Impact, Measurement, and Evaluation

A *Fundamentals of Family Philanthropy* webinar recorded on August 12, 2021.

NATIONAL CENTER FOR FAMILY PHILANTHROPY

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Transcript of the Fundamentals of Family Philanthropy webinar, Impact, Measurement, and Evaluation. Recorded on August 12, 2021.

Jason Born:

Welcome everyone, let's get started. My name is Jason Born, and I'm the vice president for programs at the National Center For Family Philanthropy. Thank you for joining us today for our monthly Fundamentals of Family Philanthropy webinar series. This series provides guidance on the core tenants of effective family philanthropy, from motivations and values to governance, grantmaking, and succession. The series is designed to equip giving families with the latest information on evergreen topics in the donor lifecycle through practical takeaways and diverse family stories that illustrate important practices.

Impact is often an elusive concept in philanthropy. What is the most effective way to monitor progress? How do families define and measure success? What is the burden on grantee partners and how might it be mitigated? The framing around impact, measurement, and evaluation is also changing as the sector evolves. There are new considerations for doing evaluation with an equity lens and working in partnership with grantees and community partners to achieve impact.

In today's webinar, we'll explore three critical questions. How do families define impact and why is this important to a family philanthropy effort? How do you measure and assess impact effectively, and what are some important considerations when creating an evaluation strategy? How can foundations use feedback, data, and input from stakeholders to inform their grantmaking and their broader strategy?

Before we begin, let me briefly share about our webinar technology. We want this webinar to be interactive, so please submit questions for the panelists. To ask a question please use the question box as indicated on the current slide. When sending in a question, if you wish to remain anonymous, please indicate that as well. As a reminder, this webinar is being recorded and a replay will be made available to all attendees. If you experience any technical issues, please reconnect to the technology or email jen.crino@ncfp.org. As always, you're also welcome to chat with us on Twitter about today's webinar using the hashtag #ncfpweb.

Let me now briefly introduce our wonderful panel and then we'll move into this discussion. Today we're joined by Phil Buchanan, president and CEO of the Center for Effective Philanthropy, Lisa Spalding, partner with The Philanthropic Initiative, and Kat Athanasiades, Senior Associate for The Center For Evaluation Innovation. Lisa will begin with an opening presentation on impact, measurement, and evaluation, and then we'll open it up for a full panel discussion. We are so thrilled to have all of you joining us today for this important topic. Lisa, over to you.

Lisa Spalding:

Thank you so much, Jason. I'm so happy to be here. Again, my name is Lisa Spalding. I'm a partner with TPI, The Philanthropic Initiative, and we're all here in this field, in this space for the same reason—we are trying to make a real difference on things that we care about in the world. The things that we care

about in the world are often incredibly complicated and interconnected. Understanding and defining and proving impact are really challenging pursuits.

The practice plays out at all sorts of scales for foundations—from small initiatives and grants to meta coalitions and collaborations—and in really different timescales, and the practice of evaluation continues to evolve quite a bit. Today we're going to explore, as Jason touched on, what's the most effective way to monitor and track the things that we're funding and to understand what's happening on the ground. How do family foundations and funders of all kinds define and measure success? How can they partner with others to do this effectively and how can they make it much more of a collective learning journey? A journey that benefits all and not just for example, a foundation board. Also, how do we think about grantees capacity for evaluation? How do we minimize burdens through our approaches? How do we make sure we're really maximizing collaborative, shared learning? Then what does it really mean to center equity and evaluation? That's a huge topic that's defined in a lot of different ways. Where do you start? We only have a limited amount of time and it's a big topic, so I'm going to try to move through pretty quickly.

We're going to talk about what and why to evaluate, we're going to go over a few tools, but there's many. We're going to talk about the importance of asking the right questions and then we're going to my favorite part, which is explore some of the tensions in the space that we all experience and some of the challenges to doing this effectively. It's also what makes it incredibly fascinating and meaningful work. Just as context, at TPI we're philanthropy advising group. We support foundations of all kinds—family foundations, corporate foundations, independent foundations, and just independent individual funders. In partnering with them, we learn a lot about this space over time yet we're constantly learning more and are endlessly curious. I'm excited to collaborate with the panel today and with the audience and learn from you as well.

People come to this with a lot of initial questions. One of the classics is, did they do what they said they were going to do? Did they do what they had intended to do? Then some of the more bigger meta questions are: Is it making any difference? Are we making any difference through our resources or other roles that we could be playing or maybe aren't playing? How is our decision-making? Are we making good decisions? Do we know enough about this to make effective decisions? Are the right people at the table to inform those decisions? What kind of partner are we and how could we be a much better partner because partnerships are the core of all of this?

When we talk about evaluation, sometimes things can still quickly get siloed as if it's one separate endeavor, but we always try to think about it as something that's infused throughout the lifecycle of philanthropy and it's embedded in. It's also more broadly defined. It's about learning. It's about listening, assessing, tracking; it should infuse your goals. It should inform the research and learning that you want to do. When I say research, I don't just mean sort of more clinical sounding research. I mean really in-depth learning site visits, experiences, observations, focus groups, all the ways that you can sort of develop more of a sense of context about the space that you're working in.

We try to think about everything as cyclical, and it's all focusing in on the impact that we're all seeking to make together in this space. If you look at "why evaluate?", it always goes to the classic accountability is the first thing that's framed. I just want to challenge us in how we talk about that because sure, it's accountability for the nonprofits that we're partnering with to do what it is that they are seeking to do, but it's also accountability for funders to be having the impact that it is we say we seek to be having. I

think GrantCraft has some great pieces and a quote from one of them is "Make it a learning experience, not an accountability experience", which is really important.

That said, I've certainly worked with organizations that just didn't even use the money after a couple of years. That's when you start to go, okay, well, if we're not going to make the impact that we wanted to make, let's get curious and understand why, what's missing. Then the most interesting part, I think, is the continuing learning and adaptations. For grantee partners to strengthen their work, make mid-course corrections, their ability to do self-assessment and really thinking about investing in an organization's ability to understand their impacts. I will say, I think the funders that I partner with learn the most from the expertise of the nonprofits themselves and how they track their work, but it's also a really important thing to be funding and fueling in terms of capacity building, because that's some of the most important ways that you can strengthen their impact.

Then it's also thinking about the learnings that you're going to share with other funders and practitioners and organizations in the field. None of this is about creating something that's perfect. It's not a competition, but really being part of a community of practice and thinking about transparency so that we can inform others of what went well and what didn't. Lifting up failures and honestly celebrating the fact that you can unpack them and understand what happened, have the accountability and inform things so that the work is constantly improving as the world gets ever more complex every day.

Then when we talk about impact sometimes it's sort of put up on this pedestal, impacts can be positive and impacts can be negative. They should be learned from and used to inform your work. It's also about testing your assumptions and hypotheses, your theories of change about, well, I thought this was how things would work, but clearly my assumptions are wrong because it didn't have the outcomes that I had planned. That's really important when we talk about adjusting your strategies to start unpacking some of the assumptions or even biases you might be holding. When we talk about what to evaluate, I mentioned earlier scale, there's lots of different scales. We could be talking about evaluating a project, a grant, a cluster of grants that are all working towards the same common goals or maybe in a common geographic space or community.

It's also tracking progress towards sort of bigger goals and objectives that might be beyond a specific grant, but more of a long-term process towards trying to make change that could be a result of a number of different things. Really assessing your foundation's overall strategy. If you've been working on trying to solve a specific problem for 10 years, the world has changed a lot in those 10 years and the strategies that you've been using, even as they've changed incrementally, it's really good sometimes to take a moment, collect feedback and input and thought partnership and be able to very comprehensively refine your approach to things. I think Phil brings this in particular in the conversation, about evaluating foundation practices and governance: How do we work? How effectively do we work? What positive impacts do we have in the way we do things and what are some of the burdens or challenges we're creating where we're really leaving impact on the table, or could even be causing harm?

There's a lot of words in evaluation, believe me—I did a little prep sprucing up some old ideas in preparation for this. There's even more words now, and there's a lot of definitions. I'm really curious if everyone just takes a moment to think about what comes to mind when they think of these words, and we're going to have Phil and Kat share a little bit about how their organizations frame these words and approach things. In general, when we talk about monitoring, it's the output. What happened? Did they do what they proposed? What's going on? Check-in type of things. Measurement—and there's pros and cons to trying to measure things or figuring out what's measurable—but it's that how much, how many,

what's quantifiable. Those are really attractive things, seductive almost and we know that they don't tell the whole story.

Evaluation kind of triggers to mind the "so what?". What is the impact? What's happening? Why does this matter? People use evaluation and assessment sometimes interchangeably and sometimes very distinctly, but it's a little bit more of the reflection of how did we do? How can we improve? Really unpacking ways of working in a detailed framework in order to reflect on things and improve practice. There's a lot of tools and approaches for evaluation. Some of these you might not even think about as evaluation tools, but communications at the outset of a grant or before a grant—trying to understand, share goals and objectives. Midstream communications and reporting, site visits, observations, listening.

There's a lot of different ways beyond the more formalized peer assessment review, independent evaluations. There's a lot of different ways that we're learning all the time. I'm usually inclined to have a big tent about what constitutes sort of a reflection or evaluation tool, because I think they all really matter and some can be experienced very personally and some can be experienced very organizationally, particularly as you think about how family foundations work and the different scales of staffing and trustee engagement. All of these methods can have really qualitative and quantitative aspects. That's really important to keep in mind as you think about how you sort of sum it up into overall takeaways.

At the foundation level, there's a lot more tools in terms of surveys, feedback, developing logic models and theory of change, which some people really lean into and others find that a model is a model and it's not always useful. I personally really enjoy that exercise. I think it helps create a shared understanding of how we're thinking about things, but one of the most interesting parts is then unpacking it later to see where some of the flaws are or where our logic models or theories of change are different from others working in this space.

People often get a little bit hung up on outputs and outcomes, and it's kind of a delicious rabbit hole to go down, but it is important to acknowledge the distinction because we so often focus on things that are outputs, tracking activities. What happened? How many people came to a program? They're great to measure. But how many events did they help hold—they don't necessarily tell you how well things are going, how things are changing, how effective work is, and that moves more into outcomes. Those are a lot harder to identify, to measure.

There's a lot of reasons for that. In particular, because of the short term, medium term, long term, a lot of the long-term changes that we're all collectively trying to influence in the world are not easy to monitor on a day to day basis but they're the most important things. Specific changes we hope to see— maybe more proximate things that could indicate progress towards a long-term end goal—it's always worth noting are very hard to tie back to an individual organization under a grant. That is okay. That is something that we all have to sort of embrace that grayness, yet still focused on the outcomes or else we're just focusing on sort of the activities and the busyness, and we're not understanding how things are different due to the way that we're working.

Questions are incredibly important in evaluation and they matter a lot. I love this quote from Madeleine L'Engle about how much more important the questions are instead of focusing so much more on finding the right answers. A lot of us are trained to show up with the answers or to feel like an expert, but being able to really lean into questions and the nuance of questions is a really important exercise, particularly in philanthropy. Framing evaluation questions—the more you can be very clear and explicit about the

question you're trying to answer, it increases the odds of getting helpful answers. One of the things that we always try to keep in mind is that it's easy sometimes to go down the path of trying to answer questions for their own sake and find great answers as opposed to generating information that you can really act upon.

Also not just you, not just us who are in the philanthropy space, but broadening it to our collective work together so that grantee partners, nonprofits, peers, others can be influenced by the information that we're creating. It's not just only things that happen in theory. Here's a few examples of some effective evaluation questions. Just a few, there are so many, and they're so individual to the funders and the change that they're trying to seek, but they range from really looking at the impact of a specific program or a partner's work to looking at how changes in the broader context influence the foundation's approach.

Look at the last 18 months, I don't even need to describe to you all that has changed, but understanding the broader context and how it should influence the foundation's work is incredibly important. We aren't just following our path and doing the same thing as we always did as everything either crumbles or blossoms around us. Then the last bit of course, is the importance of including in your evaluation questions the effectiveness of your own personal role in practices and making sure that you're an effective partner and learning from that. My favorite part, and I'll try to go quickly because I think this will be much in the discussion too with Kat and Phil, but some of the tensions; I like that word better than challenges, but I threw them both in there.

I know a lot of you know many of these, but I'll just add a little bit of nuance. We know that not everything that's measurable is important. We also know that if you focus on just the things that you can measure, it can actually shift the work that you're trying to do and you're not paying attention to all the right things or working towards the outcomes that actually are most meaningful. The long time horizons is a huge concern, funders that are passionate about democracy, strength of democratic institutions, biodiversity, climate change, people who support education and thinking about the outcomes for young people. How do you know that your education strategy or your scholarship was successful and effective? How much later in a human being's life can you go, hey that was a strong outcome and at what point can you even track it back to that work?

It's not impossible. It's just a nuanced conversation and it means to get information in real time to inform your work. It's challenging. You have to think about those more proximate ways or even qualitative things that you can be thinking about. Capacity for data collection also relates to cost as well. When you think about capacity for data collection, it's not just scientific data collection, but the skill sets and competencies to do the kind of listening and stakeholder engagement that are also important parts of collecting data together. Talk about contribution and attribution.

I love this sort of ecosystems versus test tubes concept that if you're trying to influence the health of a coral reef, and you're doing some various specific interventions but the water is warming and that's what's creating bleaching. There's so many different variables happening. It's very hard sometimes to target the very specific elements that are influencing a system or that are creating the outcomes that you're trying to influence. The world's always evolving. I think that the question about getting candid feedback, I think we're getting better at it every day. I know we're nowhere near there yet and a lot of that relates to power dynamics and also skill sets and abilities and formats for having really important communication with stakeholders and partners.

Also, I think sometimes there's a possibility of defining important outcomes and striving towards them, but they aren't necessarily the outcomes that everybody would identify as the most important outcomes. Thinking about what you're working towards and who gets to decide what the important outcomes are is another tension and opportunity in philanthropy. Lastly, I'm just going to briefly touch on there's increasingly so much thoughtful emphasis on equity and evaluation, and I'm barely going to scratch the surface, but I just want to share that, and I think we'll be going into this in the discussion as well, but there are so many definitions of equity as well as evaluation.

I think the most important thing is to start having this conversation if you haven't and to lean further into it if you've started and really be thinking about who asks the questions, who owns and interprets information and data, who determines impact and who benefits from evaluation findings and recommendations? This is just to counter some of the orthodoxies that we've all sort of grown up in, or some of us have grown up in philanthropy and about foundations and philanthropy being somewhat top-down, somewhat ivory tower, evaluators as experts, evaluation to inform boards, as opposed to inform stakeholders and systems and a number of other dynamics that we're often familiar with.

I always think it's nice to go, okay, where do you start and we will come back to some of those questions. I think the very act of asking questions around equity is an incredibly important step forward. Thinking about sharing power with folks that are most effected, thinking about the diversity of perspectives that you're counting as data sources and thinking about people that are most proximate to issues, thinking about culturally competent approaches. Thinking about is your evaluation and your strategies, are they focused on the changes that are really needed to advance equity? How well have you infused that into your work and what would you need to do that more effectively?

Then finally just making sure that evaluation is informing and lifting up all groups in the field and not just philanthropy in a vacuum. This is such an exciting space right now. With that, I am going to invite Phil and Kat to join me and open up the discussion. Welcome you guys. Thank you so much for being here. I'm just going to open up immediately and ask each of you to take a moment and share with us. We talked about how many approaches, how many ways of defining things are. Can you share a little bit about where you and your organizations are coming from in terms of how you define evaluation, impact, measurement? Just tell us a little bit about your perspective and your framing going into this. Phil you're unmuted. Do you mind if I call on you first?

Phil Buchanan:

Not at all. Thank you, I thought that was a great overview and framing, just really incredibly helpful. I'm really pleased to be here with you and Kat and view both your organizations as well as the National Center for Family Philanthropy, which we've had a close connection with over the years, as just all part of an ecosystem that are trying to play various roles to help foundations sort through these questions. I guess I would say we operate at the foundation level, if I'm thinking about your slide in terms of foundation level and grant level approaches, and we operate with a point of view that assessing performance for foundations is uniquely challenging.

There has been over the years, a tendency to oversimplify to look for the one measure, the analog to ROI in the investing world. Lots of, I think, unhelpful analogies between investing and philanthropy. We have a perspective on what philanthropic effectiveness requires. Actually we just updated it, it's on our website and it's about goals, which is what are you trying to achieve? Strategies, which is the how?

Implementation, which involves a lot of different elements but crucially working with nonprofit grantees.

Then the fourth dimension, which is what we're talking about here is really we try to talk about in terms of assessment and learning, as opposed to words like impact and measurement, which imply the ability to measure impact in some precise way that I think just often isn't a reality. In fact, what you're doing is embracing a set of indicators that taken together tell you something about whether you're on the right track or not. I think the reason it's hard is really related to everything that you've alluded to in your presentation, Lisa, but we tend to talk about it in terms of the four particularly tricky challenges.

One is causality, how do you understand your role when you're one of many funders and should you even try to understand your unique role? Is that even productive exercise? The other is aggregation, which I've already alluded to in terms of the analog to ROI. There isn't one, there's not some common unit of measurement by which you can compare the work on climate change to the work in education in Cleveland. Third is subjectivity, your positive outcome might be my negative outcome. The fourth is just the timeliness issue, and you alluded to this in terms of outputs and outcomes and what can you know now versus what do you know later. All of that sometimes gets taken when I say this as if I'm saying it's not really important to assess and learn, and it really is. I think Peter Drucker said something like assessment in the nonprofit world is way harder than it is in business, and it's also even more important, but there are simpler answers. That's a little bit about how we see it.

Lisa Spalding:

Excellent. Thank you so much. Kat, you want to pick it up from there, share a little bit about where you're coming from?

Kat Athanasiades:

Yes, sure, absolutely. Thanks Lisa also for your terrific presentation and setting up this conversation and Phil, those comments were extremely valuable. Thank you for those. I am with the Center For Evaluation Innovation. We're a small nonprofit based in Washington, DC and we're working to transform philanthropic practice particularly in the areas of evaluation, learning, and strategy in support of racial equity and justice. That's just a little bit about our orientation, our mission.

I think one of the key ways that we see evaluation and this is, I think going on a little bit of a different tack, is that we see it as inextricably linked from learning and strategy. I know that there are a lot of funders who live with an idea that evaluation to be "objective". You need to have a third party and then that will ensure objectivity of an evaluation of the results. It'll preserve the process and start at this pristine thing that will be able to tell you whether or not something works, and we really don't ascribe to that.

We think that to be useful to the funder and to the grantee partner, you really need to see it as a process that is part and parcel with your learning processes around what's working and then your strategic decisions that you're making around where to allocate your resources. I also think that a lot of times evaluation that I've conducted, some of the work that we do at the center is evaluation work. It's really focusing in on the sort of monetary resources that foundations are allocating to different efforts.

It's really, I think, much more useful to consider the whole of what the foundation is bringing to an effort, which requires you to grapple with who you are as an actor in the ecosystem and thinking about the funding that you're putting behind an effort. Also your relationships and who is staffing your foundation. There's a lot of different angles that you can consider as you think about what are the important factors or assets or resources that we're bringing to the table to try to transform some of these extremely complex sticky problems in society. And because it's not one dimensional, how is it that we can systematically collect information about those that we can then ask questions like, so what does that mean for our organization?

Then make strategic decisions going forward on that information that's coming in, maybe just as one input, there are likely many other inputs that are going to inform these decisions. But yes, that being able to answer some questions with evaluation that will then inform those decisions about how to allocate resources and how to develop relationships, maybe who you need to have on staff in order to have an impact in the areas you're trying to have an impact. That's all I'll say for now.

Lisa Spalding:

Thank you, especially for doubling down on that excellent point that it's not just about financial resources to nonprofits. That's not your whole game. We're whole humans and actors in this world, and we're bringing a lot to the table. I believe that a lot of foundations, even though those without staff, families, trustees have so much that they are bringing to the table and can offer. It's not just the things that you would assume about your connections or referrals to other funders but it's the way you show up in these relationships. That's equally as important as to the size of the check and to where it goes. Thank you for that.

Let's talk a little bit about funders. There's a huge diversity in approaches to grantmaking and grants management and relationship management. In the last year, year and a half, there's a big trend towards quickly pivoting to reducing burdens on nonprofit partners including, and this was a bit of a harder thing, figuring out how to effectively gather information and feedback and check in with grantees without creating burdens and doing it perhaps in new ways. I saw a lot of people actually that felt they were much more effective and efficient. But can you share how do you solicit feedback from grantees without being burdensome, doing it in a way that adds value for everyone and that is productive. Then how do you also put that feedback into work and not just in your notebook?

Phil Buchanan:

Sure. A big part of what we do at CEP is to try to elevate nonprofit perspectives to foundations because of the fact that you've already alluded to Lisa, and I guess I would put it even more bluntly, that foundations reside in a bubble of positivity. They are surrounded by people who are predisposed to tell them what they think they want to hear no matter how down to earth accessible and focused on relationships you may be, you are not getting-

Lisa Spalding:

Phil froze for a bit and he's still frozen. While we get him back, Kat, do you want to jump in and add anything from your standpoint on this?

Kat Athanasiades:

Yes, sure. I think that this moment of being able to step back and really asking questions around what we need to know in order to know if our funding is being put to good use, that the grantees are able to do both of the things that they would do, but also how they're changing in these times. How they are responding to the moment, if they're starting a new program in order to address the incredible poverty and housing crisis that the nation is facing.

I think first taking stock of what you tried now that was useful and if there are practices that you were going to check a box, can you just let those go as you move forward into a time that may or may not be a little bit more normal. I also think, and then Phil, I'll turn it back to you in a second, but when I think about what we've experienced as also a grantee organization that has been very useful to us and to reducing the burden on us. There are ways that some funders have built evaluative and/or reporting questions into our routine check-in calls.

That's the kind of thing I think that if you're already having check-in calls with grantees that in order to build your relationships with them or to work through some kind of sticky question that they might have, or that you might have about what's going on right now in the ecosystem of actors that you're trying to support. I'm asking you a couple of routine questions, just sticking them in there about how they're adapting, what they've managed to achieve. What's the direction that they see themselves going next and what they're learning.

That's the kind of thing that once you start asking, it becomes a value of data because you were asking it systematically and you're collecting it over time. That's the kind of thing I think that we've seen work and that we've heard from others has worked for them as well in order to reduce that burden, especially right now. Phil, I want to turn it back to you. You were in the middle of a brilliant thought.

Phil Buchanan:

I don't know how bright it was, but I was saying that you're in a bubble of positivity as a funder and it's hard to hear the direct and candid feedback. One of the tools that we created years ago in response to that is called the Grantee Perception Report. It's an anonymous and comparative survey because it is hard to know how to make sense of a survey of your grantees. They're your grantees after all, without a comparative data set. That has really fueled a lot of change and improvement at foundations.

Foundations that regularly use that tool and get that feedback do end up shifting their practices in ways that grantees experience is better. Not all of them, but a statistically meaningful proportion of them. The other thing we try to do is elevate the nonprofit perspective through research pieces that are all available on our website free for download so that folks can understand things like what do nonprofits actually most value in their relationships with funders.

Obviously, I've got a bias here because I believe what we've done has been helpful to foundations, but I think that getting that candid third-party comparative feedback is just so crucial. It has to be one element of the approach as well as the strategies that that Kat is describing in the day-to-day.

Lisa Spalding:

That's great. I don't know how you managed to pick up exactly where you left off but well done.

Kat Athanasiades:

Actually, can I just jump in on one thing that Phil was saying. As a grantee also, we completed the Grantee Perception Report. I have experienced it in that capacity. It's very thorough. One of the things that I really like about that tool as a tool that anybody who has grantees or, I guess, a certain number of grantees can use is that when we at the Center are thinking about what does the foundation need to do to build their equitable practice, one of the things is really taking a look at the kinds of, again, policies and practice that are internal to the foundation.

Not navel-gazing but taking a hard look and seeing which of those things are perhaps reproducing, maintaining inequitable structures or that are reproducing or maintaining inequitable power dynamics between... There's already funky power dynamics between funders and their grantee partners. But understanding how that is experienced by grantee partners is really a critical way to start to embed more equitable practice into your work, both in your practice's non-evaluation, and then also in your evaluative practice. I just wanted to add that, that I really appreciate the Grantee Perception Report for that reason too because it starts to provide that perspective that you otherwise really wouldn't have that also is evaluative data.

Lisa Spalding:

Kat, thank you for adding that. I think there's almost no substitute for the opportunity to give feedback anonymously. It can be pretty transformative but then also the way the Grantee Perception Report does that benchmarking against others so that you have some sense of what's okay, what's good, how do I compare and where could this go. Then the fact that it's elevated, it's often public and there's a platform for it is really powerful for the field. I'm going to skip ahead to a question about roles. Somebody actually asked, who had registered for this, about the roles of staff. I know not all foundations have staff—but board or family members and other stakeholders, what roles they play. In the assessment process, they said, "I'm interested to learn about the balance of being involved as a trustee and wanting to see the impact of giving while still giving staff more independence and decision-making power, especially when we're not always aligned." Any reflections on this balance, when there is staff, between trustee and staff in evaluation and decision-making.

Phil Buchanan:

I think it reminds me of a little story. Many years ago, I went to an Evaluation Roundtable meeting. These were private meetings but I think it's okay for me to tell this story. I was just there as a guest. It was the evaluators from many of the big foundations. The speaker that was speaking before me, the guest, was a foundation president who was also a medical doctor. They had one of those graphic recorders who had been charting everything that was said by the evaluation folks over a couple of days. This doctor foundation president began his presentation by saying, "There's so much angst in this room. I'm worried about you all from a mental health perspective." The reason was the disconnect that was felt between what the board wanted from the evaluators and what the board itself had failed to provide.

It goes back to something you alluded to, both you Lisa and Kat, the connection between goals and strategies and evaluation. Often there is this, and I don't mean to caricature it, but demand for evidence of impact or evidence of progress but not enough clarity about, "Well, what would success actually look like? What are we going for?" I guess, my feeling would be that the board's role is more to make sure that that exists, that there is clarity on what we're trying to do and how we're trying to do it. Then to

check in on the available information about how that looks, which staff would provide assuming a situation in which there is a staff, which the question obviously assumed.

Then to let the staff make the decisions and to step back. I think that means, for example, that I don't think there's a lot of value in boards approving every single grant or considering every single grant. Rather, they should set the framework under which staff would then make those judgements and decisions.

Kat Athanasiades:

That's definitely helpful, Phil. I want to add a little bit. We've done a bunch of work with boards and a lot of work with executive leadership and staff at different foundations. We have asked a number of times, "What role do you want to play vis-a-vis the other group? Do you want to be more involved in the strategic decision making or in the thinking and the thought partnership with staff or boards and vice versa?" Asking staff if they want their board's input on things. Across the board, I would say that folks say yes. We would appreciate them as a thought partner." Staff and boards would like to have more say or sway or just ability to interact with the different kinds of challenges that the foundations are facing.

Just to say that everyone's on the same page even if you're coming at this from really different places. One of the things that we have found has helped with the, I guess, bringing in both staff and board as thought partners without necessarily saying that one of them abdicates decision-making power is to think about just the structure of how board meetings are set up. Often, when there is something that's presented to a board, there's a board packet. It's super glossy. I don't know how it works with all of your foundations but that's what we've seen over and over again. It's presented to be very polished and finished. Often, what we've seen is that there are many issues or challenges that staff are working through that do not get raised with the board because there is sometimes a fear that those will get picked apart and their strategy will get thrown out the window.

B, there's not really a precedent for how to engage with the board members around these challenging questions that they're facing. One of the things that we've seen some foundations experiment with successfully is asking three questions: what, so what, and now what. Asking what happened, which is a lot of the evaluative data, other kinds of inputs that that you might present in a presentation to a board, but then allocating equal times. Questions about, so what does that mean for the direction of our work? What does that mean for our foundation? What does that mean for our vision for success and our ultimate goal? Then now what do we do? As an idea for a tool, that's pretty simple but can have pretty profound changes in how board and staff relate.

It's a learning tool that we found can help to open up some of those conversations. We always just recommend just trying it and also give a little bit of heads up in advance of trying it. But say, "We're going to try something different. We know that everybody wants to have a say, engage. Everybody has something to contribute to these conversations that we have. We have questions that we want your expertise to answer. We're going to try a different way of having the conversation and just see how it goes."

Phil Buchanan:

I love that.

Lisa Spalding:

Thanks for that, you guys. We're now going to fly across the spectrum of family foundations to the other end, which I think represents many more family foundations in terms of the data, which is the foundations that have few or no staff, at least no evaluation staff. There's a number of board members and trustees on this call, which I'm thrilled about. I know a number of them are wondering can you share some, call it best practices, call it great approaches that all funders can adopt regardless of their size to do evaluation well. What advice would you have for those smaller foundations, particularly ones that have very active trustees that are some practices that are doable, particularly when you're not a full-time grantmaker and this is part of the portfolio of the things you do in your life, but it's not your full-time work? Any thoughts on that?

Phil Buchanan:

Sure. I think one thing you can do is draft, if that's the right word, off the bigger players whose goals and strategies might overlap with yours and to capitalize on the existing research about what is shown to be helpful or effective, not to feel like you have to reinvent the evaluative wheel. Certain things are known. We can do those things known to work. I think another piece is getting clear, at what level are you holding yourself responsible? There's different ways you can define your objective. Some donors and foundations define it at the level of change in outcomes on the ground. Fewer people will be in poverty in this area. More young people will graduate from high school in that area. That's what we feel responsible for.

There are other more modest ways to frame your goals, which is to say, "We will be helpful and supportive to organizations that have that as their goal but maybe we won't define ourselves as ultimately... Just given our size. It's not realistic." We can think we can help those organizations that hopefully make progress on their goals, but we define it somewhat more modestly. Then I do think the very simple practice of looking at your own funding regularly to make sure it does match with your stated objectives. I am always surprised how often there is a mismatch between what we said we wanted to do and then what we actually did with the resources we allocated.

Lisa Spalding:

Phil, I'm actually going to jump in on that. I completely agree. One of my favorite exercises to do particularly with individual donors that might be just starting to lean into their philanthropy and wanting to take it up a notch is to map out the things they care about and their goals and what success would look like. Then do the pie chart, not only of where the money goes and how much of it is going towards those goals, towards the also very appropriate good neighbor type of things, friends and family related type of things, learning goal things but really towards those strategic things. And how can we start to shift the pie towards the things that they care most about so that they can start to gain some traction on them, but also looking at where they spend their time.

I've worked with a couple that spent 90% of their time on the things that felt like obligations, and 10% of the time on the thing that the most money went to and was the change they were seeking to have in the world and that aligned so deeply with their values that it was their purpose. Yet it wasn't where they were able to spend their time. That's an organizational thing. That's such a human thing. If you looked at how I spend my time, I probably have similar issues. But I think that's incredibly valuable. The one other

thing I would add to it is I think that unstaffed foundations can learn so much from when you connect with grantees and have that phone call a couple of times a year or that meeting, that coffee.

Don't just be checking in on that grant but carve out time to consult that grantee as an expert resource, as a practitioner; learn from them and ask them questions about what they're seeing, what their ideas and suggestions are, what their concerns are about the issues that they're working on. Who else should I be talking to? Are there any other organizations you've partnered with that you think are neglected by other funders? There is so much that you can learn. That builds that trusting relationship that I think it creates more of an evaluation context and space where you're now building your own community and network to keep yourself on top of what's going on by the people that are closest to it. Sorry, Kat, did you want to jump in on this too?

Kat Athanasiades:

Lisa, I'm glad you said that because that was exactly one of the points that I wanted to make but you said it super articulately and really, really loved exactly how you put that. I'm so glad that you made that point. I just wanted to add super quickly because I know that we're coming up to the end that one of the things that I recommend keeping in mind is thinking about different spheres of control as far as what your foundation is trying to do. There's your sphere of control and what you're funding or who you're talking to or how you're, I guess, making connections or not making connections or whatever it is. Those are the things that you can, to some degree, evaluate maybe.

We recommend focusing in on what you can control or what you can influence, which is the next sphere out. It links a lot to Lisa's presentation at the beginning around outputs and outcomes. Thinking about the spheres of control and spheres of influence in terms of outputs and outcomes also can help. I know that that's vague and just throwing it out there at the end. The third sphere is the sphere of aspiration. That's where a lot of funders we have seen, try to evaluate and try to set metrics to understand impact and how a community is changing based on their funding. The way that they are funding is actually down here. What they are aspiring to is maybe a generational change and what they are funding now is in their sphere of control, in their sphere of influence.
The things that you're going to try to look for that might be signals of progress or signals that you need to change something, it's going to look a lot different than if you're looking at community-level indicators to try to inform how you're doing your work. I would think about spheres of control, influence, and aspiration, and make sure to right size if you have a third-party evaluator. If you're having those conversations with grantees, what are the questions that you ask? Thinking about what is actually possible based on your funding and the other assets that you're bringing to the relationship.

Phil Buchanan:

Can I say that there's something about humility in what Kat is talking about and in recognizing... My own feeling is that there has been this illusion that a top-down approach in which a foundation charts the strategy and can somehow see better, to the point that you were making Lisa, than the grantees who are doing this work every day. Then the strategy is unfurled as the foundation's strategy. This has not worked well. We can point to many examples that are highly public and well-known like Mark Zuckerberg's efforts in Newark or whatever. What has started to happen, I think, is a healthy backlash to that approach and a recognition that, as I think the three of us are saying, those closest to issues are often in the very best position to see what the solutions are.

Those experiencing challenges are the best experts on their own lives. Then the pandemic just made that even more starkly clear that if we try to tell an organization whose goals largely overlap with ours, "Do this, but don't use the money for that." Then they're suddenly responding to a new need as a result of some disastrous external circumstance. They have to circle back to each funder and say, "Is it okay if we use this for a partnership with the food bank because now all our clients are hungry and we didn't use to have to provide food?" This is silly. There's something about humility and trust and being realistic about who are the real experts that I think is maybe across all of our comments.

Lisa Spalding:

Phil, thank you so much for adding that. I had another question but the questions coming in from the audience are so great. I'm going to pause on that and cluster two of these together because I think they're connected in some way. One question that came in was, what about if you're providing relatively small grants, and he quoted under $30,000, but small is very relative. They don't fund an entire program or project, what's reasonable to ask in terms of feedback from the grantee. I also think of how do you evaluate that gift? How do you assess impact of that gift?

Connected to that, how do you evaluate, particularly given some of the shifts in philanthropy, towards more unrestricted support and also supporting less traditional organizations that maybe they do or do not have an established track record? How do you evaluate that type of support for efforts? Particularly when you're just putting money into a whole organization from more of a trust-based approach. You can pick any part of that to answer.

Phil Buchanan:

Kat, since I didn't see you jumping in, I'll say, everything's about the context. In the Grantee Perception Report, one of the things we ask is grantees basically estimate the number of hours that they spend on various processes. Sometimes we'll look at that relative to the grant size. You could plot it at some foundations and see literally no relationship, that the same is being asked in terms of requirements of a $30,000 grant and a $300,000 grant. That probably doesn't make a lot of sense. But another element of this is, what is the organization even doing? The evaluative questions are going to be completely different for the organization that's trying to change the life outcomes of gang-involved young people.

Well, you better hope that they're monitoring those life outcomes. If you support that organization with general operating support, unrestricted support, then I would think it's perfectly reasonable to expect that they would monitor, are we seeing the change that we expect to see? If you're supporting a children's museum, on the other hand, little Phil's life outcomes are probably not going to be different because he went to the children's museum. But if you're running the children's museum, clearly there are some indicators and metrics that you'd be looking at and that are really important. As a funder, you'd want to understand what those are. The problem with all of this is that it's so context specific.

But in general, getting back to the beginning of your question on grant size, you got to try to see it from the nonprofit's perspective, all of the funder relationships they have, and rather than issuing the unfunded to provide us this, ask, "What are you doing to gather information? What would be helpful?" Because their effectiveness is your effectiveness. They should be the judge of what is useful in making them more effective.

Kat Athanasiades:

I think that's a really useful answer, Phil. I would add that if you are providing a $30,000 grant and there are other funders of that grantee who may be asking for grant reports, one thing you could do is ask for whatever it is that they're providing to the other funder so that you aren't making more work for them but you are getting some information on what they're doing, how they're doing. I think what Phil was saying about expecting an organization to do some monitoring of how their work is going is right on. I think that you can and should expect that, whether you ask for all of that data or whether you learn about that data in a conversation or again, from another grant report to another funder is a different question.

I wanted to say that. I was also thinking about the part two question about the unrestricted funding. To Phil's point earlier about part of the board's purpose being to have the conversation around what success looks like for a foundation, and to ensure that the foundation is asking that question, tracking that question, if you think about the work that you're doing. I just want to offer that one of the ways that you can think about success is by defining values or principles by which you act and make grantmaking decisions. If you are making unrestricted spending grants, maybe the way that you are assessing your grantees is whether their values align with you or whether they are aligned with your principles.

It looks a lot different. But it looks like a very trust-based approach to your grantmaking practice. Then there may be, again, other questions that are more monitoring questions that you might want to ask just to see what's going on with their organization and with the work that they're doing in their communities. I just wanted to offer that as a different way of thinking about how to define what you're aiming towards. It can still be some major shifting the needle in a community on a housing crisis, but it can also be that you align with an organization on their values and so maybe the strategies that they're using would be a little bit different than how you would create a program if you were actually doing the work of creating programs and of carrying out those programs. But if your values aligned and if you say, "I do trust that this organization is doing this work well and they are learning from it, and they will be able to inform me on what is working the best in their communities." Then that's another way to think about it.

Lisa Spalding:

That's great. Kat, thank you so much for circling back to that part of the question. The one other thing I'd add to it is when providing unrestricted support, I love pulling back the curtain, and if there's a strategic plan, if there's a theory of change...really understanding that organization's overall goals and objectives and strategies, and then understanding what is their capacity to track their own impact and their own wellbeing and health. If there are gaps in the ability for them to be able to report on how things are going and what they're learning, that's also an opportunity to ask them, with some capacity building support, help you right now so that with your really important goals in your incredible proximity and depth in this community, what would help you know what's working and not working and how can I support you in doing that?

There is a great question that I think is so important to ask, particularly with the prevalence of people who run basically family foundations through donor-advised funds and that are unstaffed. For a number of reasons, there are families that need to or prefer to or choose to operate relatively anonymously or under the radar. Any advice on approaches to evaluation and monitoring when you really prefer to operate relatively behind the scenes?

Phil Buchanan:

I don't have anything brilliant on that one. That's tricky, I think. I would just go back to what I said before, can you align your funding with others who you know are rigorously evaluating and maybe are playing a more active and public role in order to figure out what a nonprofits track record is. It is tricky to get to know a nonprofit if you're not getting to know the nonprofit. I think it's about looking for other resources and then not underestimating the degree to which in various fields... I alluded to this before, we actually know a lot about what works. I think sometimes there's this getting clear on are we funding something where we actually have to ask the question, is it working or not? Or are we funding something where actually we just have to fund the stuff that we already know that works. If it's the latter, then it's relatively easy to do that anonymously.

Kat Athanasiades:

I struggled with this question. As I'm reading the question, it's wanting to stay more anonymous from public view. When I think about the foundations that I've worked with and have done evaluations for, I would say most of those end up being private. They may serve as tools to facilitate conversations between grantees and the foundation about what workspace sometimes serve as inputs to broader conversations with a broader group of actors if there's convening where you're trying to make progress on whatever the thing is that you're working on. But I think there are some states I know that have laws that if there's an evaluation conducted, it could be requested and that it would be public. But for the most part, I think that a lot of that stuff remains private to the foundation, it can and it will unless there's something that you want to disclose from it.

I definitely advocate for there to be something that can be shared with others coming out of an evaluation because I think that again, speaking about how for us, evaluation links to learning and strategy. Bringing in others to interpret results, bringing in others to talk about what those results mean for the next steps that a funder is going to take in an area, I think that those are really important tools especially when you have few or no staff. As far as the privacy question, it's something that I would worry less about. The privacy of the evaluation question.

Lisa Spalding:

That's a really good point. The one thing I would add to that is there's a whole world of staff at community foundations who can play an incredible role as a liaison for donors that for various reasons prefer or need to operate behind the scenes. They also can serve as thought partners. I also think that you can be relentless in this virtual world of listening in on briefings and webinars and conversations without having to actively participate and you can be a sponge. I think that's incredibly useful and important as well.

We have a couple more questions that are fantastic and we appreciate them. I'm going to press pause on them, hoping that this conversation will continue in this field. I just want to quickly give Kat and Phil an opportunity just to share any additional thoughts, important takeaways, mic drops that you would like to share. Then we're going to hand it over to Jason to close us out. Kat, I would like to give you the opportunity to go first if you'd be willing.

Kat Athanasiades:

Sure. One thing I was thinking about leading up to this webinar and also that I've been thinking about over the course of our conversation is the question that I think we didn't get to but that's about challenges and failures. Lisa, you had talked about this earlier in the conversation or in your presentation. If you're trying something new, it can feel really risky. It can feel really tough, especially if you have few or no staff and you're going in alone. I just wanted to reiterate what Phil and Lisa have talked about on this call, leaning on other partners in the field, leaning on some other foundations, leaning on community foundations. Lisa, I thought that was a terrific. Building your community so that you don't feel as much like you're going in alone and also thinking about ways to deescalate or lower the stakes on any of the work that you're trying out.

I talked a little bit about potentially restructuring board meetings to use a what, so what, now what approach and cycle of thinking. If you do that the first time and it fails, it can either feel like a huge failure and be like, we're never doing that again. Or with conversation, with lead up, with some debriefing afterwards, it can feel like one step in a very long series of steps that never ends that's about learning about your work and how you conduct your work. Just thinking about ways to lower the stakes on evaluation, on learning, on making strategic decisions, on trying new things I think will go a long way as you are trying out some new stuff in the evaluation world.

Lisa Spalding:

Thanks, Kat. Phil?

Phil Buchanan:

I would just agree with Kat and say, too much philanthropy has been done with a spirit of distrust or disbelief that nonprofits really know what they're doing or are committed to results, which always leads me to wonder, "Well, why would you do some of these incredibly difficult jobs that we see nonprofits doing on the hardest issues if you didn't really care about getting results?" I think we have so much more to gain in terms of impact and effectiveness if we approach this work with a spirit of trust and benefit of the doubt than a sense that we have to impose accountability or metrics because otherwise without us, that that wouldn't happen. That's what I would leave folks with. Thanks again for the opportunity to be a part of this and, Lisa, your great facilitation and framing.

Lisa Spalding:

Thanks you guys. Jason, you want to join us and close us out?

Jason Born:

Great. Thanks so much, Lisa. Thanks Kat. Thanks Phil for all the wisdom you shared today and for these important points at the end, especially, and really for your passion for this ever evolving work. You guys really clearly are in this for the long haul. We appreciate all your guidance for everyone. As we get ready to sign off, we have a few very quick announcements about upcoming NCFP programs. Next month, we have the next in our Fundamentals of Family Philanthropy webinar series, "Scaling for Success", which will be held on Thursday, September 9th, from 12:00 to 1:15 PM. In this webinar, you'll learn how to scale your strategy and systems needed to maximize impact as well as what is necessary to build effective management and operations as your philanthropy grows.

NCFP is also hosting our Trustee Education Institute on September 28th through 30th. This virtual three-day seminar provides a comprehensive overview of the important legal, investment, ethical, grantmaking, and family dynamics issues facing family foundation board members and CEOs. See more information and register for the event on our website. NCFP is also pleased to offer peer networks for those interested in connecting to family philanthropy colleagues with similar objectives, challenges, and shared experiences. We recently launched our new board chair peer network. If you are a board chair looking for peers or think this would be an opportunity that your chair would be interested in, please contact Katie Scott at katie.scott@ncfp.org for more information.

Finally, don't forget to connect with NCFP on social media for great information like live tweets from today's webinar and articles from the field. Again, thank you all for joining us today for this wide-ranging discussion. Thanks again to our wonderful panelists for the conversation. Remember to join us next month. Thanks everyone. Enjoy your rest of your summers.