

PFC Learning Series

tool 2

Learning in a time of crisis: 7 tips to help foundations focus on learning and evaluation

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, many foundations find themselves forced to make decisions in new ways regarding how they operate, what they support, and how they make sense of what's happening.

Board members who may be used to meeting quarterly may now find themselves called on to make important decisions more quickly. Staff who may have a variety of activities and sources of information to help inform their work over time may now find themselves having more conversations with grantees, applicants, and staff at other foundations as they try to connect and learn about different issues.

This summary provides an overview of seven tips for foundation staff to understand, adopt, and make use of a learning mindset. The detailed guide can be found [here](#).



Established in 1999, Philanthropic Foundations Canada (PFC) is a national member association of grantmaking foundations, charitable organizations and corporate giving programs. PFC seeks to promote the growth and development of effective and responsible foundations and organized philanthropy in Canada through the provision of membership services, resources, and advocacy.

To learn more, visit: pfc.ca

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CONTEXT

To begin, it's worth noting the broader context in which foundations are currently operating. The COVID-19 crisis is profound and the effects are evident in all walks of life. Philanthropic networks have been quick to offer support to their members and the broader philanthropic community through various knowledge sharing activities as well as by pushing for some common approaches.

Philanthropic Foundations Canada (PFC), Community Foundations of Canada (CFC), The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, and Environment Funders Canada developed [Five Guiding Principles for Supporting Grantees](#) to guide foundations as they consider how to best respond to the current situation. These principles are:

1. Be flexible, pragmatic and proactive in grant-making.
2. Collaborate on or contribute to emergency funds at the community and national levels as they emerge.
3. Stretch and deploy expertise and funds to protect the capacity and resilience of nonprofit and charitable organizations.
4. Support Advocacy.
5. Take the long view and stay engaged.

These principles are also echoed in other countries as philanthropic networks recognize the uniqueness of this time and push foundations to think about how to operate differently. Besides demonstrating that foundations need to operate differently, the crisis is teaching us that foundations can operate differently.

In Canada, there is already evidence of this. Indeed, many foundations are:

- Changing and accelerating how often they communicate with their boards, partners, and grantees
- Increasing support to grantees such as:
 - Removing restrictions on the use of grant dollars
 - Postponing grant reporting requirements
 - Advancing grant payments
 - Quicker turnarounds
- Introducing new support to help the charitable sector and communities such as:
 - Launching emergency response granting programs
 - Contributing to pooled funds that are either sector or regionally focused
 - Contributing to or offering loan programs
 - Offering capacity support such as by allowing staff to volunteer/assist other organizations
- Having more conversations with their grantees and others in the philanthropic sector to stay connected to what is happening in their community and being responsive to emerging challenges

While these initiatives deserve credit, it should also be noted that there have been many who have called for these types of actions for many years. While this is a unique time in human history that requires a unique response, it is nonetheless important to think about the learning opportunities that this crisis presents and to preserve the lessons to inform how foundations should operate in the future..

With that context of what many foundations are doing and what many philanthropic networks are calling on foundations to do or continue to do, let's look at how foundations can foreground learning into their work now and moving forward.

SUGGESTIONS



1. Build your learning culture

Organizations with strong learning cultures are able to adapt, innovate, and iterate to make sense of new realities and adjust accordingly. At a high level, [research](#) suggests that the following elements exist in strong learning cultures: learning is a habit; learning goals are clear; deep questions get asked; the organization is ready to act on what it learns; learning is inclusive and engages partners; and leadership drives organizational learning.

There is no one way to become a learning organization nor is there an end state. A healthy learning culture in one organization may look different in another. Learning by its nature is an ongoing process. However, there are practices and processes that can be put in place to enable learning to take place.

Developing a learning culture in a time where staff and board have less ability to connect with one another in person is particularly important. This means more attention needs to be paid to how conversations are enabled, hosted, and facilitated. There is a balance to be struck between ensuring good lines of open communication and supporting staff with understanding different work-at-home environments, connectivity and technological issues, and overall work-life balance.



2. Ask new kinds of questions

In [Learning in a Time of Crisis](#), Preskill and Cook offer a set of reflective questions based on time periods to help foundations make sense of emergent learning opportunities. As an example, Preskill and Cook propose that foundations reflect on questions like:

- **Within days and weeks (short-term)**
 - What options are available?
 - What are the possible consequences of each?
 - What assumptions or inferences are we making?
- **A few months from now (intermediate-term)**
 - What options did we consider as we selected our behaviors/actions?
 - What would we want to do again, since it worked so well?
- **When the crisis abates (longer-term)**
 - What have we learned from how we (and potentially others) engaged in rapid-response funding strategies and practices?
 - What changes should our organization consider making to prepare for future crises?

It is also important that foundations ask themselves some potentially uncomfortable questions. The reality is that foundations are well-placed to survive the pandemic. The pain felt by foundations is unlikely to be the same as that

being felt by others. Organizations with strong learning cultures are able to ask themselves [powerful questions](#) that can prompt a deep reflection about how things work and what's really important.



3. Connect with and listen to others

Listening is a key component in figuring out what steps to take next. This means being proactive and checking in with your grantees and others in your network. Remember that you don't have to — and often can't — figure out everything you want to share or commit to before picking up a phone or writing an email.

It's also true that power dynamics can be a very powerful factor in relationships between foundations and grantees. This can be a real barrier in having honest conversations and learning what grantees really need right now. Approaching conversations with humility and honesty is one way that you can model your own learning culture and demonstrate your commitment to seeing your grantees succeed to the best of their abilities.

3.1 Gather feedback

Gathering feedback is one element of listening and there are many ways to do this. One tactic is to include a question on a grant report asking for feedback. Another tactic is to use an external organization to gather anonymous feedback. This provides more distance between the grantee and the foundation and can encourage more honest feedback if they know that their words will be anonymous. Finally, consider open "[listening circles](#)." Threlfall, Tuan, and Twersky write that "Many organizations are inundated with well-meaning surveys from funders. Instead, try more personal connections — aided by technology — to ask about concerns and specific needs."



4. Be an advocate

Foundations can't succeed in achieving their missions without strong and resilient charitable and nonprofit partners. These are the organizations on the ground and in the communities working toward positive change.

Supporting advocacy means more than simply funding grassroots movements or lobbying governments for instance. From a learning perspective, it also relates to listening and considering where the information that informs your thinking comes from. Networks, associations, and other intermediaries are often strong advocates for their members and communities. They can also be useful sources of information and offer connections to others in the communities you seek to support.

5. Embrace uncertainty

Managing uncertainty is not something that comes easily to many people. The same is true for foundations. Embracing uncertainty, therefore, means coming to grips with the situation we're in and being cognizant of various mental traps that can inhibit action.

While there is no playbook for how foundations should respond, one challenge that foundations should be aware of as they engage with their grantees has to do with trust and communication. As Kotler writes: "If nonprofits are reluctant to ask for extra help, because they are afraid that such requests would compromise their ability to apply successfully for future grants, they may choose instead to scale back their ambitions in favor of being on time and on budget."

Thinking more internally, Ruedy and Moss offer up a set of principles to help inform decision-making including tips on how to be intentional, frame decisions, use information, and focus on the future.

6. Rethink accountability

There is nothing wrong with accountability on its own. There are very legitimate reasons why a foundation would want to know how its money was spent or to ask questions that could help inform future decision-making. However, it's important to recognize that when accountability is one-directional in favour of the information needs of foundations, it can have a negative impact on the needs of grantees and their relationship to foundations.

On the flip side, accountability can also include being accountable to the organizations and communities that foundations support. This might mean asking questions and designing processes that focus more on how foundations can best support their grantees and learn with them.

7. Make use of evaluation

Many foundations use evaluation to better understand the impact of their investments. They may evaluate a granting program, for instance, to enable them to describe what change has occurred, inform whether any tweaks need to be made, or whether the program should continue at all. Evaluation can also be used by foundations to better understand how they can support their grantees (for example, with grantee feedback tools).

So what makes evaluation useful? In short, research suggests that the following six factors are key to a useful evaluation:

1. A clear, shared purpose;
2. Specific people committed to meaningful use of the evaluation;
3. A plan for ongoing communication that ensures buy-in and transparency;
4. A match between expectations, skills/capacity, and funding;
5. A process to ensure that there is a safe space for critical reflection and learning; and
6. Follow-through.

7.1 Managing an evaluation in progress

Depending on the context, it may not be possible to carry out certain evaluation activities as planned whether due to public health guidelines (such as social distancing) or simply that there are other priorities and needs.

To start, go back to your evaluation plan or framework and ask yourself some questions like: Who do I need to connect with? What are my key evaluation questions and do they still hold value? What data do I already have and what insights can I draw from this? What more might be gained by further data collection methods in the immediate term? What data collection methods (e.g., surveys, focus groups, etc.) can I still do? When is the right time to gather this data and how can I do this respectfully? Depending on your answer to any of these questions, you may need to make some adjustments to your evaluation plan.

Second, as Patton suggests, adopt a "good enough" standard of rigor: "Detach from rigor as an absolute methodological standard.... Decisions are being made quickly. Some data to support those decisions when they are made is better than data that are too little and too late."

Third, remember that there are lots of potential sources for data. A good evaluation relies on more than one source of data. Therefore, consider thinking about some unusual suspects to help supplement grantee or program participant data.

Fourth, if you're working with an external evaluator, know that they are there to help you. Even if an evaluation is on hold or needs to be altered, reach out to your evaluator and connect on whether there are alternative ways they could be helping right now.

7.2 Welcome diverse voices and perspectives

Evaluation is best done when there is a clear and shared understanding of why an evaluation is needed and how it will be done. This means making sure that evaluation participants have a voice in the process. Remember that behind each data point can be a person. Similarly, how you interpret data may be different than how someone else interprets data. This can cause tension between those who are collecting information and those who are giving information if those points aren't well understood.

The Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC), for instance, has developed a set of principles (Utility, Self-voicing, Access, and Inter-relatedness) to help guide research projects led by OFIFC and urban Indigenous communities. These principles define the terms under which research and evaluation should be designed so that they are culturally appropriate, respectful, and relevant to those involved.

RESOURCES

For foundations to advance equity and inclusion in a time of COVID-19

To find a list of resources updated on a monthly basis, [click here](#).

Tools

[Organizational Learning Self-Assessment Tool](#) By Taylor Newberry Consulting.

This tool is meant to help organizations identify and assess the state of learning in their organization. It can be a helpful starting point for discussion that can identify areas of strength as well as areas for improvement.

[Rapid Response Grantee Survey](#) By the Center for Effective Philanthropy

This survey is designed to help funders better understand the pressing needs of their grantees and other partners now.

[GlassPockets](#) A Foundation Center initiative

A defined a set of indicators to help foundations determine how transparent their practices are.

[BetterEvaluation.org](#)

"BetterEvaluation.org has information on more than 300 methods and processes plus approaches and thematic pages, events and resources including a [Manager's Guide to Evaluation](#), and a Terms of Reference generator, the [GeneraTOR](#)."

[The Definitive Guide to Facilitating Remote Workshops](#) By MURAL

Tips and advice for how to facilitate online workshops.

[IssueLab](#) By Candid

IssueLab is a "searchable, browseable website set up to collect and share the social sector's knowledge."

The [Medicine Wheel Evaluation Framework](#) By the Atlantic Council for International Cooperation

Excerpt: "Traditionally, the Medicine Wheel is meant to make sense of the world and bring order to it, without isolating or compartmentalizing our different understandings of it. It celebrates both the diversity and unity of our spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional experiences. These four categories make up its four quadrants."

Blogs & Articles

[What Will it Take for Philanthropy to Learn?](#) By Reisman, Coffman, Beer, Rae, and Millett

Excerpt: "The stakes are high to get learning right. Many helpful tools to facilitate learning have been developed, but so far we have lacked clarity on the changes we want learners individually, in teams, and in organizations to experience. The sector needs to think rigorously about what constitutes high-quality, actionable, and equitable learning, and what it really takes to make it happen."

[Learning in a Time of Crisis](#) By Preskill and Cook, FSG

Excerpt: "The need to learn about the effects, influences, and impact of how organizations are responding to the crisis—through data and experiences—will be critical if philanthropy is to be effective in the short-, intermediate-, and long-term."

[Essential Questions for Foundation Boards in a Time of Crisis](#) By Wallestad, BoardSource.

Excerpt: "There's no question: significantly increasing payout is a big decision. It's a decision that gets at the heart of who you are as a foundation and an institution. It's driven by your reason for being, your philanthropic goals, your strategy, and your institutional values. And it is for all of those reasons that it's just a big decision; more specifically, it's a big board decision."

[Six Tips for Funders to Listen Well Right Now](#) By Bolduc, Center for Effective Philanthropy

Excerpt: "Listen only when you're willing to act. Listening is not free — neither for the people being listened to nor for the folks doing the asking."

[How to make the right decisions under pressure](#) By Leslie, BBC

Excerpt: "Good decision-makers judge when further delay will end up costing more than any decision they take."

[Philanthropy, this is our Matrix moment...what will you choose?](#) By Kawaoka-Chen, Justice Funders

Excerpt: "For those of us in a position to redistribute resources to frontline communities, this is a moment in which we must urgently act with moral clarity and choose which side of history we want to be on."

[Staying on Track in an Unpredictable World: Three ways to plan and manage future risks to impact](#) By Kotler, Open Road Alliance

Excerpt: "Now, more than ever, grantmakers can support their grantees through policies designed to soften the blow of risks realized today, and build resilience for the uncertainty of tomorrow."

[Foundations Must Rethink What It Means to Be Accountable](#) By Gates and Rourke, The Chronicle of Philanthropy

Excerpt: "But as foundations try to show more impact, their actions can appear unilateral and unaccountable. Foundations are increasingly choosing, and even implementing, solutions themselves, as opposed to responding to the ideas of others."

[Evaluation Implications of the Coronavirus Global Health Pandemic Emergency](#) By Quinn Patton, Blue Marble Evaluation

Excerpt: "Channel your sense of urgency into thinking pragmatically and creatively about what data you can gather quickly and provide to your evaluation users to help them know what's happening, what's emerging, how needs are changing, and consider options going forward."

Reports

[Bridging the Gap: A Review of Foundation Listening Practices](#) By Threlfall and Klein, ekouté

Excerpt: "Moreover, as the contextual landscape around philanthropy continues to shift, foundations are being pushed to take unprecedented action on issues like equity, diversity, and inclusion, and are facing increased calls for participation and transparency. Listening and connecting with those they seek to help is one way foundations can become more inclusive."

[Achieving Greater Impact by Starting with Learning: How grantmakers can enable learning relationships at the grant application stage](#) By Taylor and Liadsky, Taylor Newberry Consulting.

Excerpt: "For the same reasons that farmers must know a lot about the soil into which they plant their seeds, grantmakers interested in evaluating the impact of their investments must develop a deep understanding of organizational learning culture."

[Equitable Evaluation Framing Paper](#) By the Center for Evaluation Innovation, Institute for Foundation and Donor Learning, Dorothy A Johnson Center for Philanthropy, and Luminare Group.

Excerpt: "If we do not work in this way, and if foundations do not support evaluators to work in this way, and non profits do not or cannot resource this type inquiry, evaluation practices risk reinforcing or even exacerbating the very inequities the change initiative seeks to address."

[Benchmarking Foundation Evaluation Practices 2020](#) By the Center for Evaluation Innovation

Excerpt: "Boards are overall supportive of evaluation, but senior leadership behaviors in support of evaluation and learning fall short."

Training

[How to Ask Powerful Questions](#) [Webinar] By Beer, Center for Evaluation Innovation.

Excerpt: "The kinds of questions we often pose — Did the intervention work? What are we learning about a particular issue? — may lead to information that is a useful input into learning, but they often don't help us determine what to do next. This habit results in questions that, if answered, will make a difference in how we do our work."

[Evaluation for Leaders](#) By Lovato and Hutchinson, University of British Columbia

"A freely accessible mobile learning course that is designed to quickly increase your understanding of evaluation by maximizing those stolen moments of productivity in your busy day. It is a professional development course that you can access on our laptop, phone, or tablet, anywhere, anytime. The intent of this course is not to teach you how to do evaluation, but rather how to better use evaluation in your day-to-day decision making and organization overall."

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