Guide to Developmental Evaluation

Learning for Action's Approach

2014

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I. Preface: The Purpose of this Guide

Organizations in the social sector are increasingly venturing into new ways to tackle the social, economic, and environmental challenges of our day. More nonprofits, foundations, and public agencies are especially looking to systems change and to social innovation as they develop their strategies. This is demanding work. With systems change and innovation, complex strategies typically unfold in complex contexts: many organizations, actors, and interests interact and connect across multiple systems, in an environment often characterized by uncertainty and rapid change.

The social sector needs evaluation to rise to the challenge as well. An evaluation approach that can fit the bill, and that is gaining momentum is **development evaluation (DE):** an approach designed to help cope with complexity, capture emergent learnings, and support actors to reflect on learnings and use them in service of ongoing strategy development.

Because DE is relatively new, LFA has put together this short Guide to outline some ways that its consultant teams approach this type of work. The Guide is not a toolkit or a recipe; instead it simply lays out LFA's current thinking on how to design evaluations that have a significant developmental component. It may be useful to LFA's clients, some of whom are new to DE themselves. The Guide:

- Provides a brief introduction to DE, presenting a "compare and contrast" with traditional evaluation;
- Discusses how we can use the Theory of Change as a foundational conceptual framework, supporting the DE effort;
- Describes different "learning tools" at our disposal, that we can use to collect, analyze, and report on data;
- Discusses the role of rapid learning in DE; and
- Lays out how LFA might set up a "learning framework" with a client.

LFA has drawn heavily from the following sources to make this Guide:

Michael Quinn Patton. 2011. Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use.

Hallie Preskill and Tanya Beer. 2012. *Evaluating Social Innovation.* (CA and Washington, D.C.: FSG and Center for Evaluation Innovation.)

Patricia Patrizi, Elizabeth Heid Thompson, Julia Coffman, and Tanya Beer. 2013. *Eyes Wide Open: Learning as Strategy under Conditions of Complexity and Uncertainty.* Foundation Review, Vol. 5, No. 3.

Julia Coffman and Tanya Beer. 2011. *Evaluation to Support Strategic Learning: Principles and Practices.* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Evaluation Innovation.)

Jewlya Lynn. 2012. *Strategic Learning in Practice: Tools to Create the Space and Structure for Learning.* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Evaluation Innovation.)

Sandra Park and Sola Takahashi. 2013. *90-Day Cycle Handbook.* (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.)

Melanie Hwalek and Mary Grcich WIlliamns. 2011. *The Real-Time Evaluation Memo: A tool for Enabling Evaluative Thinking and Learning in Foundations and Nonprofits.* Foundation Review, Vol. 2, No. 3.

II. Introduction to Developmental Evaluation

Defining Developmental Evaluation

What is developmental evaluation? Here are two helpful definitions from the father of DE, Michael Quinn Patton:

- Developmental evaluation refers to long-term, partnering relationships between evaluators and those engaged in innovative initiatives and development. Developmental evaluation processes include asking evaluative questions and gathering information to provide feedback and support developmental decision-making and course corrections along the emergent path.[1]
- Developmental evaluation informs and supports innovative and adaptive development in complex dynamic environments. DE brings to innovation and adaptation the processes of asking evaluative questions, applying evaluation logic, and gathering and reporting evaluative data to support project, program, product, and/or organizational development with timely feedback.[2]

Comparing Developmental to Traditional Evaluation

It's easier to understand what DE is when we contrast it to traditional types of evaluation (to see what it is *not*):

Comparison of Developmental Evaluation to Traditional Evaluation

Evaluation Component	Traditional Evaluation	Developmental Evaluation
Purpose	▪ To test a model. ▪ To judge an effort's success, merit, and scalability. ▪ To hold organizations accountable to their stated objectives.	▪ To incorporate data and ongoing reflection into social change strategies, thus informing strategy decisions, or to change or refine strategies or implementation.
Best Suited for	▪ Improving programs. ▪ Determining whether interventions are effective.	▪ Initiatives with complicated and complex strategies (with multiple possible avenues to achieving outcomes, and with specific goals and activities that develop as the strategy is being implemented). ▪ Initiatives in which there is a degree of uncertainty in terms of whether the strategies will work. ▪ Organizations comfortable with risk-taking, learning, and that are equipped to adapt strategies in response to data and feedback. ▪ Organizations that have the space, time, and structure for collective dialogue and exchange.

[1] Utilization-Focused Evaluation (4th ed). 2008. (CA: Sage Publications.)
[2] Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use. 2011. (NY: The Guilford Press.)

Comparison of Developmental Evaluation to Traditional Evaluation

Evaluation Component	Traditional Evaluation	Developmental Evaluation
Role of the Evaluator	▪ Outside observer. ▪ “Hands-off” in terms of program implementation. ▪ Delivering reports at the end of regular reporting periods.	▪ Embedded and hands-on, working in partnership with key staff who can determine when and how strategy is planned, execute, and adjusted. ▪ Working rapidly, responsively, and flexibly. Reporting meets the organization’s decision-making needs.
Evaluation Process	▪ Articulate how program activities are intended to achieve a set of outcomes. ▪ Specify the indicators that measure progress toward those outcomes. ▪ Collect and analyze data on those indicators. ▪ Follow a fixed plan.	▪ Data are framed in a way that clarifies the data’s connection to strategy, surfacing the implications of the data for next steps. ▪ Intentional learning and reflection processes are built into the process so that the data’s end-users – the strategic decision-makers – become sense-makers who can interpret the meaning of data and uncover the implications as a team. ▪ Adjust evaluation as needed.
Data Use	▪ Use data for program improvement. ▪ Decide whether to continue funding a program, or raise more funding, based on demonstrated effectiveness. ▪ Share with the field a model that is shown to be effective.	▪ Make decisions about the next step, or the next question to ask. ▪ Modify strategy. ▪ Modify the strategy’s implementation. ▪ Abandon aspects of the strategy that are not showing results.

Why We Need Developmental Evaluation

The definitions begin to point to the utility of the DE approach: it is useful when the object of evaluation is *innovative* and *under development,* and when the development is unfolding in a *complex environment.* The traction that DE is gaining within the evaluation field parallels changes in philanthropy: foundations are increasingly “embracing complexity.”[3] Rather than focusing on funding one program at a time, foundations (and other system actors) on the cutting edge are more likely to take a systems approach. They are designing initiatives designed to build systems, create systems change, generate collective impact, and lead to policy or social change.

These systems approaches require system actors to develop strategy for how they plan to work with others in the system to create change. But because these initiatives unfold in complex environments, strategy cannot be executed like a blueprint, with A leading predictably to B and then to C. While actors often have a very clear sense of their ultimate goals, the pathway is typically unpredictable and “emergent.” It involves multiple actors with diverse interests, interacting in dynamic economic, social, and political environments, and with all of them having only a partial understanding of the links between cause and effect.

[3] See FSG’s 2013 Learning Brief: *Next Generation Evaluation: Embracing Complexity, Connectivity, and Change*, by Srik Gopalakrishnan, Hallie Preskill, and Shijie Lu.

To make matters more complicated, systems change strategies typically include innovation. Foundations and other system actors are trying new approaches, adapting tested approaches to a new context. As with all innovation, there is much that is not known. These unknowns compound the complexity and add to the emergent quality of the pathways to ultimate goals.

Under these conditions, traditional evaluation is not the best fit for the challenges at hand. There is new demand for evaluation that can better handle uncertainty, emergence, and the need for rapid feedback. In other words, clients need an evaluation that can support decision-makers to:

- Use data and learnings to inform ongoing decisions about strategy,
- Take stock at key moments and decide on next steps,
- Make appropriate mid-course corrections,
- Uncover tensions among interests or actors within a strategy's ecosystem,
- Identify emerging opportunities,
- Keep an eye out for important but unintended effects that can impact the strategy's success,
- Identify environmental threats to a strategy's success,
- Avoid continuing to invest in the components of the strategy that are not working, and
- Intensify efforts where strategy is successful.

Commitment to Learning

Social sector organizations interested in conducting a DE usually have a long-standing commitment to learning – and this commitment is indeed utterly critical to successful strategy. By its very nature, strategy is not a recipe, but instead is uncertain and complex – meaning that success is unlikely unless strategists have intentionally set out to learn, adapt, and improve over time.

When undertaking DE, social sector organizations need to be clear about their commitment to learning, which should include:

- **Seeing the Theory of Change as a *theory* of how things might go, rather than as a *blueprint* which must be followed.** Due to the complicated nature of systems change initiatives, the fact that they include innovative elements, and the complexity of the environments in which they unfold, an initiative's theory of change (ToC) cannot possibly predict with a high level of certainty how things will go. Instead, ToCs are based on research, deep experience, and some willingness to experiment. Nevertheless, they are often treated as a blueprint to which the foundations, public agencies, and nonprofits are held accountable. Instead we must constantly remind ourselves that the ToC is a *theory* about how things will go. It is the *planned* strategy, but reality will interfere and we can expect to adjust as conditions change, and as we learn new things about what works and what does not. We may adjust only our implementation, but we may also adjust core elements of our strategy. DE will help to highlight what we are learning that can function as feedback for strategy and implementation.

> Rather than serving as a "blueprint for action," the TOC approach was designed to increase awareness of the system of actors, conditions, and dynamics – both at the outset and ongoing. Doing so was to provide the focus and drive for better questions, knowledge development, learning, and strategy course correction.
>
> *From: Eyes Wide Open: Learning as Strategy under Conditions of Complexity and Uncertainty*[4]

[4] Patricia Patrizi, Elizabeth Heid Thompson, Julia Coffman, and Tanya Beer. 2013. *Eyes Wide Open: Learning as Strategy under Conditions of Complexity and Uncertainty.* Foundation Review, Vol. 5, No. 3.

- **Openness to seeing where the strategy (or its implementation) is failing.** Failure often gives us our greatest opportunity to learn! And sometimes this means comparing where the same activity is working in one part of the system, but failing in another. What factors are different in these two parts of the system? If we can isolate those, we can gain certainty about *what it takes* to succeed.

> People should not shy away from failure. […] There is no point in doing something new if you are not open to the possibility that it might not work. DE can help you learn if it's working or not.
>
> *Michelle Clarke, Burns Memorial Fund, Quoted in Evaluating Social Innovation*[5]

- **Willing to take the time for reflection.** Often the time set aside for reflection can seem like "too much processing" – after all, there is so much work to be done, and people's life chances (and sometimes lives) are in the balance. Reflection can seem like it is siphoning away effort from actually getting the work done. However, if we don't allocate sufficient time for joint analysis and reflection, we would be breaking a link in the feedback loop, which would prevent us from using the learnings to inform decisions and behavior.

> The whole idea of reflective learning is frustrating to some people. A lot of people love the conversations, while others say, "Good God, do we have to do this again and are we ever going to get anywhere?"
>
> *Marc Langlois, Skipping Stones Consulting, Quoted in Evaluating Social Innovation*

The Role of the Evaluator

LFA envisions the role of the evaluator as a **strategic learning partner (SLP).** The SLP stands shoulder to shoulder with the client, supporting the client to ask deep questions, reflect on learnings, and make sure the learnings are used well for decision-making. The client should expect a lot from its SLP team. To do DE well, the SLP team needs a diverse skillset, including:[6]

- **Interpersonal Skills**
  - Building strong client relationships based on good rapport and trust,
  - Using multiple forms of communications,
  - Being tactful and diplomatic, and
  - Observing interpersonal and organizational power dynamics.
- **Group Facilitation Skills**
  - Facilitating group learning processes,
  - Facilitating courageous conversations and providing constructive feedback,
  - Asking the right questions at the right time,
  - Listening for what is being said as well as what is not being said, and
  - Identifying themes, synthesizing information, and generating insights in real time.
- **A Complex Systems Orientation**
  - Zooming in to see the details of what is happening and zooming out to see the big picture,
  - Interpreting conversations and situations from different angles,
  - Seeing the interconnectedness among various system actors and events, and
  - Being comfortable with ambiguity and change.

[5] Hallie Preskill and Tanya Beer. 2012. *Evaluating Social Innovation.* (CA and Washington, D.C.: FSG and Center for Evaluation Innovation.)
[6] List adapted from Hallie Preskill and Tanya Beer. 2012. *Evaluating Social Innovation.* (CA and Washington, D.C.: FSG and Center for Evaluation Innovation.)

III. Theory of Change as the Ground of Inquiry

The Theory of Change Articulates Strategy

We use ToCs to articulate the strategies and activities that system actors must undertake to solve complex social problems. To do this we must also articulate how we expect the links in the causal chain to work. We answer the questions: How will these strategies lead to those outcomes? How will one outcome lead to another? How will it all add up to social change? A high-quality ToC also makes assumptions explicit. We answer the question: What capacities do we need, or what environmental conditions must prevail, for each step and link in the causal chain to succeed?

…[S]trategy development took a leap forward in the late 1990s with the development of the theory-of-change approach (TOC)…. […] The TOC approach sought to 1) expand and foster recognition of the deep interconnections among system elements, actors, and interventions; and 2) shed light on the underlying assumptions of the TOC and the uncertainties associated with them.

From: Eyes Wide Open: Learning as Strategy under Conditions of Complexity and Uncertainty[7]

Keeping the Theory of Change Alive

It is common to talk about the ToC as a "living document" – but in practice we are liable to slip back into thinking that it truly is "finished." We may neglect to refresh it periodically, making adjustments based on what we have learned. We may also measure progress against it, seeing deviation from it as a sign that we are off track.

Nevertheless, we will rise to the challenge of using the ToC as a living document. One of the most important ways we can do this is to use the ToC as a way to provide conceptual structure for the DE engagement – to use it as the "ground of inquiry" as we identify the questions we want the evaluation to answer.

Using the Theory of Change to Identify Strategic Learning Questions

Because the ToC articulates strategy, it is an excellent conceptual framework on which to base the questions that we want the DE to answer: our **strategic learning questions (SLQs).** To do this, we should in engage in "interrogating" the ToC. *Not* for the purpose of re-opening old conversations, but for the purpose of unearthing some critical questions that will generate important learnings. Interrogation of the ToC involves such activities as:

- Articulating the links in the ToC's causal chains as hypotheses to be tested,
- Discussing assumptions, and the level of certainty we have about each one,
- Expanding on existing assumptions:
    - Additional conditions that need to hold if the strategy is to be successful
    - The conditions that could jeopardize success
- Identifying key actors in the system whose interests may not align with – or may run counter to – the articulated strategy (even if there is common interest in the ultimate goal).

Using the ToC as a point of departure, *Section VI (Setting up a Learning Framework)* contains more detailed guidance on developing strategic learning questions.

[7] Patricia Patrizi, Elizabeth Heid Thompson, Julia Coffman, and Tanya Beer. 2013. *Eyes Wide Open: Learning as Strategy under Conditions of Complexity and Uncertainty.* Foundation Review, Vol. 5, No. 3.

IV. Learning Tools

The Disappearing Distinctions among Data Collection, Analysis, and Reporting

With traditional evaluation, there are clear boundaries around data collection, data analysis, and reporting. Evaluators analyze the data they have collected, put it down in a report, and turn it into the client. In the case of DE, often these activities serve more than one purpose – for example, the SLPs may participate in real-time data analysis as they collect data (e.g. while they attend strategy meetings). Or the SLPs may facilitate a reflection meeting at which they present findings, and the reflection becomes an opportunity for collaborative data analysis.

Because of these disappearing distinctions, we may want to think about all of these activities simply as **learning tools.** The table below summarizes these tools that may be used as part of developmental evaluation, and shows their areas of overlap. The remainder of this section of the Guide outlines how LFA and the client team might use each tool during an evaluation engagement.

Learning Tools
Showing Overlap of Data Collection, Analysis, and Reporting

	Data Collection	Data Analysis	Reporting
Regular meetings with the client team	✓		✓
Participant observation at strategy planning meetings	✓	✓	
Participant observation at: ▪ Routine implementation events ▪ Critical implementation events	✓		
Discussions with partners who have their "ear to the ground"	✓	✓	
Document review	✓		
Key informant interviews	✓		
Running narratives and timelines		✓	
Grounded theory memos		✓	✓
Collective reflection using Before Action and After Action Reviews	✓	✓	
Learning decks			✓
Strategic learning debriefs		✓	✓
Learning memos			✓

Regular Meetings with the Client Team

The SLP may want to hold standing meetings with the client team (or another team at the center of strategy implementation). These meetings present opportunities both for data collection *and* for informal reporting. In the sense that these meetings are data collection opportunities, they are essentially participant observation opportunities. The SLP team can also use these meetings to reflect on recent lessons learned.

Participant Observation: the “Embedded Evaluator”

When conducting a DE, SLPs should have as much contact as they can with the initiative. This type of access is necessary so that the SLP can be present to carefully observe the strategy as it unfolds, and the implementation as it takes root. These first-hand observations will, in turn, allow the SLP to perceive group dynamics, choices for particular actions, unanticipated outcomes, emerging tensions or environmental threats, and new opportunities. In practice, the SLP should attend (sometimes in person, often by phone):

- Client team strategy meetings,
- Planning meetings focused on implementation of specific activities within the strategies,
- Regular implementation-related meetings (with the people and organizations that are on the “front lines”), and
- High-level implementation convenings (when multiple system actors are brought together).

The SLP will treat all of these meetings as data collection opportunities, listening carefully and taking detailed notes. And at the strategy meetings, the SLP will also likely participate with the group in collaborative reflection and data analysis. This will usually not be done in a formal way, but instead will be part of the SLP’s “learning stance.”

Discussions with Partners who have an “Ear to the Ground”

Clearly the SLP cannot participate in *every* meeting or key event – and certainly will miss many informal interactions among key system actors. Because embedding can go only so far, the SLP can use the help of partners much closer to the ground of the initiative. This includes the client team, as well as partners the client team has enlisted outside of the organization. Intermediaries, or other “network hubs,” are often good choices for this type of data collection partner. The SLP’s data collection activities should include regular “downloads” from these partners who can provide information and updates about emerging developments: connections, challenges, opportunities, and ideas for next steps.

Document Review and Key Informant Interviews

DE has these types of data collection (document review and key informant interviews) in common with traditional evaluation. The difference for DE is that the use of these methods is not completely planned out at the beginning – data collection is much more responsive to evaluation’s emerging needs.

- **Document Review.** Document review should happen on a rolling basis. The client team and partners can keep an eye out for the documents that would be helpful for the SLP team, and sharing these documents in as timely a fashion as possible. The SLP team will read and catalogue these documents, and use the information gathered from them to make adjustments to its own “running narratives” of how the strategy is unfolding.
- **Key informant interviews (KIIs).** For DE, KIIs usually serve two purposes: data collection *and* relationship building. They are also opportunities to invite reflection on the initiative and on how implementation is going. For these reasons, the protocols are set up to inspire conversation and reflection, and are typically more open-ended than those used in traditional evaluation. In addition, protocols are not developed once – instead, conversations with stakeholders happen multiple times and protocols are developed in an ongoing way to build off of previous conversations, and in response to current information needs.

Running Narratives/Timelines and Grounded Theory Memos

The complexity of initiatives can be overwhelming – they have many moving parts, many people undertaking different and (interconnected) strands of work, and rapidly unfolding events. Under these circumstances, the SLP team must keep tabs on what is happening, so that they can keep a clear and organized understanding of where the initiative is in its development, how events and components are interacting, and what themes may be emerging. The SLP team will do this in two ways:

- **Running Narratives and Timelines.** To keep up to date, the SLP team will process multiple data sources (notes taken at participant observation opportunities, notes from conversations with those who have their ears to the ground, document review, and key informant interviews) by entering the data into running narratives and timelines. By using multiple data sources, the SLP team can "fact-check," and make any needed corrections. While the SLP team is happy to share these with the client team, LFA envisions the narratives and timelines as internal data analysis documents from which selected sections will be later used in a more polished form for reporting.
- **Grounded Theory Memos.** The grounded theory memo is a data analysis method from the ethnography tradition within Sociology.[8] These memos focus not just on recounting information, but more importantly on seeing patterns, making connections, and identifying the new questions arising. These memos can be used for more frequent, informal reporting to the client team.

Collective Reflection Using Before/After Action Reviews

An organization called Fourth Quadrant Partners has developed some techniques to build the capacity of organizations to learn and adapt in dynamic conditions. One of these techniques is two sets of questions that are part of a "before action review" and an "after action review." The SLP team can champion the use of these techniques to facilitate collective reflection – sometimes this will happen in formal sessions but the team may call for it to happen in impromptu ways as well. Here are the some questions to use for each review:

Before & After Action Review Questions

Before	After
▪ What are the intended results?	▪ What actions did we (or our partners) undertake?
▪ What will that look like?	▪ What were the results?
▪ What are the challenges we might encounter?	▪ What caused those results?
▪ What have we learned from similar situations?	▪ What lessons did we learn?
▪ What will make us successful?	▪ What do we choose to apply to future actions?

Learning Decks, Strategic Learning Debriefs, and Learning Memos

The client team should expect formal reporting from the SLP team. But these formal reporting opportunities – instead of consisting of long documents that happen infrequently – will be shorter documents that happen more often. These opportunities will integrate collective reflection.

- **Learning Decks.** At planned intervals (in three- or four-month cycles), we can develop learning decks. These decks will summarize data we have analyzed so far for the purpose of responding to the strategic learning questions.

[8] Glaser, B., and Strauss, A. 1999. The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research.

- **Strategic Learning Debriefs.** At in-person meetings, we can reflect on the learning decks and undertake collaborative meaning-making with the client team. As we extract lessons, we will be considering their implications for strategy. These debriefs should include as many actors taking on key system roles. Their participation will provide an important perspective (because of their deep involvement with implementation). In addition, they will take active part in any decisions to make course corrections. As a result, they will see (and be part of developing) the rationale for course corrections, and will be far less likely to see changes as "abrupt leadership shifts."
- **Learning memos.** SLPs will capture the wisdom of the group by documenting the strategic learning debrief meetings. The SLP team will summarize the lessons that the group collectively draws, as well as recommendations for how to move forward on strategy or implementation.

V. Rapid Learning in Developmental Evaluation

The Special Role of Rapid Learning

Rapid learning plays an important role in DE for two reasons. First, organizations undertaking systems initiatives move at a fast pace – and there has often been a mismatch between the pace of the work and the pace of evaluation. By the time evaluation findings arrive, decision points have often already gone by. Second, these systems initiatives usually involve innovation: either a new approach to a problem, or an approach that has been tested elsewhere but needs to be adapted to local conditions. Innovation involves prototyping, testing, and adapting. In other words: rapid learning.

This section of the Guide lays out one approach for how the SLP might support rapid learning as part of a DE engagement.

A Proposed Approach to Rapid Learning

The term "rapid learning" denotes an effort to collect and analyze data that either: (1) answers a strategic learning question, and then delivers the analysis in time to inform key decisions, or (2) provides feedback on an innovative program activity or service (this type we will call "rapid prototyping").

Informing Decisions by Answering Strategic Learning Questions

The SLP can undertake this type of rapid learning using the learning tools described in the section on learning decks, strategic learning debriefs, and learning memos*.* We revisit this process briefly here just to emphasize certain aspects of the process:

- For this type of rapid learning to be successful, we need to take steps to ensure that the decks, debriefs, and memos are *truly* useful for decision-making. This means choosing the right questions and calibrating the timing so that decision-makers have the information and analysis they need when the decision point arrives. It also means that the client team will "champion the … memo by making sure it is put on the right table, with the right staff, at the right time."[9]
- The utility of the learning process also rests on the SLP team's ability to ensure that they have answered the "so what?" question: what are the implications of the learnings for decision-making about implementation and strategy?
- The SLP team and client team can capitalize on their standing meetings to ensure that: (1) the client team is informally receiving information that it can use, even before the formal due-date of the learning deck; and (2) the client team provides updates to the SLP team so that the SLP team has all the most current information it needs to analyze its findings.
- We can use this type of rapid learning for "constructive trouble-making." These decks may be an excellent place to:
    - Surface areas of disagreement,
    - Warn of the possibility of missed opportunities, or
    - Point to ways that systems components could be more effectively connected.

[9] Melanie Hwalek and Mary Grcich WIlliamns. 2011. *The Real-Time Evaluation Memo: A tool for Enabling Evaluative Thinking and Learning in Foundations and Nonprofits.* Foundation Review, Vol. 2, No. 3.

Rapid Prototyping: Providing Rapid Feedback on an Innovation

With rapid prototyping, a program, service, or activity is launched, and at the same time, the SLP establishes a system for providing regular feedback (both formal and informal). Often this feedback system involves intensive on-the-ground observation work. Using these feedback loops, the SLP team can collect data to understand what the successes and the pain points are, and these learnings can be used to adjust the model or approach.

A potential risk of engaging the SLP team in rapid prototyping is the possibility that the team might find itself engaging in repeated learning cycles for this one service or program activity. This will necessarily limit the range of SLQs that the team can engage in. The client may instead want to make use of the SLP team's ability to engage in multiple *types* of SLQs that can add value across different areas of the strategy.

> To identify high-value objects of rapid learning, the team should ask itself: Why is it important to prototype and test this particular innovation? What are the benefits if we develop a successful program or service? What might be the benefits of the learnings even if we are *not* successful?

A Word of Caution on the Possibility of Learning "Too Rapidly"

Clients engaging in a DE are typically deeply committed to finding what works, and are serious about moving on from what is *not* solving important problems. The client team needs timely information in order to avoid continuing to invest in the wrong strategy, or in implementation that is off track.

We should be careful, however, not to jump the gun and pull the investment without serious consideration: social dynamics are complex, and even if we are not seeing results *yet,* it is still possible that we are building underlying capacities that will – in the future – lead to better results. Or that we are moving in the right direction, but we have not moved far enough to see the positive change manifest in "moving the needle" on the outcomes we care about.

> You can't wait until the end of a multiyear project to find out how it's going, but at the same time, you can't do it every month. You have to have enough time to let something happen. […] You can ask questions too soon and not really learn anything, or wait too long and it's no longer useful.
>
> *Susan Patterson, Knight Foundation*
> *Quoted in Evaluating Social Innovation*

In addition, it is risky to change direction too often. Partners and other actors in the system may become jaded, and be reluctant to invest time, energy, and hope in something that they expect might change soon anyway.

We cannot, however, stay the course simply because stakeholders are averse to change, or because we are hoping that there is positive movement that we simply cannot yet see. What is the answer? We have a few options to help guard against "learning too rapidly:"

- Involve on-the-ground implementers in the decision to change course. They can help us interpret the data, and can offer additional perspectives about what is working that we might not have come across in data collection so far.
- For outcomes that may exhibit significant time lag from the time of the initial intervention to the time that we see results (e.g. academic achievement), look for *leading indicators.* For academic achievement, some leading indicators are higher attendance rates and greater school attachment. If we see movement on these leading indicators, we can expect that the more distal outcomes will eventually move in the right direction.

VI. Setting up a Learning Framework

Learning Framework v. Evaluation Plan

In traditional evaluation, data collection is tightly coupled to a set of program activities and the intended program outcomes. Data analysis is meant to assess whether activities are carried out as planned, and if the outcomes have achieved the desired levels. Reporting documents this assessment, and tends to happen infrequently.

Under these circumstances, developing an evaluation plan is a relatively straightforward exercise. But this is not the case for DE, where the goal is not fidelity to a plan – but rather to learn, and to make smart changes to strategy or implementation when necessary. This means that evaluation activities must be responsive to these developmental needs, and as a result they are much less formulaic and proscribed. The goals of DE activities are to:

- Answer strategic learning questions,
- Identify the next relevant questions to explore,
- Provide rapid feedback,
- Attend to emerging developments,
- Capture learnings,
- Use learnings as feedback for strategy, and
- Support system actors to adjust strategy or implementation, based on what we have learned.

For this reason, an unchanging evaluation plan is not what we need – instead we need a *learning framework*, which (1) follows DE principles, (2) is tailored to the situation at hand, and (3) can shift emphases when the situation calls for it.

That said, a learning framework should *not* be an excuse for poor planning and lack of discipline! LFA, as part of its DE engagements, will develop a learning framework which sets out an initial plan, including LFA's commitment to a set of core deliverables. The key is to remain flexible in two senses:

1) For core deliverables, the topics of investigation may change as new questions emerge; and
2) Outside of the core deliverables, the activities may shift as we collaboratively perceive the need to shift attention to a different issue.

In this section we lay out the components involved in designing a learning framework that the SLP team can use to Guide its work with the client team.

Developing Strategic Learning Questions

The general idea of strategic learning questions (SLQs) is that we want to focus the DE not on: "are we accomplishing what we said we would accomplish?" But on: "what questions do we need the answers to in order to make our best decisions on how to move forward?" In identifying these questions, we should keep a few things in mind:

- **A good question is one that will truly make a difference to the decisions we make.** In testing an SLQ for whether it can pass this test, we should do a quick thought experiment: How would we move forward differently if we found out X? Or Y? Or Z? If there are too many constraints on our ability to *act* on the information, we should not ask the question.

- **The list of SLQs will change over time.** We can identify an initial list, and prioritize one or two to answer in the near term. As we learn new things and the context changes, we will certainly modify this list. As we answer each SLQ, we are likely to uncover the next important questions to answer.

To develop our SLQs, we will brainstorm a list as part of an in-person meeting. We will not worry about the length of the list at first, or how feasible it will be to answer these questions. We simply want to get the list down.

Burning Questions

We begin with burning questions that the team may have about the strategy or about how to implement the strategy.

- What is keeping people up at night about the strategy? About the implementation?
- What do we *not* know right now, that we need to know to move forward effectively?

Articulating the Links in the Theory of Change as Hypotheses

We can start with the burning questions, but it is also important to use the discipline of working with the ToC to identify learning questions. The initial entry point is to articulate links in an existing ToC as a hypothesis: an "if/then" statement of how we believe events will unfold. Then we can unearth our assumptions: what are the *reasons* we believe the hypothesis to be true?

Identifying SLQs by "Interrogating" the ToC's Assumptions

In theory, we could go straight into a discussion of the assumptions. However, to open up our thinking, it is helpful to first conduct a "pre-mortem."

A Pre-Mortem of the Strategy

- Imagine it is three to five years from now, and the strategy has been an utter disaster. We did not come close to achieving any of our intended goals.
- You have a sheet of paper in front of you; take five minutes to write a brief history of that disaster.

The pre-mortem will allow us to be creative about what may go wrong, and will remove the "optimism bias."[10] Based on what we have thought of, we can move on to using our "ToC interrogation" to identify SLQs. To undertake the interrogation, we can return to hypotheses and assumptions and take these steps:

- Ask: "What is the level of *certainty* we have about each of the assumptions?"
- Identify the factors that influence that certainty level.
  - What's the role of environmental or internal factors?
  - What's the role of other actors in the ecosystem?
- After identifying these factors, use the insights to identify SLQs (the table below has questions to help us think about what the SLQs might be).

[10] For more on the pre-mortem, see: Kahneman, D. 2013. Thinking, Fast and Slow.

Identifying SLQs through a Discussion of ToC Assumptions

Aspects of the Initiative's Context	Interrogating the ToC	Identifying the SLQs
Role of Environmental and Internal Factors	▪ What factors need to be in place to support success of the strategy? ▪ What factors, or changes in the environment, could jeopardize success?	▪ Do we need to learn more about any of these environmental or internal factors? ▪ Do we need to explore what we can do to lower the risk due to adverse factors?
Role of Actors in the Ecosystem	▪ Are there important actors whose interests may not align with articulated strategy? ▪ Is there a reason to believe that these actors may stand in the way of the strategy's success?	▪ Do we need to learn more about actors whose interests may not be aligned with plans for implementing the strategy (even if they share ultimate goals with us)? ▪ Do we need to learn more about how we could work with key actors to bring their interests into alignment?

Prioritizing Early SLQs

Once we have our long list, we can do a quick dot-voting exercise. Each person will have three dots that they can allocate to the three questions they see as highest priority. The SLP team will record the votes, and bring the list with the vote results to the client team for final vetting.

Revisiting the SLQ List as the Initiative Unfolds

We will have the initial list that we developed together at the outset, but we will also periodically revisit the SLQ list. Part of DE is allowing new questions to emerge from experience. Here are things to keep in mind as we collectively decide what we should tackle next:

- What is not working out as we expected?
- What warning signs we see on the horizon?
- Have competing initiatives cropped up?
- Are there new key players who present threats to the strategy?
- Which strategy elements are getting traction, where, and why?
- What kind of resistance is encountered and why?
- Are new policies emerging that will affect how the strategy unfolds?
- What are we learning about the kinds of capacities that we needed in order to execute the strategy well?

Deciding on Learning Tools to Include in the Learning Framework

The learning tools laid out in section IV of this Guide provide us with multiple options for the learning tools that we might use. As part of setting up the learning framework, we should decide which learning tools we want to include for data collection, analysis, and reporting. These will consist of three types:

- **Core Communications Routines.** These routines are the ones that we should commit to in the beginning and keep as part of the DE engagement. They should include at a minimum: (1) the regular standing meetings between the client team and the SLP team; (2) regular discussions with partners who have their "ear to the ground" for the purposes of data collection; and (3) the in-person meeting for the strategic learning debriefs.

- **Participant Observation.** The SLP needs to be as embedded as is feasible. The SLP team and the client team should work together to identify the most important regular meetings and events for SLP team members to attend either by phone or in person.
- **Additional Learning Tools that the SLP Team will Employ to Answer SLQs.** Once the client team and the SLP team have together identified learning questions, the SLP team can propose data collection and analysis plans that are tailored to those particular questions.

Codifying the Learning Framework

After the SLP team has worked together with the client team to identify SLQs and make plans for rapid learning, the SLP team will have what it needs to put the learning framework in writing. The framework will not be able to spell out a complete work plan, because SLQs will have been identified only for the first learning cycle. However, we would include a timeline specifying when these decisions should be made over the course of the year.