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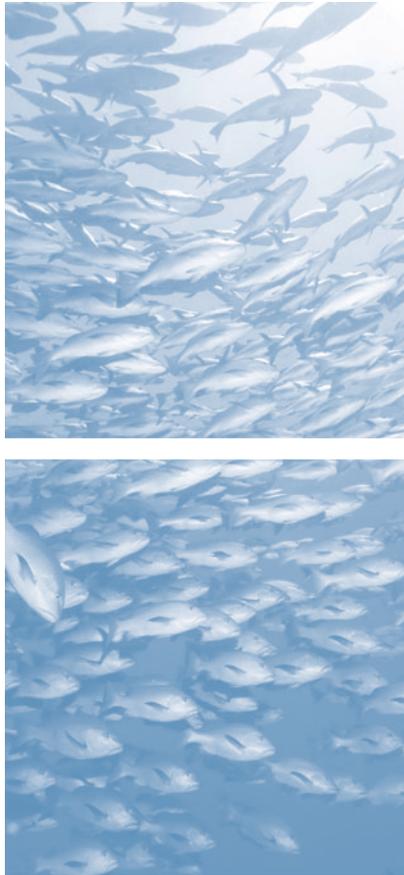
Effective Nonprofit Evaluation: Through a “Community of Learners”

Chantell Johnson and Allison Crean

In recent years, internal evaluation has become increasingly useful, both for nonprofit organizations and for funders. For funders, such mechanisms have been useful to measure the success of their funding strategies. For nonprofits, they have been used both to satisfy the increasing external demand for accountability and to more accurately measure their impacts and successes.

The nonprofits that have utilized evaluation most successfully are those that have embraced them by fully integrating them into their programs and operations, involving staff, stakeholders, and board members to produce continuous internal improvements that build on prior successes and increase impact

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This is best accomplished by creating what TCC Group terms a Community of Learners (CoL). At its simplest, CoL moves beyond the traditional hierarchical evaluation to include all those who have knowledge about the successes (and failures) of a nonprofit’s programs. These individuals become knowledgeable about evaluation, skilled in its design and implementation, and actively engaged in its dissemination. In this sense, the Community of Learners not only supports evaluation, but also encourages a shift in the organization’s culture toward evaluative learning.¹ The CoL approach uses evaluation as a tool for realizing the organization’s goals while simultaneously building a culture for continuous improvement.

Nonprofits that engage in a CoL process are motivated by the strong benefits (as outlined in Figure 1), including the advantages of “owning” the evaluation; the credibility associated with utilizing an external expert; the accumulation of cost-effective, timely data aligned with needs; and, ultimately, the sustainability of the process. Although CoL requires a willingness and commitment of time on the part of a larger group to participate, the potential gains outweigh the cost and effort involved, so few nonprofits find it insurmountable.

This paper defines CoL and provides a step-by-step guide showing how TCC can create and develop a community of learners for evaluative learning and decision making across a wide range of nonprofits. In the discussion below, we contrast TCC’s CoL approach with a more traditional model of evaluation to further illustrate CoL’s unique qualities, showing why this approach is becoming increasingly popular among clients, nonprofits, and funders.²

The Process in Brief

In the traditional evaluation process, there are usually seven major steps:

- Step 1:** Identify and organize decision makers.
- Step 2:** Determine who will conduct, participate in, and be the audience for evaluation.
- Step 3:** Develop a Logic Model.
- Step 4:** State the evaluation questions and indicators (Evaluation Framework).
- Step 5:** Develop evaluation methods, tools, and tasks (Evaluation Workplan).
- Step 6:** Gather, analyze, and interpret data.
- Step 7:** Utilize the evaluation results.

Figure 1: CoL versus Traditional Evaluation

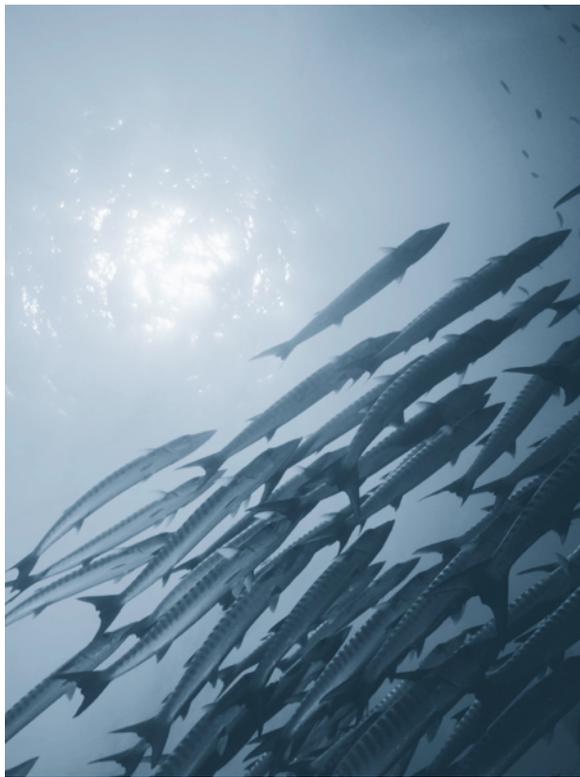
	Strengths	Limitations
Traditional Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of credibility • Perception regarding rigor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of capacity in evaluation, data use • Data not aligned with needs • Time delay in getting data • Costly
CoL Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of credibility • Capacity in data collection, rigor • Ownership of evaluation • Data aligned with needs • Timely data • Cost effective—buying expertise • Sustainable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires willingness • Requires participation • Perception that planning time is longer

CoL uses the same process. The key difference lies in the extent to which a CoL approach organizes and involves employees, stakeholders, and clients. Therefore, Steps 1 and 2 are usually the most critical in determining whether a nonprofit’s evaluation process will proceed along traditional lines, or will progress down a more effective CoL path.

In a CoL process, individual stakeholders of the organization initially determine who will drive the CoL formation and the scope of the evaluation. Typically, the CoL begins with a core group of the organization’s stakeholders and staff, often anchored by leaders in key positions focused on the question of evaluation or organizational learning. Over time, the scope of the group broadens to include additional stakeholders, clients, and employees, and the actions associated with the CoL evolve into the organization’s “standard operating procedure.”

¹For an in-depth treatment of evaluative learning, see York, P.Y. (2003). *Learning as we Go: Making Evaluation Work for Everyone*. (New York: TCC Group). www.tccgrp.com

²In fact, evaluation capacity building (ECB) has been a major topic at recent American Evaluation Association conferences; TCC Group is a leader in both employing and developing this approach.



Essential to the success of the Community of Learners approach is the concept of “evaluative learning.” This describes what an evaluation process should ideally be: ongoing, collaborative, stakeholder-led, and informative to the organization. The CoL approach enables evaluative learning to be achieved, encouraging those involved in evaluations to learn key skills, thereby giving them a head start on the evaluation process and a more sophisticated role throughout the process. Successful CoL efforts incorporate evaluative learning into the regular ongoing programs of a nonprofit. Often, though not always, an outside facilitator, such as TCC, may assist.

TCC Group’s original CoL concept paper, *Creating a Community of Learners: Successful Evaluative Learning for Nonprofits and Funders*, outlined the basic concept of CoL while this paper examines how a specific nonprofit (the Archdiocese of Chicago’s Office of Catholic Schools) and a funder (the Girl’s Best Friend Foundation) effectively used the CoL approach to build evaluation capacity and engage in evaluation.³ (The full version of this case example is featured on page 8-9.)

The Girl’s Best Friend Foundation (GBF), a Chicago-based, private, grantmaking foundation funds grass-roots, community-based programs promoting

leadership, activism, and social change by girls and young women. From its inception, GBF supported the “Community of Learners” approach, both for itself and for its grantors. Over 13 years, CoL philosophy and practice has proven to increase mission fulfillment among GBF’s grantors and amplify their impact over the long run.

Also engaged in a CoL approach, the Archdiocese of Chicago’s Office of Catholic Schools (OCS) maintains 256 schools within the diverse boundaries of the Chicago area, serving 96,197 students from pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade. In addition to sharing the educational, accountability, and fiscal challenges of public schools, OCS has a unique mission of instilling a sense of Catholic identity in its students. OCS’s strategic management process, aptly called “Genesis,” focuses on missions of academic excellence, Catholic identity, and school vitality and is evidence-based and collaborative in nature. When approaching its evaluation process, OCS desired to continue this collective approach and deemed TCC Group’s CoL evaluation process as well-matched with its strategic planning and implementation processes.

To illustrate the CoL process more fully, we have used examples from OCS’s successful experience. We have also outlined the traditional model of evaluation in order to compare and contrast it with the CoL process, using information from the OCS case, as well as other clients, to illustrate what has worked and what has been learned.⁴ It will be shown that the CoL approach, which has proven so compelling to OCS and other clients, can be utilized by other funders and nonprofits with very diverse evaluation needs.

Step 1: Identify and Organize the Decision Makers

Successful execution of Step 1—whether in a traditional or a CoL evaluation—is crucial: Those who have the power to make decisions as the evaluation is designed, implemented, and unfolds must be clearly identified. But it takes on even more importance in a CoL process because a community of learners will determine the nature, quality, and function of each of the remaining steps in the evaluation.

³ The Girl’s Best Friend Foundation is not a client of TCC and engaged in this work independently of TCC. It should also be noted that the Community of Learners model worked well for the Girl’s Best Friend Foundation both with and without the

⁴ While TCC Group encourages use of the basic seven steps for evaluation, the more salient point is how a CoL approach can impact and improve the seven steps—or any other method used for evaluation

When an Evaluation Leadership Team May Not be the First Step

On occasion, it may not always be most efficacious to immediately form a leadership team. For example, TCC Group, when beginning work with one organization (Action for Healthy Kids) determined that the organization was in a state of transition and flux, and that formation of an evaluation leadership team was not feasible or desirable at that point. Nevertheless, TCC Group was able to work informally, one-on-one with a few engaged leaders and staff to collect data and initiate ad hoc evaluation planning for a year before a formal leadership team was established to further the evaluation work and integrate evaluation into the organization’s life. Sarah Titzer, Director of Programs for Action for Healthy Kids states: “If not for our work with TCC, we would not have had the capacity to ask the questions we are asking now nor be in a position to demand the formation and function of an evaluation team to support our work.”

Figure 2: “Layers” of a Community of Learners



Building a Great Team

- Be flexible in how and when to form a leadership team (or teams).
- Keep the size of the team(s) manageable, yet broadly representative of stakeholders.
- Build a team whose members will roll-up their sleeves and actively work, not just act as leaders or advisors.

Traditional

In a traditional evaluation there are typically only a few decision makers, generally including the Executive Director or Program Director of an organization. The person who is most directly recognized as the “leader” of that which is being evaluated is usually adopted as the decision maker. While there is simplicity and some streamlining to the evaluation structure with this approach, it has great limitations compared to the benefits of CoL.

CoL

The decision makers in a community-of-learners evaluation include a larger and more diverse body of stakeholders, potentially including a broad range of internal staff (e.g., representatives from development, communications, marketing, and other program departments), board of directors representation, funders, advisors, outside experts, and even constituents or clients. This wider representation often leads to important insights during the evaluation design, to greater understanding and support across the organization regarding the evaluation process, and to increased utilization of the resulting evaluation.

Implementing CoL

The vehicle used by TCC Group to organize this broader collection of decision makers is an **Evaluation Leadership Team**. Members are invited to participate on the team because of their knowledge, skill, or ability to become change agents within the larger organization. Effective leadership teams are composed of about 5-8 persons.

Case Study

For the Office of Catholic Schools, TCC envisaged a two-tier Evaluation Leadership Team: a core group of five (a systems strategic planner, representatives of the department of data and research, a marketing representative, and a curriculum specialist) and a larger group of 12 (with the addition of principals, pastors, a school-improvement representative, and a university faculty member).

The core leadership team did much of the leg-work for the larger group. It focused on learning and developing its evaluation skills, gathering data, conducting analysis, and providing information to guide the collective work of the larger group. The 12-person group offered feedback to the core group, ensured that data collection and reporting are cooperatively carried out organization-wide, and provided reflection and supervision. Later, when the evaluation work is completed, the larger group will function as champions of the evaluation and promoters of greater awareness of and participation in the process system-wide.



Step 2: Determine Roles and Responsibilities in the Evaluation

The second step in the evaluation process is equally critical to laying the foundation for a CoL because it entails defining who is responsible for what tasks and roles throughout the evaluation.

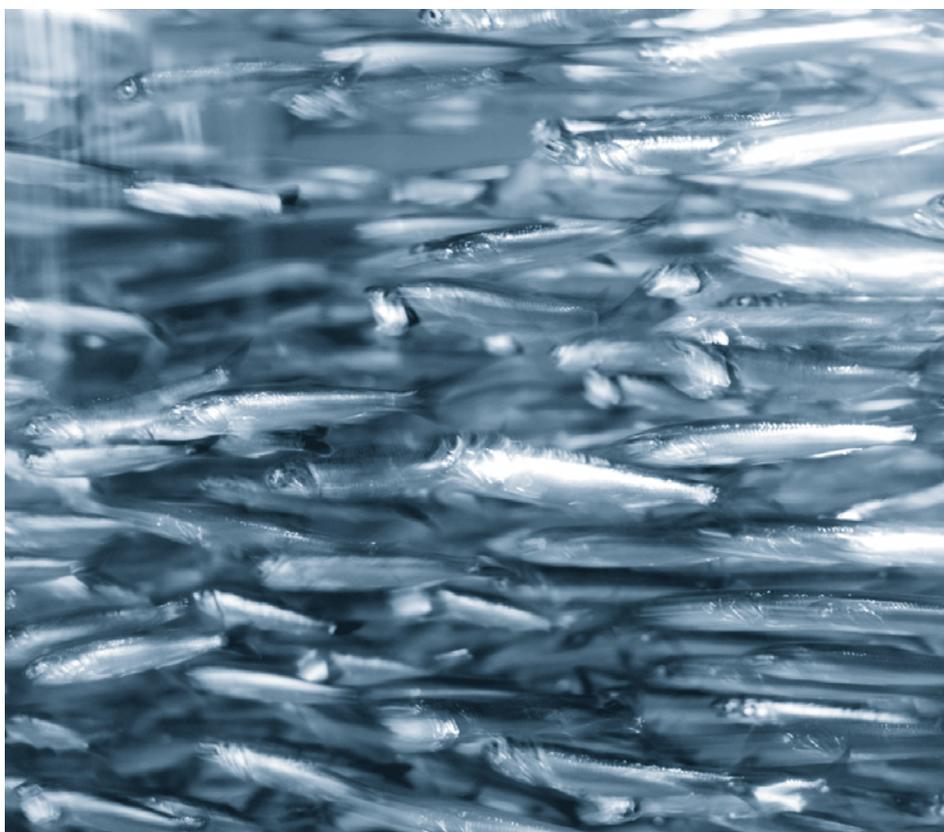
Traditional

In a more traditional evaluation, the responsibility for developing and implementing the evaluation often rests on the shoulders of an external consultant. Few staffers are involved. And, while the design itself may include data collection from a range of stakeholders, it rarely includes these stakeholders directly in evaluation planning, as advisors or leaders in the data collection process, or in determining how best to use the findings of the evaluation. The result is too often an evaluation with a number of shortcomings: lack of comprehensiveness; inability to reflect the organization's primary information priorities; and findings that do not have direct utility for the organization's stakeholders. In the end, stakeholders are not invested in the evaluation: They feel too far removed from it, unable to guide its design, and unwilling to leverage it to the fullest benefit of the organization.

CoL

In a CoL approach, however, stakeholders participate from the beginning of the evaluation process and in a range of ways that evolve over time. The entry point of participants into the CoL process may vary from one organization to the next, but, ideally, a CoL actively engages representative participants (as described in Step 1) from the beginning. By doing so, the CoL approach minimizes the challenges that can limit the effectiveness of an evaluation, particularly later in the process.

For example, the CoL approach can curtail roadblocks to effective evaluation implementation, such as: a lack of familiarity and comfort with evaluation; limited knowledge and skills around data collection and analysis; an organizational culture that is unfamiliar with evidence-based decision-making; and conflicting internal politics.



By emphasizing a process that is transparent, understandable, inclusive, and ongoing, the CoL approach addresses and curtails these barriers by design.

Because the CoL approach necessitates that participants simultaneously learn while designing the evaluation, there may be a perception that it adds more cost, in terms of time and resources, to the beginning phases of an evaluation. But the cost can be re-characterized as a wise organizational investment because it enhances the probability that the evaluation will be successful, relevant, useful, sustainable—and result in a more efficient and effective organization.

Implementing CoL

A crucial step in CoL implementation is determining the capacity of the organization and its staff to conduct the evaluation and deciding if external assistance might be needed. Assessing internal capabilities can be done formally through existing tools⁵ or informally through dialogue by exploring the organization's perceptions of its staff and board's capacity, willingness, and desire to be involved in the various components of the evaluation assignment.

⁵ Preskill, Hallie and Torres, R. Readiness for Organizational Learning and Evaluation (R.O.L.E.). York, P.Y. (2005). *A Funders Guide to Evaluation: Leveraging Evaluation to Improve Nonprofit Effectiveness*. (St. Paul, MN: Field Steps Alliance, 2005).

Figure 3: Division of Responsibilities in an Evolving CoL

BEGINNING			
Division of Labor	Responsibilities		
Consultant		Consultant	Client
	Project Management	Facilitate & coordinate meetings	Attend meetings
	Design & Implementation	Create evaluation design; Manage implementation	React to Evaluation design
	Tools	Develop evaluation tools	Provide feedback on evaluation tools
Client	Results	Analyze data; report results	Provide feedback on results of evaluation

EMERGING			
Division of Labor	Responsibilities		
Consultant		Consultant	Client
	Project Management	Facilitate meetings	Coordinate & attend meetings
	Design & Implementation	Create evaluation design; Manage implementation	Contribute to evaluation design; Manage some evaluation tasks
	Tools	Develop evaluation tools	Offer ideas on types of tools and items within tools
Client	Results	Analyze data; report results	Provide feedback on results of evaluation

ADAPTING			
Division of Labor	Responsibilities		
Consultant		Consultant	Client
	Project Management	Facilitate meetings	Manage communication process
Client	Design & Implementation	Co-Create evaluation Design; Manage implementation	Co-Create evaluation design; Manage some evaluation tasks
	Tools	Co-Develop evaluation tools	Co-Develop evaluation tools
	Result	Analyze data; report results	Assist in data analysis and reporting

TRANSFORMED			
Division of Labor	Responsibilities		
Consultant		Consultant	Client
Client	Project Management	Attend/contribute to meetings	Manage communication process and facilitate meetings
	Design & Implementation	Provide TA in creation & implementation of evaluation design	Create and evaluate design & manage implementation
	Tools	Provide TA in creating evaluation tools	Develop evaluation tools
	Result	Contribute to data analysis and reporting	Manage data analysis and reporting in/externally

In any team effort, clearly delineating roles and responsibilities of internal and external participants is critical to effective team work—and this principle holds true for a community of learners. Participants’ involvement should be deliberate, carefully planned and facilitated. And, roles and assignments should be frequently revisited and evaluated.

Figure 3 illustrates one example of how responsibilities in a CoL might ideally be shared by internal and external parties and how it might evolve over time through different phases of an evaluation (Beginning, Emerging, Adapting, Transformed). Figure 3 illustrates who (Consultant or Client Organization) might assume various responsibilities during each phase.

Case Study

With the Office of Catholic Schools, it was quickly apparent that the staff exhibited a high degree of readiness and capacity for some key CoL responsibilities. For example, research and data collection were not areas that were unfamiliar to OCS because its Data and Research Department managed and analyzed the extensive electronic and archived data necessary for the operations of a complex school system. However, evaluation planning, design, and implementation were not topics in which the organization had much experience or depth, so external assistance was focused in those areas.

During the assessment of capacity, a number of questions need to be answered:

- **How is data collected and analyzed?** Is there a central collection point or staff expert(s) who collects data, who knows how and where the data are housed and maintained, who analyzes and reports to the organization? What is the level and sophistication of baseline knowledge and data within the nonprofit?
- **What is the organization’s learning culture?** Is learning within the organization focused on inquiry, reflection, comparisons, benchmarks, goals, targets, or advocacy? Is learning supported by the structure or mores of the organization?
- **Why are data collected and to what uses are analyses put?** Is there a reliance on data and analysis across the organization? Is data utilized by individuals, by teams, by interdepartmental committees? Is there a respect for data and analyses within the nonprofit or is there fear of the change that it might bring?

Steps 3-6: Evaluation Design and Implementation

There is no need here to describe in detail Steps 3-6 of the evaluation process as, under both traditional and CoL processes, an evaluation is designed, data collected and analyzed, and findings reported. However, there is a marked difference in the nature and degree to which stakeholders participate in each of these steps:

Traditional

The lion's share of the evaluation design and data collection in a traditional evaluation is typically done by one or a small number of evaluators. And while there may be some stakeholder involvement in outlining evaluation questions and advising on the approach, such involvement tends to be reactive to models and frameworks that are put forth by the evaluator(s). Moreover, stakeholders are primarily involved only as passive respondents to requests for information.

CoL

In a CoL approach, however, stakeholders are invited, assisted, and supported in their participation at each step of the evaluation. And learning is at the heart of their participation—how to conduct an evaluation, how to use the results, and how to determine what strengthens a program or organization.

Implementing CoL

Through the Evaluation Leadership Team, a CoL process should include both formal and informal learning opportunities, including a mix of didactic, experiential, and planned learning opportunities. Engaging participants on their "home turf," the team is encouraged to identify stakeholders' strengths, assets, and capacities, and to customize evaluation training and learning opportunities.

Case Study

Participants in the Evaluation Leadership Team of the Office of Catholic Schools were invited to a series of in-person meetings that were a consistent balance of:

- 1) New Content:** 1-2 hours of didactic training, focusing on evaluation terminology, models, and processes;
- 2) Review and Connections:** Re-examination of previous learning and correlation of new content to the overall evaluation design and planning;
- 3) Learning Application:** 2-3 hours of "roll-up your sleeves" activities that encouraged and directed the participants to use what they had learned the previous sessions; and
- 4) Planning the Next Steps:** Discussion of agenda, homework, and study for the next meeting.

Assessing the Capabilities of a Nonprofit

The first question for each nonprofit taking a CoL approach is "what can be done by the organization and what must be done by utilizing the services of external experts?" The process should be initiated by assessing the nonprofit's readiness and abilities—either informally, for example by conversations or meetings, or more formally, for instance by conducting a quick survey or use of other tools. TCC Group's experience has been that the latter approach usually saves time and money and results in more useful information, but many nonprofits prefer a less structured, more casual approach."

Reflection and Learning:

- Assess stakeholders' skills and willingness in determining the most appropriate starting point for CoL (i.e., Beginning, Emerging, Adapting, and Transformed).
- Meet stakeholders where they are.
- Facilitate stakeholders' progression through the levels of CoL.
- Understand and communicate the long-term gains of a CoL approach.





A Word about Steps 3–6

Creating a logic model or theory of change for the evaluation is a particularly valuable opportunity to engage the Evaluation Team participants. Utilizing the organization’s existing documentation (vision or mission statement) and plans (strategic, operational, programmatic), the team should be encouraged to build its own logic model for use in the evaluation. TCC Group has found that it may be easier for the team to be presented with a sample model which they can deconstruct, modify, rationalize, and re-construct (rather than create one from scratch).

By the last of the meetings, the OCS team had developed an evaluation design complete with identification of intended outcomes, measures and indicators, delineation of data sources, and assignment of responsibilities for data collection, analysis, communications, and reporting. The OCS evaluation design and framework were grounded in the organization’s mission and strategic management plan, ensuring that the evaluation was SMART: Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Relevant and True-to-mission.

A number of useful resources are available to guide the Evaluation Team in creating its logic model for change. Specific references can be found at the end of this paper.

Step 7: Utilizing Evaluation Results

The high probability that results of an evaluation will be widely utilized in a nonprofit to produce measurable improvements is perhaps the strongest argument for the CoL process. And, in fact, TCC Group’s experience shows that clients employing CoL have drawn on this evaluative learning for a wide range of improvements, including developing

a wider and deeper understanding of a nonprofit’s programs; utilizing evaluation results to stimulate and shape decision making; and creating fundamental change and behavioral modifications spurred by the evaluation. The last is a particularly important achievement because it embeds within an organization the ability to make continuous future change and progress.

Traditional

Evaluation findings from a traditional evaluation are characteristically read once by a few leaders within an organization and their use limited to short-term changes or one-time decisions. Rarely does a traditional evaluation lead to a continuous process of reflection and learning that can have meaningful and permanent repercussions for a nonprofit. All too often, the traditional evaluation report is put on a shelf to gather dust.

CoL

A successful CoL approach, on the other hand, virtually ensures that evaluation findings are widely integrated into a nonprofit because of the greater investment of a wide range of participants in the outcomes and because the process is established as an ongoing one, intrinsically linked to future decision making.

Implementing CoL

To ensure that results of a CoL evaluation are fully utilized, it is important for the organization to incorporate evaluative learning into the agenda and operating procedures at every level of the organization. Assessment of new data and evaluative learning should become a regular part of each meeting and program, from the board level to the client-service level. Actions based on new evaluation data and results should become an expected and anticipated outcome to make certain that ongoing, continuous learning and improvement are achieved.

Case Study

Although the Office of Catholic Schools is just entering the phase of implementing its evaluation findings, TCC Group is already working with a number of standing committees and stakeholder groups to include the findings in their agendas,

and to distribute results through a number of information-sharing vehicles (web site, publications, newsletters). These are the initial steps toward building an internal culture to ensure that evaluation findings are used to guide and inform decision making across OCS. They will be followed by working to ensure that OCS staff and departments have the capability to process, interpret, and use the findings in more complex decision-making and collaborative working-group models.

Conclusion

More and more forward-looking nonprofits are utilizing a community-of-learning approach. Why? Because with more staff and stakeholders involved, trained, and invested in the CoL process, it becomes increasingly likely that evaluations and their results become a meaningful, valuable, and permanent part of the standard operating procedures of the organization. There is no secret to the CoL process. It is accessible and tangible for most nonprofits. Establishing a culture of continuous improvement can be accomplished through the commitment of key stakeholders and leaders, through consistent support for building evaluation capacity, and

through expert facilitation. As OCS Director of Catholic School Identity and Mission Esther Hicks said, "We have capacity internally and we want to be able to leverage this capacity in a cost-effective way. Resources are tight for us and we need to act smart. [CoL] is the right investment for our future."

As with any innovative philosophy, CoL is a dynamic, changing concept—and TCC Group is committed to measuring and improving CoL for use by a wide variety of nonprofits. Among the questions TCC Group is currently examining: How can CoL best be scaled for use by different nonprofits? What is the optimal time for an organization to move through each CoL level? Can a nonprofit expect its staff and stakeholders to fully assume all CoL skills and roles, or will there always be a continuing need for an external consultant? And how can CoL outcomes be better measured? In our next paper, we will share the results of our learning on these topics.

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Making the Evaluator Useful:

- Ensure a mix of didactic and experiential learning
- Provide opportunities for stakeholders to deconstruct and reconstruct the logic model and evaluation design.
- Revisit CoL roles and responsibilities frequently and adjust as necessary.
- Be explicit and transparent as skills and responsibilities are transferred within the CoL.

Logic Model References

1. W.K. Kellogg Foundation (1998). *W.K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook*. (Battle Creek, MI: W.K. Kellogg Foundation).
2. Grant Craft (2006). *Mapping Change: Using a Theory of Change to Guide Planning and Evaluation*.
3. Anderson, Andrea. A. (2004). *Theory of Change: As a Tool for Strategic Planning*. (The Aspen Institute A Roundtable on Community Change).
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Girl's Best Friend Foundation: A Funder As CoL Catalyst

While a single nonprofit organization has the capacity to develop an internal Community of Learners, foundations are particularly well positioned to create a CoL internally and among their grantees and/or peer funders. The Girl's Best Friend Foundation, located in Chicago until it intentionally sunset in 2008, was able to create several of these communities among people and organizations serving girls. By modeling 'learning behavior', equipping adults and girls of grantee organizations to evaluate their work and encouraging them to safely share the results, and convening grantee organizations, Girl's Best Friend was able to use the CoL approach to significantly increase the impact of its work.

Modeling Learning Behavior—Practicing What You Preach

Founded in 1996, the Girl's Best Friend Foundation continually strove to be a learning organization, and from the beginning evaluation was at the heart of this learning. A significant evaluation of the Foundation's grant-making practice and procedures, conducted in 2001, led to changes in application and reporting processes. More importantly, however, it led to:

- a reaffirmed focus on its original social change agenda for girls by funding girl-led organizing, action research, and advocacy, alongside direct programming for girls;
- more intentional focus on building the programmatic and organizational capacity these grantees;
- a more narrow geographical focus—confined to organizations in the Chicago area;
- continued ancillary support it offered grantees, including opportunities for training and networking, and—evaluative learning.

Shortly after this evaluation effort, GBF created a logic model to guide its work. In the words of Executive Director Alice Cottingham, "We articulated our theory of what it would take to support girls' activism in Chicago. We illustrated that theory in a succinct logic model that sharply condensed our goals, and stated the strategies and resources we'd deploy to reach them—and then relied on it." The work of the Girl's Best Friend Foundation was supported by an evaluation conducted by an external consultant. The evaluation focused on understanding strength of the organization's grantmaking to build capacity among its grantees and the positive results for girls.

Resourcing Grantees to do Evaluation—Building Basic Capacity

Recognizing that evaluation is a difficult prospect for any nonprofit, but particularly for smaller or grassroots nonprofits, GBF sought to intentionally support evaluation work among its grantees by providing extra funding for evaluation in the form of 10% over and above the grant amount. These additional funds were then supplemented by a series of evaluation trainings offered through the Foundation, alongside trainings in grassroots fundraising and youth activism. GBF staff deliberately adopted reflective learning practices designed to promote continuous improvement. These practices included: biannual group reflection on the past 6 months of work—what worked, what didn't, why, what they'd do differently going forward. In addition, we engaged in planning dialogue including ideas from grantees and colleagues as well as a review session at the close of each grants cycle about lessons learned, emerging understanding and new questions. Program officers were formally tasked with responsibility for learning from grantees and bringing that information back to the foundation. They sought grantee feedback about girl activism and how to promote girls' critical thinking and leadership. A survey of grantees conducted at the close of the evaluation revealed that 92% of respondents had taken advantage of at least one of the trainings. Of particular note—this combination of resources allowed evaluation to take hold at grantee organizations. Of the organizations surveyed, 88 percent report engaging in impact evaluation, but the degree to which these processes are now "owned" by the grantee organizations is evidenced in the fact that 42 percent of respondents report devoting a portion of one staff person's time to evaluation, and 46 percent have a line item for evaluation in their organizational budget.

Perhaps even more important than the funding or training, however, was the spirit of trust that GBF staff worked to intentionally create with grantees. By building respectful, open communication with their grantee population, crucial evaluative learning was able to make it back to GBF, and therefore able to circulate among those who could most benefit—peer organizations and other funders. As Cottingham explains, “We conducted site visits and read evaluation reports and followed up with questions and kudos. We were deliberate about building staff to staff relationships.” This intentional relationship building had important results. In the words of one grantee, “I have found GBF to be the most productive interaction that I have had with a foundation in my career... I always felt welcome to call GBF staff to talk through concerns, and I never felt that any issues that I brought to the table would be used against us in future funding considerations.” Another observed how this listening stance translated into real needs being met, “They [GBF] acknowledge your experience... They funded based on what they heard.”

Creating Communities of Learning—Convening, Convening, Convening

Having modeled and supported a learning culture both internally and among its grantees, GBF took the final important step to intentionally create CoLs in which the learning could circulate and be incorporated into the programs of grantee organizations. Starting in 2001, it intentionally launched a series of “Learning Circles” —for program staff, based on topical issues, and some for Executive Directors of grantee organizations. These CoLs became a safe venue for discussion about the successes and challenges of the grantee’s common work and a venue in which evaluation findings could be shared, explored and interpreted. In Cottingham’s words, “We had high expectations for these groups and offered a high degree of support to match.”

Aside from these communities, GBF reached out to girls themselves—by providing evaluation trainings focused on youth-led evaluation, and by convening a group of girls to conduct a portion of the foundation’s grantmaking. “The young women in this grantmaking and community action project were learners and teachers, keeping the rest of us real about what girls want,” explains Cottingham.

CoL Approach = Increased Impact

The overall effect of GBF’s CoL effort was to increase the impact of its work. A summative evaluation of the foundation’s work revealed the following results:

Impactful grantees, fulfilled mission: GBF’s work with and through its grantee partners established a cohort of young women leaders who are change agents in their families, their communities, and among their peers exhibiting a confident and holistic sense of self.

Strengthened nonprofit professionals: The CoLs helped to develop and sustain a group of nonprofit professionals—100 percent of whom stated they plan to remain in the nonprofit sector.

Healthier grantee organizations: Enhanced by the learning approach, GBF grantees are strong, growing, nonprofits—the majority of which have strategic plans, stable funding bases, and active evaluation programs.

About midway through GBF’s lifespan, the Foundation revamped the evaluation training it offered grantees moving away from traditional adult-driven evaluation techniques that many groups found intimidating and overwhelming, toward more participatory evaluation research (PER). Grantees found this approach more relevant and effective with a set of tools to teach youth, who applied it in programs to pose and explore answers to questions of great interest to them. PER was a powerful approach for strengthening young women’s reflective and critical thinking skills, and fostering their community activism—essential goals of GBF.

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About TCC Group

For nearly 30 years, TCC has provided strategic planning, program strategy development, evaluation and management consulting services to foundations, nonprofit organizations, corporate community involvement programs and government agencies. During this time, the firm has developed substantive knowledge and expertise in fields as diverse as community and economic development, human services, children and family issues, education, health care, the environment, and the arts. From offices in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and San Francisco, the firm works with clients nationally and, increasingly, globally.

Our Evaluation Services

Our evaluation services generate learning and emphasize data driven decision making that improves and enhances ongoing program and organizational development. Because TCC Group is a full-service consulting firm that provides evaluation and planning support, our projects reach beyond measurement and assessment and provide leaders with insights on lasting impacts for communities and the field. We work across three sectors: Nonprofit, Foundation, and Corporate Community Involvement and provide the following core services:

- Evaluation Planning and System Design
- Program Evaluation
- Cluster Evaluation
- Evaluation of Capacity-Building Initiatives
- Evaluation of Policy/Advocacy Initiatives
- Evaluation Capacity-Building / Community of Learners
- Evaluation of "Signature" Programs/Social impact initiatives
- Evaluation of Corporate Citizenship Efforts
- Outsourcing of the Management of Foundation Evaluation Projects (Your External Evaluation Officer)

How We Work

Our approach is governed by a philosophy of what TCC Group calls "evaluative learning"; this approach is grounded in principles and methods that focus on answering not only did it work (i.e., the outcomes), but just as importantly, what worked, why, and how. In this way, TCC

Group helps organizations to not only know if they are succeeding, but also to receive the types of information they need to improve their programs and strengthen their organizations to improve upon their success. We believe our clients have evaluation capacity, and we aim to leverage that capacity to ensure a productive, cost-effective, results-oriented, impactful, and sustainable evaluation. This approach helps our clients ask more sophisticated evaluation questions, collect more and better data, and use our evaluation tools, templates, and protocols well beyond our initial assignment with them.

We balance structure and predictability in our assignments with responsiveness and customized approaches to best meet our clients' needs. Working in multidisciplinary teams, TCC Group tailors each new evaluation assignment to the particular challenges, timetable, and budget for the project. We bring the perspective of our evaluation expertise, broad experience in the nonprofit sector, and the enthusiastic commitment to get the job done right.

Our Distinctive Qualifications

TCC Group consultants have extensive backgrounds in fields such as human services, youth development, arts and culture, education, advocacy, international studies, and economic development. Our consultants also have strong analytical, research, and group facilitation skills. Moreover, we believe in a culturally competent approach to our engagements, where we ensure awareness and responsiveness to the histories, values, and ethnic and racial norms or disparities informing our clients' and their communities' beliefs and comfort levels with consultants and evaluation.

Our Clients

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