

CHANGING HOW WE LEARN AND GAUGE IMPACT



Lastly, a critical and often overlooked aspect of any program design process is the role of learning, data, and evaluation. While we previously discussed the role of data in informing design, shifting our lens around how we define and measure impact is necessary for network-based work. **Leadership experiences for network-based impact require a different approach to learning and evaluation than we are used to.** In fact, the old methods of monitoring and evaluation will fall far short and perhaps even undermine impact by not providing timely or actionable metrics. At worst, traditional methods of evaluation can also reinforce power imbalances by privileging the funder perspective, valuing some forms of knowledge over others, and generating questions and data collection methods that are an ineffective use of time and resources that weaken the important work required in the communities.

Funders, operators, and designers have to shift their mindset from static outcomes to gathering data that informs the understanding of the dynamic processes at play and that fuel the network with information needed to act most efficiently and effectively. The mindset has to also shift to encouraging and explicitly supporting data collection that serves the ultimate learning of the network and informs the broader field. Understanding how relationships are built and supported, identifying gaps within the networks, and gathering data related to the needs of specific communities *before* designing and intervention (or supporting grantees in doing so) are all ways of shifting use of data.

Measurement efforts can assess the size, shape, and growth of the network, particularly after a certain amount of time has passed. However, in terms of communicating return on investment, that is one relatively limited use of measurement. It also results in data literacy and measurement skills remaining outside the network (in the hands of operators and evaluators) versus becoming a critical network skill on its own.

Many network-leadership scholars are suggesting that network-based movements adopt an emergent learning approach. Critically, funders must create the conditions that foster a learning approach over a performative/evaluative approach. This involves equipping leaders with relevant data about their context and facilitating data meaning-making and connecting it to goals and strategies (of the leader and the network). Emergent learning practices then identify proximal opportunities to test new ideas and quickly gather data on their effectiveness. Cohort programs can amplify these efforts by providing data literacy skills as well as dedicated time to share ideas, discuss generalizability or transferability, and learn from improvements. The learning orientation can be further amplified if program designers build collective problem-solving into the program itself. When fellows (who often may be or become future grantees) work together toward common goals they build stronger relationships.²⁶

This requires a shift for funders to let go of their common metrics of evaluation and even their overall mindset of performative evaluation (monitoring that fellows or grantees comply with various metrics). Prioritizing network metrics may increase both the funder and the participants' understandings of new connections and lead to collaborative projects, pathways of funding, or policy wins. There are ways that this shift can be enacted on both a macro and micro scale.



For example, field-wide network analysis studies that map relationships among leaders, organizations, goals, and resources can be an instrumental step to provide Jewish network influencers with the information they can use to identify high potential impact initiatives and synergistic collaborations that stand to benefit the field as a whole.

On a more micro level, network members can be guided through an emergent learning process to understand what the most immediate needs of the network are: Where are its strengths? What practices are getting in the way of progress? What immediate action can be taken and how will we know it is successful? The number of emergent learning experiments, case studies of specific communities, or platforms for gathering and using data become bigger-picture outcomes that focus on achieving network impact versus demonstrating just program impact.

Focusing on what we measure is also important because often what is measured becomes what really matters. Those shifts – toward emergent learning through shared measurement and data meaning-making – also encourage collaboration over competition amongst fellows, which is critical to the overall health and success of the network and its ability to influence the field. **Measurement is not benign, and funders, operators, designers, and network architects can thoughtfully consider how to leverage measurement to build the network.** Imagine if funders and operators decided that the focus of measurement would not solely be about documenting the impact to convince others of its power. Rather, the measurement efforts could focus on leveraging the resources to enable participants themselves to collect the data and information they need within their communities. This would allow them to elevate the voices of their community constituents, identify the most pressing needs, and collect just-in-time data to determine if the efforts emerging from the network were making a difference, how they could be improved, and what others in the field could learn from them. It is an entirely different lens of measurement that decenters stories of impact that serve the funder to building data capacity and the ability to leverage data within the network.

An Ask to Funders: After the Experience

A persistent theme across many of the interviewees is a frustration with philanthropy and the constant push to obtain funding. One participant likened the experience of receiving startup funding to a ladder – being funded to build up five rungs of a 25 rung ladder, in terms of potential – and then having funding wane and being forced to secure funding in order to maintain the current rung, rather than continue to progress. Therefore, a critical question for funders who seek to invest in networks toward social change, is how will they adapt their funding and measurement strategies to allow for the time and learning required to leverage networked learning and action?

The persistent slog for funding is burning out some of the sectors most productive and innovative leaders. Yet, many argue that it doesn't have to be that way. In what ways could funders relying on old funding models be harming or limiting the success of the network by artificially creating competition or funneling energy toward what is important to the funder but perhaps not the network or community?