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Creating a Learning Culture: Lessons from the ONN Conference

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“ In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the others find themselves equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.” – Eric Hoffer, social philosopher and author

Last week, we attended [Nonprofit Driven](#), an annual event for nonprofits and charities that is hosted by the [Ontario Nonprofit Network](#). The event is attended by about 600 sector leaders, along with funders, community builders and government. One of the sessions we attended was about how we can turn our data and stories into thoughtful and useful insights. This was of real interest to us, as PLC embarks on a new initiative to help nonprofits in Peel increase their ability to do evaluation.

This session challenged us to think of what would be necessary to create a culture of learning in nonprofit organizations. Each table group was tasked with coming up with a kind of ‘Do’s and Don’ts’ list to get us thinking about factors that hinder the growth of a culture of learning and what would help to build it.

Here are some things that we learned!

We like to learn

People are naturally curious so making learning our focus enables us to prioritize being reflective of our work. A learning mindset can also motivate us to come up with new approaches to making social change. And when it comes to evaluation, if we reframe it as our opportunity to learn, it’s more likely we will undertake evaluation activities that are useful for us and not just for our funders.

Whole-organization approach

A culture of learning should extend to all who are involved with an organization, including service recipients and volunteers. Widening the scope of who can help an organization learn increases the range of perspectives that can lead to greater organizational effectiveness. The added benefit is that there can be greater uptake of evaluation activities, knowing that as a learning organization, the results will be used to shape future direction.

Cultivate a desire for improvement

A learning culture can’t be developed if what’s learned is used to correct performance issues. Using results to reward some or punish others is demoralizing and encourages a culture where people are less likely to be honest about what isn’t working. A learning culture asks everyone

involved to honestly reflect on their results and generate ways of working that will make them more effective contributors to organizational goals.

Reframe failures

The best opportunities for learning come from things that didn't go as planned. Many famous inventors and entrepreneurs have openly shared how many times they failed at something before they had success. As nonprofits, we feel that failure of any degree is not acceptable – that it could have serious consequences with our funders and reduce public trust in what we do. A learning culture asks that we honestly look at our failures so that we can learn from them to discover what we can do to improve.

On purpose, leader-led, and strategic

Embracing a culture of learning doesn't just happen – it needs to be intentional and it needs to start with leaders who are willing to embed a learning mindset into all aspects of their organization. Defining our learning goals and linking them to our strategic vision is a first step. We also need to think ahead about what we will do with what we find, and how we will share our learning with our staff, our boards, our volunteers and our community. Building a learning culture also takes a commitment of financial and human resources so that infrastructure and staff capacity can be developed.

As leaders, we know that changing culture can take time, so it's more of a journey than a destination. We can begin by modelling an environment with our staff teams where it's safe to have candid conversations and where we actively encourage them to think creatively about ways to improve how our collective work gets done. At its foundation, however, creating a learning culture in our nonprofit organizations is about hope; that no matter how limited our resources, we believe in our potential to improve what we do today, to meet the needs of tomorrow.

Liz Dennis

Liz has worked for over 10 years in the nonprofit sector as a program manager and senior leader. Most recently, she helped to develop a provincial volunteering website and coached nonprofits on their use of story as a tool for engagement. Previous to this, she managed a thriving community information program in Guelph, Ontario, where, in addition to her leadership role, participated in the development and implementation of provincial data standards and was an active member of numerous community planning initiatives. Liz has a Certificate in Leadership and Management in the Not for Profit Sector and was an ONN Connect the Sector Fellow. She brings her passion for nonprofits to PLC as the first point of contact with clients and members. She also supports PLC in finding, tracking and sharing our impact.