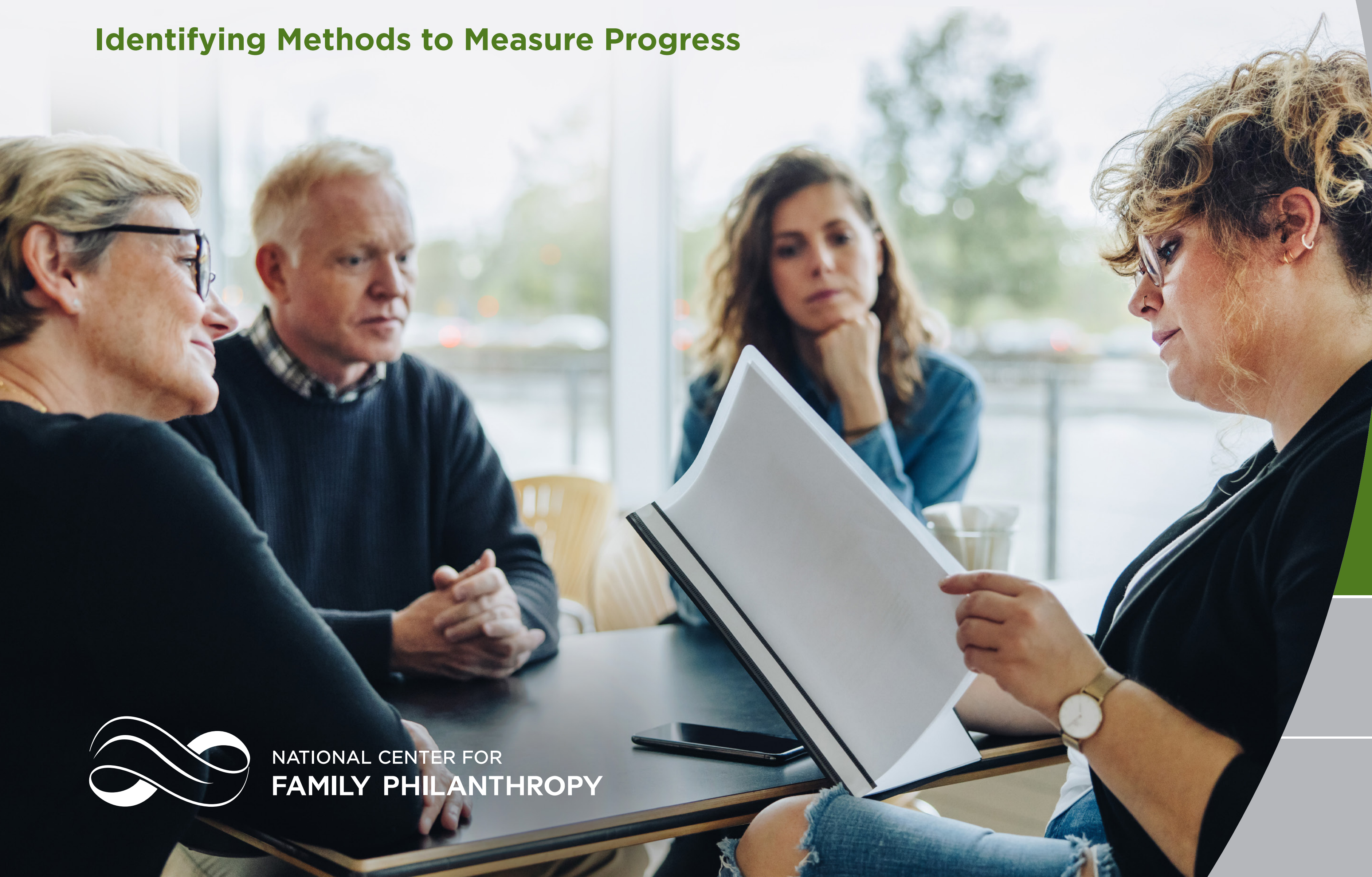
Assessment and Learning

2ND EDITION

Identifying Methods to Measure Progress



NATIONAL CENTER FOR FAMILY PHILANTHROPY

THE FAMILY GIVING LIFECYCLE

1 Philanthropic Purpose

2 Impact Vehicles & Structures

3 Governance

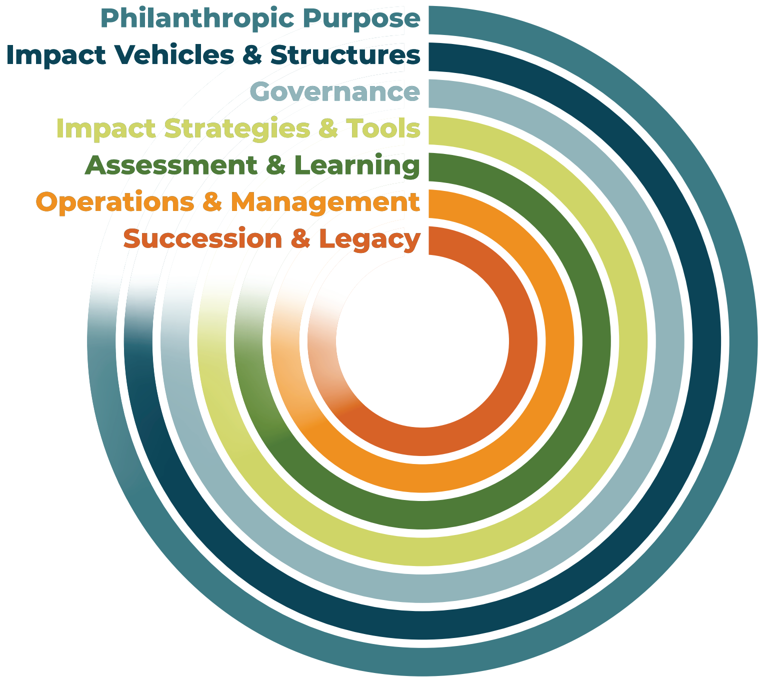
4 Impact Strategies & Tools

5 ASSESSMENT & LEARNING

6 Operations & Management

7 Succession & Legacy

About the Series



The Family Giving Lifecycle is a seven-stage framework that encompasses the breadth and inflection points of family philanthropy and orients donors to effective outcomes.

Assessment and Learning: Identifying Methods to Measure Progress is the fifth primer of the series. The primers include worksheets to help you apply the concepts to your work as well as a playbook that you can create with your family to codify decisions and plan your course of action. The Lifecycle framework applies to families at all stages of their philanthropy, whether they are wealth creators just starting out or multi-generational families improving their practice. It is important for donors and their families to revisit the seven inflection points over time as their philanthropy evolves. Please visit the National Center for Family Philanthropy (NCFP) website for the complete series of primers and related resources.

Table of Contents

Overview

There are few certainties in philanthropy, but one is undeniable: good intentions are not enough. Change requires action. It also requires a commitment to ongoing learning and a willingness to adapt your practices in response to a greater awareness of what promotes success for you and your partners.

Your social impact—the intentional net benefit to the public—may be small or big, help a few or many, or be tangible or hard to measure. Regardless, an assessment and learning plan is essential to define and measure the progress and success of your strategy, governance, and administrative efforts.

A well-designed plan documents your goals and articulates how you'll measure progress and success. The plan is also meant to be iterative. You can start with a simple version, revise your expectations based on experience, and then add more details and activities over time.

Assessment and learning plans help you identify:

- What to assess
- The principles that will guide the plan
- To whom you will be accountable
- Your goals
- Who will be involved in what roles
- How you will accomplish your goals
- How you will learn and adapt

Why is developing an assessment and learning plan important?

Effective philanthropy is a process of continual learning. We assess so we can learn. We learn so we can improve. And, in turn, we improve so we can make a bigger difference. A structured learning agenda and assessment plan can strengthen your philanthropic purpose, governance, strategies, impact, legacy, and family engagement.

Vision for Assessment and Learning

An effective assessment and learning plan is both internal and external facing. To develop the plan, you will need to make decisions about what you're assessing, the principles that guide the work, who will hold what roles, your learning goals, and the methods you'll use to measure progress.

What are you assessing?

A complete plan will address three performance areas:

1. **Internal:** The effectiveness of your operations, investments, human resources, governance, staff-member performance and staff structure, and regulatory compliance of philanthropic vehicles

2. **Social impact strategies and tools:** The effectiveness of strategies you use to advance your mission and philanthropic priorities, including activities such as grantmaking, convening, and advocacy

3. **Partners:** The effectiveness, health, and impact of nonprofits, coalitions, social enterprises, and others who benefit from your resources

What principles and values guide your plan?

Begin with self-reflection. Root your assessment goals in your philanthropic purpose—your motivations, values, and principles. For example, values such as empowerment and teamwork might lead you to collaborate with nonprofit partners to promote their access to resources to evaluate their work and report progress to other donors.

Look also to proven practices. Four principles guide the practice of effective family philanthropy and related assessment and learning plans:

1. **Accountability:** Ultimately, your philanthropy is meant to improve the lives of others. Indeed, once you place your resources in a private foundation or other public charity, you no longer own those resources but instead become a steward of them. Because of these factors, it is essential to ask yourself, "To whom or what is my (our) philanthropy accountable?" Donors' answers range from nonprofit partners and the people served by grantees to the mission of the family. Having a clear answer for yourself and your family will guide who you involve in your assessment plan and how you'll work with them.

2. **Equity:** Some people and communities historically have had more privilege and power, while others have endured a history of harm and marginalization. Committing to equity means learning how practices and policies in philanthropy can unintentionally continue or exacerbate those harms. There are a number of resources available—including the Equitable Evaluation Initiative—that help question practices that marginalize, minimize, and disrespect people of color and those with less privilege. The initiative's free resources can improve the chances that your assessment and learning plan honors diverse cultures, considers the implications of systemic biases and inequities, and empowers participants to collect, interpret, and use data.

3. **Reflection and learning:** Family philanthropy more often succeeds across generations when members commit to continuous inquiry. This sometimes includes asking themselves tough questions about perspectives, priorities, and practices. See page 9 for tips on developing a culture of learning in your family.

4. **Relationships:** Effective family philanthropy is rooted in healthy relationships—among family members and between the family and grantees, communities, staff members, and others involved in the family's philanthropic priorities. An assessment and learning plan should strengthen those relationships through practices such as honest dialogue, leading with listening and empathy for the people and organizations you are assessing.

Creating a Culture of Learning

Creating and stewarding an intentional learning culture supports the success of all the stages of your family giving lifecycle. A learning culture within a family or social impact vehicle has five components:

1. **Professional development:** It invests time and money in its people, ranging from individual professional development and coaching to group attendance at conferences and site visits. It reinforces a growth mindset—the belief that people can develop new talents, continuously improve their work, and successfully overcome setbacks.
2. **A continuous improvement mindset:** It rewards curiosity and constant improvement in volunteers' and staff members' job descriptions and performance reviews. Its assessment plans and evaluation processes focus more on learning than reporting.
3. **A safe environment:** It ensures a safe environment for honest appraisal, constructive feedback, respectful dissent, and learning from mistakes. That safe environment applies both to people within the organization and external partners such as grant applicants and the communities the philanthropy serves.
4. **An integrated approach:** It applies a learning lens to the whole organization—governance practices, philanthropic strategy, grantee relations, communications, succession, use of technology and data sets, and more.
5. **An eye on equity:** It ensures that people of different identities and backgrounds can contribute effectively and raise identity-based concerns without negative consequences.

If you're early in your philanthropic effort, creating a learning culture may seem like a tall order. But you can start with simple, repeatable steps. They include:

- **Ensuring each meeting agenda includes time for learning and reflection.** The chart on page 12 provides goals and performance areas you can revisit regularly. Typical learning agenda items include discussing goals and assessments, watching informational videos/webinars, inviting grantees and experts to offer perspectives, and visiting partner organizations and communities.

- **Inviting each board or staff member to attend at least one professional development opportunity annually.** Building the habit and expectation of learning is important. Also, consider creating a process where those who attend development opportunities can share important ideas or action items with the group, thus extending the learning.

- **Asking advisors or experts to coach your decision-makers.** Trusted advisors can help you gain skills in fundamental issues such understanding fiduciary responsibility, accountability, and managing conflict. They can also help you understand how to manage grantee relationships with care and attention.

Who stewards the learning culture and learning agenda? In many cases, it is a family member with a passion for education. Alternately, families with businesses, family offices, or staffed philanthropic entities sometimes designate a chief learning officer. As a volunteer or paid staff member, the chief learning officer is tasked with a) helping family members of all generations be successful lifelong learners and b) implementing an ongoing learning agenda. The person also identifies, nurtures, and celebrates each family member's unique strengths and capabilities.

Who will be involved?

Assessment and learning plans have multiple stakeholders. Internally, they include donors, board and committee members, family members, and staff members. Externally, they include organizations you've given resources to, beneficiaries of those organizations, experts, and other donors and funders who could learn from your work. The plan might also anticipate how regulators, journalists, and researchers scrutinize and discuss your philanthropy.

Your assessment and learning work will have multiple decision-making stages, including defining the guiding principles, prioritizing goals and progress measures, choosing who does the assessment work, and determining what information will be shared and how it will be shared. For each stage, you'll want to be clear about:

1. **Who will be involved?** You might name specific people or organizations or name groups such as family members, people with local knowledge, people with lived experiences with an issue, experts, or other trusted allies.

2. **What role and authority will they have?** Are they informing the decision or participating in collaborative decision-making? Or are you giving them authority to make recommendations or decisions on your behalf?

3. **What resources or support might they need to hold this role?** As your assessment and learning work evolves, those involved may need training, access to experts, or other supports to enable them fully lean into their roles.

The current generation of family leaders may be primarily responsible for assessment and shared family learning. However, we strongly encourage you to include younger family members in your assessment planning and processes. You can discuss the importance of setting goals, assessing progress, thoughtfully considering donations and other actions, and watching for trends and stories guiding philanthropic decisions. You can also invite them to visit organizations with you, review social media and websites, and read reports. Most importantly, ask them to discuss what they want to learn about making a difference.

What are your goals?

What do you want to learn, and how do you want to use the information you collect? Clear goals allow you and your partners to target the use of the resources you're dedicating to evaluation.

There are four overarching goals for assessment: inform strategy, facilitate improvements, monitor results, and understand impact. The goals complement each other and work together in a continuous improvement cycle. The chart below shows example questions in the intersections of the three performance areas and four goals.

Sample Guiding Questions for Assessment

	PERFORMANCE AREAS		
Goals	**Internal**	**Strategy & Tools**	**Partners**
Inform strategy What do we want to accomplish?	• Do the skills and capacity of our staff align with what we need to reach our goals? • What baselines and progress measures should we be tracking?	• How will we know if our strategy is successful? What assumptions are we making? • Are we making good decisions? What do we need to learn more about?	• What are the trends and inequities in data collection that relate to our priorities? • How are changes in the policies of government agencies and other funders impacting our partners?

[1] Adapted from information in *Four Essentials for Evaluation*, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2012, and *Impact, Measurement, and Evaluation*, NCFP, 2021

	PERFORMANCE AREAS		
Goals	**Internal**	**Strategy & Tools**	**Partners**
Facilitate improvements How are we doing? How are our partners doing? Can we do better?	• How do staff and board members rate the effectiveness of our efforts? • Have well are we living our values in our operations?	• How can we improve the efficiency of our grants program? • How do our stakeholders perceive us, and how do their perceptions inform our work?	• What activities are most successfully contributing to impact? Which aren't as effective? • Was the quality and efficiency of the program high enough?
Monitor results Are we doing what we said we would do?	• Are our staff members meeting their performance goals? • Have we met our organizational goals? • Have we met our financial goals?	• Did our activities beyond grantmaking (e.g., convening, strategic communications, or capacity building) lead to any changes?	• Did grantees do what they proposed? What hindered their progress? • What are the outputs (people served, acres preserved, units produced)?

	PERFORMANCE AREAS		
Goals	**Internal**	**Strategy & Tools**	**Partners**
Evaluate impact What's the longer-term impact?	• Are our shared values and principles showing up in decisions? • Are our systems and processes centering relationships?	• To what longer-term impact are we contributing? • Are we choosing the right mix of partners—making the right portfolio of grants—to make progress? • Do all our grants and activities add up to something bigger?	• Are our partners stronger and more effective? • Are people or places better off months or years later? • Are changes to policies and practices creating a higher return on investment?

How will you work?

There are dozens of evaluation methods, the activities and tools you use to collect information needed to make good decisions. The chart below describes three types of methods—observation, self-reporting, and research—and examples of evaluation methods donors frequently use.

Common Assessment Methods

Observation	Self-Reporting	Research
Interactive • Watch how people are interacting in meetings • Hold check-ins over the phone or during in-person conversations • Conduct site visits or watch online demonstrations • Establish advisory groups **Hands-off** • Track media, social media, websites, and public records • Hire storytellers or photojournalists to interview people and provide stories	**By individuals** • Gather qualitative ratings from program participants • Collect stories, photos, videos from participants • Conduct anonymous surveys • Field-written reports **By groups** • Hold focus groups • Convene peers • Join ongoing learning networks	**Less work and cost** • Review public data sources and research reports • Examine ratings services or peer assessments • Look at pre- and post- tests by evaluators • Read case studies by experts **More work and cost** • Commission new data collection and dashboards • Benchmark best practices • Pilot and test using human-centered-design methods

Consider these tips as you develop even a simple evaluation plan:

- **Start with what you, your family, staff members, and advisors can learn independently.** Many observation methods have no or low costs and allow family members to offer their time and skills. Significantly, these methods can shift the burden of information gathering away from your partners with limited time.

- **Don't duplicate efforts.** Donors, foundations, research organizations, government agencies, and philanthropy associations often share information they've collected and sample sets of questions to ask. Nonprofits or social enterprises are already sending reports to other funders and can share those reports with you. Accepting reports a partner already produces allows you to understand your contribution to results and often the larger context of resources supporting the partner's work.

- **Use the perspectives and expertise from people closest to the impact.** Start by learning how the community you are supporting defines success, and also listen to those voices in your assessment process. Self-reporting methods can give you first-hand insights from people involved in something you support. They might range from parents benefiting from a social service to young members of your family participating in philanthropy education programs, and from residents living in a neighborhood facing economic challenges to attendees of a new art event.

- **Consider compensation.** Most assessment methods require participants to share their time and expertise and perhaps the direct costs of travel, family care, or loss of hourly wages. Donors are increasingly thanking participants by offering stipends or gift cards or proactively including those costs in grants to nonprofits. Doing so also reduces inequities in who participates, resulting in a more diverse set of perspectives.

Lastly, know that each method has strengths and limitations. If you want to learn more or need other help from an evaluation expert, check with:

- Local universities, United Ways, or foundations that host nonprofit capacity-building programs or community research and planning activities

- State associations of nonprofits or regional philanthropy membership associations

- National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers

- American Evaluation Association

Vision for Assessment and Learning

This worksheet helps you summarize valuable information that you'll use to create your assessment and learning plan. It draws on the principles, policies, and practices you've developed throughout the Family Giving Lifecycle.

1. What do you hope to accomplish by developing or updating your assessment and learning plan?

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

2. Consider potential changes in your life, the lives of family members, and philanthropic resources in the next five years. How might your current evaluation and learning activities need to adapt to those changes?

3. Which values or principles that guide your philanthropy should also guide your assessment and learning work?

4. Pick the top three stakeholders and/or ideas to which/whom you feel most accountable.

- ☐ Founders' descendants
- ☐ Founder intent
- ☐ Board members
- ☐ Staff members
- ☐ Grantees
- ☐ Board-defined values and principles
- ☐ Specific issue(s)
- ☐ Specific population(s)
- ☐ Specific place(s)
- ☐ The public
- ☐ The planet's future
- ☐ Future generations
- ☐ Government regulators

Consider the extent to which they reflect internal versus external audiences.

How should these priorities affect/shape your assessment and learning plan?

5. If you involve other people in your philanthropic decision-making:

How will you ensure a safe environment for honest and respectful debate, critique, and feedback? How will you provide a respectful learning culture, no matter the person's age, position, gender, race, or other identity or background?

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

How can you reward a mindset of continuous improvement, innovation, and—as needed—safely learning from taking risks and even failing?

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

7. Next steps: Who do you want to talk with as you create an assessment and learning plan? How might you make simple changes to your learning and evaluation activities in the next 6 to 12 months?

Internal Assessment

An internal assessment looks inward at your personal philanthropic experience, the people you've involved, and your operations. It requires you to balance two ideas:

- **Continuity:** What works well and should be maintained and preserved?
- **Evolution:** What might you improve or change to be more successful in the future?

What should you assess?

On a practical level, consider assessing seven areas of performance:

1. **Yourself:** Your continual rededication to the *why* of your philanthropy and to listening, learning, and adapting the *how* of your philanthropy.
2. **Philanthropic purpose:** How people involved in your philanthropy align their decision-making and conduct with stated values, principles, vision, and mission.
3. **Governance:** The capabilities and level of involvement of decision-makers, their ability to work together, and their fulfillment of their assigned duties; the recruitment and preparation of a diverse mix of future leaders.
4. **Team:** The capabilities and work of paid staff members, consultants, and advisors serving a philanthropic vehicle; their ability to create and manage effective operations.
5. **Accountability:** Compliance with legal and regulatory requirements; ensuring reporting to and involvement of important stakeholders.
6. **Financial:** Meeting fiduciary standards and fulfilling stewardship principles; developing and overseeing goals and policies for operating budgets, investments, real estate holdings, and other resources.
7. **Family and legacy:** Preparing younger generations for their future roles; involving family and other stakeholders in an evolving legacy of impact; creating an environment for healthy family involvement and succession.

How can you assess and learn?

Think about the process of internal reflection and renewal as a muscle to build and maintain. It helps to start with dedicating time regularly and doing a few things you can repeat over time. Philanthropists often begin with activities such as discussing two or three strategic questions at each board or family meeting, annual checklists of items to review, annual performance reviews, and annual financial reviews or audits. Periodically, they add retreats or strategy sessions, surveys, and self-evaluation tools and sometimes engage external consultants to review the organization and people involved.

In addition, some philanthropies use standard assessment tools to compare their results to those of their peers and receive guidance for addressing issues to improve. Examples are:

- Pursuit of Excellence Board Self-Assessment by NCFP helps a family foundation board assess strengths and shared areas of concern in five areas: legacy/vision/mission, governance, family dynamics and roles, program, and administration and accountability. Families can customize the survey to focus on specific areas of interest.
- The Foundation Board Assessment Program by the nonprofit organization BoardSource enables a private or community foundation board to assess its effectiveness in seven areas of responsibility and assess its chief executive. It offers similar assessment tools for nonprofits, associations, and independent schools.
- Foundation Core Capacity Assessment Tool by the consulting firm TCC Group helps a foundation measure its capacity in five areas: leadership, adaptive, management, technical, and organizational culture.
- The Performance Imperative by the nonprofit Leap of Reason is a free set of principles, user guides, worksheets, and self-reporting tools to help nonprofits and public agencies achieve high performance in seven organizational disciplines.
- B Impact Assessment by the nonprofit B Labs is a free online tool that enables a business or social enterprise to measure its impact on its workers, community, environment, and customers. B Labs tailors the assessment questions to different sectors and companies of various sizes.

Some practitioners feel uneasy about assessing other people involved in their philanthropy, which is natural. However, most people want to use their resources (time, talent, treasure, ties, and testimony) in meaningful ways. So, whether they are board and committee members, staff members, or advisors, they deserve—and often welcome—respectful feedback about their involvement.

Internal Assessment and Learning

This worksheet helps you develop an assessment and learning plan for your philanthropic journey, the people you've involved, your philanthropic vehicle, and its operations.

1. People[2]

What's most important to assess? Check the items most important to your plan.

- ☐ **Composition:** Do we have the right mix of people reflecting a range of skills and personal backgrounds?
- ☐ **Purpose alignment:** Does the group stay true to our purpose and values?
- ☐ **Culture alignment:** Does the group work well together? Do meeting agendas and facilitation ensure and respect participation from everyone, no matter their positions or identities?
- ☐ **Performance and accountability:** Are members fulfilling the duties and expectations outlined in a job description or other written commitments?
- ☐ **Competency development:** Are members developing the knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors they need to succeed in their roles?
- ☐ **Engaging family:** Do we have robust practices for developing the next generations of leaders?

[2] Adapted from Alexa Cortes Culwell's "Board Assessment and Renewal" session at NCFP's 2021 Trustee Education Institute

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

- [ ] Other

- [ ] Other

- [ ] Other

- [ ] Other

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

In the chart below, note the status of your current assessment and learning policies and practices by checking the appropriate boxes. Indicate who should oversee the assessment work, who will do the work, the methods or activities you'll use, and the frequency of the activities. Include notes for your needed resources (time, talent, money, new tools or methods).

When assessing...	We will use an existing process/ method	We will review and revise existing process/method in the next one to two years	We will implement a new process/ method	N/A	Who will do the work, how, and when/how often
Board Members	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Committees & Task Forces	☐	☐	☐	☐	

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

When assessing...	We will use an existing process/ method	We will review and revise existing process/method in the next one to two years	We will implement a new process/ method	N/A	Who will do the work, how, and when/how often
Staff Members or Consultants	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Other	☐	☐	☐	☐	

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

Resources Needed:

2. Social Impact Vehicle(s) and Operations

What's most important to assess? Check the items most important to your plan.

- ☐ **Purpose alignment:** Are we using our administrative resources in alignment with our philanthropic purpose and values?
- ☐ **Accountability:** Are we meeting minimum compliance standards set by relevant local, state, national, and industry regulations and laws? Are we responsible stewards?
- ☐ **Performance:** Are we meeting the standards and expectations we've set in our policies and practices? Are we being effective?
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Other

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

When assessing...	We will use an existing process/ method	We will review and revise existing process/method in the next one to two years	We will implement a new process/ method	N/A	Who will do the work, how, and when/how often
Operating Budget	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Banking Relationships	☐	☐	☐	☐	

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

When assessing...	We will use an existing process/method	We will review and revise existing process/method in the next one to two years	We will implement a new process/method	N/A	Who will do the work, how, and when/how often
Investments	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Recordkeeping & Retention	☐	☐	☐	☐	

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

When assessing...	We will use an existing process/ method	We will review and revise existing process/method in the next one to two years	We will implement a new process/ method	N/A	Who will do the work, how, and when/how often
Communica-tions	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Technology	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Operations	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Human Resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

When assessing...	We will use an existing process/ method	We will review and revise existing process/method in the next one to two years	We will implement a new process/ method	N/A	Who will do the work, how, and when/how often
Other	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Other	☐	☐	☐	☐	

Resources Needed:

3. My Philanthropic Journey

Think about your journey as a donor or a leader of a group of decision-makers and a philanthropic vehicle.

How do I feel about how I'm using my resources—time, talent, treasure, ties, and testimony—for philanthropy and social impact?

How do I feel about the progress I'm making in my philanthropic mission, priorities, or goals?

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

How do I feel about the progress I'm making in involving other people in my philanthropy and social impact?

What do I want to do differently to assess myself and improve in my philanthropic and social impact roles? What do I want to learn next about those roles?

Assessing Social Impact Strategies and Tools

The second part of your assessment plan addresses your social impact strategy—your roadmap for intentionally aligning your resources and actions toward your philanthropic purpose and goals. Your strategy should include an ongoing learning agenda that contains questions to guide your perspective, activities to answer them, and processes to apply what you've learned.

What should you assess?

1. **Purpose and success:** You've likely defined progress and success for your philanthropy through a vision statement, mission statement, or one or more goals. Each goal states a priority (a specific population, place, issue, institution, or ideal) and what you hope to help change, protect, or preserve. Goals often primarily focus on impact—changes in people's lives or the health and productivity of communities and ecosystems. They can also include defining success in these approaches that support impact:

    - **Influence:** Changing the system of underlying conditions, practices, and policies perpetuating a problem.
    - **Leverage:** Changing the commitments of other individuals' and organizations' resources—money, people, facilities, and more—and aligning those resources toward a common goal and standard measures of success.
    - **Learning:** Changing knowledge about approaching problems and implementing solutions more effectively.

    Your goals might be more aspirational or more measurable depending on your priorities and ambition. They will likely evolve, often because of feedback from your partners or the changing context of the issues and communities you support.

2. **Context:** Maintaining a well-rounded perspective about the context in which your philanthropy operates is essential. Within the priorities you've chosen, keep asking:

    - What progress and success measures are most important to track?
    - What are the trends in that data? Do the data sources incorporate diverse perspectives, especially those most proximate to the issues?
    - What are the stories behind those trends? Why is progress speeding up, slowing down, or stalled? What decisions in the past are still contributing to inequities for people of color, people with disabilities, or other historically marginalized groups?
    - Who has a role in doing better in the social impact goal?
    - Which approaches to solving problems are working or promising? Which are not working?

3. **Your roles:** Based on your updated understanding of the context, ask:

- How can you be most helpful with your resources (time, talent, ties, testimony, and treasure)? What are the evolving opportunities for you to make a difference?
- Does our strategy allow enough flexibility for unexpected problems or opportunities?
- Are we approaching relationships with trust, humility, and respect? How do we show that we value their time and other contributions?
- Does our strategy take into account the resources we are willing to commit in terms of time, talent, and treasure? Are we expecting outcomes in proportion to what we are investing?

4. **Tools:** You support progress through social impact tools such as grants, fellowships, personal advocacy, and convening. The following questions[3] shape an effective assessment of those tools:

- **How much did we do?** Examine trends in measures such as numbers of applicants or participants, requests approved, or education programs delivered. Do those measures meet your expectations? Is it the right mix of participants?
- **How well did we do it?** Strive to obtain honest feedback about the quality and usefulness of your work and if participants thought it was worth their time.
- **How much change did we support?** What are the changes in your partners—the nonprofits, social enterprises, businesses, or people you've supported? Are they more capable and effective because of your support?
- **Is anyone better off in the long run?** Looking back over two or three years of your philanthropy, do you see progress in the priorities and goals you've set? Do you see the change you desire in publicly data or information your partners share?

[3] The four questions come from the Results-Based Accountability movement which provides a common-sense framework for measuring progress and success in addressing complex social problems.

How can you assess and learn?

To build a discipline of continuous improvement, develop a repeatable calendar of collecting and discussing the latest information about the topics above. Typical methods include:

- **Internal discussions:** Exploring a different topic at each board or family meeting; stepping back every two or three years to dedicate a more extended session or retreat to revisiting the whole strategy.
- **Direct listening:** Inviting speakers to family meetings, using advisory committees, conducting site visits, and participating in listening tours.
- **Indirect listening:** Paying a graduate assistant, researcher, or consultant to provide more in-depth research or story collection and analysis; providing extra money to nonprofits to expand their ability to collect and share information about their work and impact.

Families with philanthropic vehicles increasingly spend time and money to gain feedback from people, organizations, and communities they support. They use tools such as:

- Anonymous forms on their websites and feedback tools built into online grant or scholarship application systems
- The Funder Listening Action Menu by the Fund for Shared Insight
- Grantee Perception Report by the Center for Effective Philanthropy

Why is assessing and learning about your social impact strategies important?

As Benjamin Franklin said, “By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.” Not everything in your strategy will go as planned. You’ll encounter unanticipated obstacles and opportunities externally in your philanthropic priorities and internally with your social impact vehicle, board, family members, and staff members. Continuously monitoring and revising your strategy and tools will help you quickly learn and respond to changes.

In addition, this part of your assessment and learning plan reinforces accountability in two ways. It holds you accountable to your philanthropic purpose and to progress in the priorities you’ve set. You will be modeling the benefits of focused uses of their resources for other people, for example, younger generations in your family.

It also holds you accountable to meaningful and effective relationships with the people, organizations, and communities you support. When you maintain feedback loops and show you’re listening and learning, you help increase public trust in your activities and philanthropy. That trust, in turn, increases the likelihood of successful and durable progress in your philanthropic priorities.

Assessing Social Impact Strategies and Tools

This worksheet helps you develop an assessment and learning plan for your social impact strategies and the tools you use to achieve them (e.g., grants, convening, or advocacy). You can start with straightforward answers and, as needed, skip sections or make notes to do additional research. Depending on how you've structured your philanthropy, you may need to repeat this worksheet for different social impact vehicles, strategies, or tools.

How have we defined progress or success in one or more philanthropic *priorities* (e.g., places, populations, issues, institutions, or ideals)?

STRATEGY TO ASSESS:

Understand Context and Roles

What is most important for us to learn about the context in which we're working—the conditions, policies, trends, and ecosystem of partners?

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

What is essential to learn about our role within the ecosystem—our choices of resources, tools, and relationships?

Who will collect and assess information about context and roles?

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

How will they do it, and when? How can they ensure we hear from a wide variety of perspectives?

What resources will we dedicate to the work?

Facilitate Improvements

Who will obtain feedback from the organizations, people, and communities we serve or partner with?

Who will help facilitate improvements in our strategy and tools?

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

How will they do it, and when?

What resources will we dedicate to the work?

Monitor Short-Term Results

Who will monitor the results of our strategy, at least annually?

How will they do it, and when?

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

What resources will we dedicate to the work?

Evaluate Longer-Term Impact

Who will evaluate the longer-term effectiveness and impact of our strategy?

How will they do it, and when?

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

What resources will we dedicate to the work?

Sharing What We Learn

With whom (if anyone) will we share what we have learned?

How will they do it, and when?

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

What resources will we dedicate to the work?

Assessing Partners and Impact

The final part of your assessment and learning plan examines your partners and their progress on social impact goals. Those partners include recipients of grants, scholarships, prizes, or impact investments. They may also participate in activities you support, such as advocacy coalitions, capacity-building programs, or responsible purchasing programs.

Set Realistic Expectations

It is easy to track the impact of some gifts. Consider an example where you support the total cost of replacing broken commercial refrigerators at a youth center. The new equipment keeps food at the appropriate temperature, hungry kids enjoy the cold refreshments, and the youth center can spend its limited resources on something else. The results are tangible and everyone feels good.

However, most solutions to philanthropic priorities aren't quick or easy. Achieving enduring progress in complex issues requires patience and an understanding that transformation often isn't linear. Consider five tips to avoid frustration:

1. **Shift your focus from the long term to the near term.** Within each issue—from education reform to poverty alleviation—there are intermediate indicators of success. They're often activities that lead to impact later, such as increasing the number of organizations collaborating effectively, attracting and aligning new funders, or retraining staff members and improving program quality. Effective partners will be able to identify interim progress measures and short-term outcomes of their work.

2. **Be realistic about what you are committing in terms of money and time.** As you think about the progress you hope to see, be cognizant of the scope and scale of your giving compared to the span of the issue. Ask yourself, what change can I realistically expect given the amount of money I'm investing?

3. **Be inclusive.** People may have different learning styles or abilities that affect how they collect and share information. There can also be cultural differences regarding the preferred methods of communicating information, who are seen as the most respected sources, and who should be able to use the information.

4. **Be a good partner.** When in doubt, keep things straightforward. And ensure your expectations don't create an undue burden on your partner. For example, you can ask for simpler reports from smaller organizations, eliminate reporting for small grants, or pay for more intensive assessment processes. If you have higher expectations for data and evaluation, offer to pay for the extra costs.

5. **Stay flexible.** Anticipate externalities, the unexpected challenges out of your control. They include such risks as changes in a sector, shifts in political will and public policies, environmental or natural disasters, economic downturns, or the loss or gain of other partners and suppliers. Discussing "what if" scenarios with partners lets them know you're open to dealing with unforeseen circumstances and how to respond. Depending on the circumstance, you may need to extend the timeline of an activity, change the terms or measures, or entirely repurpose a grant.

Co-Create Measures of Progress and Success

Discuss potential progress and success measures with your partners before you commit your resources. You'll want to learn what measures are standard in their field of work, what measures of progress are most important to those closest to the issue, their systems for measurement and improvement, and what they wish to improve in their evaluation capabilities. The following five questions[4] can guide a flexible and useful assessment of your partners:

1. **What did they do?** By asking this, you can measure activities and the use of resources. Your partners have the most control over this measure, though it is the least important measure of long-term success.

2. **How well did they do it?** Answers to this question will help you assess quality, standards met, and customer feedback mechanisms.

3. **How much change did they produce?** This question will help you track the outcomes or near-term results of their work, such as changes in students' reading proficiency, pollution in a river, or the number of donors involved.

4. **What's the longer-term return on investment?** The answer to this question will yield the most crucial measure of success. However, externalities are out of your and your partners' control. Other businesses, donors, organizations, and government agencies contribute to your partner and influence the same communities, issues, and people your partner serves. Therefore, it is best to think about contributing to progress rather than attributing exact results to a grant or program.

5. **What did we learn so they and we can improve?** By asking this, you invite them to discuss what went according to plan, what didn't, and insights to improve future impact.

[4] The first four questions and the performance measures matrix come from the Results-Based Accountability movement.

Smaller or newer organizations may only be able to provide simple answers to the questions. Organizations with more experience or highly focused goals should be able to provide more substantial answers. The matrix below lists example measures that your nonprofit partners can use for each of the questions.

Performance Measures Matrix

	Quantity	Quality
Means	**How much did we do?** • Inputs (resources used) and activities • Number of programs delivered • Attendance or customers served	**How well did we do it?** • Customer satisfaction • Percent of activities meeting a standard • Staff qualifications, ratios, morale • Waitlists, wait time
Ends	**How much change did we produce?** • Outcomes • Amount of knowledge/skills improved • Amount of attitude/beliefs changed • Amount of behaviors modified • Amount of circumstances improved	**What quality of change did we produce?** • Percent of target population reached with outcomes in the bottom-left box • Cost/benefit ratios • Return on investment • Long-term effectiveness and impact

How can you assess and learn?

Most donors document the measures they've co-developed with partners, if any, and how they'd like the partner to share information. The documentation can be a simple email or award letter. A more formal agreement may only be needed with exceptionally large or complex gifts, investments requiring financial returns, or foundation or donor-advised fund grants that might run into IRS regulations regarding personal benefits or electioneering.

The IRS and other regulators rarely require you to collect formal reports. So, you can often learn and assess using observation methods described on page 15 (e.g., discussions, site visits, and reviewing websites and annual reports). Or you can invite partners to share reports they've used for others, saving them from unnecessarily duplicating effort.

You might add one or more self-reporting and research methods described on page 15 as your social impact strategies evolve and you have more resources to dedicate to them. Note, however, that written reports rarely tell the whole story effectively, and you'll learn more by using multiple methods.

Prepare for Changes

Presuming your partners feel comfortable being completely honest with you, it will be rare that everything goes exactly as planned and that they achieve all benchmarks. As we noted before, maintaining a culture of learning and flexibility will serve you and your partners well.

There may be times when a project is significantly off target. It's not unusual for this to happen when an organization takes on new initiatives or works with new populations or geographies. In these situations, use the following approach:

- **While monitoring the work,** give your partner the space to experiment, adapt, and even potentially fail, which can be critical to their progress. Sometimes, patience and trust are all that you need to provide. At other times, you may need to intervene and request a course correction, pause and adjust the project, or end the project early. While such conversations with a partner can be tough, everyone will benefit from developing a learning mindset.

- **After the work concludes,** don't just compare outcomes to the original expectations or only focus on data. The data won't tell the whole story. Ask your partner to share the conclusions and discuss what, if anything, it will do differently. This can help both you and your partner refine your assumptions, strategies, and tactics—all of which can each lead to better results over the long term.

Consider Sharing What You Have Learned

Once you have assessed your partners' progress and results, consider sharing what you and they have learned with others working on the same issue, population, or geography. Common avenues for sharing these lessons include:

- Gathering partners to discuss their experiences and insights. These meetings can enrich your relationships and reveal unexpected trends or challenges that you might address collectively.

- Discussing your conclusions with other donors and funders. Many donors and funders casually share their takeaways with their peers to increase knowledge, awareness, and potential for collaboration. Some funders publish evaluation reports on their websites, through philanthropic membership organizations, or on IssueLab by Candid, a free research site.

Why Can't I Just Ask for Reports?

Your philanthropy is most effective when you have productive working relationships with your partners. You need them to help you achieve your philanthropic vision and priorities. You can encourage them to focus more on evaluation and learning, and you might have suggestions for improving their work.

However, the best evaluation work is in service to your partners and the people and communities you support. **This spirit of mutual accountability and shared learning has positive ripple effects that augment your desired impact. Building a partner's ability to track and use information they believe is meaningful to their decision-making improves their programs and frequently helps them attract new donors and volunteers. Donors can do more than simply ask for reports. Empowering the people they serve with better information helps them advocate for themselves, often leading to change that lasts long after your gifts.**

Assessing Partners and Impact

This worksheet helps you plan the assessment of your partners (e.g., nonprofits receiving grants, members of a collaborative or capacity building programs you lead, or social enterprises you've invested in). You can start with straightforward answers and, as needed, skip sections or make notes to do additional research. Depending on how you've structured your philanthropy, you may need to repeat this worksheet for different social impact vehicles, strategies, or tools.

STRATEGY/VEHICLE/TOOL WE ARE ASSESSING:

Set Goals

What is most important for us to learn from our partners?

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

What do our partners say is most important for them to learn as they use our resources?

Facilitate Improvements

Who could help our partners facilitate improvements or support their learning and evaluation capacity?

How will they do it, and when?

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

What resources will we dedicate to the work?

Monitor Short-Term Results

Who will monitor results at the end of a grant, program, or another period?

How will they do it, and when?

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

What resources will we dedicate to the work?

Evaluate Longer-Term Impact

Who will evaluate the longer-term impact of partners' work? How will we look across multiple programs or years to see if partners and communities are better off?

How will they do it, and when?

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

What resources will we dedicate to the work?

Sharing What We Learn

With whom (if anyone) will we share what our partners and we have learned?

How will they do it, and when?

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING WORKSHEET

What resources will we dedicate to the work?

Next Steps

Instituting a culture of learning, continuous improvement, self-reflection, and assessment is vital for the success of your philanthropic vehicle and social impact strategy. This primer is an excellent place to start, but it merely scratches the surface of assessment planning and tools.

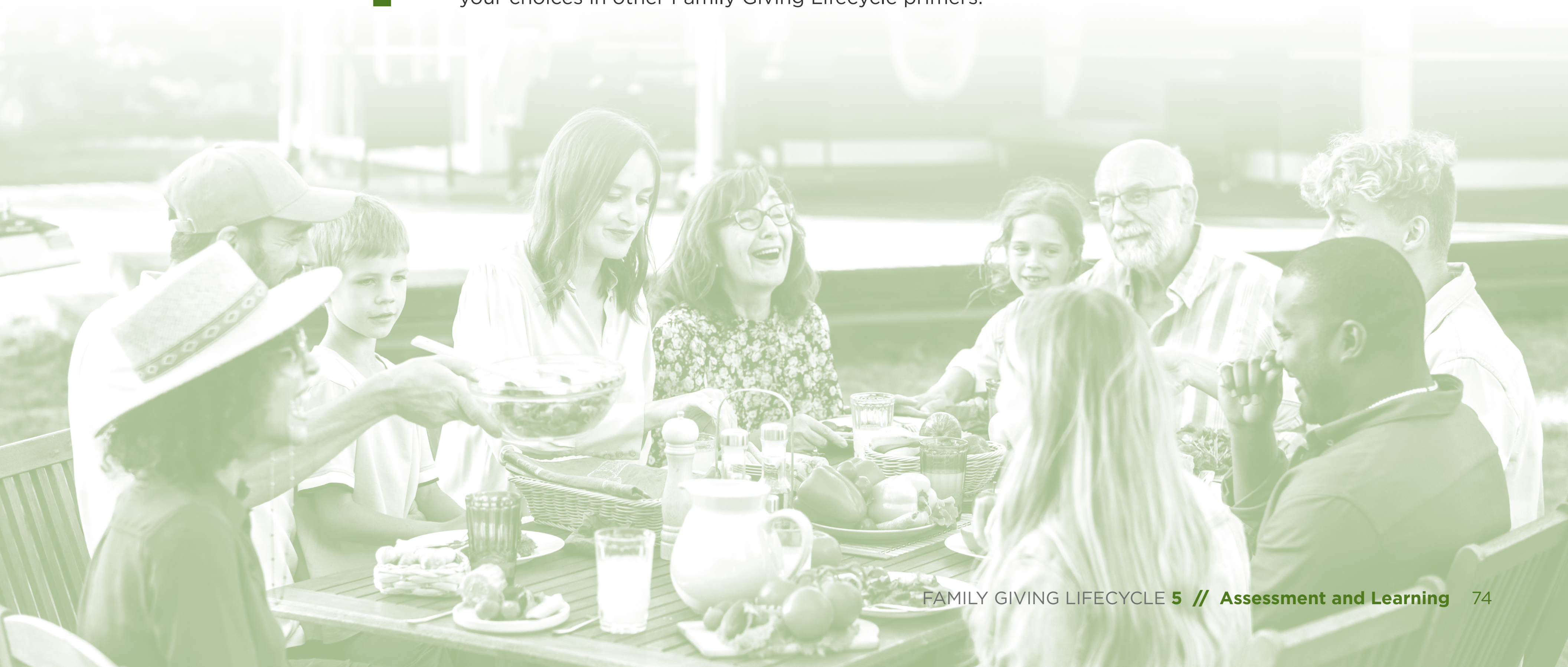
Keep in mind these tips as you develop your assessment and learning plan:

- **Rightsize:** Start with a simple framework that documents your initial goals for the elements of effective assessment and learning outlined in the first section of this primer You can choose to do one or a few things well. Then add more goals and methods as you include new people in decision-making and new resources and goals in your philanthropy.

- **Be inclusive:** Consulting with others—family members, advisors, philanthropic peers, partners such as grantees, and people closest to problems and solutions—helps you maintain a broad understanding of your philanthropic priorities.

- **Model a culture of learning and accountability:** Family members will take cues from how you seek new information, listen to diverse perspectives, and use what you learn to adapt your social impact strategies and tools. You can actively guide their views about evaluation by establishing a routine of self-reflection, group learning, and honoring the viewpoints and time your partners spend on sharing information with you. And you can offer to pay for their personal and professional development as donors and members of a philanthropic vehicle.

Lastly, reflect on how your assessment and learning plan might inspire changes to your social impact strategies and tools, operations, and operational budget, and who you involve in governance and legacy. As you learn, you might need to revisit your choices in other Family Giving Lifecycle primers.



Assessment and Learning Playbook

NAME OF FAMILY OR SOCIAL IMPACT VEHICLE

UPDATED ON

NEXT REVIEW SCHEDULED FOR

FAMILY AND/OR BOARD/COMMITTEE MEMBERS INVOLVED

ADVISOR(S) TO THE PROCESS

Instructions

This Assessment and Learning Playbook will help you and your family create an assessment and learning plan for your collective philanthropy.

The prompts will help you synthesize the information you individually completed using the primer's worksheets. Family members should consider the playbook a living draft to test as they practice philanthropy, assessment, and learning together. As such, some language will be imperfect, and some answers might be "to be determined."

Before you begin, you'll want to clarify who you will include in completing each playbook section. Some families have a founding or controlling generation member complete a draft based on their vision for the family's philanthropy, to then discuss with the group. Other families develop a draft together or form a small group to do so.

Then choose how you'll make decisions. For instance, will you work toward consensus or take votes? If you need help with the choices, review the *Fundamentals of Family Philanthropy* primer. Then, ensure everyone involved can access documents related to your philanthropic purpose (e.g., values, mission, donor intent, legacy letter), the founding of your social impact vehicle (e.g., bylaws or fund agreement), and your social impact strategy.

Guiding the Conversations

The Vision Section prompts a more philosophical conversation but is critical to shaping the rest of the plan. It ensures everyone involved has clarity on the *why* of your plan. Answering these questions will be easier if your family has completed the *Purpose* playbook or similar activities that have defined shared values, principles, mission, and goals. More family members may want to be involved in discussing this section, leaving the other sections to board or committee members who are closer to the day-to-day work of your philanthropy.

In the other three sections, you'll do your best to estimate who will do the work, how they'll do it (i.e., methods and activities listed throughout the primer), how often you hope the work will happen, and the resources they'll need (e.g., money, expertise, forms, equipment). When in doubt, start with activities that are low cost and low effort for you and your partners.

Sections 2 to 4 also connect with other Family Giving Lifecyle playbooks. Completing the other playbooks or similar activities is helpful for creating an assessment and learning plan, but it is not required.

- **Section 2** relates to the *Governance* and *Operations and Management* playbooks.
- **Sections 3 and 4** relate to the *Social Impact Strategies and Tools* playbook

Guiding Principles for Collaborative Work[1]

Consider these tips from other families who have been through similar experiences:

- **Be more inclusive than less.** Welcome children, their spouses, and future decision-makers into dialogue early and often to ensure their support later.

- **Take your time.** It will take multiple conversations to create your plan. A successful process gives everyone time to tell their stories, listen and learn from each other, and adjust based on what they're hearing. It also offers time to bring in new ideas—stories, articles, conversations with other families or experts—that can help family members more comfortably answer the worksheets.

- **Concentrate on the areas of most agreement.** It is natural for family members' interests to differ based on factors such as educational and professional backgrounds, trust in nonprofits and communities, and time available. Try to direct conversations to a plan focused on shared goals, and then determine if you want to help individual family members pursue other goals through their personal philanthropy or social impact vehicles.

- **Talk with other families.** It can help to talk with families who've been through this process. NCFP can suggest donor families willing to speak with you. You can also contact your local community foundation or regional philanthropy-serving organization for sample plans and to meet other families.

- **Be transparent.** Consider sharing the essentials of your assessment and learning plan with partners such as grantees, collaboration participants, and other funders. Doing so supports healthy relationships and greater accountability in your philanthropy.

[1] Adapted from *Splendid Legacy 2: Creating and Re-Creating Your Family Foundation*, National Center for Family Philanthropy, 2017

Shared Assessment and Learning Plan

This plan outlines how we will collaboratively assess ourselves, our social impact strategies and tools, and our partners. It also outlines how we hope to learn and improve. The plan is a living draft to test as our family works together. As such, some language will be imperfect, and some answers might be "to be determined." We'll revisit and refine the choices over time.

1. Vision for Assessment and Learning

These factors will guide our plan's effective development, implementation, and revision.

Primary Goals for This Plan

Potential Change in the Next Five Years

What changes in our lives, our resources, or the causes we serve could influence this plan?

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

Values and Principles

What will guide the plan's implementation?

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

To Whom Our Philanthropy is Most Accountable

(no more than three stakeholders)

How We Will Ensure a Safe Learning Environment for Ourselves

How We Will Ensure a Safe Learning Environment for Our Grantees and Partners

How We Will Ensure a Continuous Learning Mindset

2. Internal Assessment and Learning

This is our plan for assessing the decision-makers in our philanthropy and how we govern and manage our social impact vehicle(s).

A. People Involved in Our Philanthropic Decisions

Board Members

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

Committee and Task Force Members

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

Staff Members or Consultants

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

Other

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

B. Our Social Impact Vehicle(s) and Operations

Operating Budget

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

Banking Relationships & Investments

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

Recordkeeping and Retention

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

Communications

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

Technology

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

Other Operations

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

Human Resources

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

Other

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

3. Assessment and Learning from Our Strategies

This is our plan for assessing our social impact strategies—how we intend to make a difference in one or more philanthropic priorities. Note, you may want to complete a chart for each strategy you have.

SOCIAL IMPACT STRATEGY:

Progress Measures in the Strategy

Understand Context and Roles

The conditions, policies, trends, and ecosystem of partners we're working in, and our potential roles in supporting progress.

What is essential to learn?

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

Facilitate Improvements

Feedback loops to improve our strategy and tools such as grantmaking programs.

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

Monitor Short-Term Results

What is essential to learn?	
Who, how, how often, and with what resources?	

Evaluate Longer-Term Impact

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

Sharing What We Learn

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

4. Assessing and Learning with Partners

This is our plan for assessing and learning with partners—e.g., nonprofits, social enterprises, or people—involved in an activity we support such as a grantmaking program, capacity-building program, or collaborative. We will strive to be fair in our expectations of their ability to achieve measurable impact and be humble in our contribution to that impact. *Note, you may want to complete a chart for each partner you have.*

Social Impact Activity

Facilitate Improvements

What is essential to learn?

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

Monitor Short-Term Results (e.g., at the end of a grant, program, or timeframe)

What is essential to learn?	
Who, how, how often, and with what resources?	

SHARED ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING PLAN

Evaluate Longer-Term Impact (e.g., over several years and/or several partners, activities, or timeframes)

What is essential to learn?	
Who, how, how often, and with what resources?	

Sharing What We Learn

What is essential to learn?

Who, how, how often, and with what resources?

THE FAMILY GIVING LIFECYCLE

1 Philanthropic Purpose

2 Impact Vehicles & Structures

3 Governance

4 Impact Strategies & Tools

5 ASSESSMENT & LEARNING

6 Operations & Management

7 Succession & Legacy

The National Center for Family Philanthropy (NCFP) is a network of philanthropic families committed to a world that is vibrant, equitable, and resilient.

We share proven practices, work through common challenges, and learn together to strengthen our ability to effect meaningful change. Our range of programs and services support family philanthropy at its many points of inflection and help families embrace proven practices and advance momentum. Explore our resources, all rooted in a Family Giving Lifecycle, by visiting www.ncfp.org.

Tony Macklin, CAP® wrote the second editions of this series based on materials drafted by Nick Tedesco, president and CEO of NCFP, and Elaine Gast Fawcett, principal of PhilanthroComm; materials and family philanthropy stories collected over NCFP's history; and resources from experts across the country.

The information in this primer should not be taken as qualified legal, tax, or wealth planning advice. Please consult qualified advisors with questions about the topics' legal, tax, or wealth planning implications.

NATIONAL CENTER FOR FAMILY PHILANTHROPY