

Learning about learning

Since 2021, Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN), has been working to improve evidence-informed decision-making and learning in the nonprofit sector, in collaboration with Ajah and Powered by Data (PbD). One of our primary goals was to develop a strategy that could be shared with the sector. To help us prepare for the work of building that strategy, which we called the [DEAL \(Data, Evidence-use And Learning\) Strategy](#), we decided to explore the landscape and talk to people who have worked for years with data and evidence for various purposes, whether to inform funding decisions, craft policy solutions, connect people around an issue, evaluate outcomes or simply illuminate the context of a particular issue. As part of the DEAL strategy, for over two years, we conducted interviews, and we met in a learning circle with funders. Coming out of this process, Ajah and PbD wrote a report that describes key findings and takeaways. The report is being shared widely now to inform and to prompt further thinking about how to approach this complicated topic.

We aimed to explore what we thought were the knowledge-sharing barriers and develop strategies to overcome them. In our exploration of the landscape, we focused on funders because they could play a pivotal role in supporting shared learning and promoting more effective knowledge mobilization. There are few external incentives for nonprofits to share what they learn and many don't have the resources to do it easily. Funders, both public and private, possess those resources and arguably, a unique capability to transform the way data and evidence is shared. Academia provides a compelling example, where major advancements in knowledge-sharing have been driven by academic funders who introduced open-data mandates in their funding processes. Just as these academic funders spearheaded positive change, we recognize that funders in the nonprofit sector can intentionally facilitate collaboration and support initiatives that lead to broader knowledge dissemination and impact.

So, what did we find?

1. There isn't agreement on the problem: People we spoke to questioned whose learning and evidence-sharing challenges should take precedence: funders alone, funders and their partners, or partners exclusively. However, some funders agreed that there is a need for knowledge sharing to allocate their limited resources more effectively. And nonprofits agree. Understanding and addressing the learning needs of both funders and nonprofit partners is crucial to moving forward.
2. It's hard to share information, especially about what doesn't go well: Nonprofits face challenges in openly sharing information about what does not work. The fear of unintended consequences and negative repercussions from funders hinders their willingness to share failure stories. This is well understood. However, its broader impacts may still be under-acknowledged.
3. It's not *how* but *if*: Our work gave us insights into the nonprofit sector's learning culture. Recognizing the complexity, we need to take a step back and reorient the conversation. We should start by asking a different question: not *how* to share knowledge but *if* we are able to implement shared learning practices. The people we spoke to believed that open-ended discussions on how they feel about knowledge sharing could lead to more fruitful outcomes, as they have different understandings of the need for knowledge sharing. Our initial perception, from what we have seen so far, is that such discussions might pose challenges and not be straightforward.

What became very clear to us is that to have a good conversation and to make solid progress on advancing learning within organizations, there need to be clear and shared objectives among a group of participants who place a similar priority on a learning agenda in their organization and have the mandate and bandwidth to execute it. As always in these efforts, having some support through a backbone (intermediary) organization or network is key to success and sustainability. This can be light touch support...but it needs to be consistent and sustained.

This exercise convinced the collaborators (Ajah, PbD and ONN) that learning agendas are important and that sharing evidence on what works (in the form of data, reports or any other knowledge product) really does matter. The question is how to move it forward productively. Establishing partnerships with the intermediary organizations and networks that might have experience in creating communities of practice, such as PFC, EFC, or United Way/Centraide, as well as more focused networks, such as Environment Funders Canada, can provide the necessary support and infrastructure for ongoing learning initiatives.

We invite you to join us in advancing the agenda of knowledge sharing and collective learning in the sector. [Read our report](#), reach out to ONN, Ajah, or Powered by Data (PbD) to find out more and to let us know if you want to support a peer learning circle that will engage in ongoing conversation about how we can advance learning agendas for ourselves and for the whole sector. We have included links to further reading and advice in the report itself. We would love to learn from you!