Corporation for National and Community Service
Research Summit: Focus on Evidence
Working Session 4—Understanding and Developing Learning Organizations
Summary of Discussion

Wednesday, December 16, 2015 **1:00–2:00 p.m.**

MODERATORS: Joseph Breems, CNCS Policy Analyst, and Adrienne DiTommaso, CNCS Research Analyst

INTRODUCTION

- Joseph opened the session at 1:00 and thanked everyone for coming.
- He explained that the format would be an open conversation rather than breakout sessions followed by discussion.
- He explained the background to this summit and outlined the goals:
  - Discuss how organizations find what works and what does not work.
  - How does an organization become a "learning organization" that increasingly makes decisions based on good data and evidence rather than entrenched beliefs?
  - In a tight funding climate, how do organizations adapt?
- Joseph then thanked the different sectors—academic, funders, research, Federal, State, local, and tribal—for participating in an interactive discussion to:
  - Build a learning community going forward
  - Promote interplay across sectors
  - Highlight research
  - Cite great studies and come up with new research questions
- Adrienne gave some background on this summit and said that it is based on a listening session held in November.
- Joseph referenced the three questions to be addressed in this session:
  1. How can (and how should) we measure "learning" in an organization? What are the indicators that differentiate *capacity* for learning and actual learning?
  2. Why does organizational learning appear to be limited to a small group of funders and nonprofit organizations? What are the barriers to and opportunities for expanding this conversation to encompass more of the third sector?
  3. What is the relationship between funding and learning? What types of relationships, if any, have been more conducive to learning than others?
- Congressman John Delaney opened the discussion with a quote about choosing between what works and what does not work. A learning organization is most effective if it moves from making decisions based on what people believe, to what the data suggest, to what evidence-based research shows.

Question 1: How can (and how should) we measure "learning" in an organization? What are the indicators that differentiate *capacity* for learning and actual learning? (The discussion spilled over into Questions 2 and 3)

- Christine Heflin, Director of Performance Excellence, U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, DC, brought a perspective of having worked in the commerce department since the 1970s.
- She addressed the vocabulary of learning and said that for programs to learn, staff need to anticipate methodology and design before setting up the program. For example, anticipate research questions; realize that learning looks different to different organizations; integrate evaluation data in program design; tell people why you are collecting the data.
- Christine cited the Baldrige Foundation (www.baldrigefoundation.org), whose mission is to ensure long-term financial growth and viability through innovation and continuous improvement.
- She also brought up the Kirkpatrick Model (www.kirkpatrickpartners.com) for learning, which helps trainers measure the effectiveness of their training through four levels: reaction, learning, behavior, and results.
- Amber Berger, graduate student at Northwestern University, Houston, TX, said that in practice, students do not have time for levels 3 and 4 and asked the group if there are other methods to build learning objections and training? A culture of learning needs to be developed before they can develop models.
- Adrienne asked the group, “Are there other models to consider?”
- Christine responded that we are not learning what we should be learning, and she saw the same problem in the 1970s. She said that the ultimate test of learning is return on investment (ROI). A culture of learning needs to be institutionalized based on a logic model, a series of hypotheses.
- A participant noted that in terms of setting culture, we have to acknowledge that we don’t know it all from the beginning. For example, in the culture of grant-making, we have to admit that there are problems first, and before we can change, we need to acknowledge that as a start-up, there is room for improvement.
- A participant stressed that learning happens between organizations, so we need to measure the relationship among trust, transparency, and authenticity—that creates a learning environment.
- Lance Potter, Director of Evaluation, New Profit, Boston, NA, said it is important to take away stovepipes. At the end of the day, we are talking about change. But people like to make changes according to personal preferences. So we need to take baby steps across groups in order to trust each other.
- David Wihry, Commissioner, Maine Commission for National and Community, Bangor, ME, said that when making an assessment, what has been most successful in his experience is interviewing people in different levels in an organization. Ask them what they have stopped doing based on evidence.

Questions 2 and 3 were discussed together.
Question 2: Why does organizational learning appear to be limited to a small group of funders and nonprofit organizations? What are the barriers to and opportunities for expanding this conversation to encompass more of the third sector?
Question 3: What is the relationship between funding and learning? What types of relationships, if any, have been more conducive to learning than others?

- Amber brought up the Lipsitz model of organizational learning—which her program has used—when considering the relationship between funding and learning.
- A participant made the point that three-year grant programs do not provide a long enough time to make change that is sustainable. There can be tension between organizing to execute and organizing to learn.
- Adrienne asked whether anyone has been in a funding relationship where there is tension over expectations of learning; and what is the long-term goal—it may take years, but what are the steps you need to get there?
- Christine commented that although there are some important steps being made at the federal level, most change happens at the staff level.
- A participant said that in her experience, it takes long-term grant cycles. It takes a multiyear research goal and an appropriate design mechanism.
- The group discussed needing more time and space—as well as a solid knowledge base—because everyone is so busy. So it comes down to resources—staff and time.
- A participant commented that most new staff are young people with a lot of energy. They want to make a difference right away. But we need methodologists rather than just throw money at hiring staff. The cost of data can be enormous. Data-based evidence needs to be built into the structure, which would be cost-saving. The rise of integrated data sets can make evaluation and learning less expensive.
- A discussion of research and evaluation funding brought up the following points:
    - Funder expectations can cause resentment.
    - Most research and evaluation funding is currently going to programs, not administration.
    - There needs to be more research on tension between funders' expectations and grantee learning.
    - There needs to be time to use data, not just collect data.
- A grantee staff member said that they have had to get multiple funding sources and they all have different expectations. Staff want to help, but expectations get in the way. They need to find new ways to create space.
- Joseph thanked the participants and wrapped up the session with the following points:
    - When we consider cultural competence, we need to look at organizational climate surveys (Federal Employee Viewpoint Summary through OPM).
    - We need to ask the question, "Is an engaged organization a learning organization?"
    - Are there creative ways that smaller organizations can compete with the vast number of nonprofits?
    - Change is on a continuum. Are there common observations that can be made?
    - Can research help answer the question, "Should organizations with different resources (for example size and funding level) be held to different standards?"

The discussion session ended at 1:58 p.m.

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Wednesday, December 16, 2015 **2:15–3:15 p.m.**

MODERATORS: Joseph Breems, CNCS Policy Analyst, and Adrienne DiTommaso, CNCS Research Analyst

INTRODUCTION

- Adrienne opened the session at 2:15 and thanked everyone for attending. She commented on the wide diversity of participants and said that because of the large size of the group, the format will be an open conversation rather than the planned break-out groups followed by discussion.
- She suggested framing the discussion around Michael Quinn Patton's[1] quote in the handout, "…becoming a learning organization, which can be understood as an organization making an increasing number of decisions and increasingly taking action based on good data and evidence rather than simply belief."
- She also posed the following questions:
  - What are the barriers to becoming a learning organization?
  - What is the relationship between funding and learning?
  - Does targeted funding induce learning?

Question 1: How can (and how should) we measure "learning" in an organization? What are the indicators that differentiate *capacity* for learning and actual learning? (Questions 2 and 3 became part of the discussion and were not individually raised.)

- One participant brought up the Harvard Strategic Data Project, which looks at how organizations use data.
- There was discussion around the time invested in professional development. Some organizations invest heavily in conferences—for example, giving staff time to get away and think. Some organizations believe strongly in the value of space and time to learn, but not all can afford time away.
  - Exposure to other organizations leads to learning from peers.
  - Time away conflicts with getting things done, but that depends on the environment.
  - Taking time for learning is a long-term investment but it is difficult if the organization is always in crisis mode regarding getting things done.

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[1] Michael Quinn Patton. (2011). *Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use*. New York: Guilford Press.

- Strategies for measuring learning include:
    - Making space, setting aside time
    - Having a research agenda
    - Giving staff time to digest the research and resulting data
    - Realizing it is a long-term improvement strategy
    - Learning how to learn as an organization
    - Learning how to deal with failure
- Making change in an organization is affected by:
    - Systems-level improvements
    - Who is at the table during decision making
    - Who is/what are the catalysts for making changes
- The goal is to create a culture of change by institutionalizing knowledge and learning and defining success.
- Motivation and good ideas come from all levels. Who is at the decision-making table? Options and good ideas also come from throughout the organization.
- Navjeet Singh, Deputy Director, National Fund for Workforce Solutions, Boston, said that in small nonprofits, it is not practical to set side space and time for these learning measure techniques. Small nonprofits hire young volunteers who learn on the job so it is difficult to know where you are starting and what to expect from employees. Where are you starting and what are your competency standards? Large companies can invest in their employees, but small nonprofits are unable to do that.
- Jaclyn Kolar, Grants Officer, OneStar Foundation, Austin, TX, brought up the issue of accountability in nonprofits. That issue points to whether learning is individual or organizational. If learning is on the individual level and the individual leaves the organization, does the organization need to learn again? We need to identify what is the catalyst for institutional change.
- Bernie Beaudreau, Executive Director, Serve Rhode Island, Providence, RI, pointed out that we need to define how an organization defines success and how that definition changes over time. How does the organization use evaluations? The large priority is funding and not as much how to improve the organization.
- Leah Ermarth, Chief, Evaluation and Research, Peace Corps, Washington, DC, said that it is difficult to have excellence in a program without ongoing training of sponsors. It is difficult to keep up with the changing tides. In performance planning, the more nervous an organization is about hitting perfection, the less involved that organization will be in training. That speaks to how organizations use evaluation data. Staff in different interest areas often do not speak to each other so learning becomes siloed. So it is important to keep looking outward toward the community being served.
- Navjeet addressed the issue of what an organization does as a result of survey information. Often, nothing is done. So what does it take to have learning part of the strategic plan? He said that the ability to change involves the need to talk about how hierarchical an organization is and whether learning can be captured. An extreme example of how hierarchy can affect decision making is the cause of several airplane

crashes. As Malcolm Gladwell writes in *Outliers,*[2] when there is hierarchy in the cockpit, the captain may make all the decisions even though the copilot or flight engineer might have an idea that the captain does not see. If they are afraid to speak up because of the culture of hierarchy, all the decisions are up to one person. The same can be true for organizations, especially in health care.

- Bernie brought up another example of a siloed decision: The space shuttle *Challenger*, which exploded during it ascent to space. One of the engineers said that the O-rings were sensitive to temperature and might fail if the launch took place in freezing temperatures. But his warnings were not communicated and the launch went ahead with disastrous results. Bernie also brought up the book *The Power of Positive Thinking*,[3] which stresses the importance of thinking about what went right, not just what went wrong. An analysis of successes as well as failures will lead to more positive outcomes.
- Navjeet agreed with what Bernie said but with a learning culture among organizations, there is much more grey area. It is difficult to measure learning when there is a large turnover of employees. We need space and resources for buy-in.
- What types of resources are needed? Competencies: How questions are formulated is important. Before creating a learning agenda, we need to ask if something works; who does it work for; and when does it work.
- Conferences: There is a mentality that going to conferences is as important as programs. We need to strike a balance between whether staff are appreciated and supported and how much focus is on the target achievement—is learning more important than measurement?
- It is important to reach for goals but if we are missing targets, there is an opportunity to measure in the next quarter and see if learning is happening.
- Navjeet said that over time, if we are a learning organization, we should see the improvement. It is important to have knowledge on how to use an evaluation report to improve the organization and then measure improvement.
- Federal agencies and other funders determine what the levels of funding are and what activities they fund, so organizations need to fit into those parameters.
- A participant from Veterans Affairs said that one problem is that funders provide data that some organizations do not understand, so it is important to address that. Data evaluation needs to be valuable to the organization, not to just show data outcome.
- Adrienne wrapped up the session by summarizing the main points discussed and asking, "What does it mean to make space to learn?" She pointed out the importance of good quality data.

The discussion session ended at 3:15 p.m.

[2] Malcolm Gladwell (2008). *Outliers: The Story of Success.* New York: Little, Brown and Company.

[3] Norman Vincent Peale. (1952). *The Poser of Positive Thinking.* New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc.