATEGIES

Collaborative development of evaluation frameworks can happen one-on-one with a single grantee or it can involve bringing together multiple grantees working on similar themes. The planning process often begins with the grantmaker and the grant recipients sharing their respective evaluation priorities with one another and looking for common interests. The following questions can be helpful in setting the agenda for a meeting like this:

1. What are we really trying to learn? How will this learning lead to action?
2. How can we help each other learn?
3. What type of evaluation do we need?⁵

Remember that collaborating on the development of evaluation frameworks does not necessarily mean that the resulting evaluation framework will be loose and vague. These frameworks can include standardized data collection tools as well as very rigid agreements on reporting expectations. The key is that these frameworks are designed in a collaborative way.

Sometimes, grantmakers choose to collaborate with grantees on certain portions of an evaluation framework. They may, for example, fix their investment priorities before the meeting begins but collaborate on the development of measurement tools or other aspects of the framework.

Other tips:

- When collaborating on your evaluation framework, be upfront about your needs as a grantmaker. Begin the process by letting grantees know what you need to get out of the evaluation process, where you are willing to be flexible, and where you are not able to be flexible
- Establish a clear protocol for making final decisions. If you, as a grantmaker, are seeking input from grantees but plan to make the final decisions about the framework yourself, be clear about that
- It can be tempting to start out with a focus on measurement strategies because it feels very concrete and practical. Make sure to spend time talking through the intended users and key evaluation questions as well. Clarity on these issues can help to keep discussions about measurement more focused
- When working with grantees to agree on a set of key outcomes or priorities, it can be helpful to start in very broad and general terms (e.g., we want youth to succeed in school) and then move gradually to more specific outcome statements in order to gauge how precise your outcomes need to be. Sometimes if you have different perspectives on what the outcomes should be, you can turn these differences into evaluation questions. For example, you may feel addressing systemic barriers is the best way to help youth succeed in school, while a grant recipient may be focusing more on building individual skills. You could agree to explore both pathways in your evaluation framework

Sometimes, it can be helpful to ask some risk-management type questions as well:

- What's most likely to go wrong with this evaluation framework? What obstacles could hinder our progress?
- What can we do to prepare for those obstacles now?
- What are the interim stages of this evaluation framework? When should we stop to review how it is working?
- Where can we build in times to test or prototype our evaluation frameworks?

GREAT EXAMPLES

▶ **United Way Oxford: Communities of practice for ongoing sharing**

In an effort to improve evaluation communication, **United Way Oxford** has created communities of practice for each of its three investment priority areas: From Poverty to Possibility; Strong Communities; and All That Kids Can Be. Grant recipients come together quarterly to discuss individual and collective evaluation priorities, share data-gathering tools and other strategies, and share preliminary findings and learnings.

▶ **The Rideau Hall Foundation: Developing high-level evaluation frameworks collaboratively**

Rideau Hall Foundation is working closely with its program partners — Mastercard Foundation, Vancouver Island University, and Yukon College — and their Indigenous community partners to co-create its learning and evaluation framework. By involving all stakeholders from the conception stage, each partner's learning will benefit everyone. Once the framework is finalized, the partners will meet collectively twice a year to share outcomes and to refine the framework.

DEVELOPING GRANT APPLICATIONS

Grant applications are one of the early points of communication with a potential grantee. They can help to set the tone for collaboration. Many grant application forms ask for information about how a proposed project will be evaluated. Reviewing these proposed project evaluation frameworks can be a good way for a grantmaker to determine whether a project has the potential to achieve measurable impact. Since it is difficult to develop a good evaluation framework for a poorly planned project, asking about evaluation frameworks can also be a way to gauge whether the applicant has thought through the program design in sufficient detail.

Ideally, asking questions about evaluation at the application stage helps you, as a grantmaker, to know what to expect. However, projects, programs, and initiatives frequently evolve over time. Evaluation frameworks developed with the best of intentions can run into a host of implementation snags and the final report can end up focusing on different kinds of outcomes than had been anticipated.

Setting up a grant application process that invites discussion of evaluation frameworks can develop a more collaborative approach to evaluation.



CHALLENGES

The role of the grant application varies across grantmakers. Some larger grantmakers rely heavily on a standardized application form, since it ensures that the decision-making process will be transparent and fair. A well-designed application form can also save time during the review process, since there will be fewer applications that don't align well with the grantmaker's mandate and reviewers will be able to access the pertinent information quickly and easily.

However, an application form can also become long and complicated if it is the only source of information being used to make funding decisions. Questions about evaluation frameworks can sometimes be several pages long and involve complicated tables of objectives, planned indicators, targets, and data collection methods. They can become difficult for applicants to complete and they can be hard for reviewers to digest and understand.

Smaller grantmakers sometimes have the luxury of using a more interactive, conversation-driven approach to the application process. They may not rely so heavily on forms, and may have the chance to start forming a more collaborative working relationship with potential grantees from the early stages. This can leave room for more informal conversations about evaluation that give the grantmaker a sense of what the applicant hopes to learn and why those learnings are important. However, this approach can lead to challenges too. It can be seen as less transparent and objective, for example.



TIPS AND STRATEGIES

Moving away from a form-driven approach to evaluation planning and towards a more interactive, conversational approach certainly sets a more collaborative tone. Even so, forms may have their place and it is possible to ask questions about evaluation in a more flexible, plain language way.

Consider shifting questions about evaluation frameworks to a later stage of the review process. For example, the initial application could ask general, high-level questions about evaluation but details about indicators and targets could be developed and submitted only by those applicants that have a strong chance of getting funding. It may even be possible to defer the development of an evaluation strategy to after granting decisions are made (see the next section on development of indicators for more information).

Consider scaling evaluation questions on applications to the type and size of grant. It may be better to use fewer, simpler, more open-ended questions for smaller grants or those that are more exploratory in nature. Larger, longer-term grant applications may ask for more details about a formal evaluation framework.

Table 5 lists some of the evaluation-related questions that are typically included in grant application forms and offers suggestions about when to use each type and how to keep the questions focused and manageable for applicants.

Table 5. Questions about evaluation frameworks on application forms

QUESTION TYPE	SAMPLE QUESTIONS	HOW TO KEEP THIS KIND OF QUESTION MANAGEABLE
Intended outcomes	Who will be better off as a result of this project? In what way? What difference will this project make, and for whom?	It can be helpful to ask about who, specifically, the intended beneficiaries are. Consider a menu of options to get consistent, focused answers. Limit the number of outcomes that can be chosen. Encourage the use of short-term, achievable, measurable outcome statements.
Output targets (e.g., # of people served)	How many people do you intend to reach? Who will those people be? How many sessions do you plan to hold?	These types of questions are more useful for very structured, focused projects where there is consensus on what targets would be appropriate. They can be less useful for projects that are more open ended. They can come across as micro-managing the operational aspect of a project. In order to keep these kinds of question manageable, keep them simple and high level. Make it clear that targets are estimates only.
Evaluation questions	What do you hope to learn through this project?	These types of questions help to place the focus on learning. In order to keep them manageable, provide guidance about what kinds of evaluation questions you'd like to see. Give examples. Use plain language.
Planned indicators and planned methods	How will you measure your progress towards your outcomes? How will you know if you have made a difference?	Provide examples. If you intend to pull together data from multiple grants to produce a report, offer a menu of options. Encourage use of both qualitative and quantitative methods.

GREAT EXAMPLE

▶ **The Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation**

The Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation recently added an evaluation planning component to some of its grant applications. Its goal was to ensure that all evaluation work aligned strongly with the key priorities for the fund, while at the same time allowed each individual grantee to develop an evaluation methodology that made sense in their context. The foundation **created an interactive “goal builder”** as part of the online funding application. Using a series of drop-down menu options, applicants are walked through the process of creating goal statements that capture the intended impact of their proposed project and also align well with foundation priorities.

DEVELOPING INDICATORS AND DATA COLLECTION METHODS

One of the most technically challenging aspects of evaluation is the design of data collection tools and strategies. This step normally happens once key evaluation questions have been identified. Indicators are the concrete points of data that are capable of answering the evaluation question, and methods are the techniques that will be used to gather data on those indicators. If an evaluator were interested in determining whether a program had helped youth to complete high school successfully, the graduate rate and length of time to graduation would be key indicators. Depending on the specific project, other indicators might include credit accumulation, attendance rate, sense of engagement with school, or the percentage of students applying for post-secondary training. Data on each of these indicators might be gathered using a variety of methods, including analysis of school records, reports from teachers, and interviews with youth.

The identification of indicators and methods is when evaluation planning gets practical. It focuses on how much data will be gathered, from who, and how.

CHALLENGES

Developing methods requires balancing rigour and fit. On the one hand, an evaluation method should be credible. It should gather high-quality information that gets to the heart of the desired outcome, and do so consistently and thoroughly. It should draw on the best academic knowledge about how to measure a given construct in a reliable and valid way. On the other hand, a method also needs to make sense in the context of the program where it is being used.

If the evaluation method is too long or asks overly intrusive questions, participants may not feel comfortable completing it. Ethical concerns may arise, and a tool developed in one cultural context may not translate well into another. Staff may not have the training to administer the survey or interpret its results.

Finding this fit can be a challenging process for grant recipients who don't have a lot of experience with evaluation. Inexperienced groups sometimes end up gathering way more data than they need to ensure they have covered all possible bases. Others make the opposite mistake, pinning their whole evaluation design on one or two indicators that don't capture the richness of their work. For this reason, working together with others on the development of indicators and methods is a good idea.

For grantmakers, it helps to work with grantees to develop the indicators and methods to gain clarity on what kind of data to expect in the final grant report.



TIPS AND STRATEGIES:

Developing indicators

One of the reasons that indicators are so useful in collaborative approaches to evaluation is that they make it possible for different organizations to focus their measurement efforts around similar kinds of information, while allowing for some flexibility in exactly how that information is gathered.

The process of collaborating on indicators and methods works best when it begins with a discussion of indicators. This involves going through the agreed upon evaluation questions and considering the types of data that might help to answer each one. It is about asking “how will we know if the program has achieved this outcome?” This discussion can take place with an individual grantee or with a group of similar grantees. Here are some suggestions:

- Remember the distinction between high-level indicators of population change and those that are tied to short-term program outcomes
- Try to brainstorm a number of different possible indicators for each question rather than looking for the single best indicator. Remember that indicators can include self-reports, stories, and examples, as well as hard numbers

Population-level indicators

At the broadest level, some grantmakers identify high-level population indicators that speak to overall changes at a community or societal level. Examples include the poverty rate or the high school graduation rate. In some cases, agreement on these high-level indicators may be all that is needed. Grantees may work on a variety of different projects that are designed to make a contribution to these broad population-wide issues, and they may each identify short-term outcomes and program-level indicators appropriate to their own work. This focused but flexible approach helps to ensure that the grantmaker will receive useful, similar data from all grantees, but still allows for those grantees to develop a methodology that works for them.

For example, if you are meeting with grantees that offer employment skills training, it may be that they all share an interest in the city-wide unemployment rate. However, program models may differ across organizations. Improved resume quality or the number of practice interviews completed successfully might be good program-level indicators for some grantees. Other programs may evaluate their contribution to population change using different indicators, such as changes in hiring practices among local businesses.

Program-level indicators

Under some circumstances, grantmakers may work with a group of grantees to develop a much more specific and focused set of shared program-level indicators. A cluster of grant recipients working on homelessness, for example, might work with their funder to develop an evaluation strategy within which they all use the same set of indicators to track housing stability or risk of eviction. In some cases, grantees may agree to choose two or three options from a shared menu of program-level indicators. This approach works best when the cluster of grantees does similar work and when the grantmaker has in-depth knowledge of the context within which grant recipients work.

This approach still allows for some flexibility across organizations. Grantees may use different data collection methods to gather data on shared indicators.

GREAT EXAMPLE

► Developing indicators

The Ontario government's Local Poverty Reduction Fund uses a set of shared indicators approach. All grantees must link their work to one or more of a set list of fairly long-term key poverty indicators. However, they are not required to measure these indicators directly themselves. Instead, they are asked to propose an evaluation methodology that highlights the ways in which they contribute to the achievement of change in the high-level indicator.

Many local United Ways have developed a suite of preferred indicators for each of the outcome areas in which they invest. They ask grant recipients to choose from a menu of indicator options, and also offer suggestions about methods that might be used to track each indicator.

Data collection methods

In some circumstances, it makes sense to collaborate on data collection methods and on indicators. This is most helpful when:

- The cluster of grantees is quite similar in terms of the services they provide and the outcomes they expect to measure
- Grantees have some experience with evaluation already and can offer valuable insights about measurement strategies that might be useful to other similar agencies

Getting together with a cluster of similar grantees to review the tools and data collection methods that are already being used is a good place to start. Grantees may share the pros and cons of these tools or tips about how to use them well. In some cases, it may also make sense to look outside the cluster for measurement options that have worked in other settings. There are a number of online inventories of measurement tools (► BetterEvaluation.org is one resource) to generate some ideas and learn from others.

This process may lead to agreement on a specific tool or suite of tools that all members of the cluster can use. However, in many cases the process is more gradual than that. Cluster members may choose to refine their measurement approach, drawing on ideas from others without formally agreeing to use exactly the same approach. Even when this is the result, a meeting like this one can increase the quality and consistency of the data reported to grantmakers substantially. Even if grantees are not able to agree on exactly the same methods or indicators, they may emerge from the gathering with an increased willingness to share evaluation findings and a better understanding of how to share those findings in a helpful way. (See the next section on reporting for more insights on how to manage this process.)

GREAT EXAMPLE

► United Way of Waterloo Region Communities: Developing consistent survey questions In Waterloo Region, Ontario

United Way is building a collective impact strategy with funded partner agencies focused on youth development. To develop a practical tool for evaluating a sense of connection to community for youth, a series of meetings were facilitated by an external evaluator with a small group of agencies. The agencies shared their existing measurement strategies as a pilot project and tested a short list of consistent survey questions that may be added to each agency's evaluation protocol.

DATA COLLECTION PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES

When it comes to the collection of evaluation data, talking through the operational details of the process can be a great way to avoid problems down the road, like low survey response rates, or data gathered inconsistently across sites. Whether grantees are using exactly the same methodology or simply agreeing to employ the same suite of indicators, much confusion can be avoided by addressing questions like these:

- Who will be responsible for data gathering?
- How often will data be gathered?
- How will data be coded and organized (e.g., how will we keep track of which site sent in which data)?
- How will the confidentiality of data be protected, once collected?

TIPS AND STRATEGIES:

Improving communication

In some cases, it may not make sense to develop indicators and methods in a collaborative way. This may be true, for example, if your organization is making grants in a very focused area, where best practices in measurement are well established and getting consistent data from every site is central to success. Perhaps you are in the middle of a multi-year granting cycle and measurement plans have already been set. Even so, there may be value in checking in with grantees about the data collection process periodically, in order to see what is being learned, better understand its limitations, or simply build trust.

GRANT REPORTING

Reporting is the mechanism through which grant recipients share the story of funded work with you. Reporting systems often include a final (or annual) grant report. Reporting may also happen through face-to-face meetings, video storytelling, journaling, or site visits by grantmaker staff to grantee projects or events.

CHALLENGES

According to a 2011 survey of nonprofits, “the typical grantee spends 20 hours on monitoring, reporting and evaluation, and participates in three reporting or evaluation activities, such as providing outcome data, submitting written reports or forms, or having phone conversations with foundation staff” as part of a grant they received.⁶ At the same time, the research tells us that evaluation findings can be limited by conventional reporting formats that don’t allow for flexibility and don’t ask questions that matter to nonprofits.⁷

A grant reporting system is a data gathering exercise. As we discussed in a previous section of this guide, it is important to design a set of data gathering tools that gather the right information to fulfil their intended purpose and as little extraneous information as possible. When reporting forms get long and complicated, it is often the case that insufficient thinking has been put into how the data from those forms will be used, and by whom.



TIPS AND STRATEGIES

Improving reporting forms

In many situations, the simplest and most effective way to improve reporting forms is to make them shorter. Review the data gathered through your existing reporting forms and see how it has been used by your organization in the past. If there is data that has never been discussed or used, those questions should probably be dropped.

For example, grant reporting forms sometimes include dense and complicated tables that require grantees to provide planned and actual numbers for each intended outcome and indicator. This type of table can be important if you make a large number of grants, or if you intend to pull together data from multiple grants in order to create an impact report. However, it may not be the most efficient way to gather information about grant impact if you are a smaller grantmaker or if you know each grantee is addressing different kinds of outcomes.

Technology can also be used to streamline the reporting process. Make reports interactive and online so that people don't have to repeatedly re-enter the same information from their application for each reporting period. Online and interactive reporting also can help to remind grantees of the evaluation frameworks they had made at the beginning of the granting cycle.

Adding open-ended questions that invite recipients to share more context and more interpretation can make reporting forms more interesting and more useful. Examples include:

- What challenges did you face running this project?
- Were any of the evaluation findings unexpected?
- What is most important about the results you have just reported?
- What will you do differently on the basis of these evaluation findings?
- How would you change your evaluation methodology for a similar project in the future?
- How do these findings contribute to our shared understanding of (name specific investment goal or collective outcome here)?

GREAT EXAMPLE

► The Counselling Foundation of Canada: A focus on learning and transparency

At The Counselling Foundation of Canada, grant reporting is focused on learning. Grant recipients are asked open-ended questions like identifying the primary lessons learned from the project, things they might do differently if they could do it all again and what they consider to be the greatest strength of the project. Why? The foundation staff believe that the process of reflecting on lessons learned is more important than focusing on ticking boxes or numbers served. They also ask how grant recipients might be able to leverage the foundation's channels and networks to share and disseminate reports, tools, or resources that result from the project.

Finally, they do their best to be upfront with grant seekers about the process along the way. Their website includes information about the funding process, with templates starting from the letter of intent and formal grant application through to the final grant report, so they get a better sense of the expectation at each stage of the process.

Another helpful tip is to seek feedback on the reporting forms that you use. Questions could include:

- Was there anything you found confusing about the questions asked on these forms?
- Were there any questions that didn't apply well in your context? If so, why?
- How long did it take you to complete this form?
- Do you feel like you were able to represent your work accurately and fully in this report? If not, what else should we know?
- How clear are you on what we as a grantmaker intend to do with the information you have provided to us?
- Has the evaluation information you have provided in this form been useful to your organization internally? If so, how?

Making better use of data from reporting forms

Another way to improve reporting processes is to make better use of the data that they generate. Promote more collaborative approaches to evaluation by letting grantees know that you are making good use of the data they have shared.

Creative alternatives to reporting forms

Reporting forms are not the only way to communicate with grantees about the findings of their evaluation work or the lessons they are learning. Forms do have some advantages. For example, they assure that all funded projects are judged on the basis of comparable information and they remove any risk of perceived favouritism. However, they are also impersonal and inflexible. More interactive approaches to learning can be more efficient and more engaging.

GREAT EXAMPLE

► United Way Toronto & York Region: From outputs to sharing stories of impact

Over the last couple of years, **United Way Toronto & York Region (UWTYR)** has implemented a new strategy to support the community services sector that focuses on helping people who live in, or are at risk of falling into, poverty. UWTYR has moved from funding a static group of agencies year over year to supporting a more dynamic portfolio with more clarity and intentionality in its funding mechanisms. UWTYR believes that this new way of supporting the community services sector will allow it to be more nimble and respond better to emerging needs and community priorities.

With this new way of working comes a new approach to monitoring and evaluation, one focused on learning. UWTYR is working more closely with funded agencies to understand the role of stable, flexible funding in creating impact. Together, they are developing the questions that agencies will be reporting on annually. The hope is that these reports will become a foundation for deeper, more holistic evaluations that highlight important learning from the work agencies do to support and engage community and to address systemic issues. UWTYR hopes the collaborative, learning-focused approach will lead to valuable insights for the community services sector and help it generate compelling stories of impact that encourage more involvement in its work.

GREAT EXAMPLE

▶ **The Atkinson Foundation: Building a culture of reciprocity**

The Atkinson Foundation aspires to be an ally, not only a grant administrator. Its grant management system is built, therefore, on the principle of reciprocity. After a grant has been approved, the foundation meets with each grantee to exchange expectations for collaboration, learning and shared accountability. They discuss how their respective boards measure progress and impact in qualitative and quantitative terms. In their reports, grantees are asked to reflect briefly on a set of questions and to provide evidence of progress. Invitations to participate in meetings or events organized by grantees are as important to the foundation as mid-term and final reports. Further, the foundation values ongoing conversation for critical reflection and organizes regular in-person meetings, occasional events and “learning road trips” to this end. Foundation staff curate a closed Facebook group for grantees to routinely share news, photographs, presentations, media coverage, and other information about their work in “real time” rather than at the end of a reporting cycle. This digital platform enables collaboration among grantees and the foundation as well as documentation of project activities.

SUPPORTING GRANTEES TO ENGAGE IN EVALUATION

Many nonprofit organizations have limited capacity to do evaluation work internally. Some kinds of evaluation work require specialized expertise and this can be time consuming and expensive for small organizations. Any effort on the part of grantmakers to collaborate with grantees on evaluation has to be sensitive to this reality. Most grantmakers in the sector are aware of these challenges and many have made efforts to increase the evaluation capacity of nonprofits.

CHALLENGES

A nonprofit’s capacity to conduct evaluation includes a number of elements. Some nonprofits don’t have the technical skills to succeed in evaluation. For example, they may not have the experience or training to build a logic model or design a survey. This kind of capacity deficit is relatively easy to address. Many grantmakers and other organizations run evaluation workshops for nonprofit groups and there are also excellent resources available online. However, other aspects of capacity can be more challenging to address using these approaches. Board members or other senior leaders could be skeptical about the value of evaluation. Nonprofits often lack the resources to effectively implement their evaluation frameworks. Some grantmakers don’t allow their resources to be directed towards evaluation work, and evaluation expectations often differ between grantmakers. Simply managing the practical logistics of evaluation (entering data into a computer, improving response rates for surveys, etc.) can become a significant obstacle.

More collaborative approaches to evaluation can sometimes help to address these kinds of challenges more effectively than traditional approaches.





TIPS AND STRATEGIES

Resources and templates

Grantmakers can create resources, such as evaluation guides, webinars, tip sheets, templates, or interactive planning tools. They can also disseminate resources created by others. This is a cost-effective and flexible way to build nonprofit evaluation capacity.

Workshops and coaching

Evaluation workshops are a great way to provide an introduction to basic evaluation concepts and to the technical steps involved in carrying out an evaluation. The workshops can also be helpful when explaining grantmaker expectations. Individual coaching can provide more customized support and help to build evaluation solutions that address questions that are important in a specific context. Coaching can help to foster a culture of learning within a nonprofit and help leadership weave elements of evaluation into the routine of the organization.

Financial support

Evaluation work requires resources. For straightforward projects, the cost of evaluation may be as little as 5% of the total grant budget. In more ambitious or innovative projects where evaluation may be centrally important to the work, as much as 25% of the total budget may be devoted to evaluation. Financial support for evaluation can help nonprofits access specialized expertise or build tools and processes for the future.

Active participation

In some cases, grantmakers can help to build evaluation capacity by taking on primary responsibility for evaluation tasks that are beyond the capacity of grantees. For example, a grantmaker may do background research on best practices for evaluating certain kinds of interventions. It may make a content expert available to answer grantee questions. This approach can free up resources among grantee organizations. It can also be an opportunity to learn by doing, or to adapt solutions that have already been developed by other similar organizations.

Streamlining reports

As mentioned in an earlier section, you can help to build the evaluation capacity of grantees by revamping your grant application or grant reporting forms. You can reduce the time required to complete them, and perhaps make them more consistent with those used by other funders in your sector.

Teaching by example

Another great way to build evaluation capacity is to lead by example. If you as a grantmaker are evaluating your own work and sharing the findings with grantees, you can help to convince skeptics that the process is valuable. By sharing your own challenges faced and lessons learned, you may also create a safer space for your grantees to do the same.

Providing feedback

Nonprofits sometimes feel like the evaluation reports they submit to grantmakers disappear into a vacuum. Build nonprofit capacity by providing concrete written feedback on their evaluation work.

GREAT EXAMPLES

▶ **Johnson & Johnson Global Community Impact: Building partner buy-in by tailoring evaluation to local needs**

“Our grantmaking strategy has always been partner centric. We choose them for their extensive knowledge of evidence-based solutions, creativity, and local expertise. During the program design and prioritization, partner voice is the number one thing we listen to.”

Johnson & Johnson Global Community Impact funds partners in various countries around the world in a number of different areas prioritizing people on the front lines at the heart of delivering health care, including nurses, midwives, doctors, family caregivers, and mothers who care for their children. They are currently in the process of revamping their strategy to become more supportive of local needs and leveraging the full strength of the J&J enterprise.

For them, the process is more focused on helping to address the needs in a particular region, as opposed to forcing consistent indicators and measures that all partners will be measured against. Given the diversity of their partners and programs, they have found it difficult to be able to make broad claims across their funding streams about the impact of their work beyond output numbers like overall reach and number of health care providers trained. However, the majority of programs do measure outcomes that are important to them, such as knowledge and behavior change.

The evaluation staff members work with partners to co-design their logic model or theory of change if one does not already exist. They also work together to help prioritize output and outcome indicators. The foundation supports its partners by providing technical assistance as well as supporting clusters of grantees to share knowledge with one another. Lastly, Johnson & Johnson takes responsibility for synthesizing and summarizing the data across programs. Going forward, the foundation is looking to build in more learning and reflection elements into their process.

The strategy revamp has taken time — about a year already. The foundation is designing systems to identify achievements at the program, portfolio and strategy levels, and to translate this into a cohesive learning. Internally, they are working to formalize and improve the process of how managers pull information together.

ANALYSING EVALUATION DATA

Bringing grant recipients into the process of analyzing and interpreting data engages them as partners and agents in the evaluation process. This engagement has obvious advantages. Grant recipients know the context within which their data was gathered and they may see trends in the findings that grantmaker staff would not have noticed. If you and your grantees are able to reach conclusions together, grantee anxiety about the evaluation process will decrease and ownership over the recommendations may grow. Overall, it creates more of a two-way flow of information.

CHALLENGES

Data analysis is a technical process that can require specialized skills. This is especially true for grantmakers who are often faced with synthesizing very diverse types of data from many different kinds of projects.

There are also risks when collaborating on analysis. Grant recipients may have a vested interest in presenting themselves as having been successful and this may colour their analysis. If the analysis involves synthesizing data from multiple projects, grantees may have concerns about who has access to their evaluation data and how it might be used. When resources are limited, grantmakers may have to draw on evaluation findings to make very difficult decisions. Trying to engage grantees in analysis under these conditions may place them in a difficult position.

TIPS AND STRATEGIES

Some grantmakers seek to make the process of analyzing data more transparent, while retaining primary responsibility for the final interpretations drawn.

GREAT EXAMPLE

United Way Regina held a data analysis forum with funded agencies. After annual outcome reports had been submitted, United Way researchers consolidated the data into a set of detailed tables and a slide deck that summarized main themes and findings. The tables identified which programs and agencies had provided data on which outcomes, but the figures provided were aggregated. They did not include the actual data for individual agencies or programs. At the sessions, agencies were invited to offer feedback on these preliminary analyses. They were asked to identify interpretations that they felt were misleading or to suggest new themes. This input was incorporated into a final **United Way Community Impact Report**.

Another way to help to encourage data analysis is through data workshops or **data parties** where partners come together to discuss and analyze the data collected. These can be useful learning opportunities and can help to promote ownership of the evaluation. The emphasis is on participatory sense-making, results-briefing, and participatory data analysis. A data party should occur before the draft of the final report begins. **Dabbling in the Data** offers a number of step-by-step tips for making meaning from data in a participatory, collaborative way.

In other instances, it may be more appropriate for one partner to take the lead on doing the data analysis, but discussion of the analysis and the sharing of insights will be done together.

SHARING EVALUATION FINDINGS OR LEARNINGS

No evaluation can lead to action unless the findings are shared. The process of sharing and discussing findings can be an excellent opportunity to promote a collaborative relationship with grantees.

CHALLENGES

When it comes to collaborative evaluations, there can be challenges to ensuring usefulness (i.e., avoiding becoming a dust collector on a shelf). Nonprofits often compete for limited grant resources, meaning some may not be comfortable sharing their evaluation results with a wide audience. Organizations may also worry that evaluation findings will be taken out of context or misunderstood. In addition, it can be challenging to synthesize the findings from evaluations of several different projects into cogent messages.

While these challenges are significant, it is crucial to overcome them. When evaluation projects don't lead to action (for example, when grantees never hear back about findings they submit to grantmakers) their frustration about the evaluation process grows and the collaborative relationship is undermined.





TIPS AND STRATEGIES

Plan for use

Talk about how findings will be shared at the planning stage of any evaluation project. Discuss why the evaluation questions are important, and who will act on them. Be specific and concrete about the kind of action you hope the evaluation will inform. For example, “the evaluation findings will be presented to the board for their information” is not a very clear plan for use. But “evaluation findings will be used by the board to review progress on the four priorities in our strategic plan, as they prepare to renew that plan one year from now” is better.

Use stories alongside quantitative data

Once you have your findings, share them with all relevant stakeholders and seek feedback. Let partners know you see the limitations of the data and that you are not jumping to conclusions, but instead hoping to gather better data in the future.

GREAT EXAMPLE

▶ Ontario Trillium Foundation: Transparency and open data

Through its commitment to the Ontario Government’s **Open Data Directive**, Ontario Trillium Foundation makes information about its grantmaking and evaluation work accessible online. For example, it recently published a **synthesis** of lessons learned through its 2016 application and granting process, along with **spreadsheets** listing the intended outcomes and target populations for each individual grant.

COLLABORATING WITH YOUR OWN GRANTEES: SUMMARY

If you have an interest in collaborating with your grantees on evaluation, there are many places to start. The right first step for you depends on your evaluation purpose, your own readiness, and your context. Use the checklist below (Table 6) to identify the next step that's right for you!

Table 6. Collaborative Evaluation: What's your next step?

SECTION	MIGHT BE A GOOD PLACE TO START IF:	☑ STEPS
Developing a high-level evaluation framework	You've already got some pockets of experience with collaborative evaluation, and you're ready to adopt the approach in a more comprehensive, strategic way.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You feel you need to do some work on the purpose of your evaluation work and the questions it will address before turning to discussions of measurement.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Developing grant applications and grant reports	You're about to start a new granting cycle.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You or your grant recipients are frustrated with evaluation paperwork.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You're not learning much from grant reports.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Developing indicators and data collection methods	You and your grantees share some clear, focused evaluation questions.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You're finding it challenging to synthesize evaluation findings from multiple grants.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Supporting grantees to engage in evaluation	You're looking for an easy way to begin exploring collaborative approaches.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You feel you may need to build trust with grantees before changing your evaluation approach.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You often work with small or inexperienced grantees.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Analyzing data and sharing findings	You're near the end of a granting cycle and can't change the data gathering processes already in place.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You've already spent a lot of time and energy on evaluation and you're not sure how to use the findings.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You'd like to bring together stories and numbers to tell a more compelling story.	<input type="checkbox"/>

3

Working with other grantmakers

Collaborating on evaluation with partners beyond your grantees

This guide has focused on collaborating with your own grantees on evaluation. Of course, your grantees are not the only important stakeholders in your work. Grantmakers often collaborate with each other, governments, donors, corporate partners, and other stakeholders. A collaborative evaluation with a larger and more diverse set of partners has more moving parts than a collaboration with grantees. At the same time, it holds significant promise for achieving greater insight and impact.

Collective impact approaches emphasize the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration on social issues, and they have underscored the important role that shared measurement can play in aligning the efforts of diverse actors around a shared goal. However, some writers have criticized collective impact models for focusing on shared measurement without paying enough attention to the cultivation of collaborative approaches. **The Tamarack Institute**, for example, has recently called for collective impact approaches to shift their emphasis. One suggestion involves placing less emphasis on the development of shared measurement systems across partners and more emphasis on creating robust learning and evaluation processes. In their words: “CI (Collective Impact) participants are known sometimes to rush right into shared measurement with the question, ‘What should and could we measure together?’ Unfortunately, without first having laid the foundations for strategic learning, they find themselves wrapped up in messy, frustrating, tail-chasing processes with slim prospects for producing useful data.”⁸



TIPS AND STRATEGIES

All the topics covered in the previous section of this guide can be applied to more complex collaborations. Clarity of purpose, agreement on measurement tools, and a sensitivity to the evaluation capacity of partners all remain important. More collaborative approaches to grant planning, review, reporting, data analysis, and communication are extremely helpful. The examples below illustrate how some grantmakers have applied these strategies to multi-stakeholder collaborations.

As collaborative projects become more complex, attention to communication and good process becomes more important and more challenging to maintain. The story of the Canadian Women’s Foundation highlights the care they took to cultivate strong partnerships over time before turning to the evaluation process.

GREAT EXAMPLES

► **Centraide of Greater Montreal Collective Impact Project: Defining evaluation purpose and clarifying roles**

In the fall of 2015, the **Collective Impact Project (CIP)** was launched with a focus on reducing poverty in Montreal neighbourhoods. This project is possible thanks to eight major foundations that joined forces with Centraide of Greater Montreal along with two public sector institutions, and a coalition of neighbourhood-level social development roundtables. The CIP “is not a fund. It is a new form of support for community development that reinforces but does not supplant Centraide’s normal funding methods.”⁹ This initiative emerged as a response to a need named by these neighbourhood social development roundtables, which felt their current sources and types of funding were not comprehensive and flexible enough to allow them to achieve the kind of comprehensive community change needed.

The initial project was designed by Centraide and the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation, based on their extensive experience with funding comprehensive community change initiatives. The project was designed to be adaptive, meaning that goals and strategies would undergo adjustments as feedback loops enabled learning about what was working and not working. As new partners were brought on board, the CIP evolved to better reflect the plurality of goals and intentions of these partners. Since the launch of the CIP, a specific position within Centraide was created to coordinate the project and to help support the collaboration.

Evaluation within the CIP is designed to focus on learning rather than accountability for results. Communities that receive funding support through the CIP have complete control over designing and carrying out their own evaluation of outcomes and effects, with support as needed from a capacity-building organization.

► **The Ottawa Grantmakers’ Forum Table: Development of consistent reporting formats across grantmakers**

The **Ottawa Grantmakers’ Forum Table** was established in the mid-1990s and involves a number of grantmakers including United Way Ottawa, Community Foundation of Ottawa, the City of Ottawa, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, and representatives from the private sector and from federal and provincial ministries. This initiative has brought together these diverse grantmakers to help to create clearer alignment of funding priorities to achieve greater community impact under a collective impact approach. In 2015, the Forum launched the Collaborative Grantmaking Pilot Project whereby grantmakers pooled together \$40,000 to support a “city-wide program that empowers youth aged 12 – 18 years and their families to be part of the solution to youth violence and crime.”¹⁰ This project included a streamlined grantmaking process with a common grant application and measurement system and a collective review and approval process.¹¹ Subsequent surveys showed that “80% of funders agreed that the process increased their effectiveness and ability to work collaboratively, and all community organizations who responded agreed that collaboration and relationships among partners were encouraged and enhanced through the pilot process.”¹²

► **Canadian Women’s Foundation: A strategic approach to building buy-in**

The **Canadian Women’s Foundation (CWF)** is a public foundation that makes grants to women’s organizations working to address poverty and violence.¹³ In the 1990s, the CWF spent almost two years developing relationships to establish the Women and Economic Development Consortium that included seven partners.¹⁴ Each partner was required to sign a Memorandum of Agreement that explained their contributions and roles.¹⁵ The diverse partners then spent seven months, before making their first grant, developing a shared purpose and ownership.¹⁶ The consortium was evaluated by both partners and their grantees. Overall, the time and resources spent on developing that collaborative model were reflected in the evaluation. For instance, it was noted that: “Participation in Consortium decision-making about economic development projects enhanced the partners’ understanding and knowledge in the field. They now have a more practical view of the needs of marginalized women, contributing to a more compassionate perspective.”¹⁷ As well, “grantees found it rare to work in such a collegial environment, anchored by mutual respect and trust.”¹⁸

CONCLUSION

In a complex society where social problems intersect and evolve very quickly, it is rarely possible for any one of us to gather and comprehend all the relevant data, let alone use that data to guarantee the success of any initiative or program. Evaluation findings will frequently be partial and incomplete. They will raise as many questions as they answer. In order to do successful, meaningful evaluation work in this kind of context, we need to do more than simply measure the right things. We need to develop the capacity to interpret and understand evaluation information in an ongoing, evolving way. To do that, we need to step outside of our own experience and see the issues we hope to solve from other points of view. We need to worry less about measurement and more about understanding and communication. This is why collaborative approaches to evaluation hold so much potential.

Progressive grantmakers recognize not only the role they play in helping to address those problems, but also their role in promoting, leading, and supporting useful evaluation among their partners. Grantmakers need to work with their grantees and other stakeholders who are working at different levels in trying to address shared problems. This means thinking of how to make the most of evaluation through a collaborative lens where the knowledge and expertise of each partner is leveraged and shared.

As this guide illustrates, working collaboratively on evaluation can help grantmakers to address the complex challenges our society faces. This way of working can:

- Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of evaluation measurement and reporting processes
- Generate richer learning from evaluation findings
- Lead to better grantmaking

In some cases, collaborative approaches to evaluation can become complex and labour intensive. However, they don't have to be. At its core, a collaborative approach is simply a different way of thinking about why we bother to do evaluation. In this guide, we have attempted to identify some simple ways to begin reframing your evaluation work in a collaborative spirit. We hope the guide will be useful to grantmaker leaders who value learning, have built or are looking to build a culture of collaboration with their grantees and other stakeholders, and are looking for ideas to get to more useful evaluation.

APPENDIX A

Evaluation feedback letter template from a grantmaker to a grantee

July X , 20XX

Dear (agency name):

In January, we asked all funded agencies to identify their outcome objectives for each program funded by selecting from a checklist organized according to the nine population results statements. Thank you for submitting your outcomes checklist. It has been helpful in enabling us to assess where funding to agencies will impact the community over the next two years.

As you know, our expectation is that your agency will measure the degree to which your programs achieve the outcomes selected and report findings at the end of this funding year. The purpose of this letter is to give you some feedback on your outcome measurement report for this year.

Our grant currently provides partial funding for your agency's counselling program. Below is a list of the outcomes objectives you checked off at the beginning of the year, followed by our comments on your outcomes measurement report.

Counselling Program

For this program, you selected the following from the outcomes list that we provided at the beginning of the year:

- Supporting people who are vulnerable and susceptible to abuse, especially women and children:
 - Increased awareness about the effects of abuse
 - Increased awareness about people who are more vulnerable to abuse
 - Increased awareness about abuse (what it is, how to report it etc.) among frontline workers
 - Increased identification and reporting of abuse, especially for vulnerable populations like seniors and immigrants

You also added an additional outcome to your list to capture some of the unique ways your program makes a difference: To increase and improve the emotional and mental health of survivors of sexual violence and abuse.

These outcomes (and especially the new outcome you identified) align well with those that you reported in your last funding report to us. At that time, you reported that women who had participated in the counselling program had:

- Increased ability to manage triggering and other abreactions of trauma (95%)
- improved sense of wellbeing (100%)
- improved understanding of the impact of trauma (100%)

You also reported that referring service providers were making more referrals, a finding that relates well to the increased identification outcome in the list above.

When we met with you in November, the discussion focused mostly on the need to clarify and focus the outcome objectives before designing measurement tools. The outcomes selected from the checklist in January suggest that you have made good progress in this work. The selected outcomes are very appropriate and the new outcome that has been added is clearly an important one.

The new tool that you have begun to use to measure outcomes for women in the counselling program appears to be generating some very useful information. It would be helpful, in this year's report, if you could provide some more detail about how many women completed each tool as a proportion of all clients served. It would also be helpful to know a little bit more about how you interpret the feedback. We are especially interested in how you understand the connections between managing trauma and broader changes in wellbeing. This is a theme that we have been thinking about as well.

This year's report did not include any data on your work to try to raise awareness about abuse among frontline workers. We would be very interested to hear more about that work as well.

We look forward to continue working with you to better articulate the positive impact donor dollars are making in our community!

Sincerely,

Senior Manager, Community Investment

APPENDIX B

Organizations and Examples

The following is a list of organizations and examples covered in this guide:

- Ontario Nonprofit Network — Sector Driven Evaluation Strategy:
<http://theonnc.ca/our-work/our-structures/evaluation/>
- Ontario Nonprofit Network — Matching Evaluation Approaches to Expectations:
<http://theonnc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Evaluation-Approaches-Resource-2.0.pdf>
- Atkinson Foundation:
<http://atkinsonfoundation.ca/>
- BetterEvaluation.org:
<http://www.betterevaluation.org/>
- Canadian Women's Foundation:
<https://www.ocf-fco.ca/grantmakers-forum/>
- Centraide of Greater Montreal — Collective Impact Project:
<http://www.centraide-mtl.org/en/agencies/collective-impact-project/>
- Community Solutions — Data Parties:
http://communitysolutions.ca/web/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/DataParty_prf2.pdf
- Counselling Foundation of Canada:
<http://www.counselling.net/>
- Public Profit — Dabbling in the Data:
<http://www.publicprofit.net/Dabbling-In-The-Data>
- GrantCraft — Funder Collaboratives: Why and How Funders Work Together:
http://www.grantcraft.org/assets/content/resources/funder_collaboratives_secure.pdf
- Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) — Building Collaboration: From the Inside Out :
<https://www.geofunders.org/resources/building-collaboration-from-the-inside-out-706>
- Innovation Network — State of Evaluation 2016:
https://www.innonet.org/media/2016-State_of_Evaluation.pdf

- Johnson & Johnson Global Community Impact:
<https://www.jnj.com/our-giving>
- Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation — Community Grants Builder:
https://www.kwcf.ca/documents/investing/grants_revamp/guidelines_and_submission_requirements/communitygrantsgoalbuilder2015doc
- Liberating Structures — Generative Relationships STAR:
<http://www.liberatingstructures.com/26-generative-relationships-st/>
- Network Weaver Handbook:
<http://www.networkweaver.com/product/network-weaving-handbook/>
- Ontario's Local Poverty Reduction Fund:
<https://www.ontario.ca/page/local-poverty-reduction-fund>
- Ottawa Grantmakers' Forum Table:
<https://www.ocf-fco.ca/grantmakers-forum/>
- Ontario Trillium Foundation — Open Data:
<http://www.otf.ca/open>
- Rideau Hall Foundation:
<https://www.rhf-frh.ca/>
- Tamarack Institute — Collective Impact:
<https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/collectiveimpact>
- United Way Kitchener Waterloo & Area:
<http://www.uwaykw.org/>
- United Way Oxford:
<http://unitedwayoxford.ca/>
- United Way Peel Region:
<http://www.unitedwaypeel.org/>
- United Way Regina — Community Impact Report 2016-2017:
<https://www.unitedwayregina.ca/servlet/eAndar.WebExtDocument/3339353434/333039/UnitedWayReginaCommunityImpactReport.pdf>
- United Way Toronto & York Region:
<https://www.unitedwaytyr.com/>

GLOSSARY

Bottom-up evaluation	Grantmakers allow individual grant recipients to design an evaluation that makes the most sense in their context.
Collaborative evaluation	When grantmakers and grant recipients invest time in working together to develop or implement an evaluation approach that addresses questions that matter to both groups, the evaluation is much more likely to produce useful results.
Evaluation	For the purposes of this guide, we use Michael Quinn Patton's definition of evaluation: "Evaluation is the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and results of programs to make judgments about the program, improve or further develop program effectiveness, inform decisions about future programming, and/or increase understanding." We follow Patton in defining "programs" very broadly to include, for example, events, artistic projects, or systems change work.
Evaluation framework	A document that provides an overview of the plans for an evaluation project. It normally includes a description of the intervention being evaluated, an evaluation purpose statement, key evaluation questions, associated indicators, and measurement tools. It often includes a workplan specifying who will carry out evaluation tasks, timelines and a review of ethical considerations.
Evaluation purpose	The reasons why an evaluation project is undertaken.
Grantmaker	Non-governmental funders that provide financial support to nonprofit groups, including United Ways, corporate, public, and private foundations.

Indicators	The concrete points of data that are capable of answering the evaluation question (e.g., score on a knowledge quiz, percentage of youth who graduate on time).
Methods (or tools)	The techniques that will be used to gather data on indicators (e.g., mail-out survey completed before and after the course; focus groups with graduates of the program).
Outcomes	Statements about the difference that an intervention is intended to make for its participants or clients. Outcomes can be high level and long term (e.g., reduced poverty) or more concrete and short term (e.g., increased knowledge of where to go for help).
Outputs	Statements that describe the amount of work carried out by an intervention (e.g., number of attendees, downloads, or sessions held). While outputs describe how much work was done, they do not measure whether that work produced any outcomes for the intended beneficiaries of the intervention.
Top-down evaluation	Grantmakers design the evaluation methodology themselves.
Use, Intended use	The concrete ways in which evaluation findings will lead to action or decision making.
Users, Intended users	The specific individuals who will be responsible for taking action on the basis of evaluation findings.

WORKS CITED

Bartczak, Lori . 2015. *Building Collaboration: From the Inside Out*. **Report, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations.**

Buteau, Ellie and Timothy Chu. 2011. *Grantees Report Back: Helpful Reporting and Evaluation Processes*. **Report, Center for Effective Philanthropy.**

Cabaj, Mark and Liz Weaver. 2016. *Collective Impact 3.0*. **Tamarack Institute.**

Forti, Matthew. 2011. *Creating a Culture of Learning and Accountability*. The Bridgespan Group. <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/blog/measuring-to-improve/creating-a-culture-of-learning-and-accountability>

Morariu, Johanna, Veena Pankaj, Katherine Athanasiades, and Deborah Grodzicki. 2016. *State of Evaluation 2016: Evaluation Practice and Capacity in the Nonprofit Sector*. **Report, Innovation Network.**

Mosher-Williams, Rachel and William H. Woodwell Jr. 2015. *Learning Together: Actionable Approaches for Grantmakers*. **Report, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations.**

Tarsilla, Michelle. 2010. *Inclusiveness and Social Justice in Evaluation: Can the Transformative Agenda Really Alter the Status Quo? A Conversation with Donna M. Mertens*. **Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation 102-113.**

Taylor, Andrew and Ben Liadsky. 2017. *Learning Together: Five Important Discussion Questions to Make Evaluation Useful*. **Ontario Nonprofit Network.**

ENDNOTES

- 1.** Mosher-Williams & Woodwell Jr. 2015, 4.
- 2.** Bartczak 2015, 3.
- 3.** Forti 2011.
- 4.** Morariu, Pankaj, Athanasiades, & Grodzicki 2016, 19.
- 5.** Taylor & Liadsky 2017.
- 6.** Buteau & Chu 2011, 1.
- 7.** Tarsilla 2010, 109.
- 8.** Cabaj and Weaver 2016, 8.
- 9.** Centraide of Greater Montreal, Collective Impact Project 2016.
- 10.** Community Foundation of Ottawa, Collaborative Grantmaking Pilot Project 2016.
- 11.** Ibid.
- 12.** Ibid.
- 13.** Canadian Women's Foundation 2004, 1.
- 14.** Ibid.
- 15.** Ibid.
- 16.** Ibid.
- 17.** Ibid, 3.
- 18.** Ibid, 4.

ABOUT US

ONN is the independent nonprofit network, with a reach of over 20,000, for the 55,000 nonprofits and charities in Ontario, focused on policy, advocacy, and services to strengthen Ontario's nonprofit sector as a key pillar of our society and economy.

ONN works to create a public policy environment that allows nonprofits and charities to thrive. We engage our network of diverse nonprofit organizations across Ontario to work together on issues affecting the sector and channel the voices of our network to government, funders, and other stakeholders.



