

Overview

To explore the possibilities of strengthening strategic learning in the social sector, Eval Lab was launched in 2018 by the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Families (University of Alberta), the Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations, and the Community Development Unit (Government of Alberta).

Eval Lab took place over 8 months, between April and November of 2018. The Lab comprised six full-day sessions and one individualized coaching session. It was structured to allow sufficient time between each session to 'test' concepts and to 'learn through doing.'

A cohort of 10 participants was selected through an application process that asked individuals to reflect on what they wanted to achieve through their participation in the Lab and was specifically targeted towards individuals who were curious, open-minded, critical, reflective, and willing to embrace uncertainty.

Although initially intended for team managers, the final cohort included executive directors, team managers, and internal evaluators from nine non-profit organizations of varying sizes.

Topics covered included:

- Understanding change and social innovation
- Situating evaluation in the adaptive cycle
- Complexity, Theories of Change & Logic Models
- Attribution versus contribution
- Asking questions and gathering information
- Data collection & sense-making
- Applying learning to strategy

"Since joining Eval Lab the direction of my small non-profit has drastically changed. I have a much clearer focus on the impact I want to make and while the path there is still uncertain, I know the future is bright because while I'm in the muck I am getting busy learning instead of just getting dirty!"

2.

Organizational readiness to learn played an important role. In some cases, this required addressing staff issues in order to create an environment conducive to open communication and evaluative thinking.

"My previous brushes with evaluation excited me, but I couldn't seem take the vital step of actually engaging with the ideas. I needed the framework of Eval Lab to be able to both make the information accessible to me and provide me with dedicated time to begin to use it."

4.

For many Eval Lab participants, our time together entailed confronting the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpinned their work. This included revisiting the mandates of their organizations to better align practices and principles to purpose.

Key Insights

1.

Strategic learning requires embracing uncertainty and treating evaluation as a journey rather than as a destination. Shifting to an orientation of 'learning' was essential for making evaluation less intimidating. For many, this was liberating.

3.

Situating strategic learning within the larger framework of social innovation was helpful. Drawing on systems thinking helped participants zoom in and zoom out of their interventions/programs to explore outcomes and dynamics in context.

Our Core Assumptions
The overlapping domains of evaluation, social innovation, and strategy provide useful frameworks and tools for strengthening strategic learning.

EVALLAB

Increasing Strategic Learning in the Social Sector

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Nonprofit organizations are under pressure to increase their relevancy and impact in a complex operating environment. Despite the push for evidence-based decision-making, many nonprofits find it challenging to make evaluation part of the life-blood of their organizations. Barriers include resourcing, expertise, mindsets, and organizational readiness. Evaluation is often perceived as an add-on or as lacking usefulness, rather than as a facilitator of innovation and adaptation. In response to this, concepts such as '**strategic learning**' have emerged to integrate evaluative thinking into strategic action.

Evaluative Thinking

Strategic Learning

Innovation & Adaptation

• **Innovation** and effective **adaptation** are driven by the ability of individuals and organizations to turn **evidence** into **insights** to shape **decisions** and **actions**.

Decisions → **Actions** → **Consequences**
Intended/ Unintended

• The quality of our decisions is influenced by our ability to **make sense of the information** available to us.

• The information available to us is influenced by the **questions** we ask...and by the **frameworks** and **mental models** we use to both gather and interpret this information.

• The quality of our thinking can be improved by having a **latticework** of frameworks and mental models.