

# What is a Learning Organization?

Learning in philanthropy can happen in any number of ways — from traditional training programs and orientations for new staff to regular discussions among staff members, board members, grantees and grantmakers about how things are going and how to get better results. Using evaluation as a tool for learning and continuous improvement requires an organizational culture that is committed to supporting the capacity of people to reflect on our work in ways that lead to better performance. But what does it really take to become a learning organization? This piece explores the characteristics of a learning organization and steps that funders can take to integrate learning into organizational culture.

## Components of Foundations that Learn

There are a number of elements that need to be in place for a foundation to effectively become a learning organization. Researchers at [Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago](#) identified seven core components of foundations that prioritize learning:<sup>1</sup>

1. **A clear and concrete value proposition.** We know what it means to learn and how learning will contribute to our work and the achievement of our goals. This value proposition should be communicated to board and staff to ensure buy in.
2. **An internal structure aligned with learning.** We create organizational structures that promote and encourage learning within the organization.
3. **Leadership committed to learning.** Board, executive and staff leaders embrace learning and embed it in their own work.
4. **A learning partnership with grantees and communities.** We create the conditions for learning and sharing with grantees and community partners.

*For more information on this topic, see [Four Essentials for Evaluation](#), (Washington, D.C.: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2012).*

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Hamilton, et. al, "[Learning for Community Change Core Components of Foundations that Learn](#)," Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2005.

5. **A learning partnership with foundation peers.** We form partnerships and networks for learning, while exploring other opportunities to learn from (and with) each other through collaboration.
6. **A commitment to share with the broader field.** We share what we learn so that others can apply our lessons.
7. **An investment in a broad and usable knowledge base.** We produce learning that is accessible, that answers common questions and that can be applied by practitioners in the field.

## Learning from the top and within an organization

It is crucial for the board and senior leadership of a foundation to make the necessary changes and commitments that develop an organizational culture that fosters learning. This means prioritizing learning work by both embedding it in our personal habits as well as the processes of the organization as a whole. Leadership can work to anchor the learning in the organization, help share the impact of evaluation and shift learning from an inward facing practice to an outward facing one.

*“Unless evaluation and learning are made a priority and supported by organization leadership, they won’t be prioritized throughout the organization.”*

*– Jane Mosley, chief evaluation officer with the Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City*

### Anchor the learning.

One way to demonstrate the importance of learning is to create a place within our foundation where this work is anchored. Although many grantmakers have created staff positions — such as chief learning officer — to manage this function, this is not the only path to becoming a learning organization. Foundation CEOs can work with staff members who are charged with the human resources, communications or IT functions to build evaluation and learning into the formal structure of the organization.

The staff members responsible for these functions can develop an array of tools and strategies for advancing learning; from creating and maintaining an intranet for staff and board to share information and insights, to creating recurring opportunities for staff to meet and discuss what we’ve learned and how it may be used for future work.

## Share the learning and its impact.

Learning will become a priority when we act on what we learn to make improvements to our work. We need to be able to build a clear connection between our lessons and end results, and position learning as an integral part of our mission. However, improvements in how we operate as a grantmaker are not the only goal of learning. True learning expands beyond the walls of the foundation in support of the learning and improvement of our stakeholders.

Learning organizations are open to others' ideas and create opportunities for outsiders to share their insights and perspectives. This can happen in a variety of ways, such as holding informal conversations about evaluation findings or regular learning-focused meetings or instituting ongoing peer learning circles. These practices help cultivate more open, honest conversations with grantees and communities about our progress, challenges and needs. Engaging with stakeholders in learning on an ongoing basis can broaden our understanding of the issues we are facing and how we can address them together.

## Steps we can take to make learning a cornerstone of our work

**No matter how far along we are in our journey to integrate learning in our work, there are still steps we can take to further strengthen our learning practices. We can:**

1. **Review our organization's learning practices.** There are several questions to should consider as we regularly review our practices, such as: Are we using learning for improvement, or just proof? Are we looking to learning to show contribution, not attribution? Are we learning with others, not alone? Are we looking beyond the individual grant? And, last but not least, are we learning from failure?
2. **Hold board and staff discussions** about how to strengthen our learning practice so that it improves the work of our organization, our grantees, our grantmaking partners and others.
3. **Connect learning and grantmaker strategy** by using data and information about our ongoing work to refine our strategy and to spur staff and board discussions about how to attain better results.
4. **Talk to grantees** to get their perspectives on how to leverage the power of learning as a core practice. Ask what they need (e.g., more resources, training, technical assistance) to strengthen their capacity to evaluate their work in ways that can contribute to learning and improved performance.

5. **Convene other grantmakers** to share perspectives, ideas and challenges. We can develop a shared sense of how we can work together to advance the practice of learning within and among our organizations, and to help grantees realize its power as a tool for improvement.

## Conclusion

Learning organizations realize that learning is about more than ensuring that grantees are doing what they promise, or that a specific program area at a foundation is meeting its goals. Rather, it's about advancing knowledge and understanding among grantmakers, our grantees and partners about what's working, what's not and how to improve overall performance over time. To do this effectively, we should periodically review our internal and external learning process and structures to ensure that we are maintaining the core components of a learning foundations and that we are continuously cultivating a strong culture of learning throughout our organizations.