APPROACHES TO LEARNING AMID CRISES:

Reflections from Philanthropy

This work was led jointly by the Center for Evaluation Innovation and Taylor Newberry Consulting, with funding from Wellspring Philanthropic Fund. Read our first blog post: [Can Foundations Radically Transform How They Learn?](#) for an introduction to our work.

Authors

Ben Liadsky & Andrew Taylor - Taylor Newberry Consulting

Julia Coffman, Tanya Beer, & Albertina Lopez - Center for Evaluation Innovation

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Introduction

Since early 2020, foundations have had to both react quickly and learn rapidly, while also reflecting deeply on their roles in society and the alignment between their operations and values. Long-held assumptions about how foundations should work and be held accountable have been fundamentally challenged, and foundations have been forced to learn, reflect, and adapt in unprecedented ways.

Responding to the twin crises of COVID-19 and the widespread acknowledgment of systemic racism and racial inequity has meant a lot of foundation learning had to happen on the fly. Foundations had to engage in rapid on-the-ground change without a clear end state and with incomplete knowledge. As philanthropy generally is unaccustomed to acknowledging this kind of complexity and messiness (which has always existed, but was in stark relief in 2020), a lot has been learned in the process. Much more learning is yet to come.

Our intent is to support philanthropy in learning from doing while changes are still underway.

Here, we lift up examples of how foundations have reacted and specifically what and how they are learning. We spoke with leaders from seven Canadian and American foundations to learn what they did during the first several months of the 2020 crises, how they did it, and what it means from the perspective of organizational learning and evaluation.

These questions guided our inquiry:

- How does a foundation's learning culture shape its capacity to act and adapt during a crisis?
- How do relationships between funders and grantees shape their capacity to learn together?

We start with context setting and framing around what we mean by organizational learning. Then we share the seven foundation learning examples. We conclude with some themes across the examples.

Context setting on --- organizational learning

At the Center for Evaluation Innovation (CEI) and Taylor Newberry Consulting (TNC), we are privileged to be able to think and reflect, probe and analyze, and make suggestions and recommendations regarding how foundations operate and learn. We are fortunate to work with many different kinds of organizations—both foundations and nonprofits—and to learn with and from them. Over time, based on research and experience, we have developed insights about what contributes to a strong learning culture for foundations.

Elements of strong learning cultures

Day to day, [foundations with strong learning cultures practice the following habits](#). They:

1. **Make their thinking visible** by naming areas of uncertainty, hypotheses, and assumptions.
2. **Ask powerful, bold questions** that will make a difference in how they do their work.
3. **Combat their biases** by seeking out rigorous information from a variety of sources, listening to diverse voices, and holding experts in equal measure.
4. **Attend to causal inferences**, exploring the relationship between actions and their outcomes.
5. **Answer the "now what" question** to identify how insights generated will be applied.

They also are [organized in a way that structurally and functionally reinforces learning](#). They:

- **Position foundation staff as learners** and establish learning as a core element of their day-to-day work.
- **Reward staff and grantees for learning** and adaptation, as opposed to just sticking to the plan.
- **Attend to the role of power dynamics in learning**, recognizing they can be both an incentive and a disincentive.
- **Create physical and virtual workspaces that reinforce learning.**

Finally, they [interact with external partners, including grantees, in a way that models a culture of learning](#). They:

- **Take time to understand partners' approaches to learning and respect their unique contexts.** Organizations learn in a wide range of ways. Their capacity to learn may be inhibited by a range of external factors, and their approach may change over time as they grow. Culture is a dynamic phenomenon and learning often arises in unexpected ways. As such, the process of interaction and reporting needs to be adjustable to make sense for the conditions and context that each grant recipient is operating under.
- **Build partnerships that prioritize learning.** Learning requires reaching outside one's comfort zone and listening to others. It requires developing a different kind of relationship with grant recipients. Learning prioritizes relationship development and trust building over strategy and accountability.
- **Plan for learning.** Parties must identify up front what each hopes to learn but also acknowledge that learning is, by nature, iterative and can include unexpected results. This can set the stage for more honest conversations going forward, help form trust between the parties, and clarify alignment.
- **Reward learning.** It should be clear from the beginning that a commitment to learning will be valued in the decision-making process and in managing the grant on an ongoing basis. This can also help to reduce the reporting burden on potential and future grant recipients and encourage discussion of what really matters.
- **Are transparent and adaptable.** Cultivating a learning culture necessarily involves surrendering some control over the process and acknowledging mistakes. It is important that all stakeholders are comfortable with this shift and that they are supported to manage it.

In strong learning cultures...

- 1 **Deep questions get asked.** Organizations ask questions about their values and assumptions, not just about program tactics.
- 2 **The organization is ready to act on what it learns.** Organizations are prepared for the implications of what they learn. They are willing and able to alter their practices.
- 3 **Learning is inclusive and engages partners.** Organizations engage their external partners in the learning process.
- 4 **Leadership drive organizational learning.** Executive directors, CEOs, presidents, and senior managers play an important role in leading by example, creating space, and encouraging learning in others.

Definitions of Organizational Learning

Alvesson (2010) defines organizational learning as "a shared and learned world of experiences, meanings, values, and understandings that inform people and that are expressed, reproduced, and communicated partly in symbolic form, and also partly in functional and practical actions."¹

Crossan, Lane, and White (1999) discuss organizational learning processes through feedforward and feedback among the individual, group, and organizational levels. The feedforward learning process moves learning from individuals and groups to the organization, where learning becomes embedded and institutionalized in organizational processes, systems, strategies, and structures. Feedback learning, on the other hand, moves the institutionalized learning to groups and individuals. Crossan et al. (1999) described learning as moving through four stages—intuiting (subconscious individual-level learning), interpreting (individuals sharing learning with others), integration (assimilating learning at the group and organizational levels), and institutionalization (embedding learning at the organizational level). According to these authors, organizational learning moves back and forth among individual, group, and organizational levels.²

¹Alvesson, Mats. *Organizational Culture: Meaning, Discourse, and Identity*. Edited by Neil M. Ashkanasy, et al., *The Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate*. Sage Publications, 2010.

²Crossan, Mary M., et al. "An Organizational Learning Framework: From Intuition to Institution." *The Academy of Management Review*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1999, pp. 522-537. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/259140?seq=1>. Accessed 12 December 2020.

Foundation Learning Examples

All foundation interviewees were asked to reflect on how their foundation responded during the first four months of the crises, beginning in March 2020 at the start of COVID-19 lockdowns in North America, through the widespread protests in June 2020 after George Floyd's murder. Interviewees were asked to share what actions they took and what informed their decision-making. Our conversations were semi-structured and took place during the summer or early fall of 2020, with the goal of telling instructive stories about how learning helped to shape action.

The foundation learning examples represent real-life experiences but not necessarily best practices. They do not cover all aspects of the foundations' inner workings or thinking, but rather offer a point-in-time snapshot through the eyes of the interviewees. The issues explored here could be unpacked further and in much greater detail. As such, they may leave the reader with more questions than answers, which we consider a positive (albeit potentially frustrating) outcome.

Metcalf Foundation

Interviewees:

Sandy Houston
President and CEO

Michael Trent
Director of Performing Arts

Date:

September 2020

Background

The [Metcalf Foundation](#) is a Canadian family foundation based in Toronto, Ontario, with over 60 years of philanthropic giving. It currently employs nine staff members. In 2019, it granted approximately CA\$6 million in three program areas: the environment, inclusive local economies, and the performing arts. In addition, it provides Innovation Fellowships to critical thinkers working to address complex ecological, social, economic, and cultural issues.

Responding in times of crisis

The Metcalf Foundation's external response to the COVID-19 crisis began with a mid-March email to all its stakeholders. The communication acknowledged the severity of the crisis and signalled that the Foundation was in the process of formulating a response. Internally, staff recognized the interruption to their own planned programming and that the crisis would likely impact their three focus areas differently.

Ultimately, the Foundation's Board of Directors decided to increase its granting disbursement to 5% of assets (as part of the [GIVE5](#) movement in Canada) and identified three strategic areas it wanted to focus on over the coming months.

“ Our three funding buckets were emergency response, supporting intermediaries, and future-looking initiatives. We assigned titular dollar amounts to each bucket. Since we wanted to move quickly, we decided against an open call in favour of supporting our existing relationships, especially when it came to emergency dollars. Typically, we rely on advisory committees to assist staff in making recommendations to the Board for approval. This time, the Board empowered the staff to determine grant allocations. We also converted a number of our existing grants to unrestricted operating support and reconfigured grant reporting mechanisms.

“ Even though we were moving very quickly, we also wanted to be thoughtful and take our time. It took us about two months to develop the strategy, which is unusually fast for a foundation.

In the normal course of business, several of the Foundation's programs include intensive in-person engagements. The COVID-19 crisis meant these gatherings were no longer feasible, so program directors needed to find new ways to sustain and advance the work without them.

Maintaining good lines of communication with the Foundation's existing relationships was a key priority that helped staff understand what was going on now and how to think about the future. Some of the shifts involved new ways of collecting information, including a proposed short survey to emergency fund recipients in early 2021.

“ In our March and April conversations, we tried to turn down the heat by shifting our questions from 'give us intel' to just 'talk to us about your experience and what is going on.' The survey will ask different kinds of questions like 'What has this funding meant to your organization?' We want to hear the story underlying the grant's impact.

This commitment to keeping lines of communication open also helped the Foundation recognize that they could do more to support Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC)-led and -serving organizations, with particular attention to the performing arts portfolio.

“ We knew that certain BIPOC communities had been disproportionately affected by COVID. In the arts, this raised issues of access for us. In our first wave of emergency support, we provided some support to BIPOC organizations but felt that we could do better. In our second round, we decided to decentre Metcalf and invite BIPOC arts leaders to define the selection criteria and make the granting decisions. This is not typically how we work (although we do rely on advisory committees), and it was a very rich experience for us. This happened remarkably quickly, and we had fantastic discussions about the very definition of equity and the language we use to speak about it.

The Foundation has long valued working with other funders, but the crisis further reinforced its desire to engage with peers in areas of shared interest.

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We want to work with others. We all acknowledge that collaboration and partnership make us more effective. We do everything from pooled funds to strategy sessions. For the arts, this has been an opportunity for a group of funders to come together and, lately, go beyond sharing updates to dig into shared issues in a really open and safe way. Those are the kinds of conversations we are finding extremely fruitful.

Internally, the Foundation has had to adjust and create ways to keep the staff and Board on the same page. This has led to more frequent interactions but also presents challenges over the long term.

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Because staff aren't working physically in the same space, we're having more conversations online. We've created more internal opportunities for us to speak, although we miss the 'hallway culture' and informal conversations from the before times.

In terms of the Board, they typically meet four times per year. In this situation, the Board gave staff a lot more latitude to make decisions. As CEO, I started writing the Board a monthly letter beginning in March, summarizing what staff were doing and where we were headed to make sure they remained abreast of a fast-moving situation. Our fall Board meeting is typically the one each year where we bring Board members into the communities we serve so they can engage with our grantees. We are not doing that this year. They value that sense of connection, and we will need to think about how to keep the Board engaged.

Learning Insights

The type of rich learning experiences the Foundation values typically involve opportunities to bring people together to create spaces for learning. Whether this be gathering together with grantees, working with other funders, or through Board meetings, the ability to be together has been a conscious value of how the Foundation works and learns. The Foundation's response to the crises represented a doubling down on connecting and communicating with its stakeholders even if they couldn't do it in person. The Foundation noted an increase in how often they connected as a staff team, and they experimented with new ways of keeping Board members engaged (such as through the monthly letter), connecting with grantees in different ways, and asking grantees different kinds of questions that prioritize shared learning.

Moreover, staff leadership took on a greater role and, as a team, made space to ask themselves some powerful, bold questions. By communicating openly with their network early in the crisis, even before they had finalized their response, they made their thinking visible. First, the Board empowered staff to make some grant decisions in an effort to be more responsive in the early days of the

COVID-19 crisis. Second, staff haven't shied away from tough conversations about how to name and combat their biases, and how to think differently about who has access to funding, who might be hardest hit, what programming elements can be adapted and what needs to be let go, and what reporting processes might look like going forward.

As an organization that values partnerships and collaboration, the Metcalf Foundation was already well placed to build on some extant conversations with its funding peers. In some cases, this meant carrying on with existing collaborations, keeping lines of communication open, and steering the conversation toward learning. In other cases, it meant being more proactive, reaching out to build a more inclusive network in a strategic way, and creating time and space to go deeper as a way to learn together, such as in the example of how the Foundation came to increase its support of BIPOC arts organizations.

Lyle S. Hallman Foundation

Interviewees:

Laura Manning
Executive Director

Abbie Graftstein
Manager of Grants and
Community Investment

Date:

July 2020

Background

The [Lyle S. Hallman Foundation](#) is a Canadian public foundation based in Kitchener, Ontario, with over 17 years of philanthropic giving and a current staff of four. In 2019, it granted approximately CA\$8 million, mainly in the Waterloo Region, in support of several causes related to children's initiatives, children and youth capital, higher education, and health care.

Responding in times of crisis

The Foundation felt that its ways of working were conducive to responding to the COVID-19 crisis and, in many respects, much of the groundwork for the types of actions it took had been laid in recent years.

Like many foundations, its response began by prioritizing the relationships it had with its existing grant recipients, offering reassurance, and loosening restrictions.

In addition, the Foundation made some smaller proactive grants on its own to organizations it knew were being most affected. These grants focused on things like food security, homelessness, and addiction treatment. The ability to offer unrestricted grants and be proactive was made easier in part because some of its funding pre-pandemic was already allocated as unrestricted.

Next, using its connections with other local funders, the Foundation worked with some of its peers to establish an emergency response fund.

We collaborated with six other local funders and pooled money for an emergency response fund administered through the United Way. We created one application form to save applicants time. We also had a collective decision-making process.

We focused on being as supportive as possible to the organizations with which we have existing strong relationships. It was about helping them get through this. The first thing we did was lift all restrictions. We said we would be flexible on reporting deadlines and that reports would not be tied to the flow of money.

As a funder that doesn't need to fundraise or have a lot of restrictions on who they can grant to, it was easier for them to help fill the gaps when good proposals came forward but where other funders had more specific parameters to respect.

Functionally, the process of working collaboratively with other funders also benefited from the place-based nature of the funders. Not only were there existing professional relationships, but in a community the size of Waterloo Region, there was the reality that people would bump into each other in the community and would know many of their grantees well.

“ We had three days to go through dozens of applications. After reviewing them individually, this meant meeting, ranking, and deciding on who was getting what. Before even getting to this point, we decided we needed to have some shared principles around ways of working together. It was difficult on an emotional level reading these applications, learning about the challenges happening on the ground, and then having to make decisions. The process itself went rather smoothly, and part of what helped is the relationships we have. We are place-based, we see each other, we get together for coffee, we call each other. Cross-pollination happens anyway.

Finally, as the weeks passed, the Foundation began to think about how it would approach the rest of the year.

“ Our Board asked us to figure out what we should do for the rest of 2020. In our normal cycle, this fall would have been our largest funding envelope, focused on children's programs. Given that we didn't know much about what would happen with schools or camps, we realized restricted program granting didn't make sense. Our Board decided to approve a framework that involved proactively offering a range of unrestricted grants in amounts that were roughly equivalent to the last payment they had received. No application would be required. The only thing we will ask for from this group is a low-burden report in about a year, and we'll figure out what that looks like down the road. This was a way for us to scale our investment with aligned organizations. There is no requirement to continue the previously funded program; this new money could be used for whatever they needed. The idea was to provide a bit of 'breathing room' in an unclear environment.

Altogether, the Foundation's emergency response added up to approximately CA\$6 million. Yet staff knew early on that this was going to be a long-term challenge and wanted to be thoughtful about how they moved forward while also being sensitive to the immediate needs.

“ Personally, I had a lot of anxiety. Were we going to be challenged for doing things this way? Some are calling for foundations to dip into our endowments, recognizing that this is the rainy day. We haven't really done that yet. We are anticipating that the really ugly part is going to be next year. We wanted to be meaningfully supportive of organizations but recognize that we needed room to do more. We second-guessed that decision. There's so much pressure to move fast and big. In week two or three of COVID, I was already thinking about this issue of what does a year from now look like. As soon as there was a sense of the scope of the shutdown, it was clear that there will be more uncertainty when government support programs end. We know there will be a lag until the government supports run out, and that is when it will really hit the nonprofit sector.

To help inform their decision-making, they relied on a number of different data sources. Staff had one-on-one conversations with 33 organizations the Foundation had a history with to check in and learn about how they were faring and what they were dealing with.

“ We thought the calls would last 30 minutes, but people wanted to talk. They [grantees] hadn't had anyone to talk to. The act of reaching out and caring and asking questions like 'How are you personally?' and 'How is your team doing?' was important. We were working based on trust. In a crisis, you sail the boat you built. The way we work normally positioned us really well.

As a staff team, the Foundation has also benefited from the support of trusted consultants, with whom they have had long relationships, to help them process and reflect.

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We've been meeting biweekly with consultants that we're close with. They let us step back and think about process, and they helped us to move forward incrementally. They've been our sounding board. This wasn't what we contracted them to do originally. They've been supporting us for several years on strategy. Part of their role has always involved coaching sessions with the team to allow us time to step away and reflect. We reallocated hours for COVID. They've helped us to make sense of information in different ways. Because we're not all together, we're not having those incidental conversations in the hallway, so we have to structure time for that. We've also moved to staff meetings twice a week. That is our way of keeping our intel up to speed and being able to build up for the next thing.

They also relied on other sources to help inform their thinking.

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We checked in with other local funders too. We also made use of information from sector intermediaries, such as the Ontario Nonprofit Network and Imagine Canada, which did surveys and research on the sector. We spoke with other funders from other parts of the province or country that either operate in the same space that we do or are peers in terms of a comparable size. We spoke with cities and the regional pandemic response group. And we attended a lot of webinars.

Learning Insights

One of the things that enabled the Foundation to move quickly and pursue the actions it took was that it already had established a culture and way of working that valued trust and communication. Things like unrestricted granting and trust-based philanthropy were not new concepts for them, and there was already a degree of comfort at both the staff and Board level toward sharing power and taking more risks with its granting and reporting requirements. They have always designed Board meetings and staff meetings to create space for learning.

Indeed, building relationships with grantees and other funders that are trust-based and focused on learning has always been a key point of emphasis. This meant that staff were comfortable picking up the phone and speaking with colleagues, whether to check in, share news, or plan for the next step. The place-based nature of the Foundation's work meant that the issues they were hearing about and talking about were very real to them because it was their community too.

The Foundation built in time to listen and to understand and respect the learning cultures of its partner organizations. This included hearing from a variety of different stakeholders, including grantees, intermediaries, and other funders. In addition, they made sure to build in time to reflect, ask bold questions, and make their thinking visible. They took a step back by using the skills and support of consultants with whom, once again, they had long-standing relationships.

Altogether, the Foundation was able to leverage its ability to be flexible and move quickly, whether that meant reaching out to other funders or removing grant restrictions and doing some proactive granting to support its grantees. It meant they could be thinking not only about how to respond in the immediate but also have the resources to begin to plan ahead. Throughout their work, both staff and Board have been on the same page, and there has been a shared understanding of the needs of the community and how the Foundation should respond.

Lawson Foundation

Interviewee:

Marcel Lauzière
President and CEO

Date:

July 2020

Background

The [Lawson Foundation](#) is a Canadian family foundation based in Toronto, with over 60 years of philanthropic giving. It currently employs seven staff members. In 2019, it granted over CA\$6 million in support of several impact areas related to early child development, outdoor play, child and youth diabetes, youth and the environment, and support for charitable infrastructure.

Responding in times of crisis

The COVID-19 crisis challenged the Foundation to work differently in some ways, but in others, the crisis represented more of an evolution in the way the Foundation already worked.

As a team, staff were already comfortable working virtually, with staff spread out in different parts of Ontario and Québec. This meant that the team already was set up to act quickly when the crisis hit and had developed a culture where the digital tools, communication processes, and support systems didn't need to be implemented or learned on the fly. Similarly, the Foundation benefited from having a nimble Board that was willing and able to work differently.

As the scale of the crisis became clear, the Foundation quickly decided to put its strategic funding on hold and focus its efforts on responding to the COVID-19 crisis. The Foundation's initial response consisted of a number of initiatives.

In late March, the Board of the Lawson Foundation allocated CA\$2.7 million to a [COVID-19 Response Fund](#) with these elements:

- An early emergency response phase to meet immediate community needs (CA\$780,000) through pop-up granting teams across the country
- A collaborative COVID response fund with the London Community Foundation (CA\$300,000) directed toward a CA\$1 million pooled fund led by the London Community Foundation

I'm able to call on the Board for decisions on a regular basis through email or Zoom calls. This morning, for instance, we have seven or so grant decisions to make, and this will be done through email. We will only have a Board call if one or more Board members raise an issue that needs further discussion. We have a small Board of nine members, and they understand the importance of moving fast.

- A fifth generation family component (CA\$100,000 for COVID-19 responsive granting)
- A fund specifically to support Indigenous organizations and communities during the pandemic (CA\$800,000)
- A second phase of support (CA\$800,000) for organizational stabilization and support during the COVID-19 crisis for key organizations relevant to the Foundation's impact areas

The pop-up grants were targeted at different communities across the country. This approach was designed to be responsive and efficient as well as cater to different needs as defined by the communities themselves.

“ Our emergency response started by creating six pop-up granting teams across the country in different areas so we could learn. These communities were: Vancouver; Saskatchewan; Perth/Lanark; Gatineau; St. John, New Brunswick; and Nova Scotia. Each granting team had six members that were set up with trusted members (this was a new experience for Board members). The Foundation gave each team CA\$130,000, but we made it clear that decisions would be community-driven as opposed to coming from us. Within two weeks, several hundred thousand dollars went out the door.

We were listening to organizations on the ground about the kinds of things they were dealing with. All of the funding was unrestricted. We asked for a one-page update from each organization sometime down the road. We're also asking for a report from each pop-up team to see what we can learn and how we can build that into our strategic approach going forward. None of this was in our strategic approach that was approved last December.

The Foundation's approach overall was based on both the trust they had in their partners as well as the recognition of the uncharted waters of the time. There was also an open acknowledgement that they weren't going to have all the answers and that they would need to rely on different kinds of data to make decisions.

“ We focused on fast learning. I think we're pretty much an evidence-based organization already. In general, we start with systematic reviews and always have a process for looking at the data. We've been open about throwing quantitative data out the window right now. Instead, we've relied on different kinds of evidence from our pop-up teams who are on the ground, and trust that these teams know their communities and have thoughtful conversations around how much money was available. It's been a learning experience that 'evidence' can come in many forms. The pop-ups, for instance, are small dollars. We're not going to evaluate the impact, but we trust that it will make a difference. A bit of a downside in that approach is that we won't have as much data around how the money was used as a whole.

The pop-up teams were set up quickly. The first week was used to set up the teams, and in the second week we sent out the dollars. It wasn't like we went back and forth with our partners, but was also

less of a need for this because we weren't imposing anything on them. They used different models, which was interesting to see. One team wanted to work with the local United Way and community foundation. Others went directly to organizations they knew.

Similarly, the Foundation began to rely more heavily on intermediary organizations such as Imagine Canada, Pillar Nonprofit Network, the Ontario Nonprofit Network, and the YMCA for information and data on what the nonprofit and charitable sector was dealing with. This information helped to further inform on what challenges the sector was facing as well as the scale of the problem. Aside from granting, the Foundation also took steps to reach out to its existing grantees in the spirit of open communication around their priorities. This wasn't a new concept for the Foundation, but rather reflects something the Foundation has been thinking about for a few years in terms of how to be responsive and supportive.

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We wrote to our grantees early on to ask how they were doing, ask about their fundraising, if they've let people go, etc. and, at the end, encouraged people to reach out to us and let us know how we could help. We got about a 20% response rate, and this wasn't a survey. It was people writing emails to me. I'm not sure what to make of this. I was expecting more grantees to come forward. It tells me that engagement and accountability is an ongoing issue. Maybe this is one of the learnings of COVID. Under normal circumstances, we wouldn't have written to grantees, asking them how they were doing.

A few years ago, we undertook a project to gather feedback from our grantees that highlighted that our grantees felt that Lawson didn't always understand their organization as well as they wanted. The message we took was that grantees want to see us more and be more connected. We did our work during COVID with grantees via Zoom and learned we could do a lot more 'site visits' this way. One of our key learnings is that we will be able to do grantee engagement a lot more effectively. It seems like an obvious thing to say, but why didn't we do this before?

At the same time, the Foundation isn't resting on its laurels and sees an opportunity in this crisis to have deeper conversations as a staff and Board team on some of the broader issues in philanthropy.

“Our strategic direction was approved last December. If we were to do it now, I think it would be a bit different. I think there would be more emphasis on being community-driven now. This is something I’m struggling with a bit myself. What does this mean for how we do our work as a foundation? I’m not sure how much is linked to COVID and how much is linked to other conversations over the last year to year and a half. For example, unrestricted funding and wanting to know more about grantees—we’ve always done some unrestricted funding for some grantees. At minimum, COVID will allow us to have these conversations with our Board. Even if it doesn’t bring in new data, it brings context.

Learning Insights

The response of the Lawson Foundation illustrated two central tenets of how the Foundation approaches learning: trust and developing strong relationships. These habits are reflected in how they work internally and also in how they work with others. They did not emerge overnight but rather took time to build.

Internally, the Foundation has developed spaces and processes that encourage critical reflection and learning. An experienced staff team works well with an engaged Board that values their input. Getting to this place took time and relied in part on the ability of staff to effectively communicate and share with the Board what they were hearing and learning. While staff do provide evidence to the Board, they also work hard to understand where Board members are in their thinking and their priorities—in other words, their learning goals and their culture—before bringing information forward.

Within the staff team, there is trust in one another to get the work done. Some staff may work different hours and no one is checking in to make sure that staff are at their (virtual) desks, but communication processes have been thoughtfully designed to encourage learning. There is also an ability and willingness as a team to slightly shift their roles as needed. During COVID, as new initiatives emerged, some staff have been asked to step up in different ways.

Externally, the Foundation has built strong relationships with others in the philanthropic sector. This has helped them engage more fully with themes raised in internal conversations and translate insights into action by contributing to emerging initiatives. For example, the Foundation has been involved in impact

investing for a few years, and it has reached out to other funders to convene a gathering of Foundation investment managers to share and learn with others. In the context of the pandemic, the Foundation took a similar approach, contributing funds to the emergent Indigenous Peoples Resilience Fund, a national fund launched in June 2020 and governed by an Indigenous Advisory Council with financial support from the philanthropic sector to support Indigenous communities across the country. Contributing to this initiative was an easy sell for the Board in part because Indigenous reconciliation has been a topic of concern for the Foundation, but also because it had built relationships with other trusted partners who were also contributing to this initiative.

In terms of its grant recipients, the Foundation has acknowledged this is an area in which it continues to strive for improvement. In non-pandemic times, convening and a cohort approach to grantmaking were two strategies the Foundation used to develop deeper relationships with grantees to better understand their context and their approach to learning. During COVID, it experimented with other ways to engage with and support grantees, such as through its community-driven pop-up grants.

From a learning perspective, the COVID-19 crisis represented an evolution in how the Foundation thinks about its own culture and how it can be successful and responsive to the communities it supports. Rather than a revolution that dramatically reshaped the Foundation's perception of itself or its values, the crisis has allowed the Foundation to try some new things and provided additional context for broader conversations regarding initiatives it was already thinking about or working toward.

J. Armand Bombardier Foundation

Interviewee:

Ode Belzille
Director of Philanthropic
Activities

Date:

July 2020

Background

The [J. Armand Bombardier Foundation](#) has been active for over 50 years. The Foundation is headquartered in Valcourt, Québec, while its Philanthropic Activities team is based in Montréal. The Foundation employs 50 people (a museum and a cultural centre are part of its programming), while the Philanthropic Activities team currently employs six staff members. In 2019, it granted approximately CA\$4 million in support of several causes related to health care, community support, education, and arts and culture. In addition, it also supports Philagora, a capacity-building program for nonprofits which provides workshops, training opportunities, networking, and knowledge sharing through a variety of means.

Responding in times of crisis

Like all foundations, the J. Armand Bombardier Foundation has processes in place for topics like how often the Board meets, how granting decisions are made, and the ways in which staff interact with grantees. When COVID hit, it quickly became clear that these processes needed adapting. There was so much happening so quickly that staff made the request to convene much more frequently with their Board and Granting Committee.

The decision to change the frequency of granting meetings came from staff, but the members quickly came to agree. It became evident very quickly that we wouldn't be able to give quick responses to grantees without this. At first, we decided to just have a special meeting between March and the normal summer granting meeting. Then we decided to have one meeting a month until it's not necessary anymore. For the Granting Committee, they are working harder than before. They are looking at new types of requests that are being made. They needed to adjust from one month to another. The situations and priorities that are put forward by organizations change, so we need to be more flexible. At first it was a challenge, and now they are more willing to test new approaches and say, 'Let's try this.'

During this period, the Board also became more engaged in the Foundation's work and wanted to understand the challenges that were affecting communities across the country and how the Foundation could offer support.

Working virtually with their Board also created new challenges. For example, the difficulties of having people talk in a freer flowing way as they would if they were meeting in person often meant that, at first, someone was often interrupting someone else. This forced staff and the Board to think more about how information was shared and move away from mostly oral reports to more documented reports.

“ Our Board members are more engaged in learning now. They are participating more in webinars. In the past, we would not necessarily have had Board members attend Philanthropic Foundation Canada webinars. Some not only attend now, but will call us about it to discuss what they heard.

“ In the past, we would do a lot of oral presentations. Now, I have to document things more and prepare reports. We moved from more informal knowledge transfer to more documented knowledge transfer. It's something we wanted to do for a long time, and now we need to do it. This allows us to better retain the learning and share it with both our Board members and grantees.

In March, the Foundation announced that they would be [loosening their reporting restrictions](#) and working with other funding partners to provide emergency support to frontline organizations. The idea of working with other funding partners was not new to the Foundation, but there was a desire to work more collaboratively and in an action-oriented manner.

“ The biggest change for staff was how often we talk with other funders. In Québec, the philanthropic sector is very tightly knit. Before, we would talk a lot together, but now we act together a lot more. Now, someone will say we need help and someone else will volunteer staff to help. We see working together in a much more natural, more organic way.

For example, there is a coalition of foundations that want to act to address inequality. It's been active for a long time. We got involved in the months before COVID. Since May, our team has been working along with the collective's coordinator and representatives from another foundation and a provincial organization to coordinate a new initiative. We share planning and execution.

We see each other much more as colleagues.

For my staff, it's very stimulating, they get to see and support projects outside the Foundation. This is a huge advantage.

Similarly, the Foundation thought carefully about how they could continue to run their Philagora capacity-building program and what types of activities would be most helpful.

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We stopped our capacity-building program for a month because there was so much noise and so much going on at the start of the pandemic. For example, lots of organizations were offering virtual trainings and webinars. We didn't want to overwhelm our grantees. During this time, the Philagora team went into observation mode. They reached out to hear what organizations needed and reported back.

One of the things we heard related to an ongoing activity we had been holding. Pre-COVID, we were supporting a relatively informal 1½-hour morning coffee chat for nonprofit staff to discuss one subject. These chats took place every two months, and participants were eager to take part again. We decided to continue to support this but shifted to bringing people together virtually once every two weeks and focused on executive directors (EDs). We act as co-facilitators with a different ED each week who decides what the topic will be. Topics include things like managing stress, what to do with your strategic plan, etc.

This worked because our partners chose the medium. It was already familiar to them; they'd been doing this before COVID. There were relationships already in place and it was easy to continue. It's important for us to understand this rapport and what it means in terms of value-added. It was not that different from how other organizations offer workshops and networking opportunities, but it's what worked for our partner organizations.

As the crisis progressed, the Foundation realized it was getting more calls from organizations looking for funding that had never approached the Foundation before. While the Foundation works nationally, approximately 85% of its grantees are from Québec.

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In Québec, it's a small community, so even if we don't grant to them, they know us and what to expect. The questions we get asked from those who don't know us are different. Some of these new people come to us with projects, for instance, but we prefer core mission funding. And so we'll ask why they are proposing a project and they'll say because that's what other funders want us to do. I used to have these conversations when I first started at the Foundation. It's interesting to go back to those conversations.

With the death of George Floyd at the end of May, the Foundation also reflected on its own Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts.

COVID accelerated our work on DEI. It made it mandatory. BIPOC-led organizations are not as present in Québec. We started having questions about why this is the case.

The conversation around DEI has been going on in a more sustainable manner for the past three years. In terms of grantees, we were already trying to work with a gender-based analysis, but that was easy because the Foundation was created by women, and currently 75% of our Board is made up of women and the management is women-led. In terms of organizations led by people of colour, it was less natural for us to grant with this lens.

When COVID started, we recognized that many of these communities lived in the north part of Montréal and we recognized that we didn't have many grants there, so we focused on trying to build more formal relations there.

This reflection also prompted changes in their capacity-building program.

We also invited leaders from 16 organizations to come together as a learning circle—some of them we support financially and some we don't. We tried to create a microcosm of the nonprofit sector: big orgs, small orgs, different ages, different geographies. We started this in June and it will end in November. In essence, this group is doing a theory of change process without using that language. We call it a "circle of co-reinforcement and mutual aid." In essence, organizations are reflecting on their organizational culture and what the gaps in our ecosystem are, thinking about what we want to learn and how to measure it. The idea, in part, is to equip organizations to better communicate to funders how they work and what they need in terms of support. It's about taking the time to reflect together. Everyone we invited said yes except one because they didn't have the time. They meet every three weeks. For us, we also use this information to inform our own practices, but there's no expectations. If something interesting comes out of it, then we will share it with others.

We wanted to start with organizations we support financially, but then with the Black Lives Matter movement we recognized that our proposed participants weren't diverse enough, so we chose a quarter from the broader Philagora community. We also hired consultants to support this process. For participants, it's a free training, brainstorming, networking, and programming opportunity.

Learning Insights

One of the strongest insights that came out of this conversation was how committed staff and Board were to asking deep questions. These are questions that focus on values and assumptions and not only program tactics. This is evident in how the Foundation took time to understand how they might respond to the crisis and support its grantees and communities, whether this was to carry on, in a modified way, the co-facilitated gatherings of EDs or to challenge themselves around what role they could play in supporting racialized people in leadership positions in nonprofit organizations. It was also clear that this process of asking deep questions was not finished just because they had figured out their immediate programming next steps.

In addition, as a staff, more questions are now being asked regarding what the future might hold and the potential for supporting nonprofits that aren't charities. It was also noted that there is a desire to undertake an internal evaluation with an external evaluator to help discover further insights about how they work.

Moreover, the change during this period regarding how staff and Board interacted may suggest that stronger feedback loops are being developed. This isn't a question only of how frequently the Board and staff met, but rather that interactions were happening in new ways. That might mean discussing a webinar that a Board member attended with staff, increasing awareness of how staff engaged with other funders, or demonstrating a willingness to see this work continued without a need for more formal approval.

Finally, the desire to work collaboratively was not new for the J. Armand Bombardier Foundation, but there was a clear recognition that there was even more untapped potential for collaboration that could help inform their learning and actions. Staff noted real value in being able to call up another funder informally to discuss an issue or ask a question. Similarly, there was a sense that these interactions were very rich and allowed for more meaningful action to happen more quickly. Whether it be staff at the Foundation or staff from another funder who took the direct next steps, there was nonetheless a sense of camaraderie and shared interest and support.

Barr Foundation

Interviewee:

Yvonne Belanger
Director of Learning and
Evaluation

Date:

June 2020

Background

Based in Boston, Massachusetts, the [Barr Foundation](#) focuses regionally and selectively but engages nationally, working in partnership with others to elevate the arts and creative expression, to advance solutions for climate change, and to connect all students to success in high school and beyond. Barr was co-founded in 1997 by Amos and Barbara Hostetter, who are living donors and members of the Board of Trustees. In 2020, Barr had an annual giving budget of US\$95 million and about 45 staff.

Responding in times of crisis

The Foundation started by thinking about its COVID-19 response as a long-term approach with sequenced phases of relief, recovery, and rebuilding/reimagining. A set of principles were developed to guide the response that committed the Foundation to:

- Not reducing grantmaking in 2020 or 2021, which would mean belt-tightening operationally
- Sustaining all existing commitments (overall planned grantmaking) and supporting existing partners across core programs with [as much flexibility as possible](#)
- Directing the response to places in the region where there are fewer philanthropic resources (i.e., beyond Boston)
- Focusing on populations disproportionately impacted and left out, including immigrants and undocumented families and individuals who can't access federal or state programs
- Supporting organizations closest to the populations and communities most impacted, as they are most in touch with those populations' needs

In mid-March, the Barr Foundation joined over 750 other organizations in signing a pledge that committed foundations to being flexible and responsive to existing grantees' needs. The Foundation would:

- Welcome a conversation about revisiting grant objectives, timelines, and terms
- Be flexible with deadlines for grant reports or other deliverables, and be open to alternative formats for such reports
- Commit to the timely release of grant payments
- Entertain requests to augment or accelerate approved grant payments
- Understand that events and other large meetings or conventions are likely to be postponed or canceled, and explore the implications

Barr also engaged in direct and indirect grantmaking to support COVID-19 relief efforts in the region. Each program team reviewed budgets and determined how much of their planned grantmaking for 2020 could be reallocated to a centralized fund to support a COVID-19 response.

In the first week of April, Barr announced US\$2.6 million in grants to community foundations and pooled funds that had been established in response to the pandemic. This included grants to support:

- Arts and creativity organizations through five community foundations with whom Barr already had partnerships and six additional Massachusetts community foundations to ensure that resources were available in other parts of the state. These grants supported emergency response funds, with community foundations making their own decisions about how to allocate funds.
- The Boston Resiliency Fund, established by Mayor Marty Walsh to provide food for Boston's children and seniors, technology for Boston Public Schools students, and support for first responders and health care workers.
- The Boston Foundation's COVID-19 Response Fund, which provided general operating support grants to organizations addressing the basic needs of vulnerable populations during the pandemic.

In addition to these contributions to pooled funds, Barr engaged in additional direct grantmaking. Barr primarily leveraged an existing short-term portfolio of grantees focused on civil rights and immigrants, renewing one-time general operating support grants that had previously been scheduled to end in spring 2020. Program teams in Arts, Climate, Education, and Sector Effectiveness also expedited supplementary grants to existing partners directly involved in responding to COVID-19. In total, Barr had awarded US\$4.6 million of emergency response ("relief") phase grants as of April 16, 2020.

Finally, the Foundation encouraged employees to leverage existing matching fund programs and also initiated a one-time staff-directed giving program.

This was really meaningful for the staff during a very stressful time when we were all wanting to find ways to make a difference. It helped us to amplify our own personal philanthropy and to direct resources to personally meaningful causes, like a food bank in our neighborhood or a nonprofit provider.

Learning Insights

Barr's goal of substantially reducing grantee burden included reduced outcome and reporting requirements and the conversion of some project grants to general operating support. By the end of May 2020, Barr had:

- Accelerated grant payments for three current grantees
- Waived reporting requirements for 21 grantees
- Amended eight grant agreements to repurpose some or all funds from project to general operating support, extend project timelines, or revise expected outcomes

For its emergency relief grantmaking, the Foundation readily accepted that it would not be possible or necessary to understand the impact of these general operating support grants. During later grantmaking phases (recovery and rebuild/reimagine), some evaluation-related work may be added.

“Pre-COVID, our 2020 learning and evaluation priorities were to focus on more fully implementing outcomes measurement to guide our ongoing strategy development. Because of increased workloads and the infeasibility of additional grantee data collection, we slowed this way down. In some cases, resources intended for outcome measurement were redeployed to field scans and research on COVID-19's impact on the context, and to inform strategic pivots over the next year and beyond.

The Foundation also has been building on efforts from recent years to develop a more open and inclusive learning culture. Program teams and Foundation leadership are engaging in real-time reflection and learning to capture key lessons to inform pivots in strategic priorities and tactics. In May 2020, multiple conversations across program teams, leadership, and the Board produced additional learning to guide Barr's response:

- **Uncertainty and planning for multiple scenarios.** The Foundation will need to plan for an unknown future, and considering multiple scenarios will be important.
- **Catalytic action.** Building on Barr's mission to serve as both a steward and a catalyst, the Foundation should embrace that latter role in this moment and identify the strategic ways it can inform action that can be catalytic.
- **Connectedness.** Rather than focus on recovery and rebuilding phases in silos, Barr should recognize the interconnectedness of systems and pursue an interdisciplinary approach that builds alliances across fields and shapes a recovery based on a wider spectrum of perspectives.

With staff working remotely, Barr Foundation President Jim Canales began sending an email to staff every morning, detailing what was on his mind to make his thinking visible and to maintain community. The cadence of all-staff meetings increased from bimonthly to monthly, and a new monthly meeting was initiated for program staff only to enable teams to more frequently share their analysis of the changed context and details of their response. In addition, these forums enabled new grantmaking processes to be rolled out more smoothly, with more rapid cycle iteration and improvement.

An important hallmark of Barr's internal COVID-19 response was distributed leadership of change. For example, Barr's IT team rapidly rolled out Microsoft Teams after the shutdown, shifting from a planned three-month rollout with a small pilot to a full rollout in less than one week. Within Teams, staff were given significant latitude to create new channels, which resulted in a wide range of new forums. As the protests following George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis intensified, Jim convened a virtual town hall in which many staff spoke openly about their concerns and struggles, as well as their personal experiences with racial injustice and systems of oppression. Additional Teams forums (e.g., a staff-lead reading group of Afro-futurism literature) sprang up in response.

Hawai'i Community Foundation

Interviewee:

Tom Kelly
Vice President of
Evaluation and Impact

Date:

June 2020

Background

The [Hawai'i Community Foundation \(HCF\)](#) is a public, statewide, charitable services and grantmaking organization supported by donor contributions for the benefit of Hawai'i's people. Community foundations serve a specific geographic area and are unique in that they are made up of a collection of charitable funds given by multiple donors. As a strategic grantmaker, HCF invests through initiatives and programs, has 70 staff across four islands and counties, and gives approximately US\$70 million annually from funds and assets of US\$770 million, about two-thirds donor-advised and one-third discretionary.

Responding in times of crisis

The pandemic became the fourth crisis that HCF responded to in one year (lava, flooding, and wildfires are the others). The Foundation already had some mechanisms for rapid response and had done some reflective practice on ways to frame relief and recovery and improve grantmaking before the pandemic hit.

In mid-March 2020, HCF created the Hawai'i Resilience Fund, which organizes giving around a four-phased approach as illustrated below.

In Phase I of that framework, focused on Risk Reduction and Readiness and deployed within two weeks of the initial lockdown, HCF supported grantees that prioritized risk reduction, such as increasing screening and reducing the spread of COVID-19. HCF's question was: How can we help the people who are serving the most vulnerable on the front lines?

The Foundation chose to focus specifically on the systems outside health care where infection control experience and resources were absent and where the highest vulnerable populations (elderly, homeless, chronically ill) were served.

Although much attention was being paid among funders and the media to the need for personal protective equipment (PPE) in hospitals and clinics, HCF decided to fund the purchase of PPE for those serving vulnerable families in the state's behavioral health system (e.g., substance abuse programs, domestic violence and homeless shelters).

We prioritized support for frontline behavioral health care workers over support to the hospitals that had access to other funding and resources, including already-established mechanisms for purchasing PPE.

Frontline behavioral health workers tended to be social workers and paraprofessionals who were unfamiliar with accessing and using PPE and protective protocols. In addition, many of these workers and volunteers were at risk of infection themselves, with health challenges and vulnerabilities similar to the people they were serving (older volunteers, young pregnant women, those with chronic health conditions).

HCF also deployed Phase II (Rapid Relief and Response) funding simultaneously for emergency food and feeding programs and emergency financial assistance grants for rent and utilities. Phase III (Recovery and Stabilization) recently began with grants for data and planning economy recovery, addressing the education disruption of graduating seniors, and preserving childcare capacity for workers.

Learning Insights

As a critical source of funding in Hawai'i, it was important for HCF to be able to make decisions and deploy resources quickly. This meant relying on what it had built already--its strategic focus, and its investments in networks as structures that have the potential to effect greater change than a single organization working on its own.

In recent years, HCF has developed a set of community goals that focus on equity and are shared across all grantmaking areas. HCF has been using the United Way's Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) framework to consider its equity focus. ALICE families and individuals are working but are unable to afford the basic necessities. In Hawai'i, nearly 48% of the population is considered ALICE or below. Because of the economic and unemployment impacts of COVID-19 and the dramatic reduction in tourism, HawaiiData.org now estimates that 59% of the state's population will be ALICE or below by the end of the year.

When the pandemic hit, many ideas were competing for limited funding (e.g., supporting entrepreneurs to make ventilators). But HCF chose to maintain its strategic focus on ALICE populations, those most likely to be at risk of COVID-19 infection, and, later, those most likely to be financially impacted by the economic shutdown.

“My normal evaluative frame would have been to come at the Foundation's COVID-19 response with a set of questions for the leadership and program teams to carefully consider. The Chief Impact and Strategy Officer felt there wasn't enough time for extensive deliberation and suggested making affirmative statements based on data being collected and what the Foundation already had been doing. For example, we said that HCF would keep to its equity goal and ALICE focus by ensuring that responses are targeted to these groups and communities.

HCF was then able to deploy resources widely and efficiently through a network of behavioral health providers with which the Foundation had an existing, authentic relationship.

Headwaters Foundation

Interviewee:

Brenda Solorzano
CEO

Date:

September 2020

Background

The [Headwaters Foundation](#), which has a mission to work side-by-side with Western Montanans to improve the health of their communities, employs eight staff. The Foundation awarded almost US\$3.5 million in 2019. From their founding in 2018, they have focused on "democratizing philanthropy one relationship at a time" and currently have four grantmaking programs: Strategic Initiatives, Policy and Influence, GO! Grants, and Sponsorships.

Responding in times of crisis

Montana was first hit hardest by the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the midst of shutting down schools, businesses, and restaurants and laying off workers, grantees were trying to figure out how to operate in a very different business model and felt empowered to tell the Foundation what they needed to adapt. Brenda credits this to the relationships and trust the Foundation had built with the community over the past few years.

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Because we have an ongoing relationship with those communities, they very quickly came to us and said, 'I know that we had been talking about doing this work on resilient parenting or teen pregnancy or whatever it was, but because of COVID, the thing that we are seeing now is that parents who are essential workers do not have a place to send their kids for childcare, and schools are closed and now we don't have food for our kids. And so we want to shift our effort from this early childhood work into food security, or we want to shift our effort from early childhood into childcare, after-school opportunities.' In some cases they said, 'We know we had this money to do all of this kind of upstream policy work, but what we need today are learning kits that we can get out to parents in our community.' And we said, 'Sure, that's fine.' So again, it wasn't so much what we had to change. It's how we were in a relationship with our grantees that allowed us to say yes to them.

The Foundation committed to following through on the grants already in play and created an additional set of funds for new grants.

We approve our program plan, as I said, at the beginning of the year; that includes our overall grantmaking program. And we needed that. There was no way it would be fair to take money away from that preprogrammed money to our grantees that were doing this important work and not do something around COVID. So we actually went to our Board in March and asked them to increase the amount of funding that they would make available through our program plan. And they gave us an additional almost half a million dollars to do additional COVID grantmaking. This allowed us to increase GO! Grants, [which] are [going to organizations] doing the essential services by giving them another grant right now.

In addition to the GO! Grants, Headwaters took the onus of figuring out who needed funding and for what in order to spend out the new pot of money the Board approved. They learned from their grantees that food security was a big issue, so they compiled a list of every food bank across the state and called to offer them a general operating support grant. These nonprofits did not need to apply for this money; they only had to share basic information during their phone call with the Foundation. Additionally, Headwaters learned that communities were struggling with childcare, so they funded existing local collaboratives that were already working on early childhood and told them to do whatever they needed to with the funds.

Learning Insights

Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the Headwaters Foundation had a core value of placing communities and relationships at the center of their work, enabling real-time learning and quick decision-making in line with what the community wanted and needed. The Foundation did not really need to pivot as an organization aside from increasing their grant spending for the year; they needed to be a support and a partner to those on the ground who were doing the pivoting.

“It’s important ... to be very clear about where we were beforehand because it really, I think, helps explain how we pivoted or maybe didn’t pivot. ... So we are a foundation that had the luxury of being able to be built from the ground up as a trust-based funder. That really grounds the notion of being in relationship and really placing the community in the center. And I know that there’s a lot of philanthropy, and myself included in that, that used to say that but didn’t really do it in terms of how it actually gets operationalized. [It’s] taking a lot of the power away from the Board and the staff and giving it back to the community and to our grantees.”

The way the Foundation was organized enabled quick adaptability and effective learning. The following examples demonstrate ways the Headwaters Foundation can achieve that adaptability and learning³.

- **Strategy.** The Headwaters Foundation does its work through a trust-based philanthropy lens, leading with trust and centering community. They have a six-year strategic framework that provides big picture guidance (e.g., working on social determinants of health) rather than having a detailed, long-term plan (e.g., the traditional five-year plan about what the Foundation does). They create one-year plans based on the strategic framework and what they have been learning in community (the program plan).
- **Structure.** Power is distributed unconventionally at the Foundation. The Board is not responsible for approving grants but for setting the big picture direction for the organization, such as the strategic framework, the organization's values, and how to invest the financial portfolio. Staff are responsible for approving grants, making changes to initiative strategy, being in community, building relationships, and learning rather than writing dockets, reviewing proposals, and rehearsing Board presentations.
- **Processes.** Rather than the typical, cumbersome grant application process that requires time for the grantee to complete the application, time for a foundation staff to review the proposal to check fit and IRS requirements, and time for the Board or other leaders to approve or deny applications, Headwater's GO! Grants require time for the applicant to complete information, but technology assesses the rest. If aligned, there is approval within 24 hours and a check out the door in two weeks. Processes like these free up staff time to be in relationship and communicate to grantees that the Foundation trusts them.
- **People.** The Foundation intentionally hired program people who were not content experts. Their role was defined as conveners, facilitators, coaches, and connectors. This helps put the power of content knowledge in the community's hand, inevitably incentivizing the Foundation to look to the community about how to move forward.
- **Rewards.** Interestingly, Headwaters distinguishes between accountability and learning when setting up reward systems and metrics. The report to the Board includes these concepts as two separate sections. Accountability is about what the Foundation can control. This includes progress on the approved program plan, such as the deliverables, budget, and timeline, as well as the extent to which the Foundation is living up to its values and desired culture. Learning is about the areas the Foundation hopes to influence and generally includes longer-term outcomes, such as what is happening in Western Montana regarding social determinants of health.

³These examples are categorized by Kates and Galbraith's (2007) Organizational Design framework, the Star Model: Designing your organization: Using the STAR model to solve 5 critical design challenges.

Themes

Across all of the foundation learning examples, one key theme stands out: **Building a culture of equity and learning during periods of relative stability equips foundations to respond nimbly in times of crisis.**

Building a culture of equity meant normalizing and institutionalizing the sharing and using of power, which enabled rapid learning. No two organizations have the same organizational learning culture, but it's safe to say that each of the interviewed foundations had, over time, taken concrete actions to shape theirs. This meant that when the crises began, the foundations were able to move forward in ways that were both responsive and strategic for their grantees. Below, we focus on some particular themes to illustrate this point.

Rethinking reporting and looking for new ways to learn

Looking for ways to ensure more rapid and informal feedback between the foundation and grantees while also reducing burden led foundations to immediately remove, reduce, or postpone reporting requirements on existing grants. Even for new grants, the types of reporting required were much lighter touch than normal. Staff primarily drove this decision, with seemingly little to no pushback from boards around the type of information and due diligence needed to inform their thinking during this period. For some foundations, this offered an opportunity to think differently about the type of information to collect and the ways in which they collect it. Several made a choice to rely more on other sources of information—such as reports from intermediary organizations or via informal conversations with grantees or other foundations—to help inform their thinking. Many also changed the kinds of questions they sought to answer with evidence. Where the focus had been on outcome measurement before the crises, it shifted to a broader interest in understanding changing community needs (often in a place-based way), sustaining grantee operations, and reaching out to underserved groups, neighborhoods, or organizations.

Fostering more two-way and human relationships with grantees

Foundations quickly sought connections with their grantees that ranged from simple check-ins with questions like "How are you and your team doing?" to more focused efforts to learn what was happening on the ground in communities. Because so much was unknown in the pandemic's early weeks, conversations tended to be open-ended and exploratory, with grantees setting the agenda and identifying what was important to discuss. Sometimes this meant having more than one conversation or having conversations that ran longer than anticipated. Communication also seemed more two-way, with foundations sharing what was happening inside the foundation and how they were responding externally. Meetings often led to surprising insights or connections. The intent to connect with grantees beyond email or other digital communications (like social media or surveys) led many interviewees to reflect on the value of reaching out to grantees on a more human level. This raised the possibility of being able to learn differently about the people and issues grantees were dealing with.

Doubling down on collaboration with other philanthropic actors

The interviewees we spoke to already had strong relationships with other foundations and peers in the sector. However, for many, this time period affirmed the value of those relationships and opened up new ways for them to work together. Some noted that their conversations with other foundations were both more action-oriented and more open to exploring new ideas, such as creating new funds or exchanging more information. These were not always easy conversations, and issues of funding restrictions and differing focus areas and capacities still arose, but they were not barriers to action.

Shifting internal ways of working and making decisions

Like other organizations or businesses, foundations were forced to adjust how they work. Staffs began working remotely, and they took steps to keep boards engaged. However, by and large, foundations noted how quickly both board and staff were able to align. Sometimes this meant building in more time for staff to connect virtually. Oftentimes it required more frequent and informal communications (in addition to more formal meetings) with boards to ensure they stayed engaged and to shorten the time needed to review and approve grants. Roles and responsibilities shifted as well. To respond quickly, boards empowered staff or volunteer teams to make more granting decisions. Staff, in turn, encouraged board members to become more active in learning and planning.

Embracing new ways of granting (to a limit)

For a sector that often is criticized for sticking to the minimum required disbursement rates (3.5% of assets in Canada and 5% in the U.S.) and for having narrow granting focuses, the foundations we spoke to were open to thinking about new ways to support the communities they serve. Some had been moving in that direction before COVID-19, such as embracing multiyear funding, going beyond the minimum disbursement rate, and providing unrestricted funding. At the same time, many of the granting processes and initiatives that were named by the interviewees were explicitly tied to the 2020 crisis period. It remains to be seen whether these processes and initiatives become more permanent fixtures. It should also be noted that the number of foundations that have increased their minimum disbursement rates (at least publicly) remains a relatively small percentage. For example, as of publication, only about 70 foundations have signed on to the GIVE5 campaign, which calls on Canadian foundations to increase their disbursement rate to 5%.

Grappling with how to address racial equity and justice

In both Canada and the U.S., George Floyd's murder in May 2020 drew widespread protests that further highlighted the systemic racism that is pervasive throughout our institutions and society. The foundations we spoke to could all point to specific ways in which they responded to widespread calls for philanthropy to play a stronger role in supporting racial equity and justice. Some actions were in direct response to the events of 2020, while others were part of longer-term DEI commitments.

Some foundations are working on changing the racial composition of their boards and staff, and rethinking grantmaking practices that burden and constrain nonprofits. Some are working on shifting the foundation-nonprofit relationship to be more trust-based and reciprocal, even creating participatory grantmaking mechanisms that give community members power over resource allocation. New funds have been created that are devoted entirely to advancing racial justice and equity or funding BIPOC-led efforts, and numerous examples exist across philanthropy of foundation program staff and program teams who are working on centering equity in the way they do their work.

The reality, however, remains that there is a long way to go toward fundamentally shifting power dynamics in philanthropy in terms of how decisions get made and whose voices get heard. It is one thing to name a problem and offer support in ways that may be new for a foundation within a defined period of crisis—though this is a sign of progress to be sure. It is another to cede power long term and show integrated and sustained support for racial equity and justice. While commitments have been made, questions remain whether these efforts will be compartmentalized or permanently integrated into foundation programs and how foundations will continue to respond as time goes on.

Conclusion

The year 2020 was a time of rapid learning by necessity. While some things will eventually revert back to the way they were, others will be left behind and new ways of working will emerge. Organizations that have strong learning cultures are well suited to internalize the lessons learned over this period and to make those judgments going forward.

During a crisis, foundations can move quickly. They operate with fewer constraints than other actors such as governments, tend to have sizable and stable endowments, and have fewer accountability requirements that limit their ability to act. They can be nimble and adapt when they want to. Whether they created new grant streams, pursued joint funding initiatives, lifted restrictions on how funds could be used, or increased the amount of grant dollars available, the foundations we spoke to recognized that they could do more with their assets.

The COVID-19 and anti-racism crises have challenged and changed grantmaking and evaluation processes that foundations had in place prior to 2020. Many foundations are making decisions in new ways regarding how they operate, what they support, and how they make sense of it. For some, this has included at least a temporary shifting of control over strategy from the foundation to people and organizations who are positioned to understand the needs of their communities.

The foundation learning examples presented here offer insights as to what the future could hold for philanthropy as foundations further reflect on what they experimented with and learned in response to the 2020 crises. We believe, as these foundation learning examples show, that there already are good examples of movement in how foundations are rethinking how they will operate and learn in the future.

What distinguishes an adaptive, trust-based approach in practice

Here we identify some broader themes and trends in philanthropy and note some areas of movement that many foundations—perhaps enhanced by the crises of 2020—may increasingly be shifting their practice toward. We note these changes not as a fact nor as a linear process, but as a hopeful indication of where more foundations may be headed.

FROM		TO	
WHICH LOOKS LIKE		WHICH LOOKS LIKE	
Privilege and control	Foundations setting the rules and defining the terms of engagement with others	Democratization and transparency	More back-and-forth discussion and openness to interaction and ideas from outside the foundation
	One-way accountability from grantees to foundations		Two-way accountability between foundations and grantees/communities
	Top-down and controlled communication		Open, dynamic, and networked communication
Strict, top-down evaluation expectations	Narrow definitions of evidence and a valuing of certain, oftentimes credentialed, expertise	Codesigned, flexible, and participatory approaches to evaluation	Broader definitions of what counts as evidence and a valuing of more diverse expertise
	Dominated by prescribed program outcomes		Including a focus on systems outcomes
Overplanning and underdelivering	Grand and detailed plans, which take months to years to develop and which spell out big visions far into the future with little to no room to adjust	Flexibility, adaptation, and ongoing reflection	Having more short-term experimentation and adaptation guided by a vision for long-term transformation
Undervaluing learning	Isolating learning as one job function or event	Integrating learning into everyday work	All staff valuing and understanding how they contribute to a learning culture
	Minimizing opportunities to share insights and missing opportunities to follow up and take action		Having regular opportunities (based on a sense of curiosity or need for clarification) to ask questions, share, and reflect

Selected readings on learning in times of crisis

Can Foundations Radically Transform How They Learn?

Taylor Newberry Consulting and the Center for Evaluation Innovation

Foundations Respond to Crisis: A Moment of Transformation?

The Center for Effective Philanthropy

Learning and Unlearning: Centering Equity in Our Evaluation Practice.

The Colorado Health Foundation

Rethinking Outcomes in a Crisis Context.

FSG

The Work of Foundations During COVID-19: Summary Report I.

Carleton University

POWER MOVES: Your Essential Philanthropy Assessment Guide for Equity and Justice.

National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy.

Unfunded: Black Communities Overlooked by Canadian Philanthropy.

Network for the Advancement of Black Communities and Carleton University's Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership program