Evaluation Capacity Building:

Examples and Lessons from the Field

Johanna Morariu, April 2012

WHAT IS CAPACITY BUILDING? Capacity building is a catch all term for an array of efforts a nonprofit organization may undertake to strengthen its operations or activities. In addition to evaluation, a few common areas in which nonprofits seek to improve capacity include technology, back office management (e.g., accounting and human resources), fundraising, advocacy, communications, governance, leadership development, and volunteer recruitment and development.

Capacity building often takes the form of an organization or individual with particular expertise transferring knowledge and skills to the staff of a nonprofit organization. This can take many forms, such as technical assistance, coaching, training, and workshops.

WHAT IS EVALUATION CAPACITY BUILDING? Evaluation capacity building (ECB) is the process of improving an organization's ability to use evaluation to learn from its work and improve results. Organizational learning is incredibly important. Organizations that are adept at learning from mistakes and adapting to new challenges are more likely to be successful, and in the nonprofit sector, more likely to make significant progress toward mission-related outcomes. In general, ECB can be used to:

- *Improve the knowledge and skills of individuals.* Staff members need to have an understanding of evaluation, and the confidence to apply basic evaluation approaches and methods to their work. Everyone does not need to be an expert, but everyone does need to have a basic support for and understanding of evaluation.
- *Strengthen organizational evaluation approaches.* Within an organization, there have to be effective mechanisms to support evaluation. Established systems and processes support staff to identify, collect, and use evaluative information.

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> In addition to other types of support, the Trust provides evaluation consultation and tools to grantees. The focus is on "what grantees want to know to make programs and organizations more successful." Staff of the Trust, such as Wayne Parker, director of research and evaluation, work directly with grantees.

High-performing organizations seek and use data and feedback to continually assess and improve their work. And sometimes behind such efforts are supportive grantmakers that embrace the unique role they can play in helping grantees make effective use of information. These grantmakers recognize that before nonprofits can scale what works, they must understand what works. They also realize that a prerequisite to understanding what is working in their own philanthropic efforts is helping grantees understand what is working for them on the ground.[1]

WHAT DOES EVALUATION CAPACITY BUILDING LOOK LIKE? Evaluation capacity building can take many forms. Grantmakers can work with grantees to confirm their evaluation need or evaluation capacity building purpose, and then design a strategy accordingly. (For more information, see the tear sheet in this series, *Readiness for Evaluation and Learning: Assessing Grantmaker and Grantee Capacity*.)

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[1] Brennan, Kathy and Major, Dara. 2011. Expanding the Impact of Grantees: How Do We Build the Capacity of Nonprofits to Evaluate, Learn and Improve? From the series, Reframing the Conversation: A GEO Briefing Paper Series on Growing Social Impact. http://scalingwhatworks.org/resources/scaling-what-works-publications/briefing-papers-series

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TRANSFORMING EVALUATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

COACHING & TRAINING: Consultants and grantmakers can provide technical assistance in the form of coaching (usually one-on-one customized support) and/or training (more often group learning and practice) to build knowledge and skills. They can provide input regarding evaluation practices, and ensure alignment between program goals, the evaluation, and opportunities for learning and improvement.

EXPERIENCED CONSULTANTS: Consultants can support the delivery of a variety of ECB strategies, and/or implement a custom project, for example, the design of an evaluation framework.

TOOLS & RESOURCES: Beyond funding, tools and resources such as publications, validated assessment tools, and equipment (e.g., voice recorders to capture interview and focus group data) can be provided.

Evaluation Capacity Building Strategies

PEER LEARNING: Grantmakers are in a unique position to convene peer organizations to discuss issues of evaluation capacity and practice. Peer organizations often have much to learn from each other, and may be able to adopt and build off of each other's evaluation successes.

TECHNOLOGY: Technology tools such as online survey software, databases, data analysis packages, etc. can be great assets to grantees. Tech tools are great—but they work best when they support a functional evaluation approach. In sum, tech tools are not a silver bullet to organizations getting started with evaluation. Effective use of evaluation tech tools comes after the development and testing of an evaluation approach.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES For more information, check out these resources:

Backer, Thomas E., Bleeg, Jane Ellen, and Groves, Kathryn. 2010. *Evaluating Foundation-Supported Capacity Building: Lessons Learned*. Human Interaction Research Institute. http://www.humaninteract.org/images/finalrep129c.pdf

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. 2012. *Four Essentials for Evaluation*. http://www.geofunders.org/publications

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and Council on Foundations. 2009. *Evaluation in Philanthropy: Perspectives from the Field*. http://www.geofunders.org/publications

McCray, J. 2012. *Is Grantmaking Getting Smarter? A National Study of Philanthropic Practice*. http://www.geofunders.org/storage/documents/2011_geo_field_study_final.pdf

Reed, Ehren and Morariu, Johanna. 2010. *State of Evaluation: Evaluation Practice and Capacity in the Nonprofit Sector*. http://www.innonet.org/client_docs/innonet-state-of-evaluation-2010.pdf

Welsh, Myia and Morariu, Johanna. 2011. *Evaluation Capacity Building: Funder Initiatives to Strengthen Grantee Evaluation Capacity and Practice*. http://www.innonet.org/client_docs/funder_ecb_final.pdf

FOR MORE INFORMATION Please contact:

- Innovation Network (www.innonet.org, info@innonet.org) or
- GEO's *Scaling What Works* initiative (www.scalingwhatworks.org, scalingwhatworks@geofunders.org).