

Submitted to:  
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# Learning Circles Project

## 15-Month Report

# InnoNet

Helping Agencies Succeed ▲

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## I. Executive Summary

The Learning Circles Project was created to help selected nonprofit agencies in the District of Columbia measure and improve their overall organizational effectiveness. To begin, the ideal components of organizational effectiveness were identified and each organization's internal structure with respect to those components was measured. Based on these findings, the Learning Circles Project provided information and guidance to assist agencies to improve their organizations against these ideals. Moreover, the activities were specifically tailored to facilitate communication and implementation of the tenets of participatory capacity building.

The Learning Circles Project participants were emerging nonprofit organizations that operate in the District of Columbia. The participant organizations ranged in age from less than five to more than 20 years. Staff sizes ranged from two to approximately 15.

The Learning Circles Project was designed to work with senior agency executives to help them become better planners and learners. The project was comprised of two parts:

1. *Measuring and Improving Organizational Effectiveness*
2. *Participatory Capacity Building*

Using an organizational diagnostic tool, InnoNet measured participant organizations' levels of organizational effectiveness. Based on InnoNet's experiences and research of organizational effectiveness, InnoNet tested some ideals associated with the nine components of organizational effectiveness. An analysis of the organizational diagnostic tool responses, which presented the organization's current status with respect to the ideals, was written for each organization. A lead coach, assigned to each organization, worked with stakeholders to identify priorities based on the diagnostic tool analysis and provided on-sight assistance to work towards goals they identified.

Participatory capacity building was the method by which InnoNet increased the knowledge and skills of participant organizations. There were three days of formal training to review program planning, fundraising, and program evaluation. Additional topics included interpersonal communication, team building, and valuing. Informal training consisted of small workshops that were held for organizations that have similar challenges and individual training sessions at each participant organization.

Evaluation efforts thus far have provided a wealth of information on the process, tools, and methodology for the Learning Circles Project. Participant organizations:

- Were unlikely to have strategic plans, program plans, evaluation plans, or fundraising plans;
- Struggled with board development, information systems, and evaluation;
- Encountered internal barriers to success such as communication challenges and conflict;
- Are eager to learn from other nonprofit agencies but feel isolated from one another;

- Are anxious to learn and improve their internal processes; and
- Value significant time from an organizational coach to motivate them to build the habits, structures, and processes to plan for the future

InnoNet estimated that each organization would receive approximately 15 days of technical assistance and training; each organization actually received approximately 20 to 25 days.

Participating in the Learning Circles Project has given us many insights on how to improve for the future. A few of the lessons learned from this project include:

- Identify specific challenges within each organization earlier in the process
- Develop a faster application process
- Structure the training sessions to assist organization with scheduling time efficiently and making changes to the schedule with ease

## II. Overview

According to most of the literature published in the 1980s and 90s on nonprofit effectiveness, five characteristics associated with organizational success include:

- A vital mission;
- A well-organized board with involved members;
- Strong leadership;
- Motivated and empowered volunteers and staff with clear direction; and
- Solid finances, including reliable and diverse revenue streams.

Based on InnoNet's experiences with nonprofits and recent literature, InnoNet devised five components of organizational effectiveness that encompass the aforementioned five characteristics.

1. Planning
2. Organizational Structure
3. Fundraising
4. Communications
5. Finance and Accountability

Each of the aforementioned five characteristics is comprised of subcomponents of organizational effectiveness that address the internal systems, structure, and responsibilities that increase success (Appendix A). As the nonprofit sector grows in scope, scale, and resources, it is increasingly being forced to address growing internal and external pressures. Externally, nonprofit agencies are being held accountable by stakeholders and facing market pressures from nonprofit and for profit competitors. Internally, nonprofit agencies face personnel management challenges. However, a fundamental challenge remains cultivating and maintaining a belief in the organizational mission while adapting to organizational pressures.

Recent research indicates the state and nature of an organization's culture can help build an organization's capacity to learn and succeed. Thus, three characteristics have been added to the components of organizational effectiveness:

6. Innovativeness
7. Quality and Responsiveness
8. Organizational Learning

Additionally, all programs and projects carried out within an organization should strive to accomplish the organization's mission. A ninth component of organizational effectiveness should be considered a direct link to and consequence of its activities:

9. Outcomes

To improve organizational effectiveness it is important to know:

- What to examine; ideals of organizational effectiveness, components, and elements
- Where the organization currently stands with respect to the ideal
- Where the organization wants to be by the end of one year; the end of three to five years
- What the organization needs to move towards achieving each of the desired goals
- What the key barriers are to organizational effectiveness

The ten Learning Circles organizations were:

- Dance Place
- DC Action for Children
- The Ethiopian Community Center
- Family Life Center Foundation, Inc.
- JHP, Inc.
- Jumpstart for Young Children, Inc.
- Mentors, Inc.
- My Sister's Place
- Perry School Community Services Center, Inc.
- Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company

The life stage of an organization is important in understanding and gauging its effectiveness. Nonprofit research provides a clear description of four major stages of nonprofit organizational growth. The stages are characterized by varying levels of organizational capacity and program effectiveness. The stages are start-up, emerging, consolidation-with-growth, and expansion.

All of the participant organizations were emerging organizations. An emerging or reemerging organization is in the process of designing carefully laid foundation for success and is incorporating many of the necessary elements for effectiveness into the organization. A mission exists and is supported by growing, relevant programs. The staff and leadership of the organization are capable and motivated. In addition, emerging organizations are working towards a well-organized board and solid finances. Successful organizations at this stage have a high demand for program services and are improving their expertise and resources. Emerging nonprofit agencies are ready to become learning organizations, build their capacity, and evolve.

### **III. Rationale/Context**

The Learning Circles Project was funded by the Fannie Mae Foundation and designed and implemented by InnoNet staff, de Barbieri and Associates, and consultants. InnoNet discussed applicant selection with the Fannie Mae Foundation but ensured that all of the information provided to the Foundation was anonymous. In addition, throughout the project, InnoNet submitted reports to the Fannie Mae Foundation to keep them apprised of the activities and the lessons that were being learned. However, Fannie Mae Foundation program officers did not attend any training sessions and none of the information shared with them had organizational identifiers. InnoNet's ability to obtain clear, honest responses from participants and engage them in discussions about their challenges depended on this guarantee of anonymity.

The Learning Circles Project was created to help selected nonprofit agencies in the District of Columbia measure and improve their overall organizational effectiveness. To begin, the ideal components of organizational effectiveness were identified and each organization's internal structure with respect to those components was measured. Based on these findings, the Learning Circles Project provided information and guidance to assist agencies to improve their organizations against these ideals. Moreover, the activities were specifically tailored to facilitate communication and implementation of the tenants of participatory capacity building.

The organizations that participated in the Learning Circles Project have various challenges and lack some of the elements that comprise the components of organizational effectiveness. However, it is not InnoNet's intention to imply that the Learning Circles organizations are not dedicated to providing high quality services to their clients. InnoNet did not evaluate the participant organization's programs. It is important to remember that the focus of the Learning Circles Project was to assist organizations in identifying what areas of organizational effectiveness they currently have in place and where they could improve.

The primary hypotheses upon which the Learning Circles Project were based are:

- Effective nonprofit organizations have a set of ideal characteristics.
- Using adult learning theory, the Learning Circles Project activities are likely to increase knowledge and skills. Adult learning theory contends that facilitated peer-to-peer learning experiences provide a better learning environment for adults than traditional classroom model.
- Identifying the ideal characteristics within each of the nine components of organizational effectiveness will assist organizations in gauging their progress towards becoming an efficient agency.
- Increasing organizational effectiveness will ultimately improve program outcomes.

This report provides an explanation of the activities that were completed during the Learning Circles Project and a preliminary discussion of the evaluation questions which will be expanded upon in the 18-month report. Learning Circles activities began in December 1999 and concluded in June 2000. The Learning Circles Project evaluation design will be described and some preliminary findings will be presented in section VI.

#### **IV. Project Objectives and Deliverables**

The Learning Circles Project was designed to help nonprofits develop the capacity to measure, understand, and improve their effectiveness. The objectives for the Learning Circles Project were designed based on the hypotheses discussed in section III. The three primary objectives of the project were to:

1. Increase the knowledge of organizational effectiveness among 10 participant organizations through training sessions, peer-to-peer interaction, and one-to-one assistance.
2. Increase the skills to create a program plan, an evaluation plan, and a fundraising plan among 10 participant organizations through training sessions, peer-to-peer interaction, and one-to-one assistance.
3. Build the internal capacity of participating organizations to create, expand and manage effective programs and services through participatory methods.

The Learning Circles Project identified five deliverables that each participant organization would have at the conclusion of the project.

1. The elements in place to create a quality strategic plan;
2. A written work plan to address the organizational needs based on the results of the diagnostic tool;
3. A written program evaluation plan;
4. A written program fundraising plan; and
5. Working knowledge of InnoNet's WIN! website.

The number of deliverables that Learning Circles Participants have completed will be discussed in the 18-month report.

## V. Methodology

The Learning Circles participant organizations are all working tirelessly to move their organization towards achieving their mission. They all fervently believe in their mission and their work. Providing high quality services to their clients is of utmost importance to the participant organizations. Moreover, each of the Learning Circles organizations is dedicated to improving their organizational effectiveness. Addressing their challenges and taking the time to participate in the Learning Circles Project was one step towards improving their effectiveness.

The Learning Circles Project included an extensive application process and structured technical assistance opportunities and training sessions. The training and technical assistance included opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction and one-to-one coaching. Each Learning Circles Organization was offered three formal training sessions, four small group training sessions, three individual training sessions, and five coaching visits; a total of 15 days. Learning Circles trainers in fact spent approximately 20 to 25 days working with each Learning Circles Organization.

The outcomes for each organization will differ because participants had the opportunity to attend various sessions and allocated varying amounts of time to the Learning Circles Project. InnoNet anticipates that the time invested by the participating agencies in the project's activities will impact the amount of knowledge and skills transferred.

### A. Application Process

#### Step One: Written Application

In August of 1999, the Learning Circles application was made available to a select group of Fannie Mae Foundation grantees. A three-step process was designed to identify 10 Learning Circles organizations. The first step of the application process consisted of a list of questions that organizations were asked about their programs. The application was distributed to 127 potential grantees; 31 follow-up applications were mailed. There were 24 applicants.

Selection criteria for choosing organizations for the finalist round were based on information the organizations provided in step one:

- *Organizational budgets* were compared to determine where applicants fell along a spectrum. Organizations with less than a \$1 million budget were considered for participation in the project.
- Existence of a *deficit* was used as an indicator of the financial stability of the organizations. Organizations with a substantial deficit and no plans to alleviate the debt were not considered for the project.

- The *number of programs* an organization had was important because InnoNet wanted to ensure the organization would truly benefit from the Learning Circles Project. Organizations with more than ten programs were not considered for the project.
- The *number of employees* was a criterion in choosing finalists. A minimum of one full-time employee was necessary to ensure the commitment and continuity necessary to carry out the responsibilities of Learning Circles Participation. Organizations with less than one full-time, paid employee were not considered for the project.

### **Step Two: Diagnostic Tool**

InnoNet reviewed the initial applications and proposed a group of 19 finalists to the Fannie Mae Foundation. The Fannie Mae Foundation approved the finalists who were required to attend a meeting at which a diagnostic tool was distributed, selection criteria were discussed, and site visits were scheduled. The diagnostic tool had three parts, each of which was to be completed by selected stakeholders including the board president, executive director, board members, staff, and volunteers. Only organizations that completed the diagnostic tool were considered for final selection.

### **Step Three: Site Visit**

Step three in the application process consisted of a site visit. Site visits were conducted to obtain additional qualitative information about each organization's culture and their interest and readiness to participate in the Learning Circles Project. Selection criteria to determine the final 10 Learning Circles Participants fell into three categories: readiness, ability, and diversity. Within each area, several criteria were used to compare organizations. The categories and criteria are the following:

- *Readiness to actively participate* – Readiness was assessed by examining the responses to questions regarding time, human resources, energy and enthusiasm, number of staff, board involvement, staff commitment, and the alignment of organizational needs with project outcomes.
- *Ability to benefit from participation* – Our perception of an organization's ability to participate in the Learning Circles project was based upon the degree of clarity of their mission and vision and the infrastructure they had in place. Organizations were not expected to have a mature infrastructure in place. However, the infrastructure that existed indicated the current state of the organization. In addition, the organizations feelings about building internal systems and structures and its readiness to participate in the Learning Circles Project were important in gauging the organization's ability to benefit from participation.
- *Diversity of groups participating* – Program area, capacity, and funding growth were the areas that will contribute to a healthy discussion and provide lessons learned from various perspectives. A diverse mix of organizations was included in the group of Learning Circles finalists.

Based on the data gathered in the three-part application process, InnoNet proposed 10 organizations to participate in the Learning Circles Project for approval to the Fannie Mae Foundation. The 10 organizations were selected and received \$5,000 grant for their time to participate in this inaugural project.

## **B. Organizational Diagnostic Tool and Analysis**

To provide InnoNet insight into the infrastructure and effectiveness of the organizations, quantitative information was collected from each organization through the diagnostic tool in the fall of 1999. The organizational diagnostic tool gathered primarily quantitative information from various stakeholders and provided insight into how each perceived the organization and their role in it. The information from the organizational diagnostic tool was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). No tests of statistical significance were conducted on the organizational diagnostic tool.

Cross tabulations of the data collected compared the responses of each stakeholder to each statement on the organizational diagnostic tool. Using the cross tabulations, an analysis report of the findings from the organizational diagnostic tool was written for each finalist organization. The reports included a description of the components of organizational effectiveness, information on what the data indicated the organization was doing well and the activities that need additional work. All of the responses from an organization's stakeholders were kept anonymous. Many of the participating agencies had very few staff members. Thus, to ensure that no staff members would be singled out and penalized for their response, the analysis report did not include the number of individuals who indicated they strongly agreed or disagreed with any given statement. Using terms such as *few*, *several*, and *many* the reports referred to the relative strength in agreement to a given statement without making one or two staff member(s) the only dissenting voice(s).

The organizational diagnostic tool analyses were written for multiple audiences (staff, executive director, board members etc.) and presented to each Learning Circles organization by their Lead Coach during their first meeting. The coach then discussed with the executive director (and in many cases the staff) what the organization was doing well and the areas that needed additional work. Together, they wrote a work plan that identified the top priority items that the organization wanted to accomplish during the life of the Learning Circles Project.

## **VI. Process**

Having been selected to participate in the Learning Circles Project, each organization was expected to participate in all of the pieces of the project beginning with the formal trainings. A meeting was held with all of the participants to decide on three and one-half days in January to meet as a group. In addition, at that meeting, InnoNet clarified the Learning Circles Project process and expected deliverables and outcomes.

Each Learning Circles Organization chose a three-person team (which consisted of one board member and two senior staff) to focus on implementing the work plan that was designed based on the organizational diagnostic tool findings. No more than two of each organization's Learning Circles team members could attend the Learning Circles formal trainings. At least one person was expected to attend all of the trainings to ensure continuity.

Each Learning Circles Organization was assigned a lead coach and allocated a maximum of five site visits (excluding the formal and informal trainings). Along with the organizational diagnostic tool analysis, organizations were given a blank work plan to help them prioritize areas that their analysis indicated they might want to consider addressing. The areas identified in the chart/work plan were discussed and addressed with the Lead Coach. The lead coaches were responsible for:

- Providing on-sight assistance;
- Identifying another Learning Circles team member (based on their area of expertise) to assist the organization; and
- Linking the organization with an external expert in a particular issue area.

#### **A. Participatory Capacity Building**

Prior to beginning the formal training, the lead trainer, Lynne Cogswell, Ph.D., and Monica Heuer, reviewed each Learning Circles organization's organizational diagnostic tool analysis and visited each Learning Circles organization to discuss their immediate concerns. This information was used to tailor the training sessions and examples to the needs of the participants.

#### **Formal training**

Although, originally, the formal training sessions were scheduled to begin in January, due to inclement weather, they were rescheduled. Each of the ten Learning Circles organizations were represented at the training; there were a total of 19 trainees. Each trainee received a binder with copies of all of the materials that were covered in the trainings.

The formal training sessions began with a discussion of participants' expectations from the Learning Circles Project in general and for the specific trainings. The timeline for the project was reviewed and an additional training date was identified to make-up for the days that were cancelled. The training began with a review of the components of a strategic program plan; the nine steps to completing a strategic program plan were presented and discussed. Participants created mock organizations and worked through the process of creating a program plan in small groups and presented their plans to the whole group for discussion. Each Learning Circles organization was asked to create a strategic program plan for one of their organization's programs. In addition, all trainees completed evaluations of their experiences on that day.

Program evaluation was the next session in the formal training. The elements included in a program evaluation plan were presented and discussed. Trainees worked through the process of creating an evaluation plan and used mock organizations created in the first training to design an evaluation plan.

The third formal training session was fundraising. Mary Ann de Barbieri presented the fundamental elements necessary for effective fundraising. Trainees created draft budgets for one program and began a fundraising plan for each.

The final formal training session topic was InnoNet's WIN! website located at [www.innonet.org](http://www.innonet.org).<sup>1</sup> The WIN! website, a free on-line service, assists public and nonprofit agencies in the creation of program, evaluation, and fundraising plans on the web. In addition, organizations can submit the plans they create to an expert online, and receive feedback. During that session, participants were trained using the WIN! website and reviewed all of the topics covered to that point in the formal training sessions. Participants worked in groups of two per computer and each participant organization used the WIN! website to begin their program and evaluation plans.

## **Informal Training**

### ***Small Group Training Sessions***

The formal training participants selected topics for the small group training sessions. The topics were selected from the areas identified as those that need additional work in the organizational diagnostic tool analysis and additional suggestions. As a group, the formal training participants came to consensus on the top five small group trainings they wanted offered. The topics for those training sessions were:

1. Marketing and Communication
2. Board Development
3. Strategic Planning
4. Internal Communication
5. Strategic Financial Planning

There were a total of 10 small group training sessions led by Mary Ann de Barbieri, Lynne Cogswell, and other experts in the content areas (see Appendix B). To keep the group sessions small, no more than four organizations were involved in any one small group training session. Thus, some of the training sessions were repeated. There were three each of the Marketing and Communications and Strategic Financial Planning training sessions. There were two Strategic Planning training sessions and one each of Board Development and Internal Communication.

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<sup>1</sup> Workstation for Innovative Nonprofits (WIN!)

### ***Individual Training Sessions***

Each organization was entitled to a maximum of three individual training sessions on-site. Topics were decided by each organization individually or in consultation with their coach. Lynne Cogswell led all of the individual training sessions. Session topics included strategic planning, interpersonal communication, team building, annual work plan development, self-assessment, and fundraising (see Appendix C). Or, organizations could choose to combine their sessions and have a strategic planning retreat.

## **B. Evaluation**

### **Evaluation Questions**

Three evaluation questions were identified at the beginning of the project:

1. To what extent did the Learning Circles Project help participants build:
  - a. An understanding of what an organization needs to improve?
  - b. The ability to implement a strategic plan?
  - c. An understanding and the skills necessary for program planning, evaluation, and fundraising?
2. What seemed to make a difference in whether or not organizations improved?
3. How well did the LCP transfer skills, knowledge and capacity to do program planning and evaluation to participants of the training workshops?

### **Evaluation Design**

The evaluation of the Learning Circles Project consists of three stages: (1) Process Evaluation, (2) Diagnostic Evaluation, and (3) Impact evaluation. Each stage of the evaluation contributes to answering the evaluation questions. Qualitative and quantitative data will be collected using the evaluation design. This section of the report will identify preliminary results from the evaluation; final evaluation results will be provided in the 18-month report. The findings from the evaluation of the Learning Circles Project are not generalizable to all nonprofits, they are only applicable to the 10 organizations that participated in the project.

### ***Process Evaluation***

There has been an ongoing evaluation of the Learning Circles Project training. Each training session was evaluated with a set of questions that allowed the trainers to identify what techniques and activities were well received and what changes were necessary. At the end of every session, all participants completed the evaluation and returned it to the lead trainer. Thus, there was 100 percent participation in this piece of the evaluation of the Learning Circles Project. An external consultant, Dr. Margo Bailey, summarized all

of the training evaluation forms. InnoNet has collected the summaries and the analysis of the findings are included in this report in Appendix D.

### ***Diagnostic Evaluation***

An estimated organizational effectiveness baseline for each participating organization was established at the beginning of the project using the organizational diagnostic tool; the findings will be included in the 18-month report. There will be the results of the posttest adapted to reflect organizational challenges originally identified (see Appendix D). It will assess the change in knowledge and skills the Learning Circles Project contributed to the participant organizations. In addition, it will provide a follow-up of the areas identified in the organizational diagnostic tool analysis to determine whether participants have made progress in addressing them. The posttest will also provide feedback on the changes that have occurred since the completion of the Learning Circles activities.

### ***Impact Evaluation***

The project evaluation consists of one focus group to be conducted in August and three case studies. Case study organizations were identified based on the initial capacity of the organization (low, medium, or high). Dr. Bailey is responsible for conducting the case studies. Some preliminary findings from the case studies have been included in this report in section VI. The primary method of data collection for the project evaluation is qualitative.

### **Data Collection**

|                                       | <b>Data sources</b>   | <b>Sample Size</b>   | <b>Method</b>   |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| <b>Intervention Impact Evaluation</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning Circles Training Participants</li> <li>• Documentation</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal training: 18</li> <li>• Small group training: 55</li> <li>• Individual training: 70</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questionnaire</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Organizational Diagnostic</b>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning Circles Participant Organizations' staff, board members, executive director, board president, and volunteers</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 207 respondents to the organizational diagnostic tool</li> <li>• Analysis report</li> </ul>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational diagnostic tool</li> <li>• Pre/posttest</li> <li>• Observation</li> </ul> |
| <b>Project Evaluation</b>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning Circles formal and informal Training participants</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 staff</li> <li>• 5 Executive Directors</li> <li>• 5 clients</li> <li>• 5 board members</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus groups</li> <li>• Interviews</li> <li>• Record review</li> </ul>                   |

## **Analysis**

*Qualitative* – The project evaluation and training evaluation will provide qualitative data to identify trends and patterns among the Learning Circles Participants.

*Quantitative* – The organizational diagnostic will provide a comparison of pre and post data. Using that information, InnoNet will compare the data to identify what kinds of organizational capacity changes have taken place.

## VII. Findings

### A. Evaluation

A baseline assessment of the organizations effectiveness based on the organizational diagnostic tool and discussions with each participant organization found that all of the Learning Circles participants were genuinely interested in improving their organizational effectiveness. They indicated that they were interested in the Learning Circles Project because they wanted to start creating a strategic plan for their organization and gain a better understanding of how to plan and conduct evaluations of their programs. In addition, applicants indicated that they wanted to learn how to move their organization forward and involve stakeholders in the process. One organization indicated that they felt they were at a place where they needed to make a choice about what direction they wanted to move in, as an organization, and come to agreement on how to achieve their mission. The reasons organizations applied to the Learning Circles Project were well intentioned.

The lack of planning is a critical factor that keeps nonprofit agencies in crisis. There are many barriers that prevent them from becoming successful. The literature indicates a number of potential challenges to achieving excellence such as technological advances and time limitations. As InnoNet began working with the Learning Circles organizations, they found that one of the primary obstacles organizations had to moving toward completing a planning process was lack of time. Learning Circles Participants were working overtime to complete their daily work; finding time to attend training sessions was difficult and making time to create plans was almost impossible.

At the beginning of the Learning Circles Project InnoNet found that there was a dearth of written plans among all of the Learning Circles participants (and applicants). Two of the Learning Circles participants indicated that they had strategic plans. However, the plans were neither up-to-date, nor were they used to guide their organization. More than half of the Learning Circles Participants did not have an annual work plan, program plan or a fundraising plan.

None of the Learning Circles participant organizations have evaluation plans. Two of the Learning Circles organizations conduct evaluations. Evaluation is very important to the participants because they want to measure their impact on their clients and have the ability to present stakeholders with some results. However, there is a lack of evaluation knowledge, skills, and experience among participants.

Participants were not aware of how strategic planning, program planning, evaluation, and fundraising were integrated in an organization. In addition, they did not know how to use a strategic plan as a guide for their activities. The Learning Circles Project made participants aware of the importance of building comprehensive plans for an effective organization.

A majority of the Learning Circles organizations indicate board development is an area that needs work. Some organizations would like to transform their board and identify

characteristics that would expand the board's expertise. Others would like to motivate their board to participate more and accept additional responsibilities.

InnoNet found that internally, many Learning Circles organizations had significant communication barriers. Some Learning Circles organizations did not function well as a team, they were unable to communicate effectively, and there was unresolved conflict. To achieve effective participatory capacity building, InnoNet had to address these issues first or organizations would become polarized. Thus, InnoNet spent two to three sessions with some organizations resolving difficulties and communication barriers.

### **Evaluation Questions**

The preliminary results indicate that staff, board, and the Executive Directors of the Learning Circles organizations have been positively affected by the project. The evaluation had both interesting and encouraging results. Although the evaluation of the project is not complete, some preliminary results in response to the evaluation questions are discussed below.

#### **Do participants understand what an organization needs to improve?**

Working with the Learning Circles participants, InnoNet identified a number of internal barriers that threatened to polarize organizations. Individual sessions that focused on addressing conflicts and identifying and practicing techniques for team building, valuing, and improving interpersonal communication between staff and supervisor assisted organizations in overcoming some barriers. This increased participant's understanding of what they need to be aware of to work effectively as an organization.

The training sessions and individualized technical assistance appear to have increased the knowledge and skills of participants in certain topical areas. The types of activities used in the trainings helped participants learn and apply skills. The importance of strategic planning was clear to all participants. Moreover, organizations are using the diagnostic tool results, resources, and knowledge gained during the Learning Circles Project to address their challenges and improve their organization.

Participants indicated an interest in beginning the strategic planning process. Some organizations have begun building their strategic plan and others are in the process of setting aside time for staff and/or board to hold a retreat and begin the process. The participants were interested in gaining an understanding of what was necessary to move from the strategic plan to a work plan. Some participants requested individual training sessions on how to develop work plans and evaluation plans based on their strategic plans.

Although many of the Learning Circles Organizations were interested in becoming more effective, they did not realize what their barriers were to beginning that process. The diagnostic tool helped them identify what their needs were and elicited more discussion about their internal challenges. Several Learning Circles participants' organizations

worked to address interpersonal communication challenges. In addition, they began to talk through how they could work better as a team. Some of the organizations had long standing conflicts that had to be explained, discussed, and resolved before they could move forward on their strategic plan. The Learning Circles organizations are very aware of their barriers and understand that they must address them before they can become an effective organization.

More details on the depth and breadth of the Learning Circles Project participants' understanding of what they need to improve will be reported in the 18-month report.

### **Do participating organizations understand how to implement a strategic plan?**

Most participants understood the steps necessary to create a strategic plan. The Learning Circles Project has provided the building blocks necessary to create a strategic plan. However, the participants are at different places in this process. Overcoming some of the internal barriers was a priority for some organizations while some of the more developed organizations have already created draft strategic plans. One organization has discussed and revised their draft strategic plan during the Learning Circles Project and is well on its way to finalizing it.

Although no organization has completed and finalized a strategic plan during the Learning Circles Project thus far, they have begun to identify what the steps are in implementing a strategic plan. The individual training sessions were useful for organizations that were poised to move to the next step in the planning process. These organizations were walked through the process of creating work plans and an evaluation plan to coincide with their strategic plan.

It is too early to determine whether any organization is or can successfully implement a strategic plan. The ongoing evaluation will present additional findings in the 18-month report.

### **Do organizations understand the skills necessary for program planning, evaluation, and fundraising?**

Preliminary anecdotal information indicates that the Learning Circles Participants have an increased understanding of the skills and process necessary for program planning, evaluation, and fundraising. Organizations understand how to complete program plans (logic models). Working in small groups and using organizational examples assisted participants in internalizing the process for program planning. One organization has already used a program plan in a grant application.

Although anecdotal evidence indicates some participants increased their evaluation skills, the process for program evaluation was not clear to everyone. Evaluation planning was very new to many participants and they found the terminology and process difficult. However, they understood the value of it and indicated that they would present the information to their staff. Two organizations requested evaluation as one of the

individual training topics. The steps to creating an evaluation plan were reviewed and participants gained a deeper understanding of how it should coincide with the strategic plan or program plan.

Learning Circles Project participants indicated that they understood the steps necessary to fundraise. However, none of the organizations have fundraising plans but were very interested in creating one. They learned the process necessary for creating a fundraising plan. Participants indicated that they would like to have had more time to go over specific fundraising strategies.

### **What seemed to make a difference in whether or not organizations improved?**

The time that Learning Circles participants were willing to spend on attending training sessions determined how far organizations progressed towards identifying and addressing their barriers. In addition, time was a factor in determining the amount and variety of technical assistance and coaching that organizations received. Seven of the Learning Circles organizations took advantage of all of the training sessions and coaching opportunities that were provided; the assistance was holistic and followed-up on previous sessions.

Participant organizations were at different places organizationally. They ranged in age from less than five to more than twenty years old. Although all of the organizations are emerging, there are striking differences between the low, medium, and high capacity organizations. Their ability to use the knowledge and skills that were offered during the course of the Learning Circles Project differed for any number of reasons.

The level and degree of participation is associated with some of the challenges these organizations faced. There were staffing problems for some of the organizations that prevented them from participating in some of the training sessions. Many participants came to sessions but did not make the time in their office to work on their plans. Managerial styles differed among the organizations. More than half of the organizations included their staff in at least one group training session or strategic planning session. However, the topical emphasis varied. A couple of organizations were interested in identifying and overcoming internal conflict and used their sessions to do so. Others opted to begin with a strategic planning process with staff and/or board participation. However, there were some organizations that did not involve their staff in the Learning Circles Project at all.

The degree to which participant organizations involved stakeholders provides an insight into how these organizations view change. Implementing change is not easy. Although the Learning Circles organizations participated in the Learning Circles Project to varying degrees, for many participants, the most difficult aspect of the project has been applying the knowledge. Understanding and using the ideas and examples is the important. However, sharing those ideas with the organization and involving them in the process is critical. Willingness to change has made and will continue to make a difference in how

well the Learning Circles organizations progress towards becoming an effective organization.

The longevity of the existing staff members makes a difference in how well the Learning Circles Project can influence positive change in an organization. Several Learning Circles organizations have had staff turnover since the beginning of the Learning Circles Project. Although the project necessitated a three-person team to prevent information from being lost in the event of staff turnover, the ability to improve as an organization depends on the sharing of knowledge and implementation of skills. Change is a slow process and as staff leave Learning Circles organizations, it becomes more difficult to maintain the knowledge base and continuity of processes. Thus, the impact of the Learning Circles Project on that particular organization may be compromised.

### **How well did the Learning Circles Project transfer skills, knowledge, and capacity to do program planning and evaluation to participants of the training workshops?**

Participants indicated that active engagement in training sessions was critical to understanding and internalizing the skills presented. In addition, working in small groups was well received by participants over the course of the project. Opportunities to brainstorm and discuss ideas with individuals outside their discipline were very valuable to participants.

Most of the Learning Circles participants were unaware of a free resource to assist them in their program, evaluation, and fundraising planning process; they had never used the WIN! website. They were very interested to find that the WIN! website was free and that they could submit a program or evaluation plan for review by an expert.

It is too early to determine the Learning Circles participants' ability to transfer what they learned. There is some evidence that the participants have been sharing their knowledge with their staff. Participants indicated that the exercises and examples used during the project are being shared with their respective organizations. They are using forms and information from the training sessions to do program planning. The Learning Circles Project participants are currently not ready to create their evaluation plans. It is too early to determine how well the knowledge and skills to do program planning and evaluation was transferred. That information will be presented in the 18-month report.

### **B. Case Studies**

Three organizations have been selected for case study research. Preliminary findings from interviews of participants from those organizations indicate that overall, the Learning Circles Project has had a positive impact on the organization and on individuals in that organization. The following bullets provide an overview of the preliminary case study findings.

In order to develop a better understanding of how organizations benefited from the Learning Circles Project, an evaluation consultant with InnoNet conducted an in depth analysis of three groups that were selected based on their organizational capacity. The

organizations were selected to obtain a cross section of groups that represented low, medium, and high organizational capacities. Organizational capacity was assessed for the Learning Circles participants and was primarily based on infrastructure, leadership, size, budget, and board involvement. This analysis consisted of individual interviews with the Executive Director and a staff member that was involved in the training sessions. The purpose of these case studies is to provide InnoNet with a personal glimpse of the individual organizations and to solicit feedback on the project as a whole. In an effort to maintain confidentiality, the organizations will be referred to as *Organization A*, *Organization B*, and *Organization C*.

## **Organization A**

### ***Background***

*Organization A* is in the process of designing a foundation for success and is incorporating many of the necessary elements for effectiveness into the organization. The programs coordinated by this organization fit well into its overall mission. This group benefits from having highly capable and motivated leaders.

This organization joined the Learning Circles initiative, primarily, to receive help in evaluation, strategic planning and fundraising. Some anticipated challenges they foresaw with participation were the lack of time and staffing. Learning Circles was viewed as time intensive. Senior level members of this organization indicated that it was difficult making time for the sessions because of staff shortages and the high volume of day-to-day work.

### ***Organizational Diagnostic Tool***

An Organizational Diagnostic Tool was administered to this organization prior to the training sessions. The initial reaction to this tool was that it was well laid out and easy to work with. Both individuals that were interviewed from this organization indicated that they believe this tool was a fair assessment of their organization. One individual mentioned that ‘the responses were helpful, though some of it (was) painful.’

Some of the challenges faced by *Organization A* include:

- Creating a detailed long-term strategic plan
- Creating a system to evaluate progress relative to the long-term strategic plan
- Developing full and participatory involvement of the Board
- Ensuring that sufficient resources are available
- Developing job descriptions that clearly describe expectations
- Encouraging staff contribution to organizational goals
- Providing sufficient tools with which to complete work
- Creating opportunities for teamwork and collaboration
- Conducting business in a more open and inclusive manner

Prior to this assessment, the Executive Director of this organization indicated that they were aware of these challenges. However, the Learning Circles Project helped this person identify and deal with institutional change in a more positive way. “Things change and it’s hard to adjust. Learning Circles helped me see (that) there are processes I can utilize to help me with (these) changes. One individual claimed that the results from the Organizational Diagnostic Tool ‘seemed a little overwhelming at first.’ This person further indicated that the results are even useful at the end of the process because they now have the tools to address them.

### ***Most Valuable Sessions***

*Organization A* felt that they benefited ‘immensely’ from the series of workshops and training sessions that they attended. They found the information presented at these sessions to be pertinent to their organization’s needs. ‘The strategic planning session has helped me in grant writing.’ One interviewee also mentioned that discussing issues on how to work with people is especially helpful for organizations going through a period of rapid growth.

One of the respondents for this organization felt that the benefits of the formal training was compromised by having a large group of attendees. This person felt that it would have been more worthwhile if these trainings were done in a smaller group. However, another individual felt that ‘there was a real camaraderie that began with the whole group getting to know each other.’

*Organization A* found the small group sessions to be highly effective. Working in small groups ‘allows you to move through the process and get down to business.’ This organization found that working in small groups allowed them to focus, move at a faster pace, and discuss specific organizational problems.

The most useful sessions for this organization were those focusing on program and strategic planning. Individuals from this organization felt that the information delivered at the fundraising session was redundant and did not add to their existing knowledge.

The individual training sessions, especially those focusing on team building brought many latent issues to the forefront of discussion. ‘It was kind of like opening a can of worms.... we did not know so many existed.’ *Organization A* had several staff issues, including dissatisfaction with professional roles and problems with personal staff relationships. These sessions helped build an awareness of these issues making it easier to be addressed by the organization as a whole.

### ***Overall Effectiveness***

In general, *Organization A* felt that participation in the Learning Circles Project surpassed their expectations. Respondents felt that the Project effectively communicated how to use the standard tools for organizational effectiveness.

One of the main hindrances towards the success of the project was the amount of time necessary to participate. This organization found it very difficult to send two of the key players with the most responsibilities, to all of the training sessions.

Many of the concepts taught by Learning Circles has already impacted this organization. For example, *Organization A* has started using a modified version of the simple evaluation forms provided at the end of each session, to get quick feedback on some of its services. This organization is also using the tools that were introduced in the strategic planning session. ‘Learning Circles has really affected my ability to put a proposal together using a strategic plan.’ Some concern has been expressed on whether the organization will continue to use the new skills or revert back to the old way of doing things. ‘Everyone wants to go back to their (old) habits because it’s easier. I’m going to try hard as possible to keep us in touch with this information because it will make us more effective.’

The person interviewed felt that their organization has never lacked the strength to create effective programs. Instead, their weakness lies in finding financial support. However, they believe that the tools introduced by the Learning Circles Project will help them find support by strengthening their internal infrastructure and fundraising ability.

*Organization A* has already started using the skills learned from this project to make substantial changes in their group. They are in the process of developing a strategic planning book that will be shared with the Board and staff. The staff will have input in creating the strategic plan. ‘People will have a sense of where we are and where we’re headed.’ This process has been met with support from both the Board and staff.

The general consensus is that the Learning Circles Project has been better than others that have tried to increase organizational effectiveness. The fact that this project was geared specifically toward nonprofits increased its acceptance and contributed towards its overall effectiveness. While time has been a key issue with this organization, the Executive Director has indicated interest in continuing to work with our facilitator to work on some of the problems that were identified through this process.

## **ORGANIZATION B**

### ***Background***

*Organization B* was primarily interested in joining the Learning Circles Project to receive organizational help, gain a better insight to strategic planning and understand how to coordinate the different working groups within the organization. This organization needed help in bringing the Board and staff together to move forward in their development to the next phase in the life cycle. They also wanted to improve working relationships among staff members by focusing on communication. This group was willing to commit time, energy and resources towards the Learning Circles initiative.

### ***Organizational Diagnostic Tool***

The organizational diagnostic tool was well received by the staff and Board. People were happy to fill out the tool and appreciated the chance to be heard. This assessment, however, occurred during a strange ‘flux time’ for the organization in which there was high turnover. Many of the staff members were unhappy and felt left out. They were not feeling as if they were part of the whole organization. The results from the organization diagnostic tool helped reveal many of these issues.

Some suggestions to improve the efficiency of *Organization B* include:

- Conducting an annual review of the mission statement
- Creating and implementing annual work plans
- Creating written policies regarding:
  - Board member responsibilities
  - Participation in Board activities
  - Conflicts of interest
- Conducting an annual evaluation of the Board’s progress
- Building a trust among staff that the leaders of the organization are capable of leading
- Representing the organization to potential funders and the public
- Making sure leaders work in collaboration with others in the organization
- Conducting business in an open and inclusive manner
- Ensuring the availability of sufficient resources
- Implementing performance reviews of volunteers based on written expectations
- Making sure staff receive guidance on task performance.

Prior to the diagnostic assessment, senior staff were aware of many of the organizational issues faced by this group. However, the analysis report of the diagnostic tool findings were helpful because it articulated the exact areas for improvement. The Executive Director and staff believed that the tool provided a fair assessment of the organization.

### ***Most Valuable Sessions***

This *Organization* chose to conduct two full-day retreats in place of the individual training sessions. These retreats were viewed as very beneficial to the organization.

‘It’s difficult to imagine how we would have done it without an outside person. We needed someone who loved us, respected us and knew enough about us. We needed a stranger who was empathetic. She (the trainer) shared enough to make us feel comfortable. That was very important. We left feeling battered by interaction. That was important.’

The first retreat was spent mostly on breaking down the dynamic of distrust that existed among staff members. People were very closed and not ready to discuss their feelings about their work or the organization. One of the individuals interviewed felt very positive about the whole process.

‘I felt so blessed being able to participate at that specific time, given what was going on in our organization. (The project) gave us people to reach out to. We were able to ask for their guidance and were given the opportunity to talk with other nonprofits. We needed a little help and we got it.’

The second retreat was spent working on goals and objectives and later focused on items related to strategic planning. These sessions are still talked about among the staff. ‘The learning has stayed. We talk about it and it’s a good sign.’ The individuals that were interviewed at *Organization B* felt that the training provided a very important framework. ‘It kept us in touch with the outside world. It helped reconfirm that we are kind of normal and that this happens in other places. It gave us a chance to bounce ideas.’

*Organization B* appreciated the networking opportunities provided at the Formal Training Sessions. ‘We met with nine other nonprofits and learned a lot from them. The information was terrific.’ The Executive Director of this organization, preferred the formal training over the smaller sessions because of the opportunity to meet with other members of the nonprofit community. They found the information presented at these sessions to be very useful and refer back to it frequently.

### ***Overall Effectiveness***

Overall, *Organization B* was pleased to participate in the Learning Circles initiative. Initially, not all staff believed that this project would be effective, however, looking back, they are very glad to have been involved. One staff member stated that the project ‘helped me look at myself as a person and as a staff member and the potential that I have as a staff member.’ At the start of the project, the Executive Director also had feelings of disbelief. ‘The Learning Circles Project seemed just another thing on the list of things I had to do.’ However, this individual felt that the project turned out to be a positive experience.

The knowledge gained from the Learning Circles Project is already being used in day-to-day activities. The strategic plan was created by combining some of the individual training sessions and is making its way to the board; staff are involved in evaluating the effectiveness of their programs; staff are also able to be more specific about goals and objectives.

Some of the challenges that still face *Organization B* is the struggle to promote open mindedness towards new ideas. Some staff resist change and continue with their everyday routines. Many of the staff participated very actively in the individual trainings. However, due to past experiences, a few individuals are pessimistic that change will result. The organization as a whole is encouraging a more participatory approach toward problem solving and this seems to be helping.

## **ORGANIZATION C**

### ***Background***

In joining the Learning Circles Project, this organization hoped to increase the efficiency of their Board by learning about different Board models, how to develop the roles and responsibilities of members, and how to educate Board members on providing organizational support. In addition to Board development, *Organization C* was interested in increasing organizational efficiency through teamwork.

The Executive Director has been with this organization for approximately 2 years. Some of the initial challenges of taking on this role included getting connected in the nonprofit community, learning about the organization's culture, and working with a new board. Current challenges include fundraising, strategic planning, board development and communication.

### ***Organizational Diagnostic Tool***

The Organizational Diagnostic Tool was administered to this organization at the beginning of the program. The Executive Director found the tool to be helpful for understanding where the staff see themselves within the organization. 'The instrument gave good direction as to what processes need to be in place and how to best communicate.'

Some suggestions to improve organizational effectiveness that were based on the results from the tool include:

- Engaging the staff in a strategic planning process where the organizational mission is reviewed and long-term goals are established
- Developing an annual work plan with staff and board that includes a schedule to periodically evaluate progress
- Establishing a new board member orientation process
- Designing a written statement of board member responsibilities
- Developing and enforcing written board policies
- Clarifying written job descriptions for all staff
- Providing constructive feedback about performance
- Creating a written pay scale
- Developing a long-term financial plan
- Developing a fundraising plan that is monitored and evaluated by staff and board
- Developing and following a marketing and communications plan
- Involving staff in setting goals and determining programs

Prior to the diagnostic assessment, the Executive Director was aware of the issues facing this organization. However, the diagnostic tool was very helpful because it provided a description of what the exact challenges were for the organization. In addition, it provided them with a starting point to address those issues and suggestions for how to do

so. After receiving feedback from the tool, this individual had a one-to-one session with the trainer to discuss areas in which their organization needed improvement and how to provide the appropriate training. This meeting was described as being extremely ‘useful.’

### ***Most Valuable Sessions***

This organization participated in a staff retreat. One staff member mentioned that the retreat was ‘really good for us. The trainers were really good at walking us through the different steps. Defining the steps clearly and helping us filter them out for our organization.’ This staff member felt that the trainer understood their structure, their board and their situation. This in turn, made it easier to work through the process. ‘They did a good job of focusing on what we needed to work on.’ It was also mentioned that the retreat helped this organization with a document that is now getting ready to go to the board. ‘Without the training, we wouldn’t have been at this point. This retreat was attended by staff and board members. By the end of the session, ‘the board members kept commenting on how much they learned about (our organization) in one day.’

The Executive Director of *Organization C* valued the concepts presented during the formal training. She felt that it was a good environment to bring the different groups together. ‘The information presented to me was new. Some of it was old, but it helped me understand a little better.’ One suggestion that this individual had was to make it mandatory that each organization bring two representatives. ‘It would have been helpful to have someone from (my organization) there who was familiar with my learning style.

This organization felt that the small group sessions were helpful. They really benefited from the sessions on board development but felt that the session on marketing and communication could have been improved. They also liked the information that was presented on program planning and strategic planning. However, the information shared during the fundraising touched upon areas with which this individual was already familiar.

Members of this organization felt that the individual training sessions pulled together a lot of information. These sessions helped them understand more about strategic planning. One suggestion was to incorporate website training into these sessions.

### ***Overall Effectiveness***

The Learning Circles Project has met this organization’s overall expectations. ‘I think this program will help us grow both internally and externally. The retreat was most helpful.’ It was also mentioned that this process helped the board realize how much work goes into the programs developed by *Organization C*. ‘They (the board) didn’t see the value of our work before. Looking at the strategic plan helped them see the day-to-day work we do.’

As a result of Learning Circles, *Organization C* has written job descriptions, and formal policies and procedures where none existed before. They are also conducting weekly staff meetings and are using the tools introduced during the training sessions. The

executive director feels that participating in this project has helped increase their overall organizational effectiveness, moral, and the organization of staff, board and volunteers. 'We will be able to better accomplish our mission.' Learning Circles has also helped the Executive Director communicate more effectively with the board.

Staff also felt that the project was effective. 'Putting this type of planning in the forefront says a lot. We were able to train people who work part-time on how to do the process. It was effective in that we can now carry this through to the long-term.' The knowledge received from Learning Circles is being incorporated in the everyday activities of the staff. The staff is involved in strategic planning for all of the programs that they take part in. 'We've branched out and mapped this out and are coming back together as a group to look over what we've done.' The Learning Circles Project has helped increase staff involvement in the organization by drawing more people into the process.

### **Summary of Case Studies**

The results from these case studies indicate that all three organizations valued being involved in the Learning Circles Project and benefited from the techniques and tools that were introduced. Participation in Learning Circles activities have benefited these organizations as well as helped individuals within the organizations work on their own professional development. These organizations received help to address and resolve problems, develop clear and specific goals and objectives, gain insights on day-to-day planning through distributed materials, and develop a framework for assessing their institutions. In addition, intangible benefits include a higher level of trust among staff, an increased level of openness and participation, improved relationships with boards, and the opportunity to see how other organizations handle similar problems.

On an individual level, respondents felt that Learning Circles helped them see the 'big picture' and how their job fits into the larger organization. They were also able to realize their potential to do better in their jobs and think differently about their organizations.

## **VIII. Lessons Learned**

Throughout the Learning Circles Project, InnoNet has gathered feedback, anecdotally and formally. That feedback has provided suggestions for changes that will improve the Learning Circles Project in the future. A summary of the lessons that InnoNet has learned over the course of the project is provided in this section.

### **A. InnoNet**

There were many challenges InnoNet found within the Learning Circles organizations. These challenges include a lack of planning, time constraints, technological inefficiencies and communication barriers. In the future, these challenges should be identified and addressed earlier in the process. One of the challenges during the implementation of the Learning Circles Project was identifying these specific challenges within each organization and working with them to move towards addressing the components of organizational effectiveness. InnoNet should consider using different techniques and a revised application procedure to identify internal organizational challenges early. A faster application process would enable InnoNet to start the training sooner and have more time to work with the organizations. Thus, organizations will be more capable of moving forward on the planning necessary for improving organizational effectiveness. Internal organizational challenges were addressed through organizational development training sessions (e.g. internal communication, team building).

Organizations often have internal challenges that prevent them from working as a team to create a strategic plan and integrate a work plan, evaluation plan, and a fundraising plan. Although the organizational diagnostic tool and site visit identified some salient organizational culture issues, the specific information necessary for addressing them was not revealed until the Learning Circles Project had progressed.

The Learning Circles Project was extremely time intensive. InnoNet worked to ensure that each session was specifically tailored to the individual needs and desires of the participants. In addition, all of the sessions were scheduled based on the availability of the participants. Participants appreciated the flexibility and InnoNet's willingness to adjust to their schedules. It would be helpful to structure the training sessions to assist organizations with scheduling time efficiently and managing changes to the schedule with ease.

### **B. Learning Circles Participants**

The Learning Circles Participants have suggested a number of ways that InnoNet could improve the Learning Circles Project. As InnoNet prepares for Round II of the Learning Circles Project, all of the suggestions will be taken into consideration during the planning process. The suggestions have been summarized below.

All of the participants had said positive things about the training sessions. Some participants indicated that they would like to have had more time for some of the training

sessions and less for others. Adding an additional section to the fundraising training was a suggestion to allow the trainer to go into more detail on individual giving. In addition, participants would have like to have more time to discuss fundraising topics.

The participants appreciated the participatory capacity building techniques that were used and the opportunities they had to network with their peers. There were some suggestions that there be more opportunities to share ideas with other participants. In addition, they suggested keeping the open discussions and the opportunities to brainstorm with people from different organizations. Changing small group membership for group work throughout the day was suggested to enable participants to work with various people. In addition, participants suggest using more organization specific examples in the training sessions.

There were suggestions about the process of the training sessions. The participants suggested tying the program evaluation process more closely to program planning and providing materials for review prior to the training sessions. This would allow participants to familiarize themselves with the material prior to the discussion. Although there was significant discussion among participants over the course of the Learning Circles Project, some participants suggested that more discussion occur at the beginning of the project. Additionally, they suggested maintaining the topic, activities, and the high level of interaction and discussions.

## **IX. Conclusions**

One of the main challenges to the success of the Learning Circles Project was convincing organizations to put fourth the initial investment of time. Although the Learning Circles Project increased participants' awareness of the importance of taking the time to create program, fundraising, and evaluation plans, many participants were not making time in their daily activities to do so.

A three-stage evaluation design, which includes process evaluation, outcome evaluation and impact evaluation is being used to provide answers to the three Learning Circles Project evaluation questions. Aspects of all three parts of the evaluation design will provide insight into each of the evaluation questions. Currently, InnoNet has preliminary data from the organizational diagnostic tool submitted at the beginning of the project. In addition, there are some data from the training evaluation and case studies.

Initial organizational diagnostic data identified a lack of written plans, processes, and infrastructure. In addition, many barriers to organizational success were identified. A comparison of the organizational diagnostic information before the Learning Circles Project activities began and after its conclusion will be presented in the 18-month report.

It appears, through initial evaluation results and anecdotal information, that participatory capacity building has a positive impact on staff members, the Executive Director, and board members. The structure, organization, and implementation of the formal and information training sessions successfully presented the process and increased the knowledge of participants.

It seems that staff are more involved in the organization and the planning processes. Organizations have included staff in the strategic planning process and involved staff in decision making. In addition, staff have been given more ownership of their organization and feel the value of their contribution to the organization. Working with staff during the project has created an open forum for discussing their internal challenges. Learning Circles organizations are addressing their barriers and working to create the plans necessary to increase their effectiveness.

It appears, from anecdotal information, that board members feel more in tune with the actual organizational operations. Each organization's three-person team included a board member. Thus, as the project progressed board members were kept apprised of the organization's progress and some participated in the Learning Circles activities. Anecdotal information indicates that board members are more motivated to move toward creating a strategic plan. In most organizations, the process has moved forward with the assistance of the Learning Circles Project.

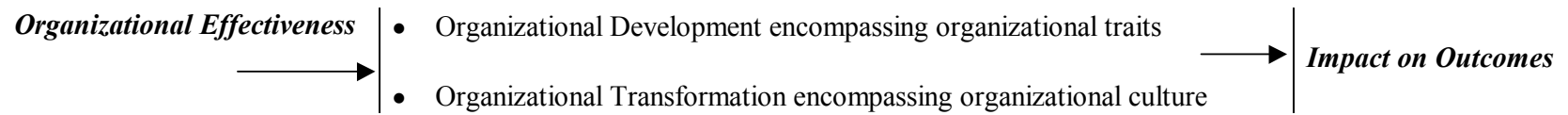
Executive Directors of all of the Learning Circles organizations participated in the project. As a result, they indicate that they have a better idea of the organizational functions necessary to increase their effectiveness. In addition, they have techniques and processes to value staff. Moreover, Executive Directors are finding that they are able to function more effectively as leaders by using participatory strategies.

The preliminary evaluation results and anecdotal information indicate that the impact of the Learning Circles Project on organizational effectiveness is positive. Participant organizations are replicating the techniques they learned in their office and beginning to change how they operate. The evaluation consultant is still in the process of gathering data on the impact of participatory capacity building on participant organization's clients; those results will be available in the 18-month report.

## X. Appendices

### A. Appendix A – Nine Components of Organizational Effectiveness

WORK IN PROGRESS, NOT FINAL



## Nine Components of Organizational Effectiveness

### *Organizational Traits:*

1. Planning
  - a. Vision
  - b. Mission
  - c. Strategic Plan – Organizational and Program
  - d. Program Plans
  - e. Annual Operating Plan with Implementation Steps
  - f. Annual Evaluation and Update of Strategic Plan
  
2. Organizational Structure
  - a. Governance – Board of Directors
  - b. Board Leadership
  - c. Staff Leadership
  - d. Staff Structure
  - e. Volunteer Structure
  - f. Information Technology
  - g. Policies and Procedures
  
3. Fundraising
  - a. Process (Plan and Tools) – Fundraising Plan and Budget
  - b. Roles (Staff and Board)
  - c. Use (Implementation and Reporting)
  
4. Communications
  - a. Process (Plan and Tools) – Marketing and Communications Plan and Budget
  - b. Roles (Staff and Board)
  - c. Use (Implementation and Reporting)
  
5. Finance and Accountability
  - a. Budgeting
  - b. Financial Systems (Grants Management)
  - c. Risk Management
  - d. Reporting

### *Organizational Culture:*

6. Organizational Learning (Evaluation)
7. Quality and Responsiveness
8. Innovativeness
  
9. *Outcomes*

## *Characteristics of Organizational Effectiveness*

### *1. Planning*

#### **a. Vision**

- Provides a clear statement of what the organization aspires to be in the future
- Provides an image of what success would look like
- Inspires and motivates staff, board, and volunteers
- Provides the context for strategic planning

#### **b. Mission**

- Should be short, clear, and concise
- Should be broad enough to endure minor changes, yet specific enough to provide a basis for developing goals and objectives
- Reflects what the organization does
- Reflects why the organization does what it does
- Reflects how the organization does what it does
- Reflects the people for whom the organization provides services
- Should be reviewed annually
- Should be reviewed by staff and Board
- Is part of ongoing planning process

#### **c. Strategic Plan – Organizational and Program**

- A written strategic plan with specific goals and objectives to achieve its mission exists
- Evaluate its progress annually
- Is developed by Board and staff
- Is reviewed annually and updated

#### **d. Annual Operating Plan with Implementation Steps**

- An annual operating work plan (AOWP) with a steps and timeline exists

#### **e. Annual Evaluation and Update of Strategic Plan**

- At regular intervals, staff meet to set goals, plan, share information, and develop solutions to problems

#### **f. Program Plans**

- Flow from strategic organizational plan
- Clear connection to strategic organizational plan

### *2. Organizational Structure*

#### **a. Governance – Board of Directors**

- Have a strong and well-organized board of directors
- Is committed to the organization's mission, vision, and values
- Ensures that programs/services are in line with them

- Clear about their role and responsibilities
- Clear handle on finances
- An orientation provided for new board members
- Written policies regarding board member responsibilities, participation in board activities, a process for non-compliance regarding policies, conflicts of interest, and attendance
- Active participation
- Board members are knowledgeable about and support the organization's policies and actions
- Meetings are scheduled at regular intervals and conducted in an organized manner
- Written agenda
- Minutes of board meetings are corrected as necessary, approved, and distributed in a timely manner
- An evaluation process to assess the board's progress is conducted at least annually
- The annual budget is presented, discussed, and approved at least annually
- Members know/receive instruction on meaning of elements of a financial statement
- Review the financial statement at least quarterly
- Board members plan and ensure sound financial resources and accountability for the organization
- Review and approve administrative, personnel, and fundraising policies
- 100% financial contributions from board members
- Provide board members with fundraising training
- Select and support ED
- Review performance of Executive Director annually (job description)
- The board is of sufficient size and has the expertise, access, and diversity to achieve the organization's mission (selection and recruitment)
- There are written statements that outline the ideal make up of the board and compare membership to it periodically; gaps in expertise are identified for which members should be recruited
- There is a systematic process and timeline for identifying, recruiting, and electing new board members
- Members' terms are stated at the time of their election and turnover is systematically achieved by following that schedule
- Attend meetings

**b. Board Leadership**

- A leader believes in and is passionate about the mission and vision
- Plan for leadership succession
- Can convey that excitement to others
- Provides ongoing support, motivation
- Capable of leading the organization towards its mission during their tenure
- Represent the organization well to the funders and the general public
- Are good role models for how other members should fulfill their responsibilities to the board

- Work collaboratively with other board members/staff
- Exhibit appropriate professional behavior
- Meetings are conducted in an organized and efficient manner
- Business is conducted in an open and inclusive manner
- The organization is good at problem solving
- Judgments made by the leaders are trusted by those affiliated with the organization

**c. Staff Leadership**

- Conducts regular employee performance evaluations to ensure the success of any nonprofit
- A leader believes in and is passionate about the mission and vision
- Plan for leadership succession
- Can convey that excitement to others
- Provides ongoing support, motivation
- Capable of leading the organization towards its mission during their tenure
- Represent the organization well to the funders and the general public
- Are good role models for how other members should fulfill their responsibilities to the board
- Work collaboratively with other board members/staff
- Exhibit appropriate professional behavior
- Meetings are conducted in an organized and efficient manner
- Business is conducted in an open and inclusive manner
- The organization is good at problem solving
- Judgments made by the leaders are trusted by those affiliated with the organization
- Maintain staff commitment, satisfaction, and high performance.

**d. Staff Structure**

- Staff know and believe the mission and work of the organization
- Individuals think that what they do for the organization is meaningful
- There are written job descriptions that accurately describe what someone is expected to do
- Individuals know what is expected of them in terms of the tasks they perform
- Performance is reviewed based on written, previously-presented expectations
- Systematic procedures exist for conducting performance reviews
- Individuals contribute to the development of their performance expectations and goals
- Performance reviews provide constructive feedback relative to the performance expectations
- Communication within the organization is frequent and good
- Individuals manage and evaluate their own performance related to expectations and goals
- Individual work plans are developed collaboratively
- Individuals have the knowledge and skills to perform their jobs well
- Individuals receive recognition for their work
- Individuals work as team to complete assignments
- Individuals think that salary and fringe benefits are fair

- Have time to do work
- Tools exist to help them do work
- Staff have some say in how things are done
- Self-assessment is usual method of performance evaluation
- Training given as needed and appropriate

**e. Volunteer Structure**

- Volunteers know and believe the mission and work of the organization
- Volunteers have some say in how things are done
- Written expectations exist
- Coordination exists
- Evaluation of performance exists
- Development of work plan for volunteers included in strategic plan and plan is developed
- Scope of work exists
- Work based on strategic organizational plan use of volunteers
- Policies and procedures for volunteers exist
- Are Recognized and thanked
- Feedback given frequently and regularly
- Training given is needed and appropriate
- Handbook exists
- Orientation manual exists
- Physical work space assured/defined

**f. Information Technology**

- Email exists
- Internet exists
- Information technology plan and budget in place
- Phone, fax, voice mail exist
- Hardware is appropriate
- Software is appropriate
- Training given as needed and appropriate
- Space assigned
- Database management in place and clearly managed
- Web page created and maintained
- Effective use of web page
- Technical support exists and is used
- Technology is an appropriate fit for organization
- Policies and procedures exist
- Accessible
- Telecommuting considered

**g. Policies and Procedures**

- Written policies and procedures for administrative personnel exist

- A basic set of forms for repetitive tasks (e.g. time sheets, travel expenses, regular staff reports, etc.) exists

### 3. *Fundraising*

#### a. **Process (Plan and Tools) – Fundraising Plan and Budget**

- Written fundraising plan exists with corresponding budget
- Implementation plan exists
- Cultivation plans exist
- Consistent focus on fundraising
- Process for grants writing

#### b. **Roles (Staff and Board)**

- Staff on fundraising
- Board committee on fundraising
- Board person on fundraising
- Every board member contributes to fundraising
- Every board member participates in fundraising

#### c. **Use (Implementation and Reporting)**

- Fundraising tools exist for board and staff
- Consistent fundraising research exists
- Fundraising action plan and calendar exist
- Fundraising reporting exists and is consistent
- Quarterly evaluation of fundraising goals to actuality
- Plan programs for which to raise funds based on strategic organizational plan and corresponding annual operating work plan
- At least annually, the board evaluates its success relative to goals set forth in the fundraising plan

### 4. *Communications*

#### a. **Process (Plans and Tools) - Marketing and Communication Plan and Budget**

- Have marketing and communication plan
- Understand audience
- Consistent focus on marketing and promotion
- Process for marketing, communication, and promotion exists

#### b. **Roles (Board and Staff)**

- Organization is effectively presented
- Organization is properly perceived
- Board expertise in marketing and communication
- Staff person who does marketing

#### c. **Use (Implementation and Reporting)**

- Implement plan
- Action plan with budget and timeline
- Evaluate marketing and communication plan annually

## **5. Finance and Accountability**

### **a. Budgeting**

- There is a long-term strategic financial plan for this organization
- Annually, the board evaluates its progress relative to the goals in that plan
- The organization uses the budget to guide decision making

### **b. Financial Systems (Grants Management)**

- Income and expenses match
- The organization has at least one staff person whose responsibilities include financial management
- The organization has at least one staff person whose responsibilities include fundraising
- Last fiscal year, the organization met its goal for projected income
- There is an accounting system including chart of accounts
- Purchases are made using a purchase order system
- There are written policies and procedures for financial transactions
- There is an inventory system for equipment
- Debts are paid on time
- There is insurance coverage
- Written pay scale exists
- Timely process developed with Board and staff

### **c. Risk Management**

- Potential risk identified
- Central location that is safeguarded
- Backups exists

### **d. Reporting**

- The financial status of the organization is reviewed at least quarterly
- The organization is audited annually

**6. Organizational Learning (Evaluation)**

- There is/are written evaluation plan(s) for each of the following and these are conducted at least annually:
  - Strategic organizational plan
  - Program plans
  - Annual operating work plan
  - Administrative plan
  - Fundraising plan
  - Marketing and communication plan
  - Financial plan
- There is/are action plan(s) developed to ensure the changes identified by the above evaluation(s) is/are systematically addressed

**7. Quality and Responsiveness**

**8. Innovativeness**

**9. Outcomes**

- Performance measures
- Indicators of client satisfaction
- Identify product outcomes/deliverables
- Identify process outcomes
- Gather information from clients
- Links internal action to external impact
- Helps you better help your clients
- Program impact

**B. Appendix B – Chart of Small Group Sessions**

| <b>Topic</b>                 | <b>Session lead</b>         | <b>Date and Time</b>                      |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Marketing and Communication  | <b>Paula Rothenberg</b>     | 9:00 – 12:00<br>Monday, March 27          |
| Strategic Planning           | <b>Lynne Cogswell</b>       | 12:30 – 3:30<br>Tuesday, March 28         |
| Internal Communication       | <b>Lynne Cogswell</b>       | 12:30 – 3:30<br>Wednesday, March 29       |
| Marketing and Communication  | <b>Paula Rothenberg</b>     | 10:00 – 1:00<br>Friday, March 31          |
| Marketing and Communication  | <b>Paula Rothenberg</b>     | 9:00 – 12:00<br>Wednesday, April 5, 2000  |
| Strategic Planning           | <b>Lynne Cogswell</b>       | 12:30 – 3:30<br>Wednesday, April 5        |
| Board Development            | <b>Mary Ann de Barbieri</b> | 9:00 – 11:30<br>Wednesday, April 13, 2000 |
| Strategic Financial Planning | <b>Elizabeth Foley</b>      | 12-3 April 17                             |
| Strategic Financial Planning | <b>Elizabeth Foley</b>      | 12-3 April 19                             |
| Strategic Financial Planning | <b>Elizabeth Foley</b>      | 12-3 April 20                             |

\*Organizations in bold indicate that is the site of the small group training

**C. Appendix C – Individual Training Chart**

| <b>Individual Training Session Topics</b> |               |         |                        |                       |                       |                               |                  |                 |
|---|---------------|---------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Interpersonal Communication               | Team Building | Valuing | Staff self-assessments | WIN! website Training | Work Plan Development | Strategic Organizational Plan | Fundraising Plan | Evaluation Plan |
| ✓   | ✓             | ✓       |                        |                       |                       | ✓                             |                  |                 |
|   | ✓             | ✓       | ✓                      | ✓                     |                       |                               | ✓                |                 |
|   |               |         |                        |                       |                       |                               | ✓                |                 |
|   |               |         |                        |                       |                       |                               |                  |                 |
| ✓   | ✓             | ✓       |                        |                       | ✓                     |                               |                  | ✓               |
|   |               |         |                        |                       |                       | ✓                             |                  |                 |
| ✓   | ✓             | ✓       |                        |                       |                       |                               |                  |                 |
|   |               |         |                        |                       |                       | ✓                             |                  |                 |
| ✓   | ✓             | ✓       |                        |                       | ✓                     |                               |                  |                 |
|   |               |         |                        | ✓                     | ✓                     | ✓                             | ✓                | ✓               |

## D. Appendix D – Training Session Evaluation

What follows is information on the lessons that have been learned over the course of the Learning Circles Project. The findings detail the successes of the portion of the project. Then, the challenges are identified and an explanation of what InnoNet proposes to do in Round II of the Learning Circles Project to prevent the problems from reoccurring.

### Application

- Distribution of the organizational diagnostic tool was very clear and simple.
- There was sufficient time to complete the entire organizational diagnostic tool.

**Table 2 Application Challenges and Improvements**

| Area                           | Challenge   | Improvements to be made in Learning Circles Round II   |
|--------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Application: Step one</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult for InnoNet to assess the applicant's responses quickly</li> <li>• Applicants unsure of exactly what the benefits of the Project and the time commitment</li> <li>• Applicants had difficulty contacting their Board President for signature on cover letter</li> <li>• Relatively low number of applicants</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantify the application to select finalists</li> <li>• Provide clear guidelines that outline what each organization can expect throughout the process</li> <li>• Provide a clear timeline for the entire process</li> <li>• Require executive director to initial that he/she has discussed application to Learning Circles Project with board of directors.</li> <li>• Plan creative ways of promoting the application of the Learning Circles Project</li> </ul> |
| <b>Application: Step two</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational diagnostic tool instructions were not applicable to all organizations</li> <li>• Difficult to contact some board members to complete organizational diagnostic tool.</li> <li>• Volunteers and board members did not have space for comments on the organizational diagnostic tool..</li> </ul>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarify instructions</li> <li>• Administer diagnostic tool only to Learning Circles Participants.</li> <li>• Administer the diagnostic tool in an alternate way.</li> <li>• Collect qualitative information separate from the diagnostic tool.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Application: Step three</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All staff were not very familiar with the Learning Circles</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide staff with a one-page information sheet on</li> </ul>   |

| Area | Challenge  | Improvements to be made in Learning Circles Round II  |
|------|--|---|
|      | Project. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of point of comparison among all groups.</li> </ul> | the Learning Circles Project at the site visit. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have one person attend all of the site visits to allow a comparison across sites.</li> </ul> |

### Organizational Diagnostic Tool and analysis

#### *Organizational Diagnostic Tool and Analysis Successes*

Using the data collected in the organizational diagnostic tool, InnoNet provided organizations with a written document that outlined the activities they were performing well and those that needed additional work. The organizational diagnostic tool analyses were well received. Some additional findings include:

- The presentation of the ideal elements that comprise each component were well liked. In addition, the comparison of the organization to the ideal was appreciated.
- Thinking points in the analysis prompted careful thought on the issues identified for each organization.
- Consolidation of analysis results into conclusions was helpful to organizations.
- Incorporating the work plan in table format in the analysis was helpful to organizations. In addition, it contributed significantly to the coaching site visits.

**Table 3 Organizational Diagnostic Tool and Analysis Challenges and Improvements**

| Area  | Challenges  | Improvements to be made in Learning Circles Round II  |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Organizational Diagnostic Tool</b>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some organizational diagnostic tool measurement scales were ambiguous.</li> <li>• Organizational diagnostic tool components of organizational effectiveness overlapped significantly.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Components of organizational effectiveness have been redefined</li> <li>• Subcomponents of organizational effectiveness have been defined</li> <li>• Measurement scales have been redesigned to increase accuracy and reliability</li> </ul> |
| <b>Organizational Diagnostic Tool analysis report</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow at least a week between the time that organizations receive their analysis and the</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizations will have more time with their diagnostic analysis before</li> </ul>   |

| Area | Challenges   | Improvements to be made in Learning Circles Round II  |
|------|--|---|
|      | <p>time they should complete their work plan.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a clearer explanation of the components' ideals</li> <li>• Provide a better representation of the organization by using a continuum to represent where the organization is now with respect to where they want to be.</li> <li>• Incorporate more visual representation in the analysis report.</li> <li>• Include a better combination of qualitative and quantitative information in the report.</li> </ul> | <p>being expected to create a work plan.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyses will provide clearer explanation of the components and subcomponents</li> <li>• Design continuums to represent the organization's current level of effectiveness in each component.</li> <li>• More visual representations will be included in future diagnostic tool reports.</li> <li>•</li> </ul> |

Three primary successes were:

- Clear linkages between the components of organizational effectiveness, individual organization's challenges, and ideals of organizational effectiveness
- Thinking points that prompted organization's to consider their next steps
- Tool design, analysis report, and analysis presentation was done in a holistic manner; all aspects of the organizational diagnostic tool were useful to stakeholders.

### **Participatory Capacity Building**

#### ***Formal Training Successes***

The formal training sessions were completed over the course of three, non-consecutive days. Evaluation results indicate:

- Training materials were relevant and informative.
- People appreciated and responded to the process used to present material.
- Topics were very relevant to each organization's current needs.
- People found the types of activities used in the trainings helped them learn, apply skills, and were replicable in organization as learning tools.
- There was a lot of sharing between more and less experienced organizations.

- There was a high level of participant involvement in the trainings. In addition, there was a real sense of teamwork and comradery among the participants.
- Having small groups develop their own programs in the trainings and working on elements related to those programs worked well.
- Participants appreciated the opportunity to network with other nonprofits.
- Participants enjoyed the hands-on nature of the training.
- Working in small groups facilitated the sharing of information.
- Presentations provided organization specific examples.
- Trainers were knowledgeable and organized.
- Participants appreciated learning how the WIN! website could help their organization.

### **Informal Training Successes**

#### ***Small group training sessions***

Ten small group training session topics were covered over the course of two months. Evaluation results indicate that the participants were pleased with the sessions.

- Participants liked the energy and enthusiasm of the facilitators.
- The facilitators articulated their ideas clearly.
- Trainers were knowledgeable.
- The information presented was relevant, practical, and applicable.
- There was a high level of interaction among participants.
- Sessions were a valuable source for ideas.
- Sessions were well planned.
- Sessions provided helpful hints for implementing the activities.
- Information provided correlated to the needs of organizations.
- Sessions facilitated peer-to-peer learning.

- Participants enjoyed sharing experiences and challenges faced by other groups
- Participants appreciated the flexibility of the sessions.

***Individual Training Sessions***

One-to-one training session evaluations indicated that:

- Participants enjoyed the team building exercises.
- Team building sessions were creative.
- Exercises spurred thinking about types of communication.
- Active participation in sessions was important to the learning process.
- Exercises improved awareness of problem solving styles.
- Energy of and active engagement by the trainers was important in transferring knowledge.
- Positive interaction was important in the training process.
- Sessions were clear, well organized, and carefully planned.
- Sessions were detail-oriented and focused.
- There was a good balance between the exercises and discussions.

**Table 4 Training Challenges and Improvements**

| Area                   | Challenges   | Improvements to be made in Learning Circles Round II   |
|------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Formal training</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scheduling the formal training dates.</li> <li>• Allow more time for the formal training.</li> <li>• Link training homework more directly to daily activities.</li> <li>• Small groups reporting to the entire group was time consuming.</li> <li>• Creating fictional organizations for some of the activities was not helpful.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set formal training dates before the project begins.</li> <li>• Incorporate a back-up date should one day need to be cancelled.</li> <li>• Extend the amount of time allocated to each primary topic of the formal training.</li> <li>• Homework will be used during one-to-one activities planned for Round II.</li> </ul> |

| Area   | Challenges  | Improvements to be made in Learning Circles Round II   |
|--|---|--|
| <p><b>Informal training:<br/>Small group training sessions</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide more opportunities to share information with each other.</li> <li>• Improve the comfort of the training rooms.</li> <li>• Offer more in-depth discussions on various topics</li> <li>• Ensure that all sessions are interactive.</li> <li>• Explain all distributed materials.</li> <li>• Allow more time to walk through topics in detail.</li> <li>• Focus more on specific organizations in session.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with consultants prior to session to explain expectations and suggest participatory techniques</li> <li>• Incorporate more examples from participating organizations</li> <li>• Ensure the trainer has sufficient knowledge of the participant organizations</li> <li>• Discuss examples in greater detail</li> <li>• Lengthen sessions that appear to be in great demand to provide more assistance to all participants.</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>Informal training:<br/>Individual training sessions</b></p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some exercises may have made participants feel undervalued.</li> <li>• Instructions were sometimes ambiguous.</li> <li>• Some sessions was too long.</li> <li>• Participants were not always timely; sessions could not always start on time.</li> <li>• More time was necessary for some sessions.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure participants have sufficient information prior to beginning an exercise.</li> <li>• Try to ensure that trainers are aware of and prepared for staff dynamics prior to beginning a session.</li> <li>• Reduce the time allocated for some sessions.</li> <li>• Increase the time allocated for some sessions.</li> <li>• Warn participants that some discussions may cause them to feel mixed emotions.</li> <li>• Stress the importance of punctuality among participating organizations.</li> </ul> |

Three primary successes were:

- Participatory training techniques were critical to participants’ ability to understand and use information presented.
- Formal and informal training sessions increased knowledge of the tenants of strategic planning.

- Training sessions provided the forum for networking and sharing experiences and challenges.

**E. Appendix E – Preliminary Case Study Results**

**Table 5 Preliminary Case Study Challenges and Improvements**

| <b>Evaluation Questions</b>   | <b>Challenges</b>  | <b>Improvements to be made in Learning Circles Round II</b>  |
|---|--|--|
| <p>1. To what extent did the Learning Circles Project help participants build:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- an understanding of what an organization needs to improve</li> <li>- the ability to implement a strategic plan</li> <li>- an understanding and the skills necessary for program planning, evaluation, and fundraising?</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program planning and evaluation sessions were not very useful to organizations.</li> <li>• The formal fundraising training session was presented at a level that was too basic.</li> <li>• Some of the session trainers did not know critical information about the organizations.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structure the activities to ensure that each participant organization completes specific deliverables.</li> <li>• Provide more detailed training sessions on particular issues.</li> <li>• Provide external consultants/experts with information on the participant organizations.</li> </ul> |
| <p>2. What seemed to make the difference in whether or not organizations improved?</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The assistant trainer was not very knowledgeable about the subject area.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide supplemental training to trainers to prepare them for sessions.</li> </ul>  |
| <p>3. How well did the Learning Circles Project transfer skills, knowledge and capacity to do program planning and evaluation to participants of the training workshops?</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional research findings will be presented in the 18-month report.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvements will be made based on the research findings presented in the 18-month report.</li> </ul>   |