Engaging Boards and Trustees in Strategic Learning:
Executive Summary

In 2009, FSG published **What's the Difference: How Foundation Trustees View Evaluation** to provide foundation leaders and staff with insights into how boards and trustees were thinking about evaluation and with practical tools for helping board members better understand the critical role evaluation plays in grantmaking for social change.

Ten years later, the topic of when and how to engage boards and trustees remains important, especially given a growing recognition that solving social problems requires an understanding of systems change and complexity, and that learning along the way is critical to creating impact. We also have realized that addressing issues of inequality and inequity in social, economic, and health outcomes is multi-dimensional and relational, requires multiple voices, and needs varied approaches.

Effecting social change in rapidly changing political and technological environments and an increasingly interconnected and complex world requires foundations to adopt a learning orientation and to embrace adaptive approaches to their work. Without continuous learning, grantmakers—and thus boards and trustees—are unaware about what is working where, with whom, and why, as well as what changes or refinements are needed in order to achieve the grantmakers' desired results. The fields of strategic learning and evaluation have also grown and shifted over the last decade, and new ways of thinking about and evaluating grantmaking and its impacts have emerged.

Our new paper, *Engaging Boards and Trustees in Strategic Learning: A Toolkit*, responds to these changes and provides a fresh outlook and set of resources for grantmaker CEOs, evaluation staff, and senior leaders to use to engage their boards and trustees in strategic learning. Our hope is that the ideas presented in this paper and the tools we provide will help grantmaker leaders and staff engage their boards and trustees in conversations about the importance of strategic learning in their decision-making and deliberation processes. The toolkit includes four sections:

1. Current Realities of Boards and Trustees

This section describes four "current realities," or observations, that reflect factors that may present grantmaker leaders and staff with some challenges to engaging boards and trustees in strategic learning.

Reality #1: Board members come to their roles with vastly different backgrounds and experiences, and their understanding of and support for strategic learning varies greatly.

Reality #2: Board members come together only a few times a year, and when they do their time is limited.

Reality #3: The roles of boards and trustees vary, often depending on the size and type of the foundation.

Reality #4: Board members may prefer or request simple metrics, quantitative information, and dashboards, which may paint an incomplete picture of how things are actually going.

2. Action Imperatives for Engaging Boards and Trustees in Strategic Learning

In the second section of the paper, we acknowledge these realities and their associated challenges, but suggest there are certain "action imperatives" that require boards and trustees to participate in conversations and activities that support their continuous learning so that they may better support the foundation's work. Below, we describe each of the action imperatives and include a set of discussion questions that leaders and staff can use to frame conversations about these topics with boards and trustees.

Action Imperative #1: Understand the necessity of and advocate for strategic learning.

Boards need to understand basic evaluation concepts and terms and the relationship between strategy and evaluation. Being an advocate for strategic learning also requires a simultaneous commitment to both accountability and learning.

Action Imperative #2: Develop and use strategic learning questions to guide decisions and actions.

Strategic questions highlight important information, serve as guardrails for moving the organization's strategy forward, and stimulate the collection of information to inform that journey.

Action Imperative #3: Value and consume different kinds, levels, and presentations of data.

Boards and trustees should be exposed to forms and representations of information other than quantitative data when seeking to understand if, where, and how their organization is making progress on its goals.

Action Imperative #4: Value and build in time for reflection and dialogue in pursuit of strategic learning during board/trustee meetings.

If they are to be advocates for and active participants in strategic learning, boards and trustees must be able and willing to engage in individual and group reflection and dialogue as they deliberate about decisions in front of them or come to new understandings about the organization's work and external context.

Action Imperative #5: Understand the importance of, and be explicit about, integrating an equity focus into the organization's work.

As stewards of a grantmaker's vision, resources, and execution, boards and trustees should deepen their understanding of who is most significantly affected by the issues their organization aims to address, what historical context and underlying causes may be particularly relevant, and the inherent power dynamics that are present.

Action Imperative #6: Understand the nature of systems change and complexity and how this relates to the organization's work.

To effectively steer the organization, boards and trustees need to have a common understanding of the nature of systems change (e.g., relationships and connections, resource flows, policy, mental models, power, and practice) so they can effectively support the organization's investments in changing the conditions that are holding problems in place.

3. Case Studies

This section includes two case studies of foundations that have put these action imperatives into practice:

Case Study #1: The California Endowment
Case Study #2: Northwest Area Foundation

4. Tools for Engaging Boards and Trustees in Strategic Learning

The final section of the paper includes ten tools linked to the action imperatives that CEOs, senior leaders, and evaluation staff can use to engage boards and trustees in a variety of strategic learning conversations. This section also includes a reference table of how the tools map onto one or more action imperatives.

1. **Strategic Learning Self-Assessment**: A short survey for CEOs and evaluation directors to use with boards/trustees to reveal information about and goals for strategic learning.

2. **What It Means To Be a Learning Organization**: A brief overview of the concept and characteristics of organizational learning and the learning organization. This includes an activity designed to help boards and trustees reflect on the extent to which the grantmaker has these characteristics (or aspires to).

3. **Strategic Learning Glossary**: A guide to frequently used terms related to strategic learning and an accompanying learning activity that helps uncover assumptions, perceptions, opinions, and attitudes about key concepts and practices related to strategic learning.

4. **What Does "Integrate an Equity Focus" Mean?** Two activities related to understanding equity and how to center it in the organization's work; includes pre-work to assign to board members before a conversation about equity to stimulate their thinking about equity and philanthropy.

5. **Systems Change Primer**: An overview of key terms, frameworks, and resources related to the concept of systems change, along with an activity to help understand the grantmaker's work as it relates to systems change.

6. **Using Your Theory of Change To Develop Strategic Learning Questions**: A guide to and learning activity for developing strategic learning questions grounded in your organization's theory of change.

7. **What Types of Data and Evidence Do We Need?** An introduction to thinking about what types of data and evidence your board needs to understand progress and impact, including a levels of evidence learning activity.

8. **What Does It Mean To Be Accountable in Philanthropy?** An introduction to thinking about the connection between accountability and learning, including an accountability and learning activity.

9. **Full List of Discussion Questions**: Includes options for facilitating conversations about one or more of the action imperative discussion questions.

10. **Engagement Practices from Your Peers**: Five examples of practices for engaging boards and trustees in strategic learning from grantmaker CEOs, evaluation directors, and board members.

Authors

Hallie Preskill, Joelle Cook, Colleen McCann, and Caitlin McConnico, FSG
Amy Shields and Meghan Duffy, GEO

About FSG

FSG is a mission-driven consulting firm supporting leaders in creating large-scale, lasting social change. Through strategy, evaluation, and research we help many types of actors—individually and collectively—make progress against the world's toughest problems.

Our teams work across all sectors by partnering with leading foundations, businesses, nonprofits, and governments in every region of the globe. We seek to reimagine social change by identifying ways to maximize the impact of existing resources, amplifying the work of others to help advance knowledge and practice, and inspiring change agents around the world to achieve greater impact.

As part of our nonprofit mission, FSG also directly supports learning communities, such as the Collective Impact Forum, Shared Value Initiative, and Talent Rewire to provide the tools and relationships that change agents need to be successful.

Learn more about FSG at **www.fsg.org**.

About GEO

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) exists to help grantmakers turn their desire to improve into real progress. That's the power of the GEO community. With more than 7,000 grantmakers across the globe, we work together to lift up the grantmaking practices that matter most to nonprofits and that truly improve philanthropy.

Learn more about GEO at **www.geofunders.org**.

Download the full toolkit at:

fsg.org/engaging-boards

JANUARY 2019