



Developing **your learning** **and evaluation plan:**

A workbook to support your grant recipients

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About this tool

Many traditional grant application forms require nonprofits to include evaluation plans as part of their submission. We know that this part of the application is often one of the most challenging sections for applicants to complete. We also know that funders often find the information provided in this section to be less useful than they had hoped. One of the reasons why this section doesn't always work well is that it tends to focus on the technical details of a measurement plan without first exploring the why of that plan, i.e., what the grantee hopes to learn and why those insights are important. This workbook includes worksheets designed to draw out and clarify the learning goals associated with a proposed project before turning to the measurement plan. We hope it will lead to conversations between the funder and grant recipient about what really matters.

At Taylor Newberry Consulting, we've worked with both funders and nonprofits and have thought a lot about some of the bottlenecks that get in the way of useful evaluation. In previous work, we identified [six principles to guide the development of a learning relationship](#) that we feel helps set the stage for good evaluation. These principles are:

1. Model a culture of learning
2. Learn in partnership
3. Understand an applicant's approach to learning
4. Plan for learning
5. Reward learning
6. Balance flexibility and fairness

This Workbook aims to implement these principles for creating a strong learning relationship between grantmakers and grant recipients. We know that many grantmakers want to provide a degree of flexibility to their grant recipients and support their ability to develop meaningful insights from their work. We also know that many grantmakers struggle to find the right balance between supporting the learning and evaluation needs of their grant recipients with their own learning and evaluation needs. This Workbook offers some practical space and structure to learn with and from grant recipients in a way that continues to value the spirit of good relationships and ongoing shared learning.

How to use this tool

We designed this workbook as a way to take evaluation planning out of the equation during the grant application process so that it can be given fuller consideration in the less stressful period after granting decisions have been made. However, we encourage you to use these worksheets, together or individually, in whatever way works best for you — whether you are a funder seeking out grant applications or a nonprofit working on a project plan.

This Workbook was developed by [Taylor Newberry Consulting](#).

Introduction

Here is a draft letter that you may use to introduce this Workbook to your grant recipient(s). However feel free to personalize your own version if that works better for you.

As a funder that wants to have a **learning relationship** with its grant recipients, we'd like to share this workbook with you as a tool to help us better understand one another.

The purpose of this workbook is to help you **develop the ideas you included in your grant application into a more detailed plan for learning and evaluation.**

Here's why this is important to us. We're not only investing financial resources in your organization, but we are also investing our time and human capital so that we can learn with you about what is working and what isn't. In practical terms, this means we welcome opportunities to talk with you as your work unfolds and to support learning and evaluation in a way that is meaningful for both of us. To do this well, we need a bit more information.

We know that evaluation and learning is important, but we don't presume to be the experts in your work. That's where this workbook comes in.

The Workbook includes six worksheets. Each worksheet is designed as a **discussion starter** and should be used in whatever way makes the most sense for your organization. Throughout the worksheets, the term "we" is meant to refer to the people most actively involved in running your funded project or program. That may include staff, volunteers, or program participants, for example.

It is specifically being introduced to you now **after you've received your grant** and before you get too far down the road of implementing your program or project. The intention is that, through this Workbook, you can **set the stage for thinking about learning and evaluation** in parallel as the implementation work unfolds (rather than only at reporting time).

Once completed, these worksheets (especially Worksheets 4 & 5) can be used to share your learning and evaluation plans with us and, if helpful, discuss how and how often we can check-in with each other.

Getting started: Getting acquainted

Why is this important?

This worksheet aligns with the principle: Model a Culture of Learning. As a grantmaker, you can demonstrate your commitment to learning by sharing your own learning goals. By going first, you are also helping to create the conditions for information to flow in both directions rather than only being a data collection exercise from your grant recipient to you.

To begin, we'd like to share a bit of information about us as a reminder for your reference.

Here are our strategic priorities (from our strategic plan):

-
-
-

We are interested in these priorities because:

-
-
-

Here's why we're interested in your organization and the work you do:

-
-
-

What, if any, questions do you have for us about who we are, how we work, or what our interests are?

What kinds of questions do you wish a funder would ask you about the work you do?

What have we already learned?

Why is this important?

You may already have a fair bit of knowledge about the project or program you are planning. This worksheet is designed to capture some of those insights so that: 1. You can explain how these insights have shaped your plan; and 2. They don't get lost as you jump into this next phase of work. You can spend a bit of time reflecting on how what you have already learned can be applicable going forward.

Reflect on what you have already learned and how that learning has informed the design of this project or program.

What do we already know? What knowledge informs our project/program?

- About the challenges that participants or service users face?
- About the actions that are most likely to make a difference?
- About the skills and capacities that our participants or service users already have, and their views on the help they need?
- About the resources that exist in our community?
- About the challenges we may face in taking action?
- About the people or groups that are important to involve in our work?

How does this knowledge inform the actions we take?

What do we hope to learn?

Why is this important?

No one starts a new project with a foolproof plan and most good projects or programs evolve and grow through time as the context changes and unexpected challenges or opportunities arise. Being clear at the outset about what you hope to learn along the way is a good way to make sure that you are mindful about this process. Learning goals are different from outcome or impact statements. For example, “reducing youth homelessness” is an outcome, while “developing more meaningful ways to engage youth in our decision making process about our homelessness work” is a learning goal.

Reflect on these prompts to help surface potential blind spots and identify some learning priorities. Remember that this is a starting point and that you may not have answers to all these questions right away.

What don't we know yet?

- What assumptions are we making...
 - about factors outside our control?
 - about who will be willing to help us?
 - about larger trends in our community?
- What might catch us off guard?
- How are we most likely to fail? What would be the red flags that we are getting off track?
- Whose voice have we not heard?
- What will we have to figure out as we go?

OUR LEARNING GOALS FOR THIS PROJECT

Based on these answers, here are our key learning goals for this project. Learning goals are the new things we most hope to learn through the grant.

1.

2.

3.

WORKSHEET 3

What difference do we hope to make for our service users or program/project participants?

Why is this important?

One of the keys to good evaluation is identifying short-term outcomes that capture the unique ways in which your program contributes to long-term change. By identifying some short-term outcomes, you can begin to set some goal lines to measure your work against.

Gain clarity on what success means to you and your team and set some short-term outcomes in this worksheet.

What will success look like?

- How will the people we serve be better off as a result of our work?
- What will be the early signs that we are on track to make a difference?
- What kinds of change do we have the greatest degree of control over? E.g., we can make sure participants have new knowledge, but we can't always control whether they use that knowledge
- What difference do we want to make for every single participant (as opposed to just some of them)?

OUR SHORT TERM OUTCOMES FOR THIS PROJECT

Based on these answers, here are our key short-term outcomes. Short-term outcomes are the changes that will happen for our program participants/service users as a direct result of our work.

1.

2.

3.

WORKSHEET 4

Given the information we need, what data gathering strategies make the most sense?

Why is this important?

Each data gathering strategy has its pros and cons. Factors to consider include: How much time will this take (for us and for the people we are asking information of)? Is this method appropriate for the kinds of questions we want to ask? How will we use this information? Remember you can use more than one strategy if needed, but that the goal isn't necessarily to collect lots of data, but rather to collect the right kind of data.

Strategy	Y/N	Questions that should be included to get the information we need
Information forms about participants or service users (e.g., age, gender identity, etc.)		
Surveys of participants or service users		
Interviews or focus groups with participants or service users		
Surveys of other stakeholder groups (e.g., partner organizations, parents, youth)		
Basic tracking data (e.g., attendance, referrals)		
Discussion forums, town halls, or other large group meetings		
Other		

WORKSHEET 5

What processes or habits should be in place to facilitate learning?

Why is this important?

Organizations often spend more time thinking about the data gathering process than they do thinking about how they will learn from this data once it comes in. Organizational learning leads to innovation, better programming and improved organizational performance. It also sets the stage for better evaluation.

Key learning processes	Practical ideas that will work in our context
<p>How will we make time in our work on this project/program for sharing and reflection and reviewing our evaluation goals and plans?</p>	
<p>How will we make sure people feel safe and supported sharing their honest reflections?</p>	
<p>How are the voices of program participants/service users contributing to how we learn?</p>	
<p>Does our team have the skills and processes it needs to organize and interpret information?</p>	

What processes or habits should be in place to facilitate learning?



Organizational Learning Self-Assessment Tool

As a next step, take the [Organizational Learning Self-Assessment](#) and see how your organization stacks up and where improvements can be made.