10-2016

How Do You Measure Up? Finding Fit Between Foundations and Their Evaluation Functions

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Introduction

Foundations are ever-changing places. Some shifts are internally driven: A new president gets hired and takes the organization in new strategic directions. Founders choose to spend down all their assets in their lifetimes. Board members move in and out, bringing fresh questions about accountability and performance. Other shifts link to variations in broader social, political, or economic conditions: Endowments suddenly expand or contract in response to market fluctuations; new crises arise that require quick attention. And still others are triggered by developments across the broader philanthropic sector: Emergent strategy and complexity principles start trending (Kania, Kramer, & Russell, 2014). Equity and fighting inequality emerge as sector-level priorities (see, e.g., Walker, 2015).

Analyses of the history of evaluation in philanthropy show that the evaluation function in foundations also frequently evolves in response to individual foundation or sector-level shifts (Coffman, 2016; Coffman, Beer, Patrizi, & Thompson, 2013; Hall, 2004).[1] For example, when strategic philanthropy took hold in the 1990s and 2000s, increased interest in identifying clear theories of change and being accountable for outcomes came along with it (Patrizi & McMullan, 1999). As a result, more foundations hired

Key Points

- As the number of foundations has grown, the philosophies and ways of working across the sector have diversified. This variance means that there is no one right model for how a foundation's evaluation function should be designed. It is imperative for a foundation to think carefully about how the structure, position, focus, resources, and practices of its evaluation function can best fit its own needs and aspirations.

- This article focuses on questions foundations can ask to assess that fit, and the specific considerations that can inform these decisions. It draws on 2015 benchmarking research conducted by the Center for Evaluation Innovation and Center for Effective Philanthropy to demonstrate how foundations across the sector are approaching these issues.

- This article also identifies common areas of misalignment between what foundations need and how they are spending their evaluation time and resources. For foundations that are new to evaluation, these are misalignments to avoid. For those experienced with evaluation, they are reminders of what to heed as practices are examined.

[1]Evaluation is defined throughout this article as activities undertaken to systematically assess and learn about the foundation's work that go above and beyond final grant or finance reporting, monitoring, and standard due diligence practices. For shorthand, the term evaluation is used here to represent a suite of evaluation-related activities that may also include, for example, learning, performance management, and knowledge management.

evaluation staff to support and assess their strategy work. Since then, and as foundations and the sector have continued to evolve, evaluation unit responsibilities have expanded substantially and many evaluation staff now lead a wide range of evaluation and learning practices inside the foundation as well as with grantees and partners

Rather than rethink the evaluation function as a whole, many simply add new areas of focus and activities without eliminating things that are no longer needed or valued. As a result, evaluation functions become repositories of past "eras," with old practices that act as a drag on their usefulness. Assessments of fit can help evaluation leaders to avoid this trap of ever-escalating responsibilities and adapt their approach to match, and, ideally, to help drive, a foundation's organizational evolution.

(Coffman, et al., 2013). The evaluation function in philanthropy is in a regular state of flux both within individual foundations and across them.

The Importance of Assessing Fit

Often when a foundation decides to create a new evaluation function or re-think its existing one, the person in charge contacts other foundation leaders to learn how their functions are designed, or to identify state-of-the-art thinking and pitfalls to avoid. As leaders of the Evaluation Roundtable, an informal network of evaluation leaders in philanthropy across the U.S. and in Canada, it is the question that new network participants most often pose: "Which foundations have the best evaluation units on which to model our approach?"

While gathering information on other foundations' evaluation practices makes good sense and can offer strong guiding principles, replicating what other foundations have done does not. As the number of foundations has grown and philanthropy has become more professionalized, the philosophies and ways of working across foundations have diversified. Foundations of all sizes and orientations are institutionalizing evaluative practices and creating evaluation staff roles. This variance in the sector means that there is no one right model for how a foundation's evaluation function should be designed.

It is imperative for a foundation to think carefully about how the structure, position, focus, resources, and practices of its evaluation function can best fit its own needs and aspirations. This article focuses on questions foundations can ask to assess that fit, and the specific considerations that can inform these decisions.

Assessments of fit are important for both foundations that are new to evaluation and those that already have an approach. As foundations evolve in response to the variety of drivers described above, staff often experience "pinch points" where the current approach to evaluation no longer serves the foundation's needs and aspirations and fails to add real value to social change efforts. Rather than rethink the evaluation function as a whole, many simply add new areas of focus and activities without eliminating things that are no longer needed or valued. As a result, evaluation functions become repositories of past "eras," with old practices that act as a drag on their usefulness. Assessments of fit can help evaluation leaders to avoid this trap of ever-escalating responsibilities and adapt their approach to match, and, ideally, to help drive, a foundation's organizational evolution.

Building on the experiences of Evaluation Roundtable participants and benchmarking research conducted to support both the network and the general practice of evaluation in philanthropy, this article also identifies common areas of misalignment between what foundations need and how they are spending their evaluation time and resources. For foundations that are new to

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FIGURE 1 Three Questions for Assessing Fit Between Foundations and Evaluation Function

1. What Does the Foundation Need from Evaluation?	2. How Should the Evaluation Function Be Structure and Scoped?	3. What Should the Evaluation Culture Be?
Niche and Approach	Positioning	Espoused Principles
Principles and Values	Reporting	Artifacts
Strategy	Staffing	Rituals/Processes
Leadership Roles	Spending	
Staff Roles	Scope of Responsibilities	
Arenas of Action		

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evaluation, these are misalignments to avoid. For foundations already experienced with evaluation, they are reminders of what to pay attention to as existing practices are examined.

Three Questions For Assessing Fit

Three questions can guide an assessment of fit or alignment between how a foundation approaches its work and what that demands of its evaluation function: (1) What does the foundation need from evaluation given "who" it is, what it does, and how it works? (2) In response to those needs, how should the evaluation function be structured and scoped? (3) What should the evaluation culture be? (See Figure 1.)

What Does the Foundation Need From Evaluation?

The simplicity of this initial question can be deceptive, but it requires careful analysis. The recently introduced "theory of philanthropy" concept is useful here:

> A theory of philanthropy articulates how and why a foundation will use its resources to achieve its mission and vision. The theory-of-philanthropy approach is designed to help foundations align their strategies, governance, operating and accountability procedures, and grantmaking profile and policies with their resources and mission. (Patton, et al., 2015, p.7)

The process of making the theory explicit surfaces alignment problems and arguably helps a foundation become more effective by integrating its internal and external systems.

The authors articulate more than 30 elements for a foundation to consider when identifying its theory of philanthropy. Particular elements that are important for identifying the foundation's evaluation needs include:

- *Philanthropic niche and approach.* The foundation's overall approach to funding signals what kind of evaluative support will be needed and at what level. (See Table 1.) Responsive grantmakers, for example, may want robust grant-level monitoring and evaluation practices that program staff can implement on their own, while strategic philanthropists may want in-house evaluation staff to support program staff with learning and sense-making over the full strategy life cycle. Limited-life foundations, on the other hand, may be concerned with

TABLE 1 Examples of How a Foundation's Niche and Approach Affect Evaluation Needs

	Responsive Grantmaking	Strategic Philanthropy
Description	Foundations make grants in response to requests from nonprofits that fall within the foundation's broad mission and guidelines. Individual nonprofits set their own specific goals and strategies to achieve them.	Foundations seek to achieve their own clearly defined goals, pursue those goals in collaboration with grantees, and then track their success in achieving them.
Primary Unit of Analysis	Individual grantees	Foundation strategy
Common Questions	• Are grantees producing their intended results? • What are ways to support individual grantees to be more effective?	• Is the strategy producing its intended results? • What strategy activities need to be adapted based on observed results?
Common Evaluation Approaches	• Program/project evaluation • Grantee-reported outputs and outcomes monitoring	• Strategy evaluation
Evaluation Staff Roles	Typically, no internal staff are dedicated exclusively to evaluation functions. Foundations may engage external consultants periodically for: • development of internal evaluation systems, • grantee capacity building on evaluation, and • aggregate evaluations at goal level.	• Support development of strategy. • Support development of evaluation plans. • Help to identify external evaluators. • Facilitate strategic learning within and across teams. • Manage internal and external communications about results.

commissioning external evaluations to generate evidence and lessons that have lasting value for the fields in which they focus.

• *Overarching principles and values.* Articulated standards of behavior and judgments about what is important to the foundation provide critical guideposts for evaluative practice. A value commitment to openness and transparency, for example, has direct implications for what information gets shared both internally and externally, as well as for the amount of evaluation staff time and resources that are allocated to

externally communicating evaluation findings. A commitment to creativity and experimentation requires a strong focus on rapid learning and continuous improvement. A commitment to results accountability requires attention to process and outcomes at multiple levels (e.g., individual grant, strategy, program, and overall foundation).

• *Strategy.* Foundations use different approaches for promoting social change, including prescriptive strategies that provide replicable or semistandardized models or solutions, and adaptive strategies that

are more dynamic and require unique, context-based solutions. While many foundations fund both types, they require foundations to embrace different evaluation questions and approaches, which can have different time and resource implications (Britt & Coffman, 2012). Models are best suited to formative and summative evaluation, for example, while emergent strategies are better suited to approaches like developmental evaluation that require more staff time and engagement (Patton, 2011).

- *Leadership roles.* The orientation of a foundation's leaders to evaluative issues like tolerance for risk, valuing of evidence, and openness to failure are critically important for how evaluation is positioned and incentivized. Leaders who are open to risk taking and potential failure, for example, will have different expectations about results and ask different questions of program staff (e.g., "What you have learned?" and "How did you adapt?" instead of "Did you hit your target?"). An evaluation function that focuses on establishing clear accountability and compliance mechanisms can be a good fit for leaders with lower risk tolerance.

- *Staff roles.* The roles of program staff across foundations depend on many things, including the number of dollars that have to go out the door to meet the required annual payout, program officers' substantive knowledge of the field, how big their portfolios are, and whether they play active roles in their strategies. Program staff may be conceived of as network builders, facilitators of learning, content experts, thought leaders, institution builders, nonprofit capacity builders, or financiers. How evaluation staff interact with and support program staff should look different for differing program roles. Program staff with deep topical expertise, for example, may get the most value from evaluation that helps them to understand the realities of on-the-ground implementation. Those whose role is focused on selecting and supporting high-quality individual grantees may benefit most from

[E]ven the foundation's roots or origin story can be important for evaluation. David and Enright (2015) refer to these as a foundation's "source codes," and identify three that impact philanthropy: banks, universities, and for-profit corporations.

an evaluation function that concentrates at that level. Program officers who take a field-building role in a region or issue area may want help assessing field capacity or the network of relationships among actors in a system.

- *Arenas of action.* This element refers to the areas in which foundations aim to make a difference. Foundations that emphasize general operating support for anchor institutions in a field, for example, may take a more flexible or hands-off approach to evaluation or place power over resources for evaluation in the hands of grantees themselves. Foundations investing in new issues or emerging areas may find that it is beneficial to take on more of an evaluation capacity-building role in the field. Foundations that work in areas where there are many other experienced funders may find that they are able to coordinate with or piggyback on what others are doing.

This list of elements is not exhaustive, and many others related to the theory of philanthropy may be important to consider. For example, even the foundation's roots or origin story can be important for evaluation. David and Enright (2015) refer to these as a foundation's "source codes," and identify three that impact philanthropy: banks, universities, and for-profit corporations. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, for example, was

TABLE 2 Evaluation Median Staffing and Spending in Foundations, 2015

	Overall Median (n = 127)	< $20M in giving	$20M–$49M in giving	$50M–$200M in giving	> $200M in giving
How many full-time equivalent (FTE) staff are regularly dedicated to evaluation work?	**1.5**	1.0	1.0	2.0	4.0
In the most recent fiscal year, how much did your foundation spend on evaluation?	**$200,000**	$100,000	$80,000	$500,000	$5.5M

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started by the founder of UPS Inc., and a large percentage of board members are former UPS executives. The UPS corporate culture of performance and results tracking around parcel delivery has influenced the foundation's orientation toward evaluation, including its adoption of a results-based accountability approach across its programmatic work (see, e.g., Manno, 2006).

As these examples illustrate, a foundation's evaluation needs are driven by much more than just its strategies and grantmaking. Many variables combine to drive answers to the next two questions.

How Should the Evaluation Function Be Structured and Scoped?

This question considers evaluation's positioning in the organization (separate unit or embedded in program), staffing, spending, and the purpose or scope of responsibilities.[2]

To understand how foundations across the sector are approaching these structural issues, in 2015 the Center for Evaluation Innovation partnered with the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) to conduct an evaluation benchmarking

survey of foundations that either provide $10 million or more in annual giving or are members of the Evaluation Roundtable network (Center for Effective Philanthropy and Center for Evaluation Innovation, 2016). The survey sample consisted of 254 U.S. and Canadian independent and community foundations. The most senior evaluation staff person at each foundation was surveyed, or, if foundations did not have evaluation staff, the most senior program staff. Fifty percent, or 127 foundations, responded.

Benchmarking survey findings revealed the following about how foundations are structuring their evaluation functions.

- *Positioning in the organization.* About one-third of foundation respondents (34 percent) said the evaluation function operates as its own department. If evaluation was not its own department, it most often was embedded in program departments.

- *Reporting structure.* Almost two-thirds (62 percent) of respondents said they reported to the chief executive officer. Another 23 percent reported to another senior or executive-level staff.

[2]Patton, et al., (2015) also identify "evaluation approach" as one of the elements in a theory of philanthropy. This section separates out this element to explore more deeply.

FIGURE 2 The Percentage of Evaluation Staff with Evaluation-Related Responsibilities, 2015 (n=127)

Providing research or data to inform grantmaking strategy	90%
Evaluating foundation initiatives or strategies	88%
Refining grantmaking strategy during implementation	87%
Developing grantmaking strategy	86%
Designing and/or facilitating learning processes or events within the foundation	79%
Evaluating individual grants	71%
Compiling and/or monitoring metrics to measure foundation performance	71%
Designing and/or facilitating learning processes or events with grantees or other external stakeholders	70%
Improving grantee capacity for data collection or evaluation	69%
Conducting/commissioning satisfaction/perception surveys (of grantees or other stakeholders)	60%
Disseminating evaluation findings externally	57%

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- *Staffing.* The median number of staff dedicated to evaluation-related responsibilities was 1.5 full-time equivalents (FTEs). Even for the largest foundations (annual giving over $200 million), the median went up to only 2.0 FTEs. This translates into about one evaluation staff person for every 10 program staff.

- *Spending.* Respondents said that the median amount spent on evaluation in the most recent fiscal year was $200,000; this number naturally goes up for foundations with higher annual giving. (See Table 2.) But overall these figures mean that for every 100 program dollars, foundations spend about one dollar on evaluation. Evaluation spending is notoriously difficult for foundations to estimate, however, and only 35 percent of respondents were quite or extremely confident in the accuracy of their estimates.

- *Scope of responsibilities.* On average, respondents reported having eight different areas of evaluation-related responsibilities. They are distinct activities that range from supporting the development of grantmaking strategy to designing and facilitating learning processes or events and disseminating findings externally. (See Figure 2.)

Again, foundation needs should drive decisions about evaluation structure and scope. For example, foundations that do more proactive than responsive grantmaking are significantly more likely to have separate evaluation departments. Evaluation staff serve as internal supports for program staff who are responsible for developing and implementing strategies. They do things like conduct research to inform strategy, help to develop theories of change, guide external evaluator selection, facilitate learning processes, and support strategy reviews or

refreshes. (See Table 1.) Foundations that value sharing what they are learning may give the evaluation unit a budget to support their participation in the broader philanthropic field; of benchmarking survey respondents with a separate evaluation unit, 79 percent had their own budget.

Again, there is no one right way to approach structure and scope so that it guarantees all intended users find the process engaging and useful. But Evaluation Roundtable participants have suggested one thing that matters a great deal in making these choices — the evaluation function and staff must have sufficient authority within the organization. Ensuring that authority may mean positioning the director position at the executive staff level and as a direct report to the CEO; giving the evaluation unit its own budget or control over evaluation-related resources; or balancing the supply side of data production with learning activities to underscore the evaluation function's value to programmatic work.

What Should the Evaluation Culture Be?

The topic of culture is trending in philanthropy. The conversation primarily has been about a foundation's overall organizational culture, which David and Enright (2015) define as its "personality, behaviors, and underlying assumptions" (p. 2) and as highly influential to its ability to fulfill its mission and effectiveness. Patton, et al. (2015) would agree, listing organizational culture as one of the elements in a theory of philanthropy.

The concept of culture also can apply to the evaluation function itself and how both foundation staff and grantees experience evaluation in their day-to-day work. At least three elements related to evaluation culture are important to align with foundation needs.

1. *Espoused evaluation principles.* Informed by foundation values, evaluation principles help to guide how the foundation thinks about and approaches data gathering and use. Principles set expectations about where evaluation fits into the grantmaking process and define what activities should be prioritized. They signal staff, grantees, and other partners about expectations regarding measurement and how it will be used. They can help to define what "counts" as evidence (see, e.g., Schorr, 2016). (See Table 3.)

2. *Artifacts.* Foundations typically have many concrete tools and templates related to their evaluation practice. For example, artifacts may come in the form of grantee proposal requirements, reporting forms, strategy templates, evaluation and learning plans, and board books. They send important signals about the foundation's evaluative standards and expected consistency or degrees of flexibility.

3. *Rituals and processes.* This is the practice element of evaluation culture, or the activities that are institutionalized or expected in the foundation and from grantees. They might include things like the evaluation contracting process, the strategy review or refresh process, or how foundations approach evaluation presentations at board meetings.

Aligning culture with foundation needs is, again, critical. Foundations that value transparency, for example, should incentivize sharing with grantees and partners what is learned from evaluation, and have practices in place to support that sharing. Foundation boards that play a strong accountability role will want board books with clear indicators of progress. Foundations that support inclusion, diversity, or equity will want to align multiple practices with those goals, including evaluation contracting, the development of evaluation questions (e.g., answering critical questions about the effect of a strategy on different populations and on the structural drivers of inequity), and ensuring that evaluation practices are culturally competent and oriented toward participant ownership and empowerment.

Common Misalignments Between Foundations and Their Evaluation Functions

In addition to the benchmarking survey conducted in collaboration with the CEP, in 2015 the Center for Evaluation Innovation (CEI) conducted confidential interviews with senior

TABLE 3 Examples of Guiding Principles for Evaluation

William and Flora Hewlett Foundation	Walton Family Foundation	David and Lucile Packard Foundation
1. We lead with purpose. We design evaluation with actions and decisions in mind. We ask, "How and when will we use the information that comes from this evaluation." 2. Evaluation is fundamentally a learning process. As we engage in evaluation planning, implementation, and use of results, we actively learn and adapt. 3. We treat evaluation as an explicit and key part of strategy development. 4. We cannot evaluate everything, so we choose strategically. 5. We choose methods of measurement that allow us to maximize rigor without compromising relevance. 6. We share our intentions to evaluate, and our findings, with appropriate audiences. 7. We use the data!	1. *Actionable:* Evaluations are designed to generate meaningful, interpretable results that are useful for informing decisions by the board and staff. 2. *Objective:* Evaluations are conducted or informed by the foundation's evaluation unit, which has been established as a separate entity that works in parallel with, but outside of, the focus areas. 3. *Collaborative:* Evaluation unit staff work closely with program staff on all evaluations, ensuring incorporation of the program staff's deep subject-matter expertise and experience with projects and grantees. 4. *Rigorous and cost-effective:* Achieving the balance between rigor and cost starts with ensuring that evaluations focus on the most useful information that can feasibly be obtained and not on trying to measure everything.	We are guided by a set of five core values: integrity, respect for all people, belief in individual leadership, capacity to think big, and commitment to effectiveness. These values — in particular, our commitment to effectiveness — have led us to a monitoring, evaluation and learning approach that emphasizes learning and continuous improvement, with the end goal of making the greatest difference possible in our areas of focus. In this spirit, we have developed a set of five guiding principles for our monitoring, evaluation, and learning efforts: 1. Continuously learn and adapt. 2. Learn in partnership. 3. Inform our decisions with multiple inputs. 4. Cultivate curiosity. 5. Share learning to amplify impact.
Source: William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (2012)	Source: Holley, Recchia, Carr, & Minkel (2014)	Source: David and Lucile Packard Foundation (2015)

evaluation staff from 41 Evaluation Roundtable participants. The purpose was to go deeper on questions about evaluation work and how and why foundations have made certain choices about how their work is structured and positioned.

This qualitative research, combined with the benchmarking survey data, revealed some common tensions and challenges that can arise when foundation needs and evaluation structures and cultures are not aligned.

Role Expectations That Cannot Be Met With Existing Resources

As revealed above, 2015 benchmarking research showed that the median number of staff dedicated to evaluation-related responsibilities in foundations was 1.5 FTEs. Evaluation staffing generally is low and always has been.

At the same time, the scope of responsibilities is large, particularly when evaluation staff guide performance tracking at multiple levels (grant,

The most promising approach to realignment, however, is to right-size the scope of responsibilities for evaluation staff capacity, prioritizing evaluation work where it matters the most. For example, when setting up its new evaluation function, the Kresge Foundation made it an explicit principle to prioritize: "We can't evaluate every grant, so we set priorities that include initiatives, strategy areas, and higher-risk grants" (Reid, 2016, p. 4).

strategy, portfolio, foundation), and support the evaluative thinking and practice of many strategies and stakeholders at once.

It is unlikely that the number of evaluation FTEs in foundations will rise to meet the scope of responsibilities that evaluation staff have assumed, although some foundations have begun hiring different staff to lead distinct but related functions (e.g., a director of evaluation and a director of learning). In fact, the evaluation staffing numbers from 2015 are consistent with numbers from 2009 (Patrizi Associates, 2010), even though the scope of responsibilities has increased in that same time frame.

As a result, evaluation staff must struggle to manage their many responsibilities. To do this, many have adopted a demand-driven approach that focuses their time where the most energy and momentum exists within the foundation for

evaluation and learning. The result can be an uneven distribution across the foundation regarding the extent to which program staff (and their grantees) engage in quality evaluative practice. Others have tackled the mismatch between evaluation resources and demands by creating highly structured processes and templates for application by all program staff without support from evaluation staff. Still other leanly staffed evaluation departments simply do their best to meet wide-ranging demands, creating the uneasy sensation that they are unable to do any one task well.

Fixing this means realigning the foundation's needs with the evaluation structure and culture. This may be a budget matter, for example, solved by hiring more in-house evaluation staff or supplying more resources for evaluation consultants. It also could be a role realignment issue between program and evaluation staff. When program staff lack bandwidth in their busy roles, they often ask evaluators to take on responsibilities that they would normally lead, like developing a theory of change or taking responsibility for strategic learning (Coffman, 2016). Building these capacities among program staff could free up evaluation staff to focus on other things.

The most promising approach to realignment, however, is to right-size the scope of responsibilities for evaluation staff capacity, prioritizing evaluation work where it matters the most. For example, when setting up its new evaluation function, the Kresge Foundation made it an explicit principle to prioritize: "We can't evaluate every grant, so we set priorities that include initiatives, strategy areas, and higher-risk grants" (Reid, 2016, p. 4). In fact, all foundations that are new to evaluation should choose a few things to do that best fit the foundation's needs, and do them long enough to master them and get them embedded in the organization's way of working before adding new evaluative activities or areas of focus. Scoping down the evaluation function can be difficult, as it means accepting that some work will go unevaluated or some evaluation desires unfulfilled. But it is better to do some things well that add clear value to the work than it is to underperform on many things because resources do not match demands.

Unfulfilled Commitments to Foundation Values

While most foundations have a set of espoused values, at times evaluation practice is not aligned to the standards of behavior those values promote.

For example, many foundations value openness and transparency, or the sharing of information publicly beyond what the government requires in order to help others understand who foundations are, what they do, and how they are performing. However, as Buteau, Glickman, Leiwant, and Loh (2016) found in a survey of 145 independent and community foundation CEOs and a review of more than 70 foundation websites, foundations are not very transparent:

> when it comes to sharing how they assess their performance or the lessons learned, despite their beliefs that it would be beneficial to do so. (p. 5)

Specifically, they are least transparent when it comes to failure. Less than one-third said their foundations are very or extremely transparent regarding what does not work. Evaluation benchmarking results in 2015 corroborate these findings. When asked about the appropriateness of their foundations' investment levels, 71 percent said that their foundation invests too little in disseminating evaluation findings externally.

Chief executive officers say that the most common factor limiting transparency is lack of staff time (Buteau, et al., 2016). This is a clear alignment issue between foundation values and staff roles.

Like evaluation staff, program staff have many responsibilities, including developing strategy, making and monitoring grants, convening and network building, staying immersed in the field, and coordinating with other funders. Leaders may want to examine where and how staff spend their time and reengineer foundation practices to ensure that staff roles are more in line with the organization's values. The large amount of time that both program and evaluation staff typically spend on strategy development, for example, may represent one opportunity for adjustment. Benchmarking survey results revealed that a higher percentage of evaluation staff said it was a priority for them to spend time on developing

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grantmaking strategy (34 percent) than on disseminating findings externally (9 percent).

Another common value relates to mutual respect, or seeking out and listening to the ideas and advice of others. For foundations that practice more proactive grantmaking, often the "locus of control" for strategic decision-making is internal to the foundation. Despite good intentions, evaluation and learning approaches often keep the foundation at the center of learning, answering evaluation questions that program staff want to know without considering other critical users and what they want or need to know. Evaluation benchmarking survey findings support this assertion. Fifty-eight percent of respondents said their foundations invest too little in designing or facilitating learning processes or events with grantees or other external stakeholders.

Aligning the value of mutual respect or partnership with evaluation rituals and processes would require rethinking who needs to learn, as well as on what evaluation should focus. It would require designing evaluation and learning approaches that support collective learning and make collective action smarter and more aligned. Such practices would help the foundation to align its strategic choices and actions with the interests of grantees, nongrantees, and other funders all working in similar systems or on similar problems.

"Over-Templatizing" for Diverse Types of Strategies

Many foundations engage in a diverse array of strategies. At the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (2016), for example,

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Different types of strategies require foundations to have different expectations about what accountability means for each strategy type, and the practices and tools that go along with holding those strategies accountable.

The foundation's work encompasses a variety of approaches: some aim for policy or regulatory reform, while others focus on field-building or research, and still others are built around providing direct services. Some are local, with modest budgets, while others are national or global campaigns much larger in scope and scale. Most recently, we have launched several "emergent strategies" focused on exploring a field before settling in on a specific set of outcomes. (p. 12)

Different types of strategies require foundations to have different expectations about what accountability means for each strategy type, and the practices and tools that go along with holding those strategies accountable.

Historically, the concept of accountability has focused on the achievement of intended results. Being accountable has meant a commitment to tracking those results, along with asking what is getting in the way of them and designing the work to guard against it. Two main types of failures can get in the way: theory failure — no real causal relationship between strategies used and desired outcomes, or implementation failure — the theory might be right, but sufficient resources and capacities do not exist to implement it and produce results (Suchman, 1967).

Foundations interested in guarding against these failures have aimed for both smarter planning and better implementation across all of their grantmaking. They have adopted public- and private-sector approaches and tools to improve

the rigor of their strategy designs, such as strategic planning and mapping (e.g., logic models, theories of change). In addition, they have aimed for better use of data, research, and evaluation during strategy development, reducing the likelihood of repeating past mistakes and wasting money (addressing theory failure). Ongoing monitoring practices via progress reports and site visits have become mechanisms for ensuring fidelity to smart planning (addressing implementation failure). And summative evaluation and results tracking (e.g., indicators, dashboards) have become mechanisms for ensuring ultimate accountability for results (addressing both theory failure and implementation failure).

To ensure consistency in strategy quality and accountability across the foundation, many foundations require all program staff to use a select set of the same accountability-related templates and tools. These may include theory-of-change templates, specific strategy formats, dashboards, or even return-on-investment estimates (see, e.g., Parker, 2016).

These accountability mechanisms have worked well for well-researched, straightforward, or direct-service strategies where confidence is high that an intervention will produce a particular effect. But they do not seem to improve the likelihood of success for complex and emergent strategies where it is not possible to plan everything in advance and then stick to the plan (Patrizi, Thompson, Coffman, & Beer, 2013). Accountability mechanisms that overly focus on the upfront quality of the plan and faithful implementation of it are not actually addressing the kinds of failures that get in the way of results for complex change initiatives. In fact, they might actually reduce chances for success because they incentivize the wrong kind of thinking and action: sticking to the plan instead of adapting. Nonetheless, many foundations are applying traditional accountability processes and tools to complex change efforts because they have not adopted an alternative or flexible way of thinking about it.

While traditional approaches and tools for accountability work well for some strategies,

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for others these approaches and tools may need some realignment. For emergent strategies, it is data and documentation about what has been learned and how the foundation and its grantees have adapted in response to that learning that demonstrates foundations are being accountable.

Foundationwide templates to support strategy planning, evaluation, and learning are designed to solve a variety of problems. They simplify the process of compiling and aggregating information for senior management and board members; they improve the consistency of foundation processes and products; and they facilitate a shared understanding of performance and quality expectations by prompting program staff to answer the same questions in their planning and reporting. However, taken too far, standardized templates and processes can cover over significant variations in the work, lose their facilitative power among program staff, and quickly become a bureaucratic exercise to be completed rather than a tool for improving thinking and professional judgment.

Lack of Attention to Grantees, Where Most of the Work Takes Place

A recent CEP report on performance assessment led with the following: "Foundations achieve little alone — they pursue many of their goals through the work of their grantees. As a result, foundations are reliant on the performance of the nonprofits they fund" (Buteau, Gopal, & Glickman, 2015, p. 5). This is true for all foundations, regardless of their theory of philanthropy. The CEP's report went on to say, however, that its research with nonprofit leaders found that only one-third said their foundation funders supported them on performance assessment through either financial or nonmonetary assistance.

Evaluation benchmarking survey results corroborate the assertion that support for high-quality grantee-level evaluation and assessment is not always a demonstrated priority for foundations. Almost two-thirds of respondents said they funded evaluation for less than 10 percent of their individual grants. In addition, pulled by numerous competing demands, many

While traditional approaches and tools for accountability work well for some strategies, for others these approaches and tools may need some realignment. For emergent strategies, it is data and documentation about what has been learned and how the foundation and its grantees have adapted in response to that learning that demonstrates foundations are being accountable.

evaluation staff focus their time at other levels of assessment rather than on grantees. Half of evaluation leaders (51 percent) said evaluating foundation strategies and initiatives was a priority for them, while only a third (34 percent) said evaluating individual grants was.

The lion's share of evaluation-related attention at the grant level involves program staff monitoring of data and information that grantees submit via progress reports. Commenting on the CEP's report, Kelly Hunt (2015), former chief program learning officer at the New York State Health Foundation, said,

> The trouble is, most nonprofits struggle to collect the right information and use it effectively. In addition, these organizations cannot afford to build internal capacity or hire outside experts to conduct strong evaluations. This is where foundations can and should be helpful. (para. 1)

This is an alignment issue for many foundations. While giving out grants is the main thing that foundations do, and both foundations and

Foundations that fund strategies and initiatives increasingly are recognizing that learning is real work and part of a strategy rather than an optional add-on. They see its value for their own work and decision-making. But this realization has not yet translated into investments in and attention toward supporting grantees to answer their own evaluation questions so that data can inform their own decision making, in spite of the fact that the performance of foundation strategies is dependent on the performance of grantees.

grantees care about assessment, the level of attention and resources given to supporting high-quality grantee-level evaluation and assessment is not aligned with the expressed desire to get good evaluative information. Fixing this does not necessarily require cost- and labor-intensive evaluation efforts. It can, for example, mean supporting program staff in helping grantee applicants to ask better evaluative questions about their work or focus assessment efforts where they have the most learning value. Freeing up evaluation staff to do that, however, would require many foundations to change the scope of evaluation function responsibilities, as discussed earlier.

Awareness about a lack of alignment in this area is not new. Grantees have long expressed frustration with proposal and progress-report templates that require them to submit data in formats that do not always fit with the nature of their work, or that require data collection that does not help them to answer their own questions about performance or understand why certain outcomes have or have not been achieved so they can adapt. A common refrain at grantee meetings is, "If foundations want good evaluation data, then they need to pay for it." Some foundations, like the New York State Health Foundation, are trying to tackle this by developing and testing evaluation technical-assistance models rather than providing one-off trainings or written resources. But at the sector level, philanthropy has not yet addressed the lack of grantee-level evaluation investment, in terms of either actual dollars or other meaningful supports to build grantee capacity and focus efforts where they can be most useful to both grantees and funders.

The field should be long past the debate that putting dollars toward evaluation takes dollars away from programs. Foundations that fund strategies and initiatives increasingly are recognizing that learning is real work and part of a strategy rather than an optional add-on. They see its value for their own work and decision-making. But this realization has not yet translated into investments in and attention toward supporting grantees to answer their own evaluation questions so that data can inform their own decision making, in spite of the fact that the performance of foundation strategies is dependent on the performance of grantees. This is an important area for further examination and innovation.

Leadership Engagement That Does Not Match Broader Practice

Leadership support for evaluation matters a great deal. Evaluation benchmarking survey results found that foundations are significantly more likely to experience a long list of evaluation challenges — ranging from having trouble securing sufficient evaluation funds, to incentivizing use of evaluation data for decision-making and sharing learning externally — if the board is less

supportive of evaluation or the senior management engages too little with it.

But best practices for engaging leaders on evaluation in authentic ways and in ways that help them to fulfill their stewardship roles remain in short supply across the sector. In fact, many foundations engage in routines with their boards that are out of alignment with the foundation's espoused evaluation culture. The field is full of stories in which evaluation questions are selected and designs implemented with high program-staff satisfaction, but when it comes time to share evaluation findings with the board, members suddenly pose new or different questions (typically about impact and often too early) that were not part of the evaluation's original scope or intent.

Instead of aligning boards and program staff on evaluation culture, board books are carefully curated and include metrics, executive dashboards, logic models, or other types of simplified information for often-complex strategies. Negative results get downplayed. Intricate preparation and dress rehearsals for evaluation presentations ensure that hard questions either do not get asked or have carefully scripted answers.

Ten years ago, Patti Patrizi (2006) urged foundations "to launch an evaluation conversation in which CEOs and board members, assisted by evaluators, engage in an ongoing, collaborative inquiry that explores the key questions that underlie a foundation's investments" (p. 3). She went on to encourage foundation leaders to take on the role of "evaluative inquiry" in collaboration with program staff. Evaluative inquiry, she wrote,

> works by engaging foundation leaders in conversations that critically explore the tensions and test the assumptions behind program strategy. It moves beyond strategy papers and periodic reports to a more active, iterative, and timely struggle with uncertainty, values, and risk. (p. 12)

While some foundations clearly practice this form of authentic inquiry with their boards and CEOs, this kind of engagement does not yet appear to be occurring across much of the sector. Even when program staff have embraced an evaluation culture focused on learning, this spirit of inquiry has not extended upward into the boardroom.

For many foundations, this remains a ripe opportunity for realignment. This might mean, for example, engaging in deeper and more meaningful conversations with smaller committees of board members; cycling strategies through the board docket at key decision points in their development (when critical decisions need to be made, not just at the halfway mark); providing board members with different kinds of reports for different kinds of strategies; giving emergent strategies several years of implementation before reporting to the board on results; or engaging the board in scenario and risk planning as strategies are being developed, rather than just reporting in when they are fully baked.

Conclusion

At best, frequent changes in how foundations approach evaluation are a sign that they are in a regular cycle of continuous improvement as needs change. At worst, they are a sign that foundations and evaluation staff are struggling to find approaches that add real value to foundation efforts and that fit the wide and growing demands, audiences, and purposes for evaluative work.

Evaluation functions, like program strategies, require intentional and regular assessment and adaptation. In other words, foundations should be thinking more evaluatively about their evaluation work. To support that assessment, foundations should identify signals of success that indicate the evaluation function is adding value to the foundation's work, as well as signals that its fit might be fractured. (See Table 4.)

One signal of a possible lack of alignment is evaluation staff turnover. Benchmarking survey data showed that in 2015, over one-third of survey respondents had been in their positions just two years or less. In part, this is because a number of functions had been newly created. But this percentage also represents the fact

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TABLE 4 Examples of Signals of Success and Misalignment for Evaluation Functions

Signals of Success	Signals That the Function May Be Misaligned
• Program staff demand for evaluation — across the foundation and not just in particular areas	• Regular lack of compliance with evaluation processes
• Use of data for decision-making and clear examples of adaptation, both in program and at the executive level	• Unused or ignored evaluation data and findings
• Program staff satisfaction with external evaluators	• Constantly overwhelmed evaluation staff
• Grantee satisfaction with the foundation's approach (e.g., as measured through grantee perception reports)	• Frequent evaluation function redesign, with little prioritization among areas of focus or tasks
• Leadership support and satisfaction — CEO and board	• Board members asking, "But what didn't work?"
	• Disproportionate amounts of time spent on some activities compared to others

that many evaluation staff do not stay in their positions long. If this is happening, it is worth exploring why.

Foundations overall will continue to evolve. Key transition points in this process will offer natural opportunities for pausing and assessing the evaluation function's fit. But rather than wait for these opportunities to occur, foundations should think about doing this more systematically. Evaluation functions, just like program strategies, should be on regular cycles of review and refresh.

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