



THE EVALUATION ROUNDTABLE 2014

Evaluation and Learning for Aligned Action

Framing Brief

Center for Evaluation Innovation

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The Evaluation Roundtable has a long tradition of pushing philanthropy’s thinking on foundation evaluation and its relationship to strategy. Under Patti Patrizi’s leadership, for example, in 2008 the Roundtable discussed what it meant to position strategy as the evaluand, such that evaluation can better inform how strategy is developed, executed, and adapted.¹ The 2010 Roundtable explored whether foundations adopting strategic philanthropy were making the structural, process, and cultural changes—including revisiting the role and function of evaluation—necessary to behave strategically.² In 2012, the Roundtable continued to push this discussion by exploring how to improve the use of evaluative information and promote learning and adaptation specifically during strategy implementation.³

The 2014 Evaluation Roundtable will continue the tradition of examining evolving thinking about philanthropic strategy, with an explicit focus on how evaluation and learning practices can keep pace with and support these developments.

The front edge of philanthropic thinking today is calling into question some common practices regarding foundation strategy. This thinking has urged the sector to “act bigger and adapt better” in a complex world full of complex issues and problems.⁴ It calls for foundations to embrace complexity principles and systems thinking and to recognize that many actors and factors interact in unpredictable—and often invisible—ways to create the problems we seek to address. Pathways to change rarely can be known in advance with certainty, small actions can produce big and unanticipated changes, solutions cannot be imposed, and there is no one right answer.

¹ See Patton, M.Q., & Patrizi, P. (2010). Strategy as the focus for evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation* (Winter), 5-28.

² See Patrizi, P., & Thompson, E. (2011). Beyond the veneer of strategic philanthropy. *Foundation Review*, 2(3), 52-60.

³ See Patrizi, P., Thompson, E., Coffman, J., & Beer, T. (2013). Eyes wide open: Learning as strategy under conditions of complexity and uncertainty. *Foundation Review*, 5(3), 50-65.

⁴ Fulton, K., Kasper, G., & Kibbe, B. (2010). *What’s next for philanthropy: Acting bigger and adapting better in a networked world*. The Monitor Institute.

Several observations are emerging in the field about what this means and how it is different from where the sector has been.⁵ These include, for example:

- *Nature of strategy.* Strategy should be seen as dynamic and emergent, connected to other strategies and actors and profoundly affected by context, rather than as a series of well-considered, predictable steps that can be captured in a plan that is isolated and relatively independent of others.
- *Worldview.* Problems should be considered as wholes instead of separated into isolated parts with solutions developed to address those distinct parts.
- *Focus of strategy.* Strategy should concentrate on leverage points, patterns of interaction, pressures, and structures that underlie the “presenting symptoms” of the problem, rather than just the set of players, actions, and behaviors that are projected to produce the desired outcome.
- *Role of the foundation.* Foundations should be strategy participants, one of many players who come to an increasingly aligned understanding of the whole system and attentive to how their actions affect others rather than the sole owners and orchestrators of strategy.
- *Approach to strategic decision making.* Decision making is inevitably decentralized and distributed, with independent actors making their own strategic and tactical decisions, rather than foundations dictating to others via grant requirements and funding streams.

In response to these observations, some foundations are designing more decentralized strategies that engender collective solutions and build new ways of interacting among stakeholders. The aim is for stakeholders to coordinate their work to generate systems-level solutions.⁶ Other foundations may not choose to support intentional cross-stakeholder collaboration, but nonetheless have undergone a shift in mindset about the degree of control that a foundation can or should realistically have when working on complex problems. Whether engaging in explicitly collaborative strategies or funding a diverse portfolio of organizations to work on different “change levers” in a system, it seems that an increasing number of foundations are recognizing that they are only one among many independent yet interdependent actors.

Although the sector has been using the language of complexity, systems, emergence, and adaptation for some time, we wonder whether we are sufficiently thinking through what this means for the positioning and use of evaluation and learning in philanthropy.

Our core question is this: How can evaluation and learning best support strategy when it is not (or cannot be) tightly orchestrated by the foundation, and when it requires interactions and decisions among independent but interdependent actors trying to align under complex conditions?

⁵ See, for example: Patrizi & Thompson (2011); Patrizi & Thompson (2013); Patton, M.Q. (2011). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. New York: Guilford Press; and Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Russell, P. (2014). Strategic philanthropy for a complex world. *Stanford Social Innovation Review (Summer)*, 26-37.

⁶ These strategies include, for example, networks, social movements, multi-stakeholder community change initiatives, social innovation funding, “collective impact”, and other explicitly collaborative strategy designs.

Implications for Evaluation and Learning

What does this view of strategy as a more decentralized activity imply for foundation evaluation and learning? First, as previous Roundtables have discussed, it requires that foundations recognize that learning is “real work” and part of strategy rather than an optional add-on to it. Constant adaptation is an essential component of strategy in complex systems, where hindsight does not automatically lead to foresight as system dynamics change. In addition, what will happen cannot be predicted with certainty.⁷ (In acknowledgement of this, some foundations are beginning to integrate adaptive evaluation approaches such as developmental evaluation into their work, albeit with varying degrees of success.)

It also requires rethinking who needs to learn and on what evaluation and learning should focus. While group learning processes are increasingly common, we suspect they “rarely surface much beyond information about the symptoms as perceived by the different stakeholders...addressing surface systems rather than focusing on true leverage points for lasting transformation.”⁸ And despite good intentions, these approaches often keep the convener’s (the foundation’s) questions at the center of the learning.

The 2014 Evaluation Roundtable will explore whether and how this shift in strategy mindset and practice calls for critical changes in the role of evaluation and learning in foundations. What would it take to engage in evaluation and learning that supports multiple actors working their way toward alignment? Or that truly accounts for emergence and for differing (and sometimes conflicting) perspectives of actors in different parts of the system? How can we evolve our practices so they look more like the right column in the table below than the left?

Differences in Approaches to Evaluation and Learning

	Common Practice	Evolving Practice
Primary learners	Foundation	Foundation(s), grantees, and other actors in the system
Approach to learning	Single loop: If an activity or strategy yields results that are different than expected, results are observed, feedback taken, and different approaches tried. Asks: Are we doing things right?	Double loop: When results other than those that are expected occur, then goals, values, beliefs, and assumptions about the nature of the problem or the system dynamics are reexamined or reframed. Asks: Are we doing the right things? Do we need to understand the problem and system dynamics differently?
Stakeholder engagement in learning	Even when grantees are engaged, learning primarily is for the benefit of the foundation as the owner of the strategy. A traditional hub-and-spoke approach is used with grantees, where grantees give input and feedback and the foundation learns and adapts <i>its</i> strategy accordingly.	Designed to benefit the array of actors in the system, including the foundation, grantees, and those external to the strategy. Learning occurs through doing, and through group conversation around questions that matter. The goal is to increase the collective knowledge, understanding, and capacity of everyone around the issue, so independent or collective action is aligned.

⁷ Patrizi, P., Thompson, E., Coffman, J., & Beer, T. (2013).

⁸ Laberge, M. (2006). *Collective learning for co-creative engagement*. Retrieved from www.breakthroughsunlimited.com/collective-learning.pdf. p.6

	Common Practice	Evolving Practice
Focus of learning	Developing the foundation's understanding of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How individual grantees are contributing • What is being learned about the activities and strategies already selected • Whether outcomes are being achieved and milestones are being reached • What existing activities need to be adapted based on the results observed 	Developing a shared understanding of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The issue or problem • Network of relationships in the system • Interdependences that connect people • Larger context that affects the system • What is and is not working now • What other scenarios are possible

Questions to Consider in Preparation

This Evaluation Roundtable is designed not only for foundations that explicitly are supporting more decentralized and collective action strategies, but also for those who are considering how the principles of complexity, if taken seriously, should affect the practice of evaluation for any kind of strategy. We will aim to surface and explore the practical implications of these questions for the structure, positioning, activities, purpose, and practice of evaluation and learning in individual foundations, as well as the implications for the field of evaluation in philanthropy as a whole.

Building on the insights from the teaching case and the experiences of participants, we will explore the following questions (and others that emerge) about what kind of data, evaluation, and learning foundations can support to help whole systems learn.

1. Rather than just seeing foundation strategy as the evaluand, does it help us to see the system in which the strategy occurs as the evaluand? How do we use evaluation to explore assumptions about how the system works and to illuminate unanticipated dynamics and opportunities for action?
2. How can evaluation better explore the interplay of relationships among people and processes, cause-and-effect dynamics, the assumptions that underlie the strategy, and variables that influence one another to produce results?
3. How can evaluation focus not just on whether what we have chosen to do is working, but whether we are doing the right thing in the first place? How do we watch for unanticipated effects?
4. How can we ensure that learning is a collective enterprise, where the users are the diverse array of actors in the system rather than just the foundation and grantees alone?
5. Can we create learning that is not simply event-driven, and viewed instead as a series of interactions that build on one another and are embedded in learning-by-doing?
6. How can learning in this context be about more than just process and dialogue among the actors, involving a rigorous examination of data about the system and the strategy's place in it?