



## Eight Ways to Share Lessons Learning

Most foundations understand the value of reporting on initiatives or projects after the fact. It's a useful way to document impact and share lessons learned. But even greater value can come when you sharing the lessons you're learning in real time, as they happen, throughout the life of an initiative. Sharing lessons learning helps your organization capture valuable moments and information that might get lost down the road. It also helps others better understand your work and feel comfortable joining you. It keeps board members and key stakeholders connected to your work. It can help inform the efforts of other foundations. And of course, when you are forthright and honest about what you're learning in real time, your foundation becomes far more transparent and trusted as a community partner.

How do you collect and share lessons learning? Here are eight things to try:

- 1. Case studies.** Many people think of case studies as very business-oriented documents that dissect how a problem was defined, addressed and solved, and the lessons acquired — all after the fact. But case studies are also great ways to tell your story in real time and describe the problems and lessons as they arise. Currently we're working on work-in-progress case studies that take a look at Blue Shield of California Foundation's approach to supporting innovation among grantees, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's foray into intentionally incorporating race, equity and inclusion into its Civic Sites, and what community change is beginning to look like after the first two years of The Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust's 10-year Healthy Places NC initiative. These case studies aren't formal or academic, but are meant to truly capture the stories of these foundations' efforts and what grantees are feeling and saying in the early stages. They are fabulous tools for keeping board members, staff, partners and peers engaged and on board with these long-term efforts.
- 2. Blog series.** For ongoing efforts, few things keep pace as easily and regularly as a blog series. Short posts by those who are overseeing and imbedded in the effort help share a range of perspectives about what's going on and what's being learned. To help prevent weekly (or monthly) writer's block, develop a series of prompts: one thing I learned this week; one thing I overheard in a meeting that got me thinking; a recent unexpected hurdle or setback; something about the project that made you smile; a mini-highlight about a person in the community whose life has been affected by your work.
- 3. Podcasts.** Podcasts don't take much time to create but they are a fun and effective way to share the stories of what you're learning in real time. They have the added bonus of being accessible to listeners when printed or online content may not be, such as during commuting time. Podcasts can feature your own staff perspectives and commentary (less costly and time consuming), or, if you can gather audio interviews from grantees or "end-users" of your work in the field, you can edit bits and pieces of your conversations together to tell the story, ala NPR (more costly and time consuming, but bigger impact).
- 4. E-newsletters.** I recommend committing to regular e-newsletters rather than a "send as we need to" strategy. For one thing, the regular schedule will keep you looking at the work you're doing with an eye for stories to share. For another, it will keep readers continually in touch and informed. If your foundation already has an e-newsletter that goes to your target audience(s), you don't need to reinvent the wheel with your own — just ask for space to share information about your work in each edition.



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## *Eight Ways to Share Lessons Learning, continued*

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- 5. Presentations.** Conferences and philanthropic gatherings at the local, state, regional and national level are always looking for good session topics to share. The fact that yours is a work in process makes for livelier discussion.
- 6. Social media.** What better way to share your lessons in real time than to set up a special Twitter handle and Facebook page for your initiative? This makes it easy for anyone connected with or interested in your work to participate in the ongoing conversation and sharing.
- 7. Create a story bank.** Even if you're not ready to tell the world about your work, you can capture moments of learning and key lessons by recording the stories of those participating as the work moves forward. That way, when you are ready to share, you'll have authentic voices and not just memories to rely on. As an added bonus, your story bank will provide content fodder for all of the above!
- 8. Letters from program officers.** This approach can be a great way to share lessons learning with other staff members. Ask program officers to write letters to their colleagues once a month or so to share what they're doing and learning as their work progresses. The more personal nature of letters can make for more interesting reading and better retention among peers.

Depending on the nature of your work and your community, there may be other techniques you can employ to share lessons learning. Start by asking yourself, "What have we learned so far? Who needs to know about it? How can we reach them?" Then, start sharing!

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