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Strategic Learning in Practice: A Case Study of the Kauffman Foundation

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Keywords: Strategy, organizational learning, evaluation, foundations

Introduction

Albert Einstein is apocryphally credited with saying that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. It is an adage that continues to resonate, if only because we see it play out so often in the world around us. For foundations, institutions that some argue are particularly prone to this affliction (e.g., Webb, 2018; Wooster, 2006; Nielsen, 2002), a number of formal models of philanthropy have been developed in an attempt to avoid this destructive trap: strategic philanthropy (Brest & Harvey, 2008), social return on investment (Forti & Goldberg, 2015), effective altruism (MacAskill, 2015), human-centered design (Tantia, 2017), and, more recently, strategic learning (Patrizi, Thompson, Coffman, & Beer, 2013; Winkler & Fyffe, 2016). None of these models are mutually exclusive, and various foundations have begun combining them in new and powerful ways as they seek to tackle entrenched and complex social challenges, from environmental conservation and reducing poverty to fostering a more civil political discourse.

Among these new models, perhaps the most intuitive and appealing is strategic learning — also referred to as organizational or emergent learning (Darling, Guber, Smith, & Stiles, 2016), particularly when paired with a formal evaluation function (Hoole & Patterson, 2008). Rooted in seminal works such as Senge's (1990) *The Fifth Discipline* and others that further clarified and expanded on those key concepts (e.g., Easterby-Smith, 1997; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Torres & Preskill, 2001), strategic learning takes on a related but distinct role when applied to the foundation and nonprofit sectors.

Key Points

- Increasingly, foundations and nonprofits are seeking to engage their staff in learning and reflection activities that assess successes and challenges, and then generate insights that can improve programs and funding strategies. Yet, despite the intuitive benefits, there are common challenges that often stand in the way of promoting strategic learning for continuous improvement.
- For the past year, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation has been focused on creating more systematic and intentional strategic learning across our organization. As part of this work we cultivated a select cohort of staff to be “learning champions,” created simple tools and processes that can more easily capture lessons generated internally and externally, and provided training in facilitation techniques to ensure insights are connecting back into our strategies to drive decision-making. Through the cohort, we are also developing new approaches to building a culture of learning and trust that supports transparent reflection.
- This article provides guidance to help other foundations and nonprofits create stronger internal learning systems, including specific tools and practices, insights gained from our experiences, examples of programs and strategies utilizing evidence to improve, and critical lessons that we've learned along the way.

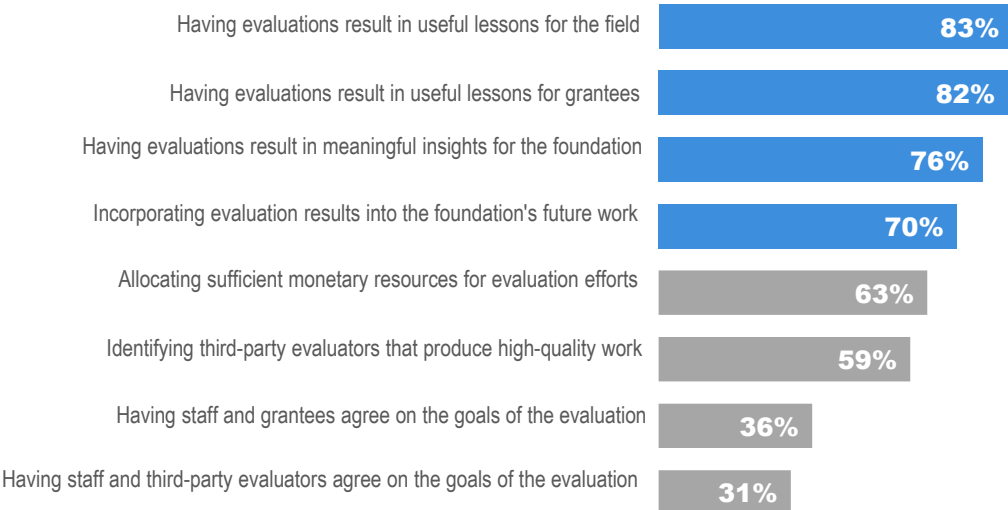
The Center for Evaluation Innovation (2018) defines the concept of strategic learning as

using evaluation to help organizations or groups learn quickly from their work so they can learn

FIGURE 1 Center for Effective Philanthropy Survey Data on Evaluation and Learning Challenges

The **top four challenges** highlighted by evaluation staff are related to the difficulty in translating evaluation to learning.

Percentage of evaluation staff who say the following practices have been at least somewhat challenging:



SOURCE: Center for Effective Philanthropy (2016)

from and adapt their strategies. It means integrating evaluation and evaluative thinking into strategic decision-making and bringing timely data to the table for reflection and use. It means making evaluation a part of the intervention — embedding it so that it influences the process. (para. 1)

In short, strategic learning is about using the best evidence available for intentional reflection to drive continuous improvement.

It is unlikely that there are many leaders who would be opposed to strategic learning (Lipshitz, Popper, & Friedman, 2002), but foundations and many other types of public organizations may struggle to develop functioning systems to cultivate, capture, and apply lessons derived from successes and, perhaps more importantly, from failures. For example, a survey of foundation evaluation staff conducted by the Center for Effective Philanthropy (Buteau & Coffman, 2016) provides some evidence that philanthropy, in particular, often struggles to build these systems.

The top three challenges identified by respondents were: 1) “having evaluations result in useful lessons for the field” (selected by 83 percent); 2) “having evaluations result in useful lessons for grantees” (82 percent); and 3) “having evaluations result in meaningful insights for the foundation” (76 percent). (See Figure 1.) Based on these findings, it would appear that an observation by Roth (1996) holds true today for foundations: “The concept of organizational learning is as elusive as it is popular” (p. 1).

There is a disconnect between the general consensus that reflection and learning are beneficial and the lack of such systems being used in practice. In particular, organizations may be impeded by the lack of available models that have been tested in foundation and nonprofit settings, limited access to practical tools and playbooks, and, potentially, a more general misunderstanding about when and where strategic learning can be most valuable. And these barriers could apply

across multiple dimensions of organizational learning: knowledge acquisition, distribution, interpretation, and memory (Huber, 1991).

In this article, we first explore some of the key challenges that organizations face when building strategic learning systems. From there, a case study of the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation (EMKF) experience is presented, with a focus on the overall learning and evaluation framework, a description of the key learning strategy (the Learning Champions Initiative), as well as the successes, challenges, and lessons that we've experienced. Along the way we also highlight specific tools used by the foundation and examples of the strategic learning process in action.

Common Obstacles to Strategic Learning

Through conversations with other foundations, anecdotes from available resources on the topic (e.g., Milway & Saxton, 2011), and our own experiences at EMKF, we have identified at least six common obstacles that may prevent an organization from successfully developing a functioning strategic learning system. A failure to assess and then explicitly plan for how to mitigate these risks, to the extent they exist in a particular setting, can leave even the most well-meaning organizations struggling to make progress.

1. *Adequate time for reflection:* One of the first and most commonly mentioned challenges incorporating learning practices is that staff lacks the time to make it a priority. As Julia Coffman (2017) notes: "Our benchmarking research shows that the biggest barrier to program staff learning in foundations is finding ... time" (para. 21). Staff often doesn't have enough hours in the day to get everything done, and setting aside time to reflect and capture learning may be seen as a low priority compared to delivering a program and serving constituents. One solution offered by Coffman (2018) is to ensure that learning practices are woven into existing processes, rather than layered on top of them. Building on the work of Daniel Kahneman (2013) and others, she argues
2. *It's too abstract:* Challenges also often arise because strategic learning, while it seems intuitive, can be overwhelming and abstract when put into practice. In particular, staff members often don't have mental models or tangible reference points upon which to structure their reflections. By analogy, one might imagine strategic learning as a sheer rock wall — it's difficult to know where to start or what path to take to reach the summit. But if the wall includes a series of anchors, the path becomes much clearer as you have something to hold onto. Such holds and anchors can be provided by developing a set of specific learning questions at the outset of a project: concrete questions

[W]e have identified at least six common obstacles that may prevent an organization from successfully developing a functioning strategic learning system. A failure to assess and then explicitly plan for how to mitigate these risks, to the extent they exist in a particular setting, can leave even the most well-meaning organizations struggling to make progress.

that for strategic learning to take hold we must "build a set of habits into our day-to-day work that we can remember and repeat automatically" (para. 14); these include calling out assumptions and hypotheses explicitly; asking better questions; having greater awareness of cognitive biases; exploring not only what happened, but why; and connecting learning to action.

In our view, an 80/20 emphasis on learning and accountability, respectively, strikes a proper balance to cultivate strategic learning without undermining the value of rigorous evaluation practice.

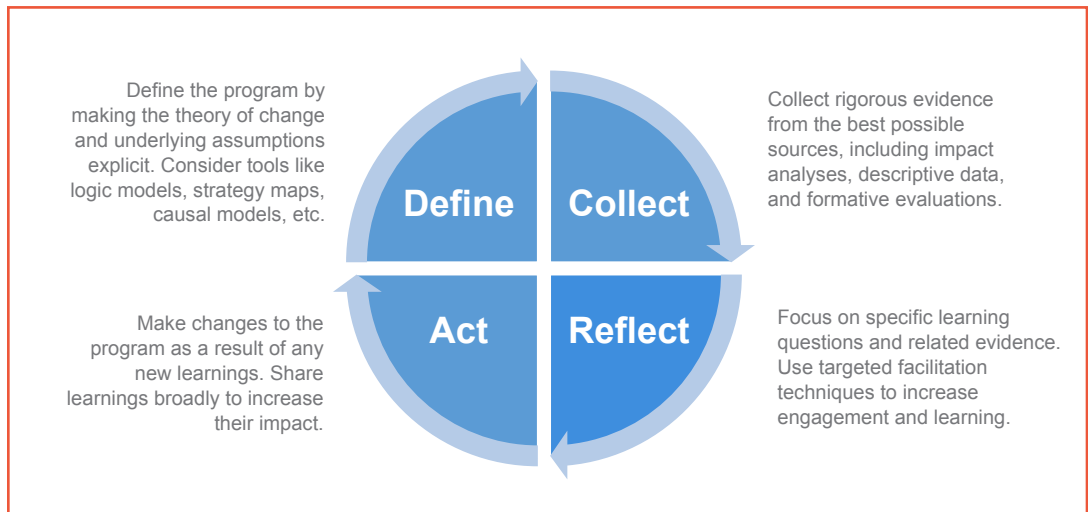
from staff about the strategy, its assumptions, and its hypotheses. They provide structure and focus that help to move from the ambiguous and difficult question — “What have you learned about your strategy?” — to the much more approachable question: “What have you learned about this specific hypothesis that we are testing in our strategy?” In addition, the time spent reflecting on these questions should involve a facilitation technique designed to ensure that reflection is concrete and grounded (e.g., Preskill, Gutiérrez, & Mack, 2017).

3. *Undefined cultural values around accountability and risk:* There is an inherent balance between the use of evaluation for accountability and its use for learning (Guijt, 2010). Both are important and necessary. Strong trust means that grantees feel comfortable admitting the reality of any given grant to a program officer, and, in turn, the program officer feels comfortable sharing that reality with senior leadership. Too much emphasis on accountability can stifle the trust and transparency needed to have meaningful conversations about what’s working and what isn’t. On the other hand, too much emphasis on learning without discussion of expected milestones may negatively alter performance incentives. Thus, it is critical to establish clear expectations around how

evaluation and evidence will be used and for what purpose. In our view, an 80/20 emphasis on learning and accountability, respectively, strikes a proper balance to cultivate strategic learning without undermining the value of rigorous evaluation practice.¹ In addition to organizational values around accountability, there also needs to be a strong culture of taking informed, calculated risks that are designed to inform specific learning questions, whether the project fails or succeeds. In particular, introducing and reinforcing the idea of “failing well” (McArdle, 2014) is an important part of strategic learning because staff need the psychological safety to admit when mistakes happen so they can then be examined and mined for lessons (Edmondson, 2008). Hosting events like a “Fail Fest” or a “Worst Grant Contest,” like the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, can help create that safe space for staff to talk about challenges (Wang, 2016).

4. *Seeing value for the effort:* If staff members are going to commit their limited time to reflection and learning work, those practices must return clear and direct value to them in exchange. In short, strategic learning cannot be a purely intellectual exercise, but instead must be closely connected to processes for refining or shifting how the organization operates or delivers a program. Ensuring that learning plans are sufficiently focused on questions that directly affect the day-to-day work of staff — as opposed to higher-level or more abstract questions — can help create better alignment between the time staff puts into strategic learning and the value it returns. Additionally, it’s important that time spent learning is right-sized for the intended purpose of the reflection. It may be possible to fit some learning conversations into the last five minutes of a meeting, where others will require a more significant time investment.

¹ In practice, the 80/20 rule is both a goal and a mnemonic device for framing an organization’s expectations about how performance — internally and externally — will be assessed. It’s also important to note that this rule refers to the achievement of deliverables and outcomes, not to budgetary or spending concerns.

FIGURE 2 The EMKF Model of Learning and Evaluation

5. *Building a knowledge management system:* Individual learning is important, but of limited value unless those lessons can be captured and then shared with others throughout the organization through an “intuitive knowledge process” (Milway & Saxton, 2011, p. 47). While there are a few successful examples, most organizations struggle with knowledge management for two primary reasons — one involving technology, and the other, human nature. There are few technology platforms that make it easy for staff to capture and share what they’re learning in a timely way; every click between opening the interface and logging an entry exponentially reduces the likelihood that the platform will be used. And adding another process or software solution to figure out is unlikely to be successful among time-pressed staff.
6. *Distinguishing among simple, complicated, and complex:* Finally, there may be some confusion about the types of circumstances where strategic learning can provide the most value or leverage for an organization.

Specifically, several articles have focused on learning as a tool best suited to programs that involve significant complexity or uncertainty (Patrizi et al., 2013; Coffman & Beer, 2011; Preskill, Gopal, Mack, & Cook, 2014). However, this focus on strategic learning as a component of evaluations involving complexity or emergence may have obscured the value of these practices for most programs, regardless of type or context. All strategies and programs, whether simple, complicated, or complex (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2007), can benefit from the application of basic strategic learning principles and tools because conditions change, staff departs, and there is always room for improvement.

The Learning and Evaluation Framework

The learning and evaluation model developed at EMKF has four parts: Define, Collect, Reflect, and Act. (See Figure 2). Evaluation is the primary focus on the top half of the model; strategic learning drives the bottom half:²

²The EMKF model was created in collaboration with Valerie Bockstette and Tracy Foster at FSG, and is based on several existing organizational learning frameworks. For example, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (2015) created a four-step process: “plan, collect, analyze, act and improve.” Garvin (1993) recommended a “meaning, management, and measurement” model. And Preskill and Mack (2013) suggest five learning processes: reflection, dialogue, asking questions, identifying and challenging assumptions, and seeking feedback.

Attempting to engage staff in reflection and learning without first defining the key parameters (assumptions and hypotheses) and then gathering relevant evidence is likely to run headlong into the abstraction challenge.

- **Define** – Make the theory of change explicit. At the most basic level, every program, project, or strategic initiative has its own theory of change, a description of how results are expected to occur as the work unfolds (Chen, 1990). Within those theories are a set of often implicit causal hypotheses about what changes will occur and how they will happen. To set the stage for learning, it is important that these theories of change and assumptions are explicitly stated through logic models or other similar tools. From there, learning questions can be derived to help create those ‘anchors’ for future reflection and learning. At the Kauffman Foundation, each program area — Education, Entrepreneurship, and Kansas City Civic — has an explicit theory of change that defines and connects the strategic pillars to top-line goals. There are also corresponding logic models that establish how each strategy will be implemented (inputs, activities, and outputs) and top-line goals will be met (short-, intermediate-, and long-term outcomes). The assumptions and hypotheses derived from these logic models then form the basis for learning questions and learning plans.
- **Collect** – Gather data from appropriate sources. Having identified key learning questions, it is important to make sure data are collected that can provide adequate evidence to reflect on these questions. These

data should come from the most rigorous methods that are feasible within the context of the project or program (Lester, 2016). Whether it’s a randomized control trial, a quasi-experimental design, case studies, or simply descriptive outcome data drawn from conversations with constituents or a performance management system, the key is to ground learning in evidence to the greatest extent possible. At EMKF, for example, our grantees establish specific output and outcome metrics as part of the grant application process (Carr, Hembree, & Madden, 2018). Throughout the course of the grant they have interim check-ins with a program officer, and conversations focus on progress toward meeting key benchmarks. Based on insights and lessons drawn from these performance measurement data, amendments and course corrections are made as needed. At the time of the final report, the program officer and grantee capture the most significant lessons that were learned from the project, which can then be incorporated into the foundation’s Annual Learning Report (e.g., Carr & Hembree, 2018).

At this point in the process it’s important to note that while it may be tempting to skip these first two stages, doing so is a critical mistake that may leave an organization spinning its wheels instead of drawing actionable lessons. Attempting to engage staff in reflection and learning without first defining the key parameters (assumptions and hypotheses) and then gathering relevant evidence is likely to run headlong into the abstraction challenge.

- **Reflect** – Analyze the data and draw insights. The exact form reflection takes can vary, from taking several minutes in a monthly staff meeting to setting aside a few hours at an annual retreat. But the key is to focus staff reflection on a small number of learning questions, derived in the Define stage and informed by the Collect stage, preferably in intentionally facilitated sessions. Without these hooks and guidance, learning is too diffuse and amorphous for staff to engage in it efficiently

or effectively. The development of our Learning Champions Initiative was heavily influenced by our direct experience with these challenges.

- Act – Make adjustments and course corrections as appropriate. Having drawn lessons, the final step is deciding to what extent they require action. Are there strengths to be built on or weaknesses to be mitigated? Has some shift in the contextual environment required a change in strategy? Course correction and emergent strategy are important parts of working to solve challenging problems (Kania, Kramer, & Russell, 2014). The scope and direction of those changes should be informed by evidence and lessons learned along the way.

The Learning Champions Model

The Learning Champions Initiative (LCI) is the third phase of a much longer project at the Kauffman Foundation, conducted in partnership with consulting firm FSG, around using strategic learning tools to strengthen our evaluation work and drive continuous improvement.³ In the first two phases, we laid much of the groundwork by introducing basic concepts of organizational learning; identifying barriers that were inhibiting staff reflection, cultivation, and sharing of lessons to get a sense of which common obstacles were most likely to arise;⁴ and developing early templates to capture data and insights as part of the regular quarterly board reporting process.

Based on that early progress we decided to take a decentralized, bottom-up approach as the primary mechanism for implementing a strategic learning function. The hypothesis behind this initial phase of the project was that if we could bring together a cohort of staff from across the foundation and equip it with the right knowledge and tools, then reflection and learning practices

would become more embedded in each of the departments throughout the entire organization. As the project progresses, this hypothesis has been and will continue to be tested.⁵

Launched in 2017, the LCI has two overarching goals:

- Create more learning moments within each department. Learning moments are specific and concrete actions taken by staff to generate or collect reflections and lessons with colleagues. This could include asking probing questions, facilitating a learning session, or maintaining a learning log.
- Strengthen and further embed a culture of reflection and learning at the foundation. A culture of learning refers to a shared set of social norms and attitudes that supports and facilitates staff reflection, such as transparency, trust, and collaboration.

The initiative has four key elements:

1. Identify “learning champions.” Each department head, from both the program areas and operational teams, was asked to nominate at least one associate to serve as a learning champion for their team. This person is responsible for embedding the culture of learning and reflection in team meetings and discussions. In addition to the nominations, we also announced the project internally with a request for additional volunteers. In total, we have 19 learning champions in our first cohort, with about half nominated and half volunteering, representing close to a fifth of all staff.
2. Develop learning plans. The learning champion works with peers in the cohort and in their department to develop an annual

³The “learning champions” concept is based on a model developed by the Kaiser Permanente Community Benefit Foundation in collaboration with FSG.

⁴The top three results were lack of time and prioritization for learning, silos between departments that limit communication and collaboration, and a perception of risk aversion and reluctance to discuss failure openly for fear of repercussions.

⁵ The Kauffman Foundation has roughly 100 FTE staff. It’s unclear whether this same hypothesis would hold in a smaller organization, where it may be easier to engage all staff from the start. As such, these experiences may not generalize to smaller foundations or nonprofits.

In the long term, the goal of this project is for reflection and learning to be completely embedded into the daily work of every staff member in the foundation, facilitated by a culture that emphasizes transparency, trust, and continuous learning through experience.

learning plan. These plans outline two to three specific learning questions⁶ (e.g., “What do we most hope to learn about our strategy in the next 12 months?”), as well as how and when the team anticipates getting answers to these questions. (See Figure 3.)

3. Provide training on facilitation techniques. The cohort participated in an all-day workshop, led by Hallie Preskill from FSG, on how to facilitate adult learning. The group has also met with several other experts in the field, including Julia Coffman (2017, 2018) and Dan Coyle (2018), to learn more about the structures and values necessary to build a learning culture.
4. Build a community of practice. The learning champions are convened at least once a month in unstructured or semistructured sessions where they can share their experiences and lessons with one another. In addition, feedback is continually sought on ways that the program can be improved to better achieve the two overarching goals set out for the cohort.

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embedded into the daily work of every staff member in the foundation, facilitated by a culture that emphasizes transparency, trust, and continuous learning through experience.

Practical Tools

Throughout the development of the LCI we have created a number of tools, many of which are modifications of the emergent learning toolkit developed by Fourth Quadrant Partners (e.g. Darling & Parry, 2007; Darling et al., 2016).

Learning Plans

Each member of the cohort develops a learning plan for the year. These plans consist of an open-ended learning question that begins with, “To what extent and in what ways” (See Figure 3.) That question is then turned into a specific hypothesis, or if-then statement, that will be tested. To increase clarity around the second half of the hypothesis, the template also operationalizes what success will look like as a specific and concrete observation that can be empirically determined from a data source that is also identified. Finally, commitments are made around who will participate, the date of the next reflection session, and the facilitation technique likely to be used.

Before and After Action Review Prompts

To help learning champions facilitate informal learning moments within their own teams, we created a modified Before and After Action Review template. (See Figure 4.) These “questions to prompt reflection” cards are simple, nonintrusive, intuitive, and can show clear and immediate value when used during meetings and conversations with peers.

Year in Review

The Year in Review is an annual report presented to the foundation’s board. (See Figure 5.) The report is based on the first half of an emergent learning table (Darling & Parry, 2007). Specifically, this report highlights and summarizes the key data points that have been collected

⁶To guide the process of selecting specific learning questions, the initiative started with the key assumptions and hypotheses identified in the logic models built for their strategies.


FIGURE 3 A Learning Plan

Learning Question	Hypothesis	Success Looks Like	Data Source	Participants	Leader	Date	Facilitation Technique
To what extent and in what ways... Are we creating a culture of learning at EMKF?	If we do X, then Y will happen: If we facilitate the development of learning champions, then reflection and learning practices will be more embedded in teams.	More frequent learning engagements in departments Higher survey scores on culture questions	Support-team survey CEP staff survey	Evaluation team, learning champions, Talent & Culture	BH	March 2018 March 2019	"Chalk Talk"
To what extent and in what ways... Are we producing actionable evidence for program staff?	If we do X, then Y will happen: If we improve third-party evaluation reports, then staff will be more likely to use them to inform strategy.	All third-party reports lead to at least one constructive discussion with staff about lessons.	Internal tracking	Evaluation team and third-party partners	MC	January 2018 January 2019	Data placemats


FIGURE 4 The Before and After Action Review Card

Questions to Prompt Learning


Learning is often created through conversation. In your everyday interactions (e.g., informal conversations, check-ins, team meetings), try sprinkling in some of these questions to uncover and clarify key lessons.


Before a project

- What would success look like? How will you know?
- What challenges might pop up?
- What have you learned from similar situations that you could apply here?
- What will help ensure this project is successful?


During a project

- How are things going so far?
- To what extent are the results in line with what you expected at this point?
- What changes are you thinking about making based on what you have seen so far? Why?


After a project

- What was the result?
- What do you think caused those results?
- What would you do again? What would you improve next time?
- What lessons have you drawn?
- How will you apply those moving forward?
- When is the next time you'll have an opportunity to try something similar?

SOURCE: Kauffman Foundation

from our evaluations. Program staff can then use these reports, along with other documents, to develop their individual, complementary learning reports.

Learning Reports

Complementing the Year in Review is the Learning Report, which focuses on a small set

of key lessons along with specific examples to bring them to life. (See Figure 6.) The creation of the content is facilitated by the learning champions, and then synthesized and distilled by the leadership team before being presented to the board. The creation of these reports encompasses every aspect of the strategic learning system and is the culmination of a long-term, focused effort

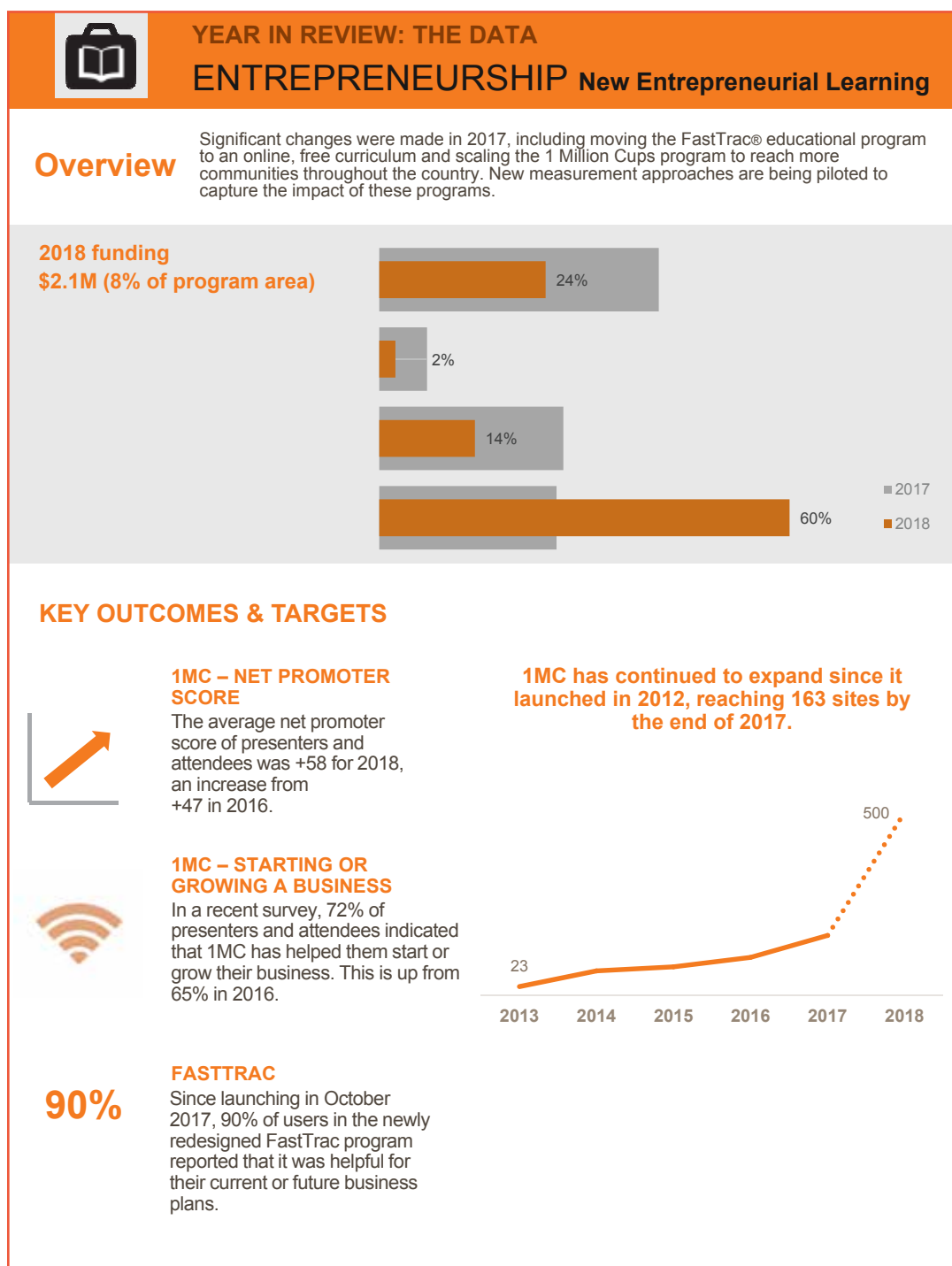
FIGURE 5 The Year in Review

FIGURE 6 The Learning Report



YEAR IN REVIEW: LESSONS LEARNED

Entrepreneurship New Entrepreneurial Learning

LESSON 1

Running entrepreneur-facing programs requires operational resiliency and robustness.

Operating programs that engage entrepreneurs directly must be run differently than grantmaking activities. They require more robust operations, which includes greater headcount, flexibility, and speed in execution; documentation of processes and practices; and operational redundancy to reduce failure points. Especially during times of active program development, it is important to devote adequate resources to document processes, support critical functions, and ensure high quality and continuity of knowledge and resilient operations throughout.

Example: Turnover of 1 Million Cups program staff

With several staff transitions in the past few months, we shifted our focus to capturing and preserving knowledge held by departing associates. This was critical to maintaining the integrity and quality of the program as new staff were brought on and trained.

LESSON 2

When making changes to programs with retail engagement, over-investing in customer research and feedback pays big dividends.

When investing in the development of new public-facing program offerings, it is crucial to conduct customer research to assure that what is built not only appeals to customers, but clearly and directly meets a need, and that can be clearly communicated. Additionally, when changing an existing program, over-investing in research to understand customer engagement from multiple angles can pay big dividends in customer satisfaction and retention.

Example: “Free FastTrac®” ads versus facilitated FastTrac affiliates

To lower barriers, we set the direct-to-consumer price of the new digital FastTrac to \$0, then promoted this new, free offering nationwide. Existing affiliates that offer facilitated FastTrac classes (often for \$100-\$500 per student) voiced concern that our “free” ads would reduce student demand. After multiple discussions, we adjusted our media targeting to minimize the risk of conflict.

LESSON 3

Technological innovation requires a collaborative, integrated strategy across at least three departments.

When selecting technology tools to deliver and support public-facing programs, we must work collaboratively with key stakeholders within the foundation (i.e., public affairs and technology) to develop an integrated strategy and ensure that the tools selected or developed fit within the larger EMKF technology plan, integrate as needed with existing systems, can be supported to ensure high-quality customer experiences, reduce duplicative technology, increase alignment and effectiveness, and reduce overall costs.

Example: Strategic marketing technology solutions

To scale our programs with existing resources, but without sacrificing quality, we needed to improve our customer understanding, targeting, messaging, and service. We collaborated with public affairs and technology to take stock of all existing EMKF tools, select the best possible solutions to meet our needs, and plan for a more strategic approach to the development of key organizational capabilities, such as a customer relationship management system.

The annual Learning Reports have provided an effective means of capturing, distilling, and sharing lessons across the foundation. We have noted that a common challenge to building strategic learning systems is the ability to show staff value for the effort required to be successful.

to develop both the culture and capacity of the foundation to engage in reflection and learning.

Programs That Utilize Learning Tools

The ability to generate specific, concrete, and meaningful lessons in the Learning Reports has led to constructive conversations about strengths and areas of opportunity for the foundation. Based on lessons captured in the Learning Reports, changes have already been made to several strategies:

- Staff reports that while postsecondary institutions are working to provide a more supportive campus environment and connect students to mental health services, they lack the capacity to adequately address these challenges. As a result, the foundation is creating community partnerships to provide additional supports outside of campus resources to help our Kauffman Scholars and Kansas City Scholars achieve success.
- Based on challenges experienced by several new public-facing program offerings, we have learned that it is crucial to conduct customer research to assure that what is built appeals to customers, clearly and directly meets a need, and can be clearly communicated to them. Additionally, when changing an existing program, we are now investing

significantly more in market research to better understand customer engagement from multiple angles and, as a result, improve customer satisfaction and retention.

- When it comes to Kansas City's most high-profile cultural institutions, we've learned that general operating grants create a far higher likelihood of reliance on ongoing foundation support than strategically focused resources for capacity building, leading to several shifts in how this grant portfolio is deployed.

Progress, Insights, and Lessons Learned

To date, results of the Learning Champions Initiative have generally been positive, though there have been notable challenges along the way.

Successes

The "questions to prompt learning" cards have proven to be very popular. We see more learning champions, and even a few nonchampions, keeping them on hand at all times and incorporating them in various meetings and conversations. At a recent speaker series event, for example, several staff members pulled out their cards during the Q&A portion and focused their questions on insights and lessons drawn by the speaker.

Every learning champion completed a comprehensive learning plan, with specific hypotheses, data sources, and a commitment to review and discuss the findings with colleagues by a specified date. Program areas tended to focus on the efficacy of key grants and programs, or on testing assumptions about the relationship between certain inputs and their causal relationship to desired outcomes. By contrast, more administrative departments, like finance and investments, tended to focus on questions related to operations and efficiency.

The "community of practice" model has led to greater cohesion and collaboration among the cohort members, increasing the reach and effectiveness of the initiative. On several occasions, for example, learning champions have helped a fellow cohort member plan or execute a

learning engagement with their team. It can be particularly difficult to simultaneously be both the facilitator and a participant in a session, and these situations present an ideal opportunity for cross-team partnerships where the two roles can be separated.

The annual Learning Reports have provided an effective means of capturing, distilling, and sharing lessons across the foundation. We have noted that a common challenge to building strategic learning systems is the ability to show staff value for the effort required to be successful. In our case, even if we have yet to find a viable “knowledge management” solution that can capture, store, and share back every lesson generated by staff, the Learning Reports have been a positive short-term step in establishing the value of engaging in learning activities, as these documents lead directly to strategic adjustments and other improvements to how we work.

Challenges

The learning log approaches tried so far have not turned out to be an effective means of capturing group learning. Even with a digital platform, it still took too long to get to the site and required too much time for staff to create posts. We will continue to use the formal Learning Reports, but will also seek out a more streamlined approach to capturing and sharing lessons more broadly.

Another challenge has been progress on specific and actionable solutions to cultural barriers, which has been much slower than creating learning moments within teams. One next step we are taking is to hold our first “Fail Fest” as an organization, with multiple associates sharing their stories of failure with the goal of increasing psychological safety and trust.

From these successes and challenges, there are five significant lessons that we have drawn from the Learning Champions project:

1. Prioritizing strategic learning in an organization requires creating incentives, extrinsic and intrinsic, to motivate a sustained commitment to the process where there are multiple preexisting and competing demands on staff time. The time spent on learning and reflection must be recognized as valuable but, even then, appropriate incentives can help drive behavior.
2. Embedding learning into the regular work of an organization is a goal that needs a long time horizon to accomplish. It requires continued and sustained management and direction for several years to fully take hold. And in the beginning, it is critically important to focus on small wins and seek to build on them.
3. Building a culture of learning is often difficult because it involves taking on several complex and interrelated challenges, simultaneously, around transparency, trust, collaboration, risk tolerance, and staff agency. Each of these is a considerable task in itself for an organization to shift, and expectations for how fast change can occur should be realistic.
4. There can be an inherent tension when an evaluation department is tasked with taking the lead on the creation and implementation of a strategic learning function. On one hand, there is a clear and intuitive fit between learning and evaluation, and a strong incentive for the evaluators who want to make sure staff are engaging with the evidence being produced. However, placing the strategic learning function within the evaluation department runs the risk of it becoming siloed there, as staff may begin to see it as a departmental function and not a shared responsibility.
5. The Learning Champions Initiative, which is inherently a bottom-up structure, needs to be paired with a top-down strategy to increase its effectiveness. While the cohort has been successful in increasing the number of learning moments, we are developing a leadership-focused strategy that includes tools and recommendations for how they can incorporate learning into their teams as another strategy to accelerate the impact of the initiative.

Conclusion

Strategic learning can be a powerful tool for leveraging the knowledge and experience of an organization to drive continuous improvement. But despite its intuitive nature, as we've discovered, creating the systems, processes, and supportive culture needed to actually capture, share, and apply what staff are learning every day can be far more difficult than expected. The Kauffman Foundation's Learning Champions Initiative is one example of what such a system can look like, though others may find different models better suited to the context of their organization.

Regardless of the model chosen, our experience suggests that there are three key factors needed for a strategic learning approach to be successful: an explicit framework that explains how evaluation and learning are connected, as well as the intent and purpose of spending time to reflect and collect lessons; an intentional approach to identifying barriers to learning activities — technological and cultural — and a plan for how they will be overcome; and a long-term view coupled with a commitment to making incremental progress through persistence.

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